



**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 6 of 15: Ms. Soomri**

*By Savaila Hunzai*

Ms Soomri, a 37-year-old woman, lives in Tobhario village of Tharparkar district in Sindh. She was born and brought up in barrage area of Sindh. She was fifth out of her nine siblings; five brothers and four sisters. The family lived in a single room mud-house. They owned some livestock and her brothers shepherded other people's livestock to earn a livelihood.



Her father worked as a peasant for a land owner, who compensated the family in-

kind, in the form of seasonal harvest. Remembering her childhood memories, she said that since a very young age she started working with her parents in fields collecting cotton, chillies, hay for livestock, and firewood for cooking meals. Their meals included butter milk or minced chillies with flat bread. She said that the family collected water for household consumption from the river where they did their laundry as well. Also, the villagers used the same water

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for their cattle's consumption. Due to poverty and lack of awareness about females' education in the settlement, Soomri did not attend any formal school.

Soon after she learned doing household chores, her parents decided for her to get married to a man from Barjang Ji Dhani village of the same district. She does not remember her age at the time of her marriage. However, she said that she was in her early teens when she was married off to a man who was at least 10 years older than her. The family of 11 members including parents-in-law, four brothers-in-law, and four sisters-in-law lived in two mud-huts. She remembered that at the time of her marriage, her in-laws owned a herd of goats and 15 camels. Her brothers-in-law looked after the family's livestock, and her husband worked as a labourer on a land owner's land and earned livelihood in-kind, a small portion of harvest. In the lean season, her husband would migrate to barrage area to search for labour work on farms.

She said that as the whole community in the settlement relied on the sole dug-well for drinking water, there used to be fights among the villagers over their turns to fill their buckets. Also, for laundry and cattle they used the bitter water available in the village. Her daily activities involved fetching water from the nearby dug-well where water was 145 feet below the surface. Then, she would grind 2-3 KGs of wheat to make flour for family's daily consumption and collect twigs to put on fire to cook breakfast. After feeding the men in the family, she would eat her breakfast with kids. She said that the family had access to nutritious food as her husband was able to earn sufficient income for the household's consumption. Also, they had a herd of livestock that produced milk, butter, and butter milk. They would exchange milk for rice, wheat and other necessities.

However, after five years of her marriage in the year 2001, the family's life turned towards extreme poverty, she said. A local land owner claimed his ownership over their settlement and forced the villagers, who lived in huts, to leave the village. She explained, "When he [local land owner] started warning us to leave the village, my husband and his brothers came forward to fight for their rights. As husband's forefather lived in the settlement for ages, nobody had claimed over their land before. Local population kept increasing and we required more water sources for household consumption. We already had arguments among ourselves in the community.

Many villagers left the village in fear. However, my family members and some neighbours stayed determined and fought back with the landlord." she continued, "the landlord had links with the police, they arrested my husband and two brothers-in-law. Also, they forced us to leave the settlement. While my husband and brothers-in-law were imprisoned, we left our settlement and started to live in this far-off village named Tobhario. Here, some of our neighbours had already made straw shelters. We collected wood pillars and some straws to make shelters on a sand dune. We did not have access to water at the new place, not even bitter water for our livestock."

Talking about her life in Tobhario, she said, "Life turned to be difficult since the day we migrated to this resource-scarce village – with no electricity, no access to drinking water or

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basic health and education facility. My daily routine changed for worse. It would take at least three hours to collect a single bucket of water from a far-off dug-well. Unlike before, here, I was expected to wake up before dawn to fetch water. We could barely collect enough water for household use and for our livestock, we did not have any source of water. Later, in Pervaiz Musharraf's reign, the government provided water canals and brought water nearer to the village."

She had a son after three years of her marriage. She said that with the natural gap of two years she had another son. After three years of her second son, she had two daughters. She said that the growing family required more resources denting the existing subsistent income. The family's economic vulnerability increased as they sold all their livestock to get bail of the imprisoned family members.

She said, "We sold all livestock for the bail. Also, due to scarcity of water, we could not even keep a single goat. This resulted in denting the household income. Now, we didn't have any source of income other than selling our labour. On the lucky days, when my husband got some work to do, we used to have food in our plates. Else, we had to beg our neighbours for stale *roti* and *lassi* (butter milk). Most often, we made our children sleep with empty stomach."

Adding to her vulnerable conditions, Soomri suffered from epilepsy after she got married. She said, "Several times I had this sudden attack of convulsions or loss of consciousness. We perceived it as a source of punishment from gods. Usually in such sort of sickness we never seek medication from a doctor. Rather, I was taken to a *Bhopa*, who found that I was bewitched with a *Kala Saaya* (bad spirit). Every time I went through the attacks, my family would call *Bhopa*, who hit me with brooms and hard sticks to make the bad spirit run away. Once I was hit by a rock and I got injured. Crying... I was even hit by hot heavy iron chains. It created scars on my body and its pain lasted for months."

With the pressing problems of hunger and diseases, the growing family needed more space to live. They decided to split the family and live in separate huts. Soomri along with her four children started to live in a straw hut. She said, "After separation, I became even more vulnerable. My family had to wait with empty stomach until my husband found work to do and earn food. I spent days when I did not have anything to put on the stove to cook. Being a mother, it was very difficult for me to see my children cry out of hunger. With the increasing tension of poverty, I started to get frequent attacks. Although we had split the family, we looked after each other's kids."

"One day while cooking *roti*, I suffered the attack and fell down on the stove. I caught the fire and it extended to burn the straws of the hut. My sisters-in-law observed the smoke coming out from my hut and extinguished the fire on time. They saved my life but it left me with disabled hands. My hands were burnt and I lost my fingers. I went through pain for months, but till now my hands are incapacitated."

She said, "I fell into complete despair when my husband, the only bread winner of the family was attacked by hepatitis and passed away. We had never thought diseases would put our

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family in such situation. My children suffered from fever and malaria but they recovered with some basic homemade remedies. We could not afford to travel to Mithi for treatment. We could barely afford a single meal a day, how could we afford medication. When my husband got sick, we waited for 3-4 months for a natural recovery, but his situation worsened with time. Observing his health conditions, his brothers took him to a hospital in Mithi. This resource-scarce village was not even linked to a main road. They carried him on their shoulders and took him to the distant road, where they waited for a public bus for hours. When, finally he was taken to the doctor, his health conditions were at the margins. After a few days he passed away leaving me, a disabled mother, and young children bare-footed. We became totally dependent on our relatives for every need.”

Soomri's eldest son, who was just 8 years old at the time of his father's death, joined his uncles in labour work to earn livelihood. The men in the family started seasonal migration to irrigated areas of Sindh to work for land owners in harvest season. Soomri and her children shared her sisters-in-law's resources for living. She said, “My brothers-in-law took the responsibility of single meal a day for my family and we washed and wore the same dress for years.”

One day after two years of her husband's death, Vishnu, a man from neighbouring village, visited her settlement. She said that on his request, the villagers gathered where he announced that TRDP would soon visit the village for orientation of its Union Council Based Poverty Reduction Programme (UCBPRP). She remembers, “After a week of Vishnu's visit to our settlement, TRDP's field staff visited the village and conducted a survey. They also informed us about the programme for women. As our men used to migrate to different places in search of labour work for livelihood, we women were all independent back in our settlement. Although we had to wait for decisions regarding purchases and huts' repairing, we had the responsibility of households in their absence. My sisters-in-law talked to their husbands and they allowed us to participate in the programme's activities.”

Soomri, following her sisters-in-law, participated in the meetings held by TRDP field team. She remembers, “I did not understand what the officers said but it felt good to get together. I used to observe them talking. We, 15 females, attended the monthly meetings. We named the Community Organisation (CO) - Paro Marvi. This name was easy to remember. I do not remember everything but initially I heard them talking about living in harmony, taking care of children, sanitation and savings. In one of the meetings, each of us in the CO was given a poverty score. My score was 10. Yasmin, from TRDP asked me what I wanted to do to improve my household situation and come out of poverty. I reluctantly said, ‘I have nothing. I do not have anything to eat even. I rely on my relatives' stale leftovers for my meals. The rainwater leaks down on my children in hut. It's about to fall and I am always afraid of it falling down anytime.’ She asked me again, ‘what do you want to do to improve the poor conditions?’ I said, ‘I know nothing than rearing livestock. If I had a goat, I could look after it and it would produce kids and milk to consume.’ She registered my name. On this request, TRDP provided me Rs. 12,000 (USD 120) from the CIF loan in 2011. With this money, I bought two goats. My son and I looked after the goats, and collected hay from the local landowners. I had just begun to hope for the better, when heavy rains hit us. My hut fell down and we became homeless.

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My eldest son was in barrage area for work, with young three children I started to live under the open sky.”

She said that aid agencies provided them emergency shelter and food. Soomri also received a tent and 5 KGs of rice. She remembered, “I started to live in the tent. Mistakenly, I kept the given aid ration in a corner of the tent. At night the rain water entered and made food items unsuitable to eat. The goats ate the wet rice, got sick and died. It further added to my trauma because without any output from the CIF, I had to return the loan. I became helpless. I appealed brothers-in-law for help, who later deposited the outstanding loans.”

In 2012, TRDP conducted a survey to provide housing facilities for the rain victims. She said, “I registered my name in the survey and received two concrete huts for my family. The floor and walls of the huts are made up of cement. It is now more secure and durable. For ventilation, we have windows. These huts do not require yearly repair. This has saved our time and energy that we wasted in seasonal repair of the old mud huts.” Although my son worked as labourer in barrage area on a meagre wage, we often faced starvation at home.

Observing the household poverty situation, TRDP nominated Soomri's family along with many other such poor families to provide a grant. She said, “The grant was in-kind, eight milk-giving goats worth Rs 50,000 (USD 500) changed my household situation for good. The goats produced kids that were our assets. We could sell the goats' kid anytime in need. The milk produce improved my family's diet. Previously, we ate the stale millet *roti* and leftovers from my relatives, then we started to consume milk, butter milk and butter. I exchanged four goat-kids for a donkey to fetch water. The donkey has now lightened the weight of carrying water that we previously used to carry on our heads. This has decreased the physical strain resulting in improvement in my health.”

She continued talking about her current family situation with pride on her face, “Recently, I also sold eight goats on my eldest son's marriage. By selling two goats, I bought utensils for my household. Now, I have a herd of 20 milk-giving goats. I sell 2 litres of milk per day and earn Rs. 60 (USD 0.06) on daily basis. The eldest son shepherds livestock for local livestock owners and earns livelihood. This way he also looks after the family's livestock as well. Due to poverty, I sent him to fields for labour work at a very young age. But now as my household economic conditions are improved we can afford my younger son's education. The youngest one, apart from part time labour work, studies in a school and I want him to do a good job. I could not send my daughters to any school because we do not have any school for girls in the vicinity. Previously, we did not have any concept of girls' education in our society. Now, people send their daughters to school, which is very good. My daughters have learned the art of embroidery from neighbours, who had attended vocational skill development training by TRDP. They are now able to make embroidery on head scarfs, pillow cases and bed sheets on order.”

Soomri concluded her story with hope in her eyes, “We do not have access to electricity in our settlement. However, we have heard that we will receive government's electric grid soon. We are optimistic about it. Apart from material gains from CO, we have got awareness about

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sanitation and vaccinations through CO meeting. Previously, we did not know about polio drops and vaccinations. This resulted in various diseases and deaths, making the family's lives vulnerable to chronic poverty. Now, the new generation is well aware of importance of vaccinations. The CO members have made it sure that each one of the settlement's child is vaccinated against polio. I am grateful to TRDP for improving our lives and planning better future for our children.”

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