



## Programme Introduction

In 2008, Mr Shoab 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 Jacobabad 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 such community member 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.

## Case Study 6 of 15: Ms. Zeenat Begum

*By Savaila Hunzai*

Ms. Zeenat Begum, 50 years old, lives in Qadirpur village of district Jacobabad. She was born and brought up in a small farmer family. Her father worked on his land and mother was a housewife, who also looked after the livestock. Zeenat was the eldest of her six siblings: four brothers and two



sisters. Zeenat got education only till grade two since her parents could not support her to continue further. Recollecting her childhood memories, Zeenat said that she and her brothers learned reciting Quran from a master in the village. She learned making Sindhi hats from a woman in her neighbourhood.

Zeenat was married at the age of 17 to a man that her family knew from village Qadirpur. She said that her husband was 10-15 years older than her. She said that the joint family including her parents-in-laws, five brothers-in-law (three of them were already married), and three sisters-in-law lived in a single-room mud house.

*June 2017*

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Zeenat's in-laws were sharecroppers on a landlord's land, which was their only source of livelihood. She said that they used to cultivate rice and wheat. From their share of the harvest, they stored produce for their annual food consumption. "We received one-third of the harvest that was never sufficient to meet family's needs. In shocks like lean periods and sickness, there was shortage of food and we used to borrow loan from the landlord. This usually led us to have more burden of loans and in harvesting season, we used to repay it in the form of produce from our share. We had a rather simple diet of boiled rice, potatoes and mustard leaves (saag). We used to ask our livestock owning neighbours for Lassi (butter milk). Unlike my parents, my in-laws did not own any livestock."

One year after her marriage, Zeenat gave birth to a baby boy. She said, "Later I had six children: four daughters and two sons. We did not have any hospital in vicinity. All births took place at home. Several times I had complexities during deliveries, but Allah helped me get through the hard times. At that time, we did not know about family planning, maternal and child health or vaccination."

Zeenat continued with her story, "My husband was the eldest of the siblings and he used to sit idle all day at a neighbour's tea cabin on the main road. My father-in-law tried to convince him so many times to help him in farming but it never worked for him. When family extended, it became unbearable for my in-laws to provide us food, clothing and space to live. We started to have arguments over food and space. The elders in the family asked my husband to leave the house along with me and my children. After separation, I was helped by my in-laws to collect straws to make a shelter for my children. In inheritance, I was given a Charpai [traditional bed], a Rilli [a traditional mat] and a Pillow. Apart from this I brought utensils that my father had gifted me in dowry. Leaving my young children in the hut, I started to work in fields for a landlord, who, in return, provided us one meal a day. While coming from fields in the evenings, I used to collect cow dung and pieces of wood to make fire to boil rice at home."

Life was never easy for Zeenat as her growing family needed resources barely to survive. Her husband kept roaming around in village and did not care about his family. Zeenat said, "I have seen the days when I had nothing other than water to feed my children. I used to beat myself and cried to sleep. I desired to feed my children, educate them and dress them up well like others, but I could not do it. It was a very painful time for me."

Zeenat said, "The flood and heavy rains in 2010 made us even more miserable. For seven months we took refuge in camps and relatives' places. When we returned back to our village, my hut was destroyed. My household items that I had stored at a neighbour's mud house were stolen. I felt helpless. We were left with nothing under the open sky. NGOs provided us cooked food to survive on. The food did not suit our children. We suffered from sicknesses. In this situation, SRSO discussed with our menfolk that they wanted to work with the community women. This was unusual for our men. Our men demanded that like other organisations, they should provide aid and leave. They even said that they did not have females at their homes. One NGO built single-room shelters for us and left us as time elapsed. We were still very vulnerable as we did not have much to eat. Fields were still inundated with

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flood waters. Our men searched for labour work but they were not lucky enough to get work every day.

SRSO's social mobilisation team kept visiting the village even they were warned not to interact with females. I heard that females in our neighbouring village had convinced their men and were benefitting from SRSO support. Therefore, I talked to my husband and he permitted me to interact with SRSO's female staff. I along with other 15 females in my locality met the SRSO's female Social Organiser (SO). The SO said that if we wanted to get support to improve our lives, we will have to make a Tanzeem (Community Organisation). Since all of us wanted to improve our lives, we agreed to form a CO and named it as Benazir. The reason we named our CO as Benazir was because we had thought that SRSO's Union Council Based Poverty Reduction Programme was supported by Benazir Bhutto's family."

Members of CO Benazir started to hold their weekly meetings at the government school. Zeenat said, "In the beginning, SO helped us to learn discipline. As we got accustomed with the meeting routines, we started to discuss about what we wanted to do to improve our livelihoods. Everyone in the CO made a Micro Investment Plan of their own household. I desired to own livestock, so I mentioned it in my Micro Investment Plan. I received a loan of Rs. 10,000 from Community Investment Fund (CIF) a month after formation of our CO in 2011. I purchased a goat with this amount. Luckily after six months, the goat produced three kids. I raised them, and then sold two to repay CIF loan. Then I had two goats left. Now this number has increase to four. Goat milk has added richness to our diet."

Zeenat applied for another loan from CIF and received Rs. 10,000 in 2012. With this money she bought petrol to sell it on a road side setup. Zeenat said, "As there was no petrol station nearby, I thought my son could sell petrol in mineral water bottles. Therefore, with the CIF loan my son purchased gallons of petrol from the city and sold it out on roadside in our village. We gained Rs. 100-150 per day as profit from this small business. I saved each penny and returned CIF loan within a year."

Zeenat speaks very fondly about CIF loans, "CIF was a base to accumulate more assets. From earnings, we were able to buy hens and my son has purchased a motorcycle which has made it easier for him to bring petrol from Jacobabad city."

Discussing about the common issues that the locals faced and suffered from prior to CO formation, Zeenat said that there was no dispensary in the village. "Males could go to the city and it was easy for them to have their medical check-ups when sick, but females had never seen a doctor. Problems related to maternal health were common. We had to go through complexities and never knew the solution. We used to have cases when stillborn remained in the womb for months."

In 2012, SRSO trained Traditionally Birth Attendants (TBA) from the community. Zeenat was selected by the CO to attend a 10-day TBA training where she learned about basic health care, support and advice during and after pregnancy and childbirth. Zeenat says happily, "Since then I have been serving my village and providing health care support, especially issues

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related to maternal health. Pregnant females get precautionary advice from me. I earn about Rs. 1,000 - 1,500 per child birth and some families pay me less or some pay more depending on the households' affordability."

Zeenat continued narrating the journey of her services at community level, "In the training, I had also learned about family planning. I started to make awareness in village women about family planning, but I did not have enough space in my house to accommodate their frequent visits. I requested wadera [Landlord] to grant me a plot of land to construct a single-room dispensary. Initially, he mocked me saying how would I afford to build a dispensary when I do not even own the land my house is built on. I told him that I will spend the money I earn by working as a midwife. He had also observed my services in the village, therefore, he permitted me to construct a room on his land. After six months, when I successfully built the room, the landlord contacted the Population Welfare Department for its assistance. After a visit to the dispensary, the Population Welfare Department appointed a Family Welfare Worker (FWW) and provided furniture and medical kit. Now, I help FWW in vaccinations and support her in basic health care during and after pregnancy and childbirth. Today each child in these two villages gets vaccinated. Mothers visit dispensary for medical consultations. I feel privileged to establish the first dispensary in the village."

Talking about Community Organisations' power and efforts, Zeenat Begum said, "Recently, the newly appointed District Officer at Population Welfare Department tried to shut down our dispensary and shift the funds to another Union Council. Although he knew, the village had this only health facility, he ordered to shift FWW along with the medical kit to another UC. In response to his reaction, the females from all COs from two VOs got united and rallied towards his office. We told him that we will post his ill intentions on the internet and inform Sindh government about his prejudice. Also, his staff informed him that women in these villages are organised and they are able to raise their voice through their organisations. Therefore, he declared that the dispensary will stay functional in the village."

Zeenat said, "Previously we were invisible because we could not speak up. We did not even know how to speak. We have now realised that it is not as difficult as we had thought to come out and speak up. We do not hide our faces while speaking in public anymore. Through community meetings we have strengthened ourselves as individuals', Community Organisations and Village Organisations to become a part of change. I hope our younger women will also ensure that activism through our organisation is sustainable."

Apart from empowerment at community level, Zeenat has also benefitted immensely at her household level. Population Welfare Department pays her Rs. 3,000 as room rent of the dispensary. She said that she has educated her daughters and a son to primary level. The eldest son is able to earn profit of Rs. 7,000-10,000 per month from the diesel business that he started with the CIF loan. Another son works as a Polio Officer and earns Rs. 500 per visit to villages. One of her daughters works as Midwife with the Department of Health and earns Rs. 15,000 as her monthly salary. Another daughter works as a support staff to FWW at the dispensary and receives Rs. 10,000 as her monthly salary.

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Zeenat concludes her story, "Now I am happy to see my children having much improved life. I foresee even a better future for them and their children as now they have good sources of income to properly look after their children, including educating them. All these improvements have happened in such a short time only due to the fact that community women got organised. We will always be grateful to the Government of Sindh for supporting us in getting organised and providing CIF."

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Disclaimer: This Publication is made possible with the support of Rural Support Programme Network (RSPN) and Sindh Rural Support Origination (SRSO). The content is the sole responsibility of the RSPN and SRSO and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Government of Sindh (GoS).

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