



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 12 of 15: Ms. Kamla Devi

By Savaila Hunzai

Ms. Kamla Devi, who reckons she is somewhere in her late 40s, resides in Ghartiyara village of Taluka Nagarparkar of Tharparkar district of Sindh. She cannot quite remember her age, but she does remember her mother saying, "Kamla was born in the fearful days, when war erupted and East Pakistan was separated." Kamla remembers the anecdotes that her mother told her; they lived a satisfying and happy life



until the war erupted between Pakistan and India. The family's fate changed for worse when the local Hindu landlords, whom her parents worked for, migrated to India. After that, for years, they worked as tenants for the Thakkur community, who owned land and livestock. Like others in the village, the family's food security was linked to rainfall; in years of good rains their share from harvest was sufficient to meet their basic food needs and in years of lesser rains the agricultural production was less hence their share was also less and they faced

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food insecurity. Share of harvest was stored in large clay vessels. These vessels, made from natural and local material, kept the grains cool so to store them for the rest of the year. Kamla recalled, "We have seen days when we had nothing other than water in our meals," she said.

The family lived in a single mud hut. In a corner, there was a stove to cook meals. Like other villagers, they would collect twigs to make fire for cooking purpose. Kamla said that Beelti, her parents' hamlet, was far away from public services such as roads, basic health centre or schools. They did not have access to drinking water or electricity. They usually ignored their sickness or delayed it due to poverty. In serious sickness cases, they would take a loan from a local money lender and walked for hours to reach a hospital in Mithi.

Kamla said, "Since I was a little girl, I started working on the landowner's farms. I would help my mother in household work as well. That time, girls were not sent to any school, so I did not go either. My four brothers used to attend the local government school. After attending their classes, they would also join us in the farms to work."

She was married off to a man from Ghartiyara at the age of 14, without her consent, in accordance with the local tradition. At the time of her marriage, her husband studied in grade eight. After his classes, he would help his father in running a home-based shop with sweets, snacks and daily household use items in small quantities.

Kamla said, in the village the women's roles were clearly defined, and their roles were limited to household chores, taking care of children and working in agricultural fields. Soon after her marriage, she was engaged in daily household chores. Talking about her daily activities she said that she used to wake up early in the morning to collect water. She spoke about her memories of fetching water, "Our nearest well was at least 2-3 km away from our hut. Filling water was always my responsibility, while my husband stayed back at the shop or worked on farms. I needed at least eight pots a day for my family of five. I would carry two pots on my head, supported with right hand, and the other one beneath my left arm. I could carry three pots at a time. It required two to three trips a day. Each trip took at least two hours of walk through the fields in the blistering heat. It was even harder to fetch water when the nearer well dried up in the years of low rainfall. We used to wake up before dawn and walked out to search for water in other villages and reservoirs located behind the mountains. I suffered a miscarriage and my first child was a stillborn, because of a trip for fetching water from mountainside. The load of water with empty stomach caused labour pain on the way. When I returned home, I delivered the stillborn."

For six years Kamla could not conceive, and then she had three sons and a daughter, having gap of one year between every child. She said that her parents gifted her a cow, as part of her dowry when her first son was born.

Talking about the family's struggles, Kamla remembers how every year, she and her husband used to repair the family's shelter, the mud hut that eroded away in rains. The family used to become helpless when rainwater poured down in the hut making the living space muddy. Yet, the rains are also a great blessing for the people living in Tharparkar.

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Kamla said, "Our livelihood depended on rains only. We cultivated millet and onions on a landowner's fields. At the time of harvest, we could get a small portion of production that we stored for household's consumption. Most often we ran out of the basic food supplies within few months of the harvest. When we didn't receive rain, all water reservoirs would dry up and we used to face famine-like situation. My cow could not produce enough milk for the family because of lack of fodder in drought years. My children cried with empty stomachs. Until recently, we used to face droughts every two or three years, causing starvation, malnutrition, diseases and deaths in the community. My parents-in-law used to collect latex from wild trees and sold it in Nangar city and thus it was a mean of livelihood. With the earnings from gum selling, my father-in-law would buy sugar, tea and other needs of household use. That time the prices of food items such as wheat, sugar, tea and vegetables were low. Every month, my father-in-law would bring ration for the family. However, when in droughts, neither we could cultivate land nor could we collect latex. We could not even find drinking water in the village."

Kamla continued with her story, "Almost 11-12 years ago, consecutive two years of drought left us with just nothing. We relied on the family shop. But since people did not have any purchasing power, the shop had to be closed down. Our household income fell down drastically and we faced economic and food crises. In the same year, my husband, who taught at a primary school for livelihood, suffered from Hepatitis-D. We were unable to afford his immediate treatment, because we could barely afford a single meal a day. We could not see my husband's health getting worse. We took a loan of Rs. 30,000 (USD 3000) on interest from a local money lender and took him to Mithi for his treatment. Apart from this loan, we had taken small loans from local land owners too to meet daily needs. The interest on these loans kept on increasing and we could not repay. It brought trauma to the family. I could not sleep at nights. I used to think about moneylenders who might come to ask me for the money tomorrow and would behave inappropriately with me in front of my fellow community members. What should I tell them? Where should I hide myself? We sold our cow and its calf and paid off part of the loans, yet we were still under debt." Kamla began to cry while narrating this sad chapter of her life.

After regaining composure, Kamla said, "My children had already dropped out from the primary school. They had started to work for a landowner, but all efforts on land were futile because it was another year of drought. Out of helplessness with hunger and burdened under loans, we decided to migrate to the irrigated areas in search of food and employment. We had just packed our luggage and were ready to move when a vehicle came to the settlement. Three men and a woman came out from the car and walked towards us. They asked us to call out to all our neighbours and to get together at one place. The village men gathered around the vehicle and started to inquire about who the people were and what they were doing in the village. After a long discussion with the local men, the visitors introduced their organisation as Thardeep Rural Development Programme (TRDP) and Government of Sindh's Union Council Based Poverty Reduction Programme (UCBPRP)."

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Kamla said with a laughter, “They came to our village to help us and we did not trust them unknowingly. They said the women of this village will have to come together in a group so that they can discuss their needs, problems and potential. Our men got angry hearing the programme was only for women. The team kept visiting the village and conducted a survey. Not a single female talked to them because it was not in our tradition to talk to strangers. Also, in the presence of our men, we had never spoken a single word. We only followed what our men said. No one had ever asked the women for their needs, concerns and potentials. This was strange. The TRDP staff wanted to talk to us. We did not know how to speak. We only knew that speaking in public, attending meetings, and taking decisions were all men’s responsibilities. How could we discuss the poverty problems when the families’ men were still alive? The TRDP staff fully explained the programme and how they could help us all via the women’s groups. If we agree to enter into a partnership with TRDP, then the organisation can provide much support to all households to improve their situation. TRDP’s interventions were linked to poverty score of households. After listening to TRDP staff members, my family decided not to migrate to irrigated areas and stay back in Ghartiara.”

Kamla continued with her story, “It was a huge challenge for TRDP team to convince the villagers. However, TRDP team was successful in convincing few of us. They said that they would support us in reducing poverty and improving our family’s economic conditions. To get support, we agreed to make the *Tanzeem* (Community Organisation - CO). My CO consisted of 15 women members and was named as Raichand Paro. Initially, our meetings were mediated by a Social Organiser from TRDP. I observed their discussions and stayed silent. When they asked us to introduce ourselves, we refused. We were very shy. We had never announced our name before.”

Members of CO Raichand Paro selected their president and manager to lead them. Kamla narrated, “When the SO asked us to select our leaders we got bewildered about it. We did not know what president and manager meant. We laughed and whispered in each other’s ears saying how a female can be a leader. After our meeting, we held discussions amongst ourselves and finally agreed to select two members as leaders. We decided to select members who were respected in the community, were trustworthy and could allocate time to manage CO affairs. CO activities were totally strange for us, and also for our men.”

Kamla remembers vividly, “Some of the village men looked down upon us because we talked to strangers. Some even mocked at us commenting, ‘Now, these illiterate women will become presidents and become leaders.’ They said, ‘You are not going to get anything from these meetings. You are just wasting your time.’ However, in these meetings, we had got a sense of self development. We could learn something new in every meeting. We learned about saving money, the importance of sanitation, health and hygiene. Therefore, we continued attending meetings every month. The village men were not happy about our meetings with TRDP. Even, some of the females, who were not members of CO, taunted us. The village men got agitated even more when TRDP asked us to attend trainings being organised in other towns and cities. This was, indeed, out of our custom. We had never stepped out without a male escort. I had walked to other villages in search of drinking water but that too in a group. I had never imagined that someday an organisation would come and ask me to travel to different towns,

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attend workshops and learn new things, all for free of cost. My husband, who was a teacher and had met TRDP staff, allowed me to attend the meetings. However, some community members came up with rumours that these strangers would take us to different cities and lock us up in rooms. They would not let us return back. I personally talked to the female SO about our doubts. She assured my safety and security. This enhanced my confidence and I agreed to attend workshops.”

Kamla said that three more COs were formed in the locality. The presidents and managers from all four COs met in the Village Organisation (VO). “Now, as we were organised well in our COs, and the CO leaders were able to conduct meetings, they kept records of the meetings. TRDP provided each member with the result from the Poverty Scorecard census that they had conducted. My family’s poverty score was 14. TRDP asked us to discuss our problems at the platform of CO and pass a resolution to get support.”

After formation of the VO, Kamla and her fellow CO members were asked to fill Micro Investment Plans (MIPs) for their households. In her plan, Kamla showed an interest of opening a small shop. As the family’s previous shop was finished due to drought, Kamla wanted to restore her previous source of income. She said, “My husband could manage it well, so I decided to reopen a shop.” She said that many families, who were more vulnerable, received Income Generating Grants (IGGs), but she received a loan from Community Investment Fund (CIF). In 2011, she received a CIF loan of Rs. 20,000 (USD 200). She bought goods with the money and opened a shop. While her husband, who taught at the primary school, fulfilled the household needs, her eldest son looked after the shop. She saved the profits and bought more items, and returned the loan in quarterly payments. Kamla said, “I took the decision that the earnings from this shop must be reinvested in buying new goods and my son followed the rule. My son kept variety of products including tea, sugar, *gur*, ghee, flour, and other edibles at the shop.”

In the same year, TRDP provided concrete houses to the villagers through its Low Cost Housing Scheme. Kamla explained, “The rains in 2011 hit the village hard. It damaged our mud-huts leaving us homeless. My shelter was also vulnerable to rains. It could collapse any time. TRDP conducted a survey in the village and identified the households, whose huts were damaged. My house was also in the list. They provided me with two concrete-huts. The new shelter was much safer and secure for us. My husband did the necessary maintenance of our old shelter and kept the shop items there and shifted my family to the new concrete house. As my household conditions were getting better, I sent my children to school to get education.”

Kamla said that she got a 15-day long tailoring training in 2011. With Rs. 5,000 (USD 50), from the profits of the shop, she bought a second hand sewing machine. She said, “At home, I started to stitch clothes for villagers and contributed to the income.” Her daughters also learned stitching clothes from their mother and helped her complete the demands of stitching clothes. She said, “I stitched two dresses per day and charged Rs. 200 (USD 2) per dress. After few months of the training session, when TRDP staff revisited us to observe our monthly meetings, they also took notice of my stitching skills.” Later, TRDP requested Kamla to become a Master Trainer and teach other females in neighbouring villages to which she agreed. TRDP

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provided her with conveyance, food, lodging, and remunerated her with Rs. 1,000 (USD 10) per day for this job.

Kamla said, "With increase in my contribution to household income, my husband respected my decisions more. I observed a change in his behaviour when he asked for my opinion regarding purchases for the shop. My sons would not do anything without asking my permission. I sent younger children to school, while the eldest one studied at home and kept running the shop. My eldest son learned business skills and is now mature enough to earn for the family. I also arranged his marriage."

In 2013, Kamla applied for another CIF loan and received Rs. 30,000 (USD 300). She told her son to keep cosmetics, shoes, fabric, kerosene oil and other basic items. With careful investment in the family's business, they have become more successful. Over time they needed more space to keep more items. With the profits, the family built a concrete shop.

She said with a big smile on her face, "My husband continued teaching in the primary school, my son kept the shop, daughter stitched clothes for villagers and I provided training session to females in 50 Training Centres. In each Centre, I spent 15 days and village females learned stitching clothes from me. As the Master Trainer, I had to visit far-off villages to ensure the tailoring skills are getting polished. I even spent nights in their villages. My husband's trust was very important and his support allowed me to perform the work of Master Trainer. As a Master Trainer with TRDP, over the years, I have earned about Rs. 750,000 (USD 7,500). I bought sewing machines for both my daughters and daughter-in-law. I encouraged my daughter-in-law to become a member of CO. Along with some other females, my daughter-in-law also learned the art of embroidery and artisan work from a vocational training provided by TRDP. I encouraged her to learn with interest so to utilise her skills for her future endeavours. She followed my footsteps and became a Master Trainer of embroidery work. TRDP hired her as Master Trainer in their Livelihood Enhancement Project to teach embroidery work to females in 10 centres. Like mine, the training session in each Centre lasted for 15 days. She earned Rs. 1,000 (USD 10) per day. Now, she makes embroidered items and stitches clothes on demand. My two daughters have also learned the skills. Along with gold and livestock, I have given them sewing machines as dowry. They are happily married and selfemployed. They are able to participate in and contribute to their household incomes."

Kamla said proudly, "Being a member of CO, I gained new skills and got CIF loans. I have mobilised assets worth hundreds and thousands of rupees. With the money I earned from the trainings, I have opened a general store. We categorised the sale items and kept in four stores. In one of the stores, I keep cosmetics, utensils, shoes, bags, children's clothes, threads and many more. In the second one, we have kept tons of grocery products including rice, lentils, grains, flour, oils, sugar, tea, spices, etc. We sell petrol, diesel and other lubricants in the third store. In fourth one, we keep surplus products."

Over the years, the family's economic situation has improved dramatically and this is reflected in the quantity and diversity of its productive assets; the family owns 10 goats, three cows, a donkey, two motor bikes, a rickshaw for conveyance, and purchased 8 acres of land from the

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earnings they made through their business. The family now lives in two well-furnished concrete houses. They also have attached toilets. Kamla said, "Previously, the whole community practiced open defecation, now everyone builds a toilet before they build a new house. Now, as we are well aware about importance of hygiene and sanitation, we keep dirt away from our living space. We have secure toilets now. I use my old mud huts as my kitchen and storage space. Now, we live in these comfortable concrete rooms. Recently, my husband has purchased a solar panel worth Rs 250,000 (USD 2,500) for electricity supply for our home and shops. We also have refrigerators, which makes our lives much easier."

Kamla says that apart from all the economic benefits that she, her family and community have gained over the years, another key benefit has been the increase in social awareness. She explained, "Previously, landlords used to threaten us when we asked for our right share of production at the time of harvest. Also, after all the annual drudgery, we were compensated with a meagre payment in-kind that was not sufficient and finished within few weeks after harvest. We were threatened when we asked for more. After getting organised in our COs, we have recognised our strength to earn a living for ourselves rather than being in slavery of landlords. Through the CO, we received CIF and acquired skills that we utilised to build diversified sources of livelihood. I am no more intimidated by any landlord. Instead, I am emboldened by my own strength and the strength of the other women who I encourage to become more aware and empowered.

"Acquiring exposure through sharing my experience in different cities like Islamabad, Karachi and Mithi, I have now realised that in order to attain greater achievements, we need to continue educating ourselves and not to be easily dismayed by the problems encountered along the way. I have planned to educate my grandchildren, both granddaughters and grandsons to get higher education. Earlier, we used to arrange marriage for our daughters at very young age, now we know through awareness sessions that child marriage is a crime. Children should get their proper rights of getting education and should not be married before they reach 18 years of age. Further, TRDP supported us to trust our strength. We will have to act and stand up for ourselves."

Talking about the community's accomplishments through CO and VO Kamla said, "Every member family of our CO is improving their condition at the household level. Villagers have used their CIF loans in productive activities. Many CO members have raised livestock and sell milk and animals, while others have acquired skills and utilised CIF loans for income generation. In the CO we discussed about problem of drinking water. TRDP supported us to install a dug-well, but we were not lucky enough to get drinkable water. At least, we use this water for laundry and for cattle. Later, we consulted the concerned Government Department and they provided us with another dug-well. Now, we have access to drinking water from nearby dug-well. We are now safe from the drudgery of water fetching."

Further, Kamla has worked with different organisations to promote awareness about nutrition, health, hygiene, and family planning. She said that TRDP linked the VO with other organisations such as HANDS. Currently Kamla works with HANDS to promote awareness about malnutrition. She encourages community members for getting regular medical check-

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ups and also identifies malnutrition in kids and refers them for proper food intake. Kamla said, “So far, I have identified 14 children who suffer from severe malnutrition in my village. I have provided them with information about proper food intake and healthy habits to ensure their recovery.” She registered all the pregnant women in her catchment area and regularly undertakes household visits to advise them about the importance of pre-natal check-ups, nutrition, and immunisation of pregnant women and vaccination of young children. In particular, Kamla does her best to make sure that pregnant women get access to healthcare.

She explained, “When pregnant mothers do hard work due to poverty, it makes both mother and child weak. Even their sugar levels drop down that not only the mother is faced with a life threatening situation, but also the unborn child. We used to have high maternal mortality rate in our village, because we could not afford to see a doctor. We were faced with difficult financial decisions, now that we are able to earn and contribute to household income, we spend on our health as well.”

Kamla has now become a role model for other poor women in the community. Her example demonstrates that when poor women get organised in their own CO, they learn to develop a voice, articulate their needs and potentials, and with suitable support and encouragement, harness their own potential for well-being of their families and communities. Kamla concluded her story by saying, “The eco-system is the same. Yet at one time we were destitute and about to migrate from the village. Then the Union Plan of the Government of Sindh came and our lives have changed in a revolutionary manner. Looking back, I think that we always had the potential to improve our lives. Only the catalyst was missing, which for us was TRDP. This organisation supported us. Essentially, TRDP showed us the power of organisation, capital and skills. We are all moving forward because we have our own organisations, we have capital (through savings and CIF) and skills. This has given us confidence, and hope. We have plans to carry on this virtuous spiral of socio-economic improvement for all.”

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