

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.

Akhtaryaar Khaton takes charge

Akhtaryaar Khaton, 40, was born in Bado, a village situated in Shikarpur district of Sindh. She was the youngest child of her parents, with two brothers and three sisters. Her father worked as a farmer in a landlord's land. He could barely earn enough to provide for two meals a day. Her mother died when she was only two years old; she grew up with her grandmother and father along with her other siblings. Her grandmother had two buffaloes; she was able to sell milk, generating a small income. The family lived in a two-room mud house. Akhtaryaar's neighbour taught her embroidery skills.

Akhtaryaar got married to her first cousin at an early age of 14. Her husband was the fourth out of his five siblings. She started her married life in a joint family with her two mothers-in-law, father-in-law, and four brothers-in-law. Two of the elder brothers-in-law were married and farmed their own land. The family owned five acres of land and lived in a two-room mud house. Her husband also had a donkey cart in the village and added to the family income. She learned to stitch clothes from her elder sister, who was married to her husband's brother.

She gave birth to a son after one year of marriage. Later, with the gap of one year between each child, she had thirteen children. She believes that five of her children died after being haunted by some supernatural being (Jinn). Eight of her children, including three daughters, are alive. As the family size increased, the elders in the family decided to distribute the



property. She moved out with her husband and children, and started to live in a straw-hut. Her husband continued to earn with the donkey cart while she looked after her children and did domestic chores. The family grew rice and wheat on their small piece of land.

Akhtaryaar had never attended school. However, she wanted her children to go to school and get an education. She admitted her children in a government school in the village. They relied on the earnings from the donkey cart to meet some of the children's educational expenses.

Akhtaryaar's family suffered a major shock when her husband was hit in a traffic accident, and was unable to work for almost two years. At the time of the accident their eldest son was in class 10th. Unfortunately, he had to discontinue his education and started to work as a *Munshi* (record keeper) at the village van station. His basic salary was Rs. 100 per day. Akhtaryaar remembers that in the same year, the village witnessed a feud over land ownership, and a rival group torched their crops. Akhtaryaar said that the dominant people in the village take such actions, but people are afraid to report such incidents to the police.

These were very difficult years for Akhtaryaar's family. She recalls that her family could afford only one meal a day during this period. To make ends meet, Akhtaryaar had to work very hard. Apart from undertaking household chores, Akhtaryaar spent hours stitching clothes for fellow village women, and also made and sold embroidered table clothes, pillow covers and handkerchiefs. Akhtaryaar continued to cover the cost of her younger children's education through the sale of her products. At times, Akhtaryaar would ask her brothers for food, to feed her children. Akhtaryaar's life began to improve a little bit when her husband recovered from his injuries and was able to start farming his piece of land. Now, the family had three working adults; their economic condition began to improve to some extent. With the passage of time they were able to build a mud room and the family moved from the old straw hut.

One day her husband came home with a news that a team from SRSO had visited the village but the community members refused to listen to them and forced them to leave the village. Akhtaryaar said, *"the SRSO team kept visiting the village, but none of the villagers allowed them to visit their houses or even sit in Autak. The main reason for this response was that the SRSO team wanted to mobilise and work only with the women. Some male members of the SRSO team also wore shirts and trousers. This too was unacceptable to the menfolk. They forced the SRSO team to leave the village. There was an element of mistrust among village men."*

She added that the SRSO team, however, did not give up. They continued to visit the village, six or seven times. In this process, two members of our community understood the objectives of SRSO, and its work. They were able to lobby and persuade the village's menfolk to allow the SRSO team to meet with the women. The men only consented to this with the pre-condition that they would sit and witness the dialogue between SRSO and the women; they wanted to directly hear what messages the SRSO team conveyed to their wives, and daughters.

"Later, an all-female team from SRSO visited the village. This was welcomed by the men, who also allowed the team to sit in the Autak. We were also allowed to meet the team. The SRSO female team spoke very well and explained to us that if we wanted to improve our lives, then we will have to organise ourselves and foster a Tanzeem (Community Organisation-CO). While recollecting her memories about the formative stages of the CO, Akhtaryaar laughed and said, we did not know what Tanzeem was. We kept hearing [about it] but did not understand their

message. We did not know how to speak at gatherings. All of us were bewildered and confused, because we had never stepped out from our houses before. However, the SRSO team kept visiting the village and eventually we understood what a Tanzeem was.”

Talking about the first meetings, Akhtaryaar said, *“in the first meeting the SRSO team asked us to make a circle and sit on the floor. We argued, saying, ‘why would we sit on the floor?’ They asked us to recite Tilawat [a verse from Quran] to start the meeting. To this we complained, ‘Is it someone’s funeral? Why are we reciting Tilawat?’ Similarly, we complained when they asked us to introduce ourselves. They actually wanted to teach us the meeting procedures and structures, but it was hard for us to accept all this. Later, they made us accustomed to the meeting rules and procedures, and we saw their benefits, and accepted. It took us four months to form our CO and to initiate bi-monthly meetings.”*

After the village women accepted to foster a CO, the SRSO team members asked them to select a president, and a manager. *“The team advised us to choose a member who we thought will work with us sincerely, and someone who was honest, and trusted. The CO members unanimously selected me,” she said.* However, she was reluctant to agree because her husband would not permit her to become the CO President. The CO members visited her house and requested her husband to allow her to lead the organisation. Her husband accepted the women’s requests, and she finally became the CO President.

“Before the formation of CO, we did not have any concept of women’s participation in any activities, other than household chores, or assistance in farming. After the CO formation, we began to have meetings; SRSO staff also attended these meetings. They trained us on how to conduct and manage meetings, record keeping and saving procedures. In these training sessions, the SRSO team would reiterate a key message ‘think about the poor in the village, meet every member individually, and give each member the opportunity to share her opinion, discuss her problems, identify needs, and, most importantly, highlight their skills’.

The next challenging step was to convince other females in the village to foster COs. I along with the manager of our CO, visited houses in the village to convey the message of forming COs. The SRSO team also continued its efforts to mobilise the women, and form COs. Our efforts bore fruit; we fostered 12 COs and a VO,” she said.

After the CO and VO formation, the SRSO team supported the members to prepare household level Micro Investment Plans. Under the plans, each CO member household identifies activities that it can undertake on its own for income generation. They also identify what support is required to initiate the activity. The SRSO team, after two months, asked them to identify poor CO members who were willing to work for their own improvement. They identified households that lacked shelter, access to water and sufficient food, and then we passed a resolution and submitted it to the VO for support.

SRSO has supported the construction of two-room houses for 35 CO members in Akhtaryaar’s village through its Low Cost Housing Scheme. Another problem that they faced was access to drinking water. There were few hand pumps in the village, which created two problems: a lot of time was spent for collecting water and, sometimes, petty disputes would also arise as women and girls waited for their turn to fill their pots. SRSO had supported the installation of 13 hand pumps in the village in partnership with the COs. This has contributed to saving time, and reducing disputes.

SRSO had undertaken a poverty scorecard census in the village, whereby each household was given a score that indicated their poverty status; lower the score, higher the poverty level.

The households falling under the 0-18 category, the poorest category, were given an interest free loan from the Community Investment Fund that SRSO provided to our VO. CIF capital was used for income generating activities identified in the micro investment plan. The villagers were told that this fund was to be utilised only for income generation activities, and repaid fully within one year.

“My poverty score was below 18, and in 2009, I received a loan of Rs. 10,000. With this amount, I bought a goat because I knew that goats gave birth twice a year. The goat produced twin goatlings. After a while, I sold the goat and repaid the CIF loan. I was left with two goats as my assets. I looked after them for some time. Later, I sold one of them to pay for my children’s school fees. At the household level, now I was better off compared to 2009. My eldest son was already working, and the second son had started teaching at a school in another village. I did not need CIF anymore. However, I stayed involved in the CO and VO, to help my community members improve their livelihoods.”

She said, *“after the formation of Local Support Organisation (LSO) in 2011, we became even more active. All VOs in the Union Council federated in to the LSO, represented by one member from each VO.”*

One of the important issues in the village was that the village children did not go to school. Parents were unaware of the importance of education. The existing government school in the village was not functional. The school building was about to fall and it was used as a hay store, by influential people. Explaining the situation of village children, Akhtaryaar said, *“the village children used to spend all day roaming around in the streets and playing in the mud.”*

The issue was discussed in the LSO meeting. During the meeting, they came to know that the children’s situation was even worse in other villages. The LSO members realised the need for a functional school in the village. They passed a resolution and submitted it to SRSO seeking support for the construction of schools in two villages. SRSO signed an agreement with two VOs and provided support for construction of two schools.

Soon, the newly established Community Cluster School started regular classes. Initially, only 12 students took admission in the school. Villagers hesitated to send their daughters to school because only male teachers were present. Also, because many villages were far from the school, the parents feared that the girls could face a lot of hardships reaching the school. To address the fears of the parents, Akhtaryaar Khatoon along with her fellow LSO members went from door to door to ensure that every child is given his/her right of getting an education. She said that it was a challenging task for the LSO members to motivate parents to send their children to school. But their efforts bore fruit, and today 380 students are benefiting from the school at present. They were also successful in arranging transportation facilities for the girls coming from distant villages.

She continued talking about the activities that she has been involved with at the platform of LSO. Apart from the above activities, the LSO has established links with other organisations, such as Save the Children, Green Star, Hidayat Trust, Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF), HANDS and CHIP. The CO members have benefitted from their services. She has received an award from PPAF in recognition to her efforts through the platform of LSO in spreading awareness about sanitation, polio vaccinations, and maternal health.

So far, besides the above mentioned activities, she has been involved in helping the poor in her community to overcome their vulnerabilities. She said, *“we help the needy households. So far, the LSO arranged dowry items for nine poor girls, who could not get married because their*

families could not afford their dowry expenses. Also, the LSO arranged treatment fees for five babies from their UC who needed surgeries.”

Being a dynamic and sincere social leader, Akhtaryaar has been elected as the president of her VO and Vice President of LSO Bakhtawar. By participating in different activities, she has become bold, confident and courageous, eager to take more initiatives for the development of her community. She envisages to link her LSO with more organisations to help her people get more benefits and break the cycle of poverty. She says, *“my husband, who was once against my social activities feels proud about my efforts for development of the village.”*

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