



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). The Chief Minister of Sindh considerably agreed to support the Thardeep Rural Development Programme (TRDP) to implement UCBPRP in Tharparkar district. Under UCBPRP, TRDP 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 11 of 15: Ms. Premi

By Savaila Hunzai

Ms. Premi resides in Lobhar village of district Tharparkar in Sindh. She does not remember her age but she shared her Computerised National Identity Card (CNIC) that showed that she is 40 years old. She was born and brought up in a village named Haryar in the same district. She was fifth of her nine siblings: five sisters and four brothers. Her parents were peasants, who worked on landowner's farms.

Remembering her childhood memories, Premi said, "We used to cultivate the lands only in the three-month long rainy season. After the first shower of rain, we used to plant the land owner's farms with the relevant seeds, usually millet. When it rained enough in season, we would get a good harvest. However, the years of bad weather when there was insufficient rain, the seeds would be wasted and our dreams were shattered. Food was easier to afford during the rainy season, if we had ample rain. We collected wild mushrooms, herbs and ate it with millet-bread.

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However, after the end of rainy season, we used to find nothing to eat. We survived on crushed chilli peppers and water for meals. In dry seasons, we preferred to migrate to the irrigated areas such as Badin and Ghotki in search of work and food for us and fodder for our animals. In these places, we used to work for wheat harvesting and cotton picking. Sometimes, landlords would allow us to cut weeds and grass to feed our goats. Sometimes in the years of scarcity, my father used to take the animals to richer farmers who did not migrate themselves, for compensation on a lump sum basis. We were not alone, all families, who did not own land and belonged to lower castes migrated during the sugarcane harvesting and cotton picking seasons.

Premi said that she was married at the age of 15. Her marriage was based on *Watta Satta*. She explained that her mother was married to her father based on the promise that one of his daughters would marry one of the males in the brides' maternal home. Later, Premi was selected to marry this person. She said with a laughter, "My husband was at least a double of my age. If I knew I had to marry this old man, I would at least have resisted getting married. Well, then, we were not even asked about our consent about getting married. All decisions regarding girls' marriages were made by elder men in the family." The joint family, including her father-in-law, his two wives, two brothers-in-law and her husband, lived in two thatched roof mud-huts. She said that at that time they did not have any concept about latrines, and the whole community practiced open defecation.

Premi said, "The resource scarce village did not have access to road, electricity, running water, school or any health facility. We lived in complete darkness at night. Kerosene lamps provided light, but we could barely afford a litre. We collected twigs that provided fuel for cooking. We used to manually grind millet to flour; nothing was mechanized. For generations, women fetched water from a far-off well. We carried the loads of water on our heads and made a trip of 3-4 km to reach home on daily basis. In droughts, the well would dry up and we used to search in neighbouring villages to get drinking water. Due to scarcity of water, I used to keep the dirty laundry water in buckets, so that the dirt would settle to the bottom and I would filter out the distilled water to reuse."

Premi's in-laws did not own any land or livestock. Selling labour was the only source of livelihood. They worked as sharecroppers on a local landowner's land. This meant that they received a small proportion of the harvest; the larger proportion went to the landowner. In order to earn extra income, the family worked as a day labourer for other farmers, earning meagre wages.

She said, "We have witnessed the years of drought, when we found nothing to eat. Because everyone in the village was desperately poor and no one had skills other than farming, we could not ask for help in the years of starvation. Many died from malnutrition-related diseases, and nearly all children suffered from the lack of proper food intake. In the years of drought, we used to migrate to irrigated areas to search for work and food. The village used to be empty, because in times of hunger people left to seek work elsewhere. However, in the years of good rains, women used to stay back, looked after children while our men migrated to barrage area to search for work. They worked as labourers in wheat, cotton, sugarcane and

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rice fields from dawn to dusk. In compensation to their work, they received a meagre wage that they would send us and thus we survived. We constantly lived on the margin, hand to mouth situation. Usually we boiled onion, pepper, or rice to eat. At times, we faced severe food shortages, we took loans from the local moneylenders to feed the family.”

Premi had a daughter after one year of her marriage and other 10 children including six daughters and four sons followed up with a natural gap of two years between every child. She said, “Only handful of children from village attended the government school that was located miles away in another village. We did not have any school in the village. Although the distant primary school offered education free of cost, we preferred our children to learn life skills from us and elders. Soon after they reached a certain height, we married off our daughters and our sons would support us in labouring work. We never left the village, visited a health facility or took a ride in a vehicle. Life was very simple, very subsistent and very hard.”

Premi said, “Life started to change for better, when TRDP started to work with us. It was about seven to eight years ago (2010), a team of staff members visited our village. On their first visit, we hid ourselves behind the bushes and observed them talking to our men. Our men shouted out to us and asked us to get together at one place. No one had ever visited us before. It was abnormal for us. We got scared when the staff members said, ‘they would work only with women’. Some of us thought that the outsiders would kidnap us. The team introduced the government of Sindh’s Union Council Based Poverty Reduction Programme (UCBPRP). After a discussion with the TRDP staff members, the local menfolk understood the message and allowed them to work with us. My brother-in-law said that the TRDP staff seemed to be trustworthy, also village men would have an eye on them while they would have meetings with women.”

After a week of the first meeting, TRDP field team revisited the village and met with the local women. While the village men observed, women attended the meeting. Premi remembers, “The Social Organiser said that TRDP would support us for improving our living conditions if we agreed to work in harmony in *Tanzeem* (Community Organisation). Initially, we were confused about this *Tanzeem*. We did not understand what she was talking about. However, I kept hearing and observed the meeting. She made us all sit in a circle. Then she asked us to choose a name for this group. We named the group as Bheel Paro after the name of our settlement. Then, we selected two members as our leaders. The leaders received training about mediating meetings and keeping the records of the meetings.” She said with a laughter, “With the passage of time, we got accustomed to attending meetings and we did not need our men to guard us anymore. Each of us in the CO was given a chance to speak. We did not know what was wrong and right. We used to introduce ourselves and say whatever came to our mind. TRDP staff was very kind with us. They respected our opinions even if it were not relevant to the meetings. We learned about saving money, health and hygiene, child care and sanitation. In the beginning we lacked money. We used to bring a bowl of millet to save in our monthly meeting.”

Premi said that before formation of CO, a Poverty Scorecard survey was conducted in the settlement. Once the CO was formed, the SO provided each household with their poverty

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score. Premi's household poverty score was five (05) out of 100. In the CO meetings, she learned about the Community Investment Fund (CIF); however, like other members of the CO she was not confident to take the loan. She said that she did not know where to invest because the only skill she had was farming and rearing livestock. The family neither had land, nor could they raise livestock due to consistent droughts for two years. She said, "When in 2011, we received heavy rains in monsoon, I expressed the desire for raising livestock. I asked the president for a CIF loan and received Rs. 5,000 (USD 50). With Rs 4,000 (USD 40) from CIF, I bought a milk giving goat and with remaining Rs. 1,000 (USD 10) I purchased fodder from a local hay lender. This added milk to my family's diet. Before, we used to have ground pepper with boiled rice or millet bread in our meals. We returned the loan after one year by selling two kids of the goat."

The rains in 2011 brought fresh hope to people, but it also made the villagers helpless. It damaged thatched-roof mud huts. The family restarted sharecropping on a land owner's land, and they lived in open spaces. She said that thankfully weather was good due to rains, and they would keep the children in open spaces. Premi further narrated, "We spent our night under the open sky, when, in a midnight, our hut fell down due to heavy rains. Next day the landowner, for whom we worked, granted us a tent for shelter. We lived in this shelter for four months. Then TRDP provided us two concrete rooms through the Low Cost Housing Scheme."

In 2012, after repaying the outstanding CIF loan, Premi applied for another loan from CIF. She received Rs. 15,000 (USD 150). With the money she bought two milk giving goats. She said that she sold the previous milk giving goat for Rs. 10,000 (USD 100) and two goat kids worth Rs. 5,000 (USD 50). She pooled both amounts and repaid the loan. Premi again applied for a loan and received Rs. 20,000 (USD 200) in 2013. She said that she spent Rs. 10,000 (USD 100) from this money on her daughter's marriage. She explained, "My daughter was engaged with a man for two years, but her marriage was delayed because we could not afford the expenses. The villagers used to make bad comments about the delay. Even her in-laws warned us several times.

Therefore, I sold two goat kids. Also, we spent half from the CIF loan on her wedding." With the remaining Rs. 10,000 (USD 100), she bought two goats. Premi was provided with a solar panel for lighting in 2014. She said, "We used to rely on kerosene as primary source of lighting. It also depended on the cash in hand as it costed us Rs. 10- 20 (USD 0.1-0.2) per day. Usually we spent our nights in darkness. The free of cost solar panels, lights along with a battery and a charger provided by TRDP became a convenient source of light. Also, we saved the money that we used to use on kerosene oil earlier."

Furthermore, she said that the government provided the villagers with clean water plants for household water supply. The villagers have now easy access to water. Also, in rainy seasons, they harvest the rain water in underground concrete tanks. She said that the family has two underground concrete tanks. "Previously we used to retrieve safe water from long distances if the nearby well dried out in droughts. The Reverse Osmosis (RO) plant and under water concrete tanks have made our lives much easier."

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The family applied for fourth CIF loan in 2015, and received Rs. 20,000 (USD 200). The family prospered by selling goats' kids and, over time, they bought a donkey, two sheep, seven milk giving goats, and 15 male goats. She said that apart from CIF and solar panels, she got awareness about many other things such as health and hygiene and child marriage. She explained, "In CO, we learned that the common viral diseases in our children were caused by poor sanitation system in our village. We did not have sanitation facilities, even a simple latrine. We defecated in the open spaces or children used to defecate around our huts. Open defecation further facilitated the spread of diseases. Now, we have latrines. Through CO, we learned to keep our surrounding and children clean. After getting organised in our CO, our living standards have improved tremendously. We now have economic assets, improved housing, including concrete rooms and latrine. We have access to water and electricity. I am thankful to the government of Sindh and TRDP for supporting us to improve our lives and for making our lives easier. Now we have a solid foundation to plan for a better life for our children."

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