

LSO Initiatives

LSO Surhan Bhakuo

What are LSOs?

LSOs or Local Support Organisations are central to the 'Social Mobilisation' approach of the Rural Support Programmes (RSPs). In a bid to reduce poverty and empower marginalised people (especially women), the RSPs mobilise rural communities into a three-tiered structure, which consists of Community Organisations (COs) - neighbourhood level community groups, Village Organisations (VOs) - village level federations of COs, and LSOs - union council level federations of VOs. LSOs are able to carry out community-led development at a much greater level due to the advantage they gain from numbers. As the tertiary tier, LSOs are also uniquely able to develop linkages with government and non-government organisations, donors agencies and the private sector.

The LSO

District: Tharparkar, Sindh
Union Council: Bhakuo
Date of Formation: 30-09-08
Total Households in Union Council: 4,039
Organised Households: 3,570
Coverage: 88%
Number of Village Organisations (VOs): 27
Number of Community Organisations (COs): 328
(Men 164; Women 104; Mixed 34; Children 26)

The Initiatives

Before the formation of the LSO, there was no tradition of using people's own power to protect their common social and economic rights. Having now been in place since 2008, the LSO has proved instrumental in using people's voice to protect their rights. Here are two examples from Tharparkar, Sindh.

ENSURING CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY

The government constructed a 12-foot wide carpeted road in 2003 to provide transportation facilities to the rural settlements of the area. This 83 km road links these rural settlements with Mithi, the main town of the area.

In the year 2008, Mr. Ismail Sattar, a businessman from Karachi, leased the salt lakes of Tharparkar from the government and established a salt factory there. He hired 22-wheeler trucks to transport salt from the salt factory to Karachi. Around 30 trucks travel on the carpeted road on a daily basis, despite the fact that the road was not designed for heavy traffic. The heavy trucks have unsurprisingly created several problems for the rural settlements, including:

- a) Due to their massive size, the 22-wheeler trucks occupy the entire width of road. The road has therefore become extremely dangerous for any other type of traffic. In addition to this, it takes public transport buses an average of 10-15 minutes to overtake these trucks.
- b) The main source of livelihood of the people of the area is livestock. Their livestock grazes openly in the semi-desert terrains, and more often than not, happens to cross the road. Road accidents of livestock have increased manifold because of these trucks. To make matters worse, the drivers manage to safely escape, because with the accidents taking place in the late hours of the day and at night, nobody can catch them on the spot.

- c) There are 70 culverts on the 83-km long road. These culverts are not designed for heavy trucks, which ordinarily carry up to 100 tonnes in weight. Therefore, gradually the culverts have been damaged. Due to this, the road has now become extremely dangerous for buses, cars and even motor bikes, especially in the evenings and at night, when road visibility is at its worst. Even though the rate of accidents has increased, no one dared to lodge a complaint against the factory owner, as they feared from his influence with the local government functionaries.

In November 2010, the female members of LSO Surhan Bhakuo were travelling by bus to attend an LSO meeting. The bus met with a serious accident due to a crack in one of the culverts (made by one of the heavy trucks). While nobody received any serious injuries, there were several passengers who suffered minor injuries. The women members complained of the accident in the LSO meeting and urged the LSO to take action against the transport trucks.

The LSO discussed the issue in their meeting and decided to block the road in order to demand that the trucks should not be allowed beyond Mithi. Around 200 people blocked the road. They informed the manager of the salt factory, and asked him to notify the factory owner to come to meet the protesters for negotiations.

The manager initially tried to threaten the people by saying that he would call the police if the protesters did not clear the road immediately. The protesters did not relent: by now, 20 trucks loaded with salt had been stopped by the protesters.

Looking at their resoluteness, the manager telephoned the factory owner in Karachi and briefed him about the situation. The factory owner asked the protesters to talk to him on the telephone but they rejected his offer and asked him to personally come to the location of the accident for negotiations.

Finally the factory owner travelled from Karachi and met the people at the road side. On behalf of the community, the Chairman of the LSO briefed him about the problems they were facing due to his trucks and demanded that they should be resolved. He apologised to the people for the damages caused by his trucks and offered to repair all the damaged culverts. An agreement was thus signed between the two sides, whereby Seth Ismail Sattar (the factory owner) took responsibility for the repair and reconstruction of the culverts damaged by his trucks. The LSO took the responsibility of managing the LSO

construction work. The LSO activists estimated Rs 250,000 for the repair of one culvert. Seth Ismail Sattar immediately paid Rs. 500,000 to the LSO in order to repair two of the culverts. Later on he paid an additional amount of Rs. two million to repair eight more culverts. The LSO hired contractors and The



A culvert being repaired

repaired all the damaged culverts.

On 7 February 2011, a fatal accident of a public transport bus near village Bhakuo took the precious lives of 10 men and women (who died instantaneously on the spot) and seriously injured 48 others. Later on, five of the injured people also succumbed to death, raising the total number of casualties to 15. The road accident was caused due to a crack in a culvert made by one of the 22-wheeler trucks. The LSO immediately decided to block the road again. This time, around 300 people come out onto the road and blocked it for three consecutive days. The LSO activists arranged water, tea and food for the protesters.

At such sensitive moments, when angry crowds quickly take the law into their own hands and indiscriminately damage government and private property, the LSO activists successfully managed to keep the people's emotion in control. They also arranged to shift the injured people quickly to Liaquat Hospital, Hyderabad for treatment and also transported the dead bodies to their families.

then held its meeting and finalised a charter of demand. It submitted an application addressed to the District Coordination Officer (DCO) Tharparkar, with copies sent to the District and Session Judge/Director Human Rights Tharparkar, Regional Ombudsman Tharparkar, District Police Officer Tharparkar, Executive Engineer Road/Highways Tharparkar and the President of the Thar Press Club Tharparkar, demanding that:

1. The trucks should not be allowed to travel beyond Mithi Town
2. The culverts should be re-built using quality materials urgently
3. The number of public transport coaches on the road should be increased
4. The traffic police should be ordered to check overloading in public transport vehicles
5. People should not be allowed to travel on the roofs of coaches
6. Proper compensation should be provided for all the deceased and injured people in the accident

The DCO Mithi formed a six-member committee comprising of four members from the LSO's General Body, including its Chairman and Vice Chairman, EDO Roads and Mr. Ismail Sattar, the factory owner to resolve the issues. The committee ended up discussing the matter for three hours and decided on the following:

1. The Seth would pay Rs. 50,000 to the family of each one of the deceased persons who had died as a result of the accident. Moreover, he would pay Rs. 50,000 to those injured persons who had become permanently disabled, while Rs. 30,000 to other seriously injured persons. The total compensation money turned out to be Rs. 1,180,000.
2. The Seth would have to re-build all 70 culverts on the improved design of the District Officer Road, at an estimated cost of Rs. 599,000 each. Thus, total cost of the culverts came to Rs. 41.93 million.
3. The Seth would have to fill in both sides of the carpeted road with mud instead of sand.
4. The Seth would have to provide employment to the local people in the factory on a priority basis.

A new committee was formed, comprising of four LSO members and Mr. Shafi Muhammad Rajo, the Road Manager of the salt factory and Mr. Ramazan, District Officer Roads, to oversee and monitor the construction of the culverts and the extension of the road. One member of the committee would routinely monitor the physical work on a daily basis.

The Seth extended both sides of the carpeted road by six feet and made it compact using heavy rollers. The extension work was completed on 22 July 2010. The construction of the culverts is in progress and will be completed by November 2011. The LSO also successfully negotiated with the factory owner to provide employment to local people in the salt factory.

Twenty local people have already been given jobs. The Seth also agreed to install 20 hand pumps in as many villages for drinking water. Ten hand pumps have already been installed. He has also promised to provide an ambulance for the Rural Health Centre of Bhakuo.

A dialogue is also in process between the LSO and the Seth to set up a welfare hospital in the area. Seth Ismail Sattar prefers to set up the hospital in Mithi, while the LSO argues that Mithi is too far away for their people, so the hospital should be established near the salt factory. The LSO offered the services of two male doctors and one female doctor (local to the area) to serve at the hospital in response to the factory owner's excuse for not wanting to make the hospital in a rural area.

The LSO also discussed the condition of the road with government functionaries and motivated them to allocate funds for widening the carpeted road. As a result of these consultations, the authorities allocated funds for widening of the carpeted road to 18 feet. The first portion consisting of 18 km has already been tendered.

STOPPING ILLEGAL RE-ALLOCATION OF GOVERNMENT RESOURCES ON POLITICAL GROUNDS

VO Bhakuo was formed around two years before the formation of the LSO Mohar Welfare Organisation. Village Bhakuo is the central village of union council Bhakuo and comprises of around 450 households. The village has a middle school for boys, which provides education up to 8th grade to interested students. Due to extreme poverty, people are unable to send their children to Mithi for higher education. Therefore, most students simply discontinue their education after the 8th grade. As a result, the establishment of a high school became an aspiration

for the people of the area. Despite promises from different political parties during various election times, this aspiration remained unfulfilled. After the formation of the VO, the community formed a committee to lobby for the school building. The committee finally succeeded in its efforts, with allocations of funds for their school made by the government in the year 2007 on special recommendation of a local politician. Before the finalisation of the lengthy internal processes of the government, new elections arrived in 2008 and a new government came into power. In the meanwhile, the organised communities of union council Bhakuo also formed their LSO.



Inside the LSO office

The LSO learned that the funds allocated in the name of their school had been shifted by the Department of Education for construction of a middle school in another area. They learned that the re-allocation was based a politically motivated recommendation submitted by a politician to the Department of Education falsely suggesting that the strength of the students was not enough in village Bhakuo to qualify for a high school. The LSO decided to fight against his decision.

The LSO formed a committee for this purpose. The committee met with politicians, and representatives of the Thar Press Club and the Education Department, and presented its case to them. The LSO also published several articles against the illegal decision in the local newspapers. Nothing unfortunately happened.

The LSO met the Session Judge in Mithi who was also a local member of the Human Rights Commission and discussed the matter with him. The Session Judge suggested that the LSO should file a petition to his court. He however warned the LSO that if they failed to prove that there were enough students to qualify for a high school, he would have to make them pay for the entire cost of the litigation.

The LSO thus filed a petition with the Session Judge and won the case: the funds were re-allocated for their school. The high school has now been completed and the students of the area are enjoying their matriculation level education in their own village.

Interestingly, embarrassed by the decision of the court, the politician arranged funds for the middle school of the other village from other sources. At the end therefore schools for both villages managed to get completed almost at the same time.

SOME OTHER ACHIEVEMENTS

In addition to these two great achievements, the LSO has also carried out several other activities, mentioned below:

1. Organised four mobile camps with the support of NADRA, for the provision of Computerised National Identity Cards (CNICs) for the entire population. As a result, a total of 1,300 people have received their CNICs
2. The LSO maintains a death and birth record at the village level
3. Three girls schools and one community centre have been sanctioned from MNA and MPA development funds
4. Two villages in the union council have obtained electricity, namely villages Bhakuo and Vee Hingorja
5. Repaired brick pavements and bridges through self-help in three villages in the union council
6. Established three non-formal education centres with the support of NCHD
7. Through linkages with the corporate sector, installed micro drip system for 20 vegetable plots and constructed two rainwater storage tanks
8. A total of 323 families received micro credit from the LSO (from their Community Investment Fund provided by RSPN) to start businesses and purchase livestock. This includes 155 male borrowers and 168 females.
9. Obtained Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) grants for 160 very poor women.
10. In a bid to provide financial assistance, linked 50 poor households with the Minority Fund and 100 women-headed households with the Zakat Fund.