



**Social entrepreneurship before neoliberalism?: The life and work of Akhtar Hameed Khan**

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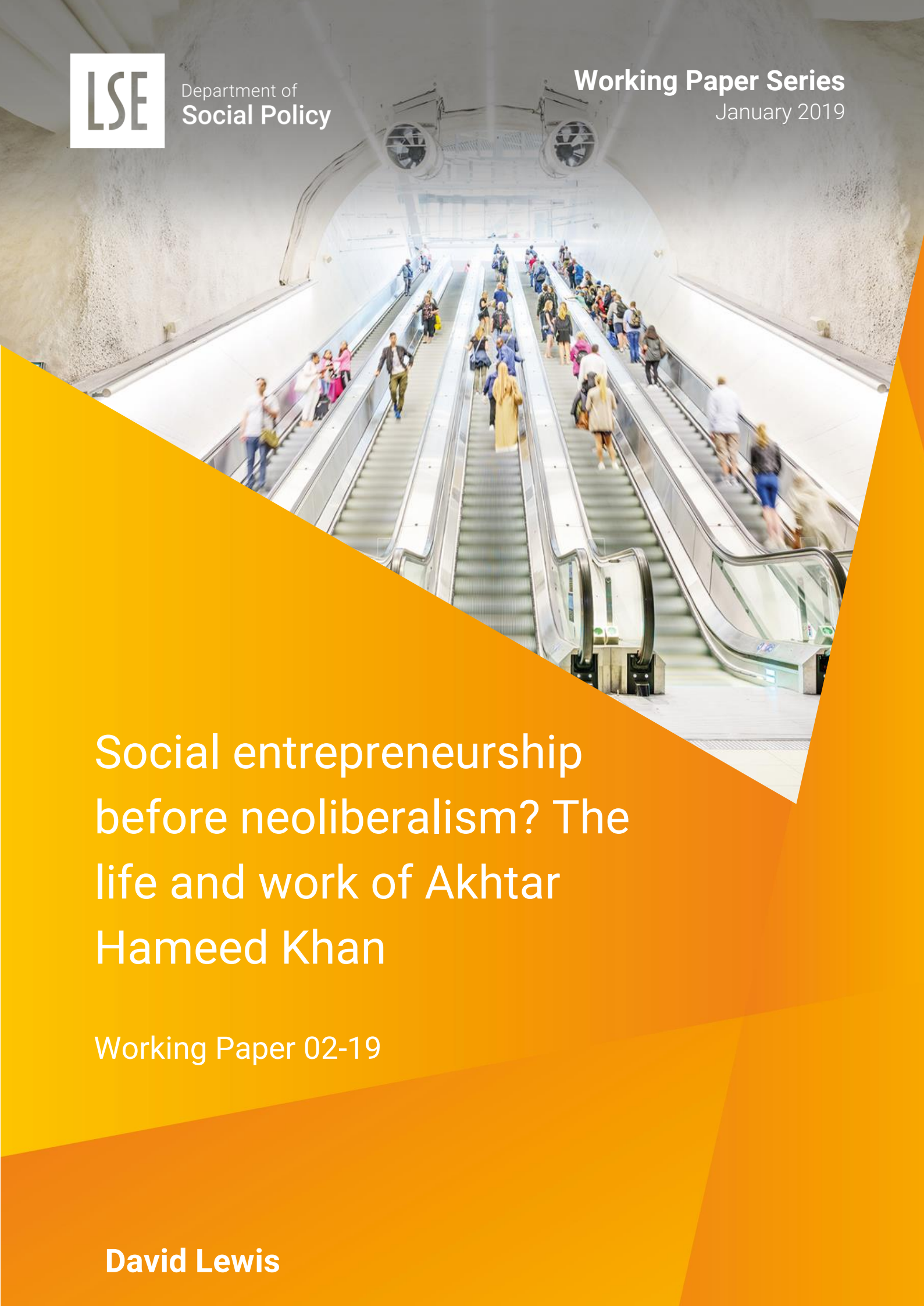
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A photograph of a busy subway station with multiple escalators and many people walking. The image is taken from a high angle, looking down the length of the station. The escalators are filled with people, and the walls are a light, textured color. The lighting is bright and even. The overall atmosphere is one of a busy, modern public space.

# Social entrepreneurship before neoliberalism? The life and work of Akhtar Hameed Khan

Working Paper 02-19

**David Lewis**

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## Social Policy Working Paper 02-19

### Abstract

The life history method can be used to historicise the study of social and public policy. Reviewing the life and work of Pakistani social entrepreneur A.H. Khan provides a useful reminder that what Jyoti Sharma recently termed 'the neoliberal takeover of social entrepreneurship' is a relatively recent phenomenon. While Khan's achievements across the public and non-governmental (NGO) sectors continue to be debated amongst scholars and activists in South Asia, his life and work – which is not well known in the Global North as it perhaps should be – highlights a much broader and more inclusive way of thinking about the social entrepreneur as an organiser of change.

**Keywords:** social entrepreneurship; non-governmental organisations (NGOs); community development; public administration; rural development; life history.

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David Lewis is professor of social policy and development at the London School of Economics & Political Science. A social anthropologist by training, he has degrees from the Universities of Cambridge and Bath. He teaches and undertakes research on the theory and practice of international development, with a specialisation in South Asia, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society, the study of policy processes, and rural development. He has carried out fieldwork in

Bangladesh regularly since 1986. He is author of several books including *Anthropology and Development: Challenges for the 21st Century* (2015, with Katy Gardner), *Non-Governmental Organizations, Management and Development* (2014), *Non-Governmental Organisations and Development* (2009, with Nazneen Kanji) and *Bangladesh: Politics, Economy and Civil Society* (2012).

## Introduction

We live in an era in which the concept of social entrepreneurship is increasingly prominent, but with a meaning that has become diminished by tendencies to understand the idea primarily in its private sector sense. For example, Jyoti Sharma has written of ‘the neoliberal takeover of social entrepreneurship’ in which the business setting of the entrepreneur takes ever more precedence over the *social* dimensions of creativity. For influential British social thinker and activist Michael Young (1915-2002)<sup>i</sup>, a definition of a social entrepreneur did not necessarily imply a for-profit model of business or even a non-for-profit form of market exchange but was simply someone who ‘organises change’ in any context, whether business, government or third sector. Young’s career trajectory had shown an extraordinary capacity to generate new ideas and help build organisations that played transformative roles in society: the Open University, International Alert, the Consumer Association, and the University of the Third Age are just a few examples. Towards the end of his life, when he opened his School for Social Entrepreneurs in 1998, the term ‘social entrepreneur’ was new, but the role itself was not.

This working paper offers a brief overview of another social entrepreneur, who was a contemporary of Michael Young’s, and active in the Indian subcontinent, whose life and work also provides insights into this broader view of the social entrepreneur as social activist rather than business person.<sup>ii</sup> Akhtar Hameed Khan, whose work spans the changing geographical contexts of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh during the region’s turbulent twentieth century, is perhaps not as well known in the west as he should be. This paper aims to redress that balance by briefly discussing Khan’s ‘work life history’ in order to draw out its significance aspects for broader understandings of professional creativity, community development activism, and social entrepreneurship. It draws on elements of a life history approach to social policy, in which focusing on a single life not only provides insights into the trajectory and impacts of activists and bureaucrats, but also requires us to further interrogate the ideas that assumptions that animate the wider policy world (Lewis, 2008a).<sup>iii</sup>

A.H. Khan (1914-1999) is best known for two main contributions to community development. The first is the work he undertook as a public official during the 1960s in the arena of rural development through the so-called ‘Comilla experiment’ in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The second was his formation in the 1980s of an NGO in Karachi, Pakistan dedicated to urban slum rehabilitation known as the Orangi Pilot Project (OPP). As both an original thinker and influential development practitioner, Khan was an early exponent of the modern ‘participatory development’ tradition, with its emphases on grassroots perspectives, building community level self-reliance, and the importance of undertaking personal critical reflection. His life and work embodies both the strengths, as well as the many limitations, of such approaches. At the same time, the significance of other aspects of his ideas, life and work are only perhaps now becoming more fully apparent. For example, he was an example of ‘sector boundary crossing’, in which during the course of a career ideas developed from one institutional sector may be transferred and developed in another sector, a phenomenon that has recently become identified as a growing feature of policy landscapes (Lewis 2008a).

Akhtar Hameed Khan<sup>iv</sup> was born in Agra on 15 July 1914 to a Pathan family, the son of a middle class police official, a sub-inspector, employed in the Government of British controlled India. He undertook undergraduate studies in history, philosophy and literature at Meerut College, and graduated in 1934 with an MA in English literature from Agra University. Influenced by his father's experience of nineteenth century social reformer Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, who favoured a synthesis of Islamic thought and Western knowledge, he read widely among Hindu, Buddhist and Western texts on religion and philosophy, and was well versed in Islamic history and Indian nationalism.

### **Bangladesh – a career in the public sector**

Khan joined the Indian Civil Service (ICS) in 1936, and spent a period studying at Cambridge University as a probationer. Khan's first posting in 1938 was to Comilla in the eastern part of Bengal (then formally in Tripura State) where he served as an Assistant Magistrate. Here he gained an understanding of Bengali language and literature that gave him 'new perspectives on religion, language and culture' (Khan 1983, p.xiii). Khan rose quickly through the ICS ranks but he grew disillusioned with life as a colonial civil servant and resigned in 1945. Distrusting worldly wealth and ambition, he felt he had learned all he could from his British rulers and began to worry that he would become 'a bureaucratic bigwig, a brown *bara sahib* rich conceited and hollow' (Khan 1983, p. xiv). He had also been shocked by the abuse of power by the British authorities during the 1943 famine in which as many as 3 million Indians died. Khan's resignation from the civil service was an act of personal renunciation that was also influenced by his interest in religious philosophy, including the mysticism of Persian Sufi poet Rumi and Islamic thinker Al Ghazali.

In the years following his departure from the ICS Khan first moved to Meerut (Uttar Pradesh). In what he described as a two-year 'Tolstoyan experiment' (Khan 1983, p.xiv) he rented a peasant house, and tried to live a life of voluntary simplicity: first doing day labouring and later on working as a locksmith's apprentice. He struggled to make a living and decided instead to build a new career as a teacher. He went in 1947 to Delhi to become headmaster of the Jamia Millia secondary school, then in 1950 migrated to West Pakistan to take up a position as a lecturer in Islamic history and English literature. He left almost immediately to become Principal of Comilla College in East Pakistan (today's Bangladesh), where he remained until 1958.

During 1954-5 he was seconded to become director of the US-funded national level Village Agricultural and Development (V-AID) programme in East Pakistan, which had begun in 1953. This was a government-led community development initiative that aimed to establish village councils that would modernise agriculture, improve infrastructure, health and education, and provide farmers with credit, training and marketing support. These were the early days of the so-called 'green revolution' which aimed to increase agricultural productivity through the introduction of high yielding hybrid rice seeds, the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, and new mechanised technologies for ploughing, irrigation and crop processing. In 1958 a new rural development academy was established in Comilla as a training centre for V-AID officials, with Khan as director (1959-64, 1965-68), attending Michigan State University (MSU) for an initial nine-month orientation.<sup>v</sup>

A key problem with the V-AID programme was its essentially top down character and its approach was one of outsider-led technology transfer that imposed on, rather than engaged with, local farmers. V-AID was abandoned in 1961, and Khan repurposed the academy for what he hoped would be a more community-led approach. He made three changes to what had gone before: bringing a new emphasis on research-led training and education, using local people as extension agents rather than outsiders, and basing interventions on permanent organisations in the form of village cooperatives and associations.

This led to the emergence of the 'Comilla model' of rural development, which created a local 'laboratory' area around the academy for new ideas to be tested. The approach was now to combine training with research so that officials could consult with and try to learn from the farmers more effectively. The intention was also to work alongside farmers in order to develop new solutions to identified problems, and then to pilot joint collaborative interventions that could eventually be evaluated, refined and scaled up more widely in conjunction with the government. In order to facilitate this, Khan designed a 'two tier' agricultural cooperative system, with primary local cooperatives of farmers, that were linked to a central *thana* (sub-district) level cooperative association that was to provide supervision, training, loans, technology and other services. The aims were to improve agricultural production, reduce farmer indebtedness by bypassing traditional village moneylending, and strengthen the overall position of farmers.

Central to Khan's vision was the still relatively uncommon insight that poverty was not simply the result of households not having resources, but was an outcome of a lack of power. He thought that people would benefit from participation in effective institutions, by claiming the right to make decisions about the issues that affected their lives, and that people could be supported in their efforts to achieve this through financial support and by the provision of new technical knowhow.

A charismatic organiser and leader, Khan's approach was underpinned by a distinctive personal style that emphasised grassroots rather than bureaucratic values, along with a culture of frugality and austerity, the most obvious example being his informal hand-spun *kurta pajama* workplace dress style. In this he was not only influenced by Islamic ideas but also by aspects of M.K. Gandhi's Hindu philosophy. Family planning interventions were also part of the Comilla agenda, and Khan worked hard to find ways to reconcile family planning services with local religious teaching, drawing on his own earlier theological studies and extensive discussions he now was now undertaking with local religious leaders. Nonetheless, Khan's view of the conservative outlook of rural clergy as a barrier to development can be seen today as problematic and Ali (2019) is critical of the way 'academy officials frequently misidentified economic arguments against technology as religious objections'.

The Comilla model was duly put into practice, achieved international recognition and was held up as an example for other Asian countries and beyond to follow (Karim, 1985). However, by the end of the 1960s it had become clear that there were significant problems. The new institutions had served as contact points for external resources, but large farmer interests dominated the villages. During the early 1970s an influential BARD study highlighted how structural factors maintained the rural poor's weak economic and social position (Wood, 1976). Despite these efforts to bring about

transformation, village level inequalities persisted such that 'sooner or later the realities of rural class structure would make themselves felt' (Blair 1978, p.77). Rich farmers were able to capture incoming development resources at the expense of the majority of small farming households (Van Schendel 1981). Nor did the formation of the new Comilla cooperatives directly benefit the large number of landless people in the villages who were unable to farm their own plots, a category which was estimated to apply to around 50% of rural households.

The domination by local landowning elites of efforts to introduce credit cooperatives in Bengal had already been recognised during the late colonial period (Iqbal 2017). Khan, with his characteristic honesty and openness, went on to recognise and accept many of these shortcomings. While Khan noted the effectiveness of the two tier cooperative model in providing inputs to farmers, he reflected in his *Tour of 20 Thanas* (1971), 'Has self-management been realised in the projects? I cannot honestly answer yes to that question' (p.25). He attempted to carry some of these lessons forward into the next stage of his work.

### **Pakistan – working in the non-governmental sector**

After the 1971 war that led to East Pakistan becoming the independent country of Bangladesh, Khan was in his own words 'displaced from Comilla' (p.xv). He briefly went to work in Peshawar at one of the counterpart rural development academies that was located in West Pakistan. Within two years he became unhappy in his new post in Peshawar, where he felt the force of political interference and a general lack of interest in his Comilla work in the new Pakistan. Khan moved to Karachi University and later back to MSU, where he taught development administration for five years, before embarking on his next major initiative, the OPP, in April 1980. The OPP was located in the city's largest squatter settlement in the northwest corner of Karachi.

Unlike the earlier Comilla experiment, the OPP was conceptualised as an NGO, initially supported by the Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI). In setting up this non-governmental organisation, Khan drew both positively and negatively on his experience at BARD, reflecting that:

The Orangi Pilot Project was very different from the Comilla Academy. OPP was a private body, dependent for its small fixed budget on another NGO. The vast resources and support of the government, Harvard advisers, MSU, and Ford Foundation was missing. OPP possessed no authority, no sanctions. It may observe and investigate but it could only advise, not enforce.

The Orangi area had first been settled in 1963. It was as a government township of around five square kilometres, and by the end of the 1970s there were a million people of different ethnicities who had become packed into 32 square kilometres of land. Many of these people had migrated from Bangladesh following the 1971 war. Here Khan found himself an outsider once again since he had never lived in Karachi for any length of time before and he reflected, 'I set out to educate myself. For several months I wandered Orangi, looking at the settlements, talking with the people, officials, councillors, lobbyists and the chairmen of associations and clubs. I could go slowly; I was a free agent, not sent by a boss with plans and targets to achieve' (Khan, 1997, p.27).



Spending time talking and listening to local residents quickly highlighted a set of priorities identified from the bottom up. The earliest self-help activities that were supported by OPP centred on the construction of underground sewers using local labour and materials, and resulted in hundreds of kilometres of drainage pipes and auxiliary facilities. In this predominantly poor multi-ethnic population Khan's experimentation with participatory approaches began to harness the high levels of energy and entrepreneurship that existed beneath the surface of these communities in ways that the earlier Comilla work had struggled to sustain. Khan's slow, careful approach made it possible for more autonomous organisations to form, including a research and training institute to manage the low cost sanitation, housing and education programmes, a charitable trust to organise micro-enterprise savings and credit activities, and a health and social development association that oversaw a set of health interventions.

In contrast to much of the foreign-funded short term NGO work that was taking place in Pakistan, the OPP became known for taking a longer-term view of the process of trying to build self-reliant local development. The NGO became acclaimed for building 'the long-term relationships that are key to unlocking the main benefits of community participation' (Bano, 2017, p.215) by building trust over a long period of careful negotiation within the community, combining both local *and* technical knowledge, and undertaking slow and patient lobbying of government officials. Over time, the OPP began to construct effective partnerships with the Karachi city authorities, mainly through its committed long-term approach, but also due to Khan's detailed knowledge of the culture and operation of the public sector that drew on his earlier experience. These days of course it is not unusual to hear of civil servants - retired or otherwise - who set up NGOs, but the OPP was an early example of the effective use of the NGO form as an innovative vehicle for a public sector activist who had grown impatient with the restrictions of red tape. OPP has also informed wider practice through replication in other cities in Pakistan and beyond. In typical contrast to many leaders of NGOs, whose charismatic authority tends to inhibit the emergence of middle management and makes leadership success difficult, Khan stepped back from his OPP leadership role in its later years and allowed second tier managers to develop. When he died in 1999, the OPP had already transitioned reasonably successfully into new leadership drawn from among its existing experienced staff.

Despite having moved from the public sector into the NGO world, Khan was a cautious in relation to the widespread optimism that broke out during the 1980s in development circles in which NGOs were sometimes viewed as a 'magic bullet' to reduce poverty. He was always clear about the limits to their role, arguing that NGOs should not replace the functions of the state, but instead should demonstrate appropriate models that could be replicated more widely, undertake social mobilisation at community level, and most importantly perhaps challenge the conventional wisdom of officials, experts and academics. He was highly critical for example of the Pakistan government's increasing contracting out of services to foreign-funded NGOs during the late 1980s, and refused to involve OPP in the government's donor-supported Social Action Programme (Hasan 1999). He was a stern critic of the government's attitude to foreign aid in general, and contrasted what he saw as Pakistan's apparently limitless appetite for international aid with Japan's full repayment of US reconstruction loans within three years following WW2.

### Conclusion: Khan's life and work in contemporary perspective

Today Akhtar Hameed Khan is mainly remembered for his work with the OPP, and the Comilla experiment has faded from public memory.<sup>vi</sup> This is unfortunate since his influence has been considerable. For example, the Bangladesh development NGO sector that emerged during the 1980s took its place was in part inspired by his experiences and ideas. Just as Khan had learned from V-AID's shortcomings, NGOs saw from the Comilla experience how important it was to centre their interventions on organised groups of poor and landless households rather than better-off farmers.<sup>vii</sup> Grameen Bank founder Muhammad Yunus has also said that his micro-credit approach owed a debt to Khan. Khan's ideas have also influenced other development organisations. For example, in 1981 the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) initiated a set of community development activities in Pakistan's Northern Areas. Turning to the example of Comilla, they contacted Khan for advice that helped establish what would become the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP). It was believed that the model was suitable basis to work from because these remote communities had fewer inequalities and less of the rural class formation that had thwarted the Comilla model in Bangladesh. Khan did not participate directly, but approached one of his earlier colleagues and disciples, Shoaib Sultan Khan, who had been an assistant commissioner in Comilla back in the late 1950s, to take on the role. He became AKRSP's general manager in 1982. As Wood and Shakil (2006) have observed, AKRSP's community-based approach to agricultural extension work 'is part of a lineage deriving from early cooperative movements in the West, adapted to South Asia by Akhtar Hameed Khan in both Comilla and Peshawar, but also reflecting various colonial experiments with community development in undivided India' (p.371).

But Khan's significance goes beyond the community development field. Firstly, he can be seen as an early example of the 'social entrepreneur', in its broadest sense. Sharma (2017) has written of the need to challenge the 'neoliberal takeover of social entrepreneurship' by holding on to its *social* aspect in the face of powerful pressures to focus more on the *private sector* capitalist entrepreneurial side. Khan's life history suggests that we should go further in conceptualising the social entrepreneur's role in transforming ideas and practices, and recognise that the term refers to creativity as much as entrepreneurship. Khan's work involved experimental problem-solving, risk-taking and the challenging of convention all of which was undertaken within the public and non-governmental realms. Furthermore, he seems always to have been in critical, reflexive mode, a cultural style that was later emphasised by many alternative development practitioners. There is today an established critique of participatory development as naive about power and complicit in the perpetuation of forms of technocratic expertise (Cooke and Kothari 1998). Khan's ideas do not escape such criticisms, but provides a counter example to the many Western participatory 'experts', as a former colonial civil servant turned committed methodological populist (see Lewis 2018) whose ideas were rooted firmly in the Global South or 'majority world'.

Second, and related to this, he was also an early example of the power of 'sector swapping', in which an individual activist builds on knowledge and experience acquired from working in one institutional sector (in his case the government) and creatively transfers this knowledge in order to build upon it in another (the world of NGOs). For example, his experience as a civil servant in the first part of his career has been credited with helping him to build relationships with the local

authorities and officials that later contributed to the OPP's success. An understanding of the bureaucratic mind-set and of the constraints that officials work under is sometimes a rare commodity among progressive activist NGOs. This sector switcher phenomenon is an increasing feature of contemporary policy worlds, where movement between the sectors is associated sometimes with creativity and sometimes with co-option (Lewis 2008b). Today's management theorists increasingly play up the significance of such cross boundary movements (see for example Lovegrove and Thomas, 2013).

Finally, Khan's efforts to connect religious philosophy and practices with development ideas feel increasingly contemporary. Those with an interest in religiously inspired multiculturalist development work might be able to learn much from a person who has been characterised as 'the Muslim Buddhist' (Khan, 1999). For someone who reflected, writing in his *Report on Twenty Thanas* 'By temperament I am a recluse and involvement in action gives me no pleasure. To organise, to manage and administer gives me no pleasure. To observe, study and contemplate makes me happy' (p.1) Khan's influence and impact as a 'philosopher-practitioner' (Hunzai, 2006), though not as widely recognised as perhaps it should be, has been considerable.

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<sup>i</sup> Michael Young was awarded a PhD in the LSE's Department of Social Administration in 1955, on family in east London.

<sup>ii</sup> This working paper is an extended version of a chapter initially written for the forthcoming (2019) book *Key Thinkers On Development* edited by David Simon (Routledge).

<sup>iii</sup> My sincere thanks for useful conversations about A.K. Khan with F.H. Abed, Masooda Bano, Stephen Biggs, and Geof Wood during the preparation of this article.

<sup>iv</sup> Both Akhtar and Akhter forms of the name are found in the published works, and for consistency I have used the former.

<sup>v</sup> As T.O. Ali (2019) has argued, the work of the Academy needs to be analysed in the context of modernisation and development efforts undertaken by the United States during the Cold War.

<sup>vi</sup> The Comilla academy still exists today as an autonomous research and training institute in Bangladesh.

<sup>vii</sup> Such NGOs also drew on the ideas of radical thinkers such as Paolo Freire and Ivan Illich (Lewis 2017).