



Government of Sindh's Union Council Based Poverty Reduction Programme
Social and Economic Empowerment of Women
Household Case Studies from Tharparkar District



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 14 of 15: Ms. Meghi

By Savaila Hunzai

Ms. Meghi is a 50-year-old woman, who was born and grew up in Tando Jam Muhammad of district Mirpurkhas in Sindh. She now resides in Malji Jo Wandio in Nagarparkar. She was the eldest of her 10 siblings; eight sisters and two brothers. Remembering her childhood days with her parents, Meghi said that her father worked as a mason and mother was a housewife. The family lived in a single room mud house. They did not own any land,



but did labouring work on the landlords' fields at the time of harvest. She recollects the memories of activities with her parents.

Meghi said, "My mother used to wake us up early in the morning. After a minimal breakfast, we used to leave for the fields. We would collect cotton, cut rice or sugarcane. We also collected peppers for our meals. Our meals usually varied according to the type of harvest.

December 2017

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From dawn to dusk, we toiled in the fields, ate whatever harvest was ready, including chillies or sugarcane in the day time, and returned home in late evenings. While returning home, we used to collect fodder for our buffalo and two cows.” Her brothers were the youngest, and soon after they turned five her father sent them to a government primary school. She learned stitching clothes from her mother. She said that at that time girls’ education was not common. Girls usually supported their parents in household chores and farming activities. Soon after they reached the age of 12-15, families would arrange their marriages. She said that in Mirpurkhas they had access to drinking water that they also used for their livestock.

Meghi was only 13 years old when her parents arranged her marriage to a man in Malji Jo Wandio, where one of her mother’s relatives resided. She remembers that at that time, there was not any trend of dowry but her parents had still gifted her a buffalo calf as part of her dowry. The joint family of nine members, including parents-in-law, grandparents-in-law, two sisters-in-law and a brother-in-law, lived in two mud huts. The family did not own any land or livestock and worked as labourers for local landowners in agriculture farming and earned a portion of harvest. The share lasted few months. Her father-in-law made wooden shoes for sale and husband shepherded for a local livestock owner on a meagre wage. They lived hand to mouth.

Meghi said that her life changed for the worst after her marriage. The resource scarce village lacked access to drinking water. Females used to make trips to other villages to collect drinking water. Each round of the trip took at least two hours. She explained, “On the second day of my marriage, I was given the responsibility of fetching water from the far-off dug-well. It was exhausting to walk in sweltering heat. Carrying the water loads was even worse.” She had a son after one year of her marriage, and the other seven children (four sons and three daughters) followed up with the natural gap of three years between every child. As the family size increased they required more resources to feed the family. She said that the elders in the family usually slept with empty stomach due to unavailability of food.

The villagers often faced famine-like situation due to droughts, Meghi said. In droughts, they usually starved or migrated to irrigated areas. She narrated, “We walked more than a hundred kilometres to search for a suitable place to build a temporary shelter. After collaborating with the local landlord about labour work, we would collect twigs and straws and make a wall-less shack in a corner of a field. With no safety, security and privacy we used to live in the wall-less shelters for months. We defecated in open spaces. The rainwater would seep down on us making the living space muddy. We used to live with all sorts of bad smells; earthy, sweat, mould, and sometimes the smell of sickness, rotting plants and standing water. We could not even afford a *rilli*. We often faced the aggressive pressure tactics of landlords.”

Recollecting the hardships of family’s income shocks she narrated, “We could barely afford a single meal throughout the day. We never had cash in hand. When her mother-in-law passed away, they had nothing other than water at their house. My father-in-law and husband contacted a landlord in Digri and took a loan to fulfil the post death rituals. After a couple of months, we moved to Digri to work on the landlord’s land in order to repay the loan. We built a temporary shelter in a corner of the fields. Throughout the day we toiled in the fields leaving

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our children back in the shelter. At the end of the day, the landlord provided us a meal to survive. While the elders worked in the fields, the young children used to starve back in shelter. Therefore, my husband sent the elder three sons to work as labourers in construction areas to earn their food. My eldest child was just 13 or 14, he took his younger two brothers along with him, to the work place. They would lift bricks and supported masons. This way they could at least feed themselves." She said with tears in her eyes, "The landlord would become aggressive when we stayed back to look after the young children if they were sick. Our children were often attacked by diseases like malaria, vomiting and diarrhoea. These diseases persisted for more than a couple of days. Every other week one of our children would get ill. We wanted to return to our village, but the landlord kept us in his slavery for six years to repay the outstanding loan."

After six years of staying in Digri, when Meghi's family returned to the village, they found their huts damaged by rainwater. The mud-walls had eroded away by the rainwater. Meghi narrated, "As we had no other place to live, we begged our neighbours to grant us space in their huts for couple of weeks until we were able to build a shelter for our family. We dug the dunes and collected soil to make mud and rebuild the walls of our hut. We roofed with boughs and twigs. We made the roof sloping and smeared with straws. The ridged roof drew off the rainwater in monsoon. Once our shelter was ready, we moved to our home."

Meghi said, "We started our work of sharecropping. Our children also supported us in farm activities and the landowner provided us with meals. The dug-wells were refilled by rainwater and now it was easier to fetch water from the nearby well. We were just expecting our lives to get better in own hamlet, when another cursed day occurred. A hut in neighbourhood mysteriously caught fire around midnight. We heard screams of our fellow villagers and found that all huts in the row including our shelter had caught fire. The fire spread throughout the hamlet and burnt almost 20 huts in a row. We rescued our lives and spent our night crying about our poverty ridden fate under the open sky. All our endowments and small items were burnt. We were just left with the clothes that we were wearing. The community got together and collected charity from other towns. We made temporary shelters once again. We were left with nothing, not a single *rilli*, once again."

The family, along with other victims of fire, became vulnerable. Meghi said that for meals, they minced pepper and mixed it with *lassi* (butter milk) that they had begged from livestock owning neighbours. There was no variety in meals. Often they slept with empty stomachs. She said that due to frequent food shortages, her children grew weak. They could not afford to have meals three times a day.

Meghi said, "Every passing day was extremely stressful as we were in dire poverty. Then one day Thardeep Rural Development Programme's field staff came to support us to improve our lives for the better. On their first visit, we did not trust them. Our men kept them away from us (the community women) and asked them about their motives for visiting the community. We did not trust the outsiders easily. On their next visit, when a female staff member was part of the team, we agreed to sit with them. We called out all women from the settlement to gather in one common place. TRDP team said, 'If you want the government of Sindh to

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support you in building the sources of livelihood and improve your poor conditions, you will have to get organised into a *Tanzeem* (Community Organisation). Although we did not understand what *Tanzeem* (CO) was or what it meant, we agreed to work with TRDP. The field officer said that the programme is to provide support and benefits to all members of the households, however this will be done through the social mobilisation of village women into *Tanzeems*. With their frequent visits and kind and helpful attitude, TRDP team won our trust and we started to share our problems and potentials with them without any fear.”

In 2011, Meghi became a member of a CO that consisted of 18 members. The CO members christened their organisation CO *Roshan* (bright). She said, “We selected our president and a manager, who attended training sessions about record keeping, savings and setting meeting agendas. We learned about saving money, but we never had cash in hand. All money matters were dealt by menfolk. We did not have courage to ask for money to save in our CO. Before, we did not even talk well with our neighbours, but after becoming CO members we started to socialise with fellow villagers. We learned each other’s problems.”

Meghi spoke about her fear of outsiders and mobility, “We had never stepped out without escort of a family male member before. Our lives were restricted to agricultural fields and household chores. We had never visited a hospital, school or a bank. TRDP’s social organiser asked us to open a bank account to save the money that every member collected in the CO monthly meetings. Each of us saved Rs. 30 (USD 0.3) per month. It was the first time in my life when I was expected to visit a bank and open an account.” She narrated with a laughter, “When at the gate of bank, I saw the guards holding guns in their hand, I started shivering out of fear. I, along with the fellow CO members mistook the guard as someone who would capture us. We did not know that the guard was there for our safety. We were totally ignorant.”

However, with the passage of time, Meghi remembered that all women enjoyed CO meetings. They became good friends and laughed out loud rehearsing what the SO taught them in the meetings. She said, “We learned about the significance of health and hygiene, child care, vaccinations, and living in harmony. Before, we did not wash our dresses for months and years, now we keep ourselves clean and keep our houses and streets clean.” In one of their meetings, Meghi and her fellow CO members received results from the Poverty Scorecard survey. Meghi’s family’s poverty score was six (6). The SO asked all CO members to fill Micro Investment Plan (MIP) for their respective households. Meghi said, “In MIP, I was asked to identify an income generating activity that my household members could undertake themselves. I had always wanted to raise small animals like goats because they are easy to look after and are productive.

Therefore, I identified goat rearing as my income generating activity. I also mentioned that I could not undertake this activity as I was lacking capital, therefore I needed access to capital to initiate this activity.” Meghi applied for a loan from Community Investment Fund (CIF), and received a loan of Rs. 20,000 (USD 200). She bought five goats with this amount. Apart from continuing her farm based work, Meghi also looked after the goats. The goats produced kids and milk. This improved the family’s nutrition. The family sold the goat kids and returned the

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CIF loan within a year. Meghi said that while her husband continued working as labourer in fields, she looked after her livestock. She said, “We often feared droughts, so we did not keep more livestock. We had goats that produced milk so we did not bother our neighbours who owned livestock for milk and *lassi* anymore.”

The family's food consumption smoothed with time; however, the house's physical conditions were still not good. She said that the family often felt insecure living under the fragile thatched roof because it could fall anytime in rains. In 2014, TRDP conducted a survey of physically weak houses in the settlement and provided the deserving households with support from the Low Cost Housing Scheme. Meghi said that through this scheme, her family was provided with two concrete rooms. “The new house is now safe and secure,” she said.

Meanwhile, Meghi kept attending the CO meetings. She learned about the importance of educating her children. She said, “Due to poverty, we could not send our elder children to schools. We needed them to support us in fields and also they worked in construction areas since a very young age. However, now my youngest son and a daughter get formal education in school. My son studies in grade 3, and my daughter is in grade 4.”

Getting united in the CO has enabled the women to identify their common problems and seek their respective solutions. Meghi said, “We shared the problem of drinking water in the village. It was the hardest responsibility that only women were expected to undertake. Carrying the loads of water over our heads often made us sick and tired. We passed a resolution to TRDP, and they provided each household with a water hand pump. Now, we have access to drinking water at our doorstep. This scheme has made our lives easier and saved our time that we earlier spent on fetching water from the far-off dug-wells. Later, the government also installed a tube well in the vicinity. Now, in leisure time, I make *rillis* for villagers. They place orders with their material and I charge Rs. 500 (USD 5) as my labour per *rilli*. I have developed the habit of saving and I save money in my CO account.” Using her surplus time, Meghi attended a 15-day long vocational training course arranged by TRDP. She learned tailoring skills. On return, she bought a sewing machine with the money from her savings and taught her daughters as well. She charged Rs. 150- 200 (USD 1.5-2.0) per dress. She said that she and her daughters have been saving money to buy a buffalo for her daughter who is married.

Meghi said, “Due to the tube well we had adequate water in the vicinity so we could grow onions as tenants. However, I did not have enough cash in my hand to buy seed. I applied for and received a CIF loan of Rs. 15,000 (USD 150) in 2016. Under an agreement with a local landlord, I planted onions and looked after the crop. After harvest, from my own share I sold onions worth Rs. 200,000 (USD 2,000). With Rs. 70,000 (USD 700) from this money, I bought gold and silver jewellery. Now, this jewellery is one of my assets, and I can sell it at any time, especially in case of any emergency. I was also able to arrange marriages for my daughter and son from this earning. If I did not have this cash in hand, the marriage expenditures would put strain on our assets, maybe leading us to indebtedness.”

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Meghi concluded her story with pride on her face, “Becoming members of CO was the best thing that ever happened to our community women. Everyone has benefited in one way or the other. I was able to accumulate economic and productive assets for my family. With the earnings from my tailoring and embroidery work, I have bought solar panels to produce electricity for lighting. It operates three electric fans, and four light bulbs at a time. Before, we used to charge our cell phones in the town. Every time we charged a cell phone, we paid the shopkeeper Rs. 20 (USD 0.2). Now, our spending on charging cell phones is saved. We have three cell phones to communicate. I have four goats and two cows. My elder two sons work as sharecroppers, while younger one looks after our goats and cows along with the herd of others’ livestock. The youngest son attends the school. TRDP provided us with a good shelter and we have also built a latrine. There was a time when we endured hunger, but now we have milk, vegetables, wheat, rice and other food items we buy from the market. All this change has happened because TRDP organised us, and capacitated us. TRDP has been a true change agent for us.”

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

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