

Programme Introduction

In 2008, Mr Shoaib Sultan Khan, Chairman Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN), and Dr. Rashid Bajwa, Chief Executive Officer National Rural Support Programme (NRSP), conceptualised the Union Council Based Poverty Reduction Programme (UCBPRP), and undertook policy advocacy with the Government of Sindh (GoS). In 2009, the Chief Minister of Sindh considerably agreed to support the Sindh Rural Support Organisation (SRSO) to implement UCBPRP in Shikarpur district. Under UCBPRP, SRSO mobilised rural women to foster their own Community Institutions. Rural women formed Community Organisations (COs) at *mohalla* level, then federated COs into village level, Village Organisations (VOs), and finally the VOs were federated at the Union Council level into Local Support Organisations (LSOs) in rural areas of the district. Organised women then began to take initiatives to improve their families' livelihoods and lives, some through self-help measures and some with SRSO's support.

This is a case study of one of the community members that clearly demonstrates the positive economic and social change that has been brought about by GoS's UCBPRP leading to reduction in poverty and generating hope for a better future.

Bashiran's story of struggle and success

Bashiran, 48, was born and brought up in village Kabulo of Taluka Gari Yaseen, District Shikarpur. She was the eldest child among her seven siblings; three brothers and four sisters. Her father owned two acres of agricultural land, where the family grew seasonal crops, i.e., rice and wheat. Her mother worked as a traditional mid-wife in the same



village. Bashiran said that her parents owned five buffaloes. The family was able to sell the surplus milk and meet various household needs. Bashiran added that the family was relatively well-off economically. However, misfortune hit the family when one of her brothers became a gambling addict. This led to selling off of productive assets including buffaloes and land. This turn of events traumatised her father and he became sick. The family began to see some harsh times and suffered a lot as it was now dependent on her mother's meagre wages that she

earned whenever a child was born in the village. Given the bad situation, in order to make her contribution to the household economy, Bashiran decided to learn stitching clothes. Luckily for her, there was a woman in the neighbourhood who knew how to stitch.

Bashiran was engaged to her cousin since birth. Her parents and her mother in law had decided that she will get married to the cousin, who was the only child of his parents. Interestingly, the in-laws chose two brides for their son, to fulfil their desire to have a big family. This way, her husband had two fiancées at the same time. Bashiran's wedding was arranged when she was 18. She remembers that her marriage was very simple. People in her village rarely practiced the tradition of giving dowry to their daughters at that time. She said that during the initial days of her marriage, her husband did not earn or do any work for wages. Her father-in-law was working as a labourer on other people's agricultural farms. The family lived in a single room mud house that leaked whenever there was rain. Later, her father-in-law opened a small tuck shop with her husband, and sold grocery products to earn a livelihood.

After 10 years of marriage, she gave birth to a baby son. Later, with the gap of one and half years between every child, she had five children; four sons and a daughter. Her co-wife had nine children; four sons and five daughters. Bashiran was encouraged by her in-laws to have more children to make a bigger family. Bashiran said that she and her co-wife lived like sisters in one house. They looked after each other's children, and performed domestic chores together.

However, when the family became bigger, they needed more basic necessities and resources; they needed more space to live, and food to eat. She said that then they started to have arguments over resources every day. The family sold half an acre of their land and used the money to build four mud rooms. Bashiran along with her five children and parents in-law started to live in two rooms, and the other wife lived in the remaining two rooms with her children.

As her husband's income was divided between the two families, Bashiran economic conditions declined severely. The family faced severe financial crisis. She was afraid that her children would remain uneducated and suffer throughout their lives. Therefore, to secure their futures, she developed a desire to educate her children. However, it was not easy for her to meet their educational expenses. She did all household chores and worked on the farm during the day and at nights stitched clothes for the fellow villagers. She charged Rs. 100 for sewing simple dresses and Rs. 150 for customised ones. Bashiran worked very hard and barely managed to meet her household's basic needs, and her children's educational expenses.

Bashiran remembers her brother complaining, when he saw her daughter going to school. She said that the villagers did not encourage girls to get an education. She said, "they thought household work was the only suitable work for girls." However, her daughter had a strong desire to get an education; she ignored people's comments and continued her education.

One fine day her sister's husband visited Bashiran and informed her about SRSO. She narrated, *"he said that SRSO team visited the village, but women were not clever enough to understand their message. He understood their mission, and he had seen SRSO's work in other villages, but they work with females only. Therefore, he could not be part of it. He said, "you are active and intelligent, you may understand their programme, and you must attend the meeting next time." I was convinced by his words."*

Bashiran attended the meeting and learned that the team was discussing the importance of the formation of Community Organisation (CO). She said, *“they told us that if we get together and foster a CO, We will be stronger, and that SRSO will support us. I right away approached the team and told them that we will make a CO in our neighbourhood. I came back to my locality and convinced other women in the neighbourhood. My sister’s husband gave us confidence by saying positive things about SRSO team. When SRSO team visited our locality, I gathered all the females, and we formed a Community Organisation comprising 20 members in the year 2009. We chose Benazir as the name of our CO, because Benazir Bhutto was a brave leader, and a woman. The CO members chose me as their president.”*

Bashiran went on to tell us that after formation of COs in the village, SRSO asked all presidents and treasurers of the COs to attend an eight-day training programme in the Gari Yaseen Field Unit Office. There, they taught us about conducting meetings, keeping meeting minutes and maintaining records, mechanism for saving money, as well as Micro Investment Plans and CIF distribution. When the training session ended, I called a meeting in my CO and shared what I had learned in the training. The CO members decided to meet twice a month. In these meetings we discussed savings and Micro Investment Plans. We also discussed the needs of all CO members and identified the neediest members. Later, all COs of the village got together to foster a Village Organisation (VO). At VO meetings, all CO presidents would get together and discuss their issues and plans. Since the poverty scorecard census had been conducted by SRSO, we knew the number of poor households, i.e. households whose score was less than 18, in each locality and CO. After the first VO meeting, a resolution was submitted to SRSO for the provision of Community Investment Fund.

She said that by the end of 2009, 17 CO members from our VO received CIF loans. *“I had applied and received a loan of Rs. 18,000. I added Rs. 6,000 from my savings to this amount and bought a buffalo calf. I repaid the loan in instalments by stitching clothes,”* she added.

In 2011, Bashiran received another loan of Rs. 18,000. Adding to this amount she bought another buffalo calf. She sold the surplus crop of rice and paid the loan within six months. Her husband looked after the livestock.

“The advantage of having a buffalo was that we had milk for domestic consumption. We could save the money that was otherwise spent on purchasing milk from the market. Now, apart from domestic consumption, I sell up to 4kg of milk every day.” After a couple of years, the buffalo gave birth to a calf; now Bashiran has three buffaloes. This has not only added nutrition in the family’s daily diet, it has also enabled her to increase her financial assets, by selling milk, and saving money.

In 2010, Bashiran received Traditional Birth Attendants’ training provided by SRSO. She became a mid-wife. She says, *“I earned Rs. 10,000 -12,000 per month depending on the number of births in the village. The rich ones pay me more, especially when a son is born, and for the needy ones I do not ask for any fee. Earlier, many women suffered from complexities during their pregnancies and deliveries. Now, I guide these women from their early days of pregnancy about maternal and child health.”*

Bashiran has educated her children. Her daughter has completed her B.A degree, and is now teaching at the Community Cluster School in the village. Her eldest son has studied up to 10th grade, while the other three are studying at the community school.

Bashiran has continued to support members of the COs and VOs. In return, they have placed great trust in her. She was elected as the president of the LSO, for her active contribution in the village development programmes. Education is a key issue in the area. To tackle this issue, the LSO approached SRSO for support. With assistance from SRSO, a Community Cluster School was constructed on land donated by the community members mobilised by LSO. Being LSO president, Bashiran was in-charge of the School Management Committee. She was accountable for all the construction funding and led the school construction process under her supervision. The school is now successfully running for the past two years. Local COs, VOs and LSO are continuing to emphasise the importance of education at various meetings. SRSO and LSO partnership is benefiting hundreds of children to get good quality education up to grade 10. Bashiran takes great pride in the school and regularly visits it to oversee its performance. Remembering her previous life, Bashiran said,

“whatever we have achieved as individuals and as communities is due to one action. We always had it within ourselves to improve ourselves. Yet, we could not find the way to harness our own potentials, and therefore we and our children continued to suffer. The SRSO field teams showed us the path, and the journey along that path began when we, the poor women, got together and set up our own CO, VO and LSO.”