



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 9 of 15: Ms. Marwan

By Savaila Hunzai

Marwan is a 50-year-old female, who was born and grew up in Soomrat village of district Tharparkar of Sindh. Now she resides in Sarki village of the same district. She was the eldest of her four sisters. She remembers her mother saying, "Cholera took my five daughters and five sons' lives and I am left with only four daughters." Recalling her childhood days with her parents, she said that her father owned a herd of goats and cows and a camel. Her father looked after the livestock while mother was a housewife. The family owned a plot of land that was harvested on sharing



basis with her uncles. She said that in the years of good weather (adequate rains) they had a good harvest of millet that they stored and ate throughout the year. And in the years of bad weather, her father would work as agricultural labourer in other districts where vegetation persisted. And in droughts, they used to sell their cattle and purchase food from neighbouring districts. She said with a sigh! "Life was always in danger in those days. We did not have access

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to any basic health facility. My 10 siblings died very young. My mother suffered from paralysis and passed away without treatment.”

The village lacked basic facilities such as access to drinking water, roads, electricity, food, etc. Frequent droughts added to families' vulnerabilities leaving them in starvation and many died of hunger. Soon after her mother passed away, her maternal aunt arranged her marriage to a man in Sarki. Her aunt also resided in the same village, so her father agreed for the marriage proposal.

She was very young at the time of marriage. She guesses her age as 14 or 15 when she was departed to Soomrat while her husband was six to seven years older than her. Her husband was the only child of her parents-in-law. She said that her husband's siblings died in a feminine when droughts hit the district. The family consisted of three members and lived in a mud hut. At the time of her marriage, her husband worked as a cobbler. Her father-in-law looked after the livestock and collected gum from the bushes and sold it out in market. Her in-laws did not have any land, but they owned a herd of goats and a camel. They worked as sharecroppers with a local landlord.

She spoke about her daily activities and married life in detail. She said, “Soon after my marriage, I started to support my mother-in-law in her activities at home and in agricultural fields. She would wake up early in the morning and ground two kilos of millet or wheat in a mechanical grinder made up of two stones. After making floor from the grains, she would collect twigs and dried grass to put on fire to bake *roti*, flat beards for breakfast. Her husband and father-in-law would take a hasty breakfast and would leave for work. Then, Marwan and her mother-in-law would eat the leftovers and get busy in other household chores. She said that fetching water was the hardest task for females. Women from the settlement would walk two to three hours to collect a single *mutka*, an earthen pot of water. She said, “The shared dug well was located far away. Carrying heavy pots of water on our heads, we used to walk for hours in sweltering heat of Thar desert.” She would also join her in-laws in agricultural fields weeding out and doing other agricultural activities. On the way back from fields, she would collect twigs to make fire to cook the family's night meal. In meals they usually had *roti* and boiled onion or yogurt.

After three years of her marriage, she gave birth to a daughter. The other five children including three sons and two daughters followed with the gap of three years between every child. She said that besides six children, she also had a miscarriage. She spoke about the hardships that led to the miscarriage. She said, “I was three months pregnant when a drought hit us and left us with nothing to eat. It destroyed our crops, and made our dug-well dried. All villagers started to move to other places, where vegetation persisted and one by one all households in the settlement migrated. My father-in-law kept selling our livestock to feed us, but at last we were left with none. Then, we decided to migrate to Badin. It was a scorching day when we left our hut and took the route to Badin by foot. We had nothing to eat on the way. We made trek for hours and rested on roadsides at nights. After travelling for continuous three days without any proper food intake, I had the stillborn.” She said that she spent some years of life in Badin and worked for a landlord, who in return, compensated with meals for

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two times. Her husband continued working as a shoe mender to contribute to the family's income. They sent their eldest son to a government school.

Talking about life in Sarki, she said, "Our lives were in dangers and darkness. We had no access to basic health facility, road, electricity, and drinking water. Our children often suffered diseases, but we could not access and afford treatment. In severe sicknesses, we used to walk to the main road where we would wait for hours for public transport to take us to a nearby town to approach a health facility. When we had a sprinkle of rain we returned to Sarki from Badin. Our mud hut was eroded away by rains. We collected soil from a far-off soil dune and reconstructed our hut. We readied our land and restored our source of livelihood. My husband continued his own work, and I joined my father-in-law in agricultural fields. From dawn to dusk, we toiled in fields while the mother-in-law looked after my children. When our harvest was ready and it was high time for us to do our best to cut the harvest, my father-in-law got bitten by a venomous snake. We tried all homemade remedies to heal, but it kept getting worst. After a week, we managed to take him to Diplo hospital, where doctors could not save his life. He passed away due to delay in treatment. We spent all our endowments and also took loans for his post death rituals. We were left with nothing than the standing harvest in the field. We then sold our yield and paid the outstanding loan. We faced the hardest days of our lives. Often in meals we had nothing than water and tears in our eyes. We tolerated the sadness of making our children sleep with empty stomachs."

With minimal belongings, and scarcity of food, every passing day was challenging for Marwan's family. "Then, one day some outsiders visited the village and showed us a ray of hope," she said. "In my hut, I was sitting idle, lost in thinking that what would I feed my children, if their father doesn't get any work today? A village kid knocked at my door and said the village females are asked to get together at Junejo Muhalla in Harron's house. I eagerly stood up and asked why females are called out. He said some of our neighbours have already arrived and wanted me to join them too. I followed him to Harron's house, where some outsiders were present with some notebooks and files. In a short time, the village females gathered at the house and announcements started. They said that they are field staff from Thardeep and they are here to introduce Government of Sindh's programme which is intended to reduce household poverty."

She remembers the occasion vividly, "they gave me a Poverty Score Card. The score was 10. All females got one for their households. They further said that if the local females wanted to participate in reducing their household poverty and improving their economic conditions, they would have to get organised in *Tanzeem* (Community Organisation - CO). As almost all families in the settlement had their scores very low and desired to improve household poverty, we agreed to form a *Tanzeem*. Then, Thardeep officials assured their support and visits in coming days." After a month, the Thardeep field staff revisited the village and gathered females. She said, "As asked by the visiting team, we sat on the floor in a big circle. We formed a CO comprising 15 members. We named our CO as Veenjhare after our sub-caste name." Her eldest son reminded her that it was the year 2010 when they formed their CO. The newly formed CO selected their president, secretary and a treasurer. She said that at the

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time of CO formation, her eldest son had completed his matriculation and he took home-take exams for his intermediate level education.

The CO members requested my son to take notes and keep records of CO meetings. She said that she attended bimonthly meetings and learnt new things. She narrated, "We learned about saving money. Although we often lacked cash in hand, but we saved whatever we had in hand. We learned about health and hygiene. We learned to talk. Earlier, we were never heard, Thardeep field staff taught us how to introduce ourselves. With the frequent sessions about sanitation, education and health, we started to take care of health and hygiene of our children as well. I used to observe them talking. I was amazed to hear how nicely they were able to talk and communicate ideas. On returning to our homes from the sessions, we used to imitate them. And we often used to fall on each other *laughing* out loud. It was good. A good way of socialising. Initial meetings made us forget about our daily struggles and sadness for the time being, and we also learned so many things."

Mawran got to know about the Community Investment Fund (CIF) loan in one of the CO meetings. However, she was sceptical about the loan's utilisation and returning it in time. Therefore, she did not take CIF in the beginning. Her eldest son continued his home based education while the younger one was dropped out of school to help his father in shoe mending work. She said that since there was no school for girls, so they learned embroidery work from a villager. The youngest son continued his education in the government primary school. The family relied on father's meagre income for subsistence.

In 2011, adding to their vulnerability, heavy rains hit the village. Marwan narrated that one night the rain water flooded their settlement and destroyed their huts. "The rain water transformed into flood, which devastated our huts and floated our assets except human bodies," she recalled. The villagers moved to a higher land to take refuge there. They lived under the open sky until a few organisations came up with emergency aid. For couple of months, they were given food and temporary shelters made of *rillis*. Then, Thardeep reached there and found the vulnerable CO members. They conducted a survey and assured to rehabilitate them.

She said, "Thardeep engineers found that the land, where our huts were located was the spillway of rain water. And heavy rains had eroded the soil making it a deep route for flood. Thardeep marked the area as danger zone and appealed us to reallocate to some other place to build our houses. When we requested the landlord, he asked Thardeep team to build our shelter on an elevated land that was safe in rainy season. After taking precautionary measures, Thardeep provided two room concrete shelters to all victims through its Low Cost Housing Scheme. My new house was safe and cosy. After construction of houses, TRDP built a concrete drainage system to protect houses from flood water. They constructed a cemented spillway to avoid future damages through RSPN's Tahafuz project. Now, the whole settlement is safe and we feel secure during rain."

Later, the CO members continued meeting and discussed their problems. Marwan said that the biggest problem of fetching water was discussed in one of the CO meetings. When CO

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leaders passed a resolution regarding water problem in the settlement, TRDP installed hand pumps at the doorsteps of households. She said, "This made our lives easier and comfortable. We could utilise the time that was earlier spent in fetching water in productive activities, such as making *rillis*, traditional wall and floor coverings." She added, "Leaders from all COs in our village got united and worked to create awareness about health and hygiene after we were provided with houses and water access. With their efforts, all families agreed to build latrines at their households. This initiative by our CO was later recognised by TRDP as well. We have built a latrines lately to avoid open defecation. Now, our village has 147 households and every household has at least one latrine."

In 2012, Marwan's eldest son attended a vocational training programme provided by TRDP. Her son said, "It was a month-long training at IRM office in Jamshoro. The training was very productive and beneficial. I learned computing skills including MS Office, emails, and other basic computing tools. I received training and returned home, but I did not have a computer to use my skills."

In the same year when TRDP field staff introduced Livelihood Investment Plan (LIP), Marwan filled her LIP and requested for a grant. TRDP provided a computer system as in-kind grant. Marwan's son shared a shop with a shopkeeper in Diplo and used internet to download data. He updated mobile phones' software, downloaded songs and videos and transferred them in memory cards for nominal charges. As in many villages, they lacked electricity and his shop was connected to national grid of electricity, he would charge batteries of mobile phones for the villagers for Rs. 20 (USD 0.2) for each battery. He said that his work's demand increased day by day and many customers came to him because there were very few who knew computer and mobile phone work. As the time passed, he became popular in the market. Excluding his utility bills and rent, he earned Rs. 6000 (USD 60) per month. She said that her son has his own shop now and it has become a regular source of income for them.

With the new income source, Marwan gained confidence to do more for her family. In 2012, she applied for CIF and received Rs. 25,000 (USD 250) from the CIF. With this money, she bought seven goats. Besides farm work, she and her husband looked after the livestock. This improved the family's nutrition. She said that she sold goatlings and repaid the loan in quarterly instalments.

After one year, in 2013, Marwan's son attended an Enterprise Development Training. This project was funded by PPAF and was held in SPO office in Thatta. Her son said that he learned new concepts of entrepreneurship, enterprise business, business marketing and strategic planning for a successful business in nine-day long training session. After successful completion of the training, TRDP hired him as master trainer for 11 training centres. He spent three days in each centre and earned Rs. 3,000 (USD 30) per day. He said that since he was fully facilitated with conveyance, accommodation and food by TRDP, he saved all his income from the training. On completion of his contract, he invested his savings on a shoe business in Diplo. His younger brother was already involved in shoe mending, he opened up a shoe shop for him.

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To enhance her younger son's shoe business, Marwan applied for another loan from CIF in 2015. She received Rs. 20,000 (USD 200) that she invested in business and kept more shoes in the shop. She said that she was able to return the loan within six months in monthly instalments. By this time, her elder son had qualified NTS and he had become Primary School Teacher in the government school. His initial salary was Rs. 15,000 (USD 150) with annual increments. She said that the household economic conditions were getting better day by day. Then her sons requested their parents to stop working and take rest.

In 2016, she applied for Prime Minister's Interest-free Loan. She was provided with Rs. 50,000 (USD 500). Again, she invested the amount in the shoe business. She suggested her sons to save the earnings and return the loan on time. She said that her children have also developed the habit of saving that she learned through her CO. She said that even today she attends meetings and saves money in the CO account. With the earnings from shop and her son's salary, the family was able to construct two more concrete rooms and a kitchen. Also, they built their assets with the increase of income. As productive assets, now family owns a herd of 50 goats, three cows, and a camel.

She said with some pride, "I have tried my best to educate my children. For the eldest two daughters, I could not fulfil my obligation. We could not afford their education, and also there was no concept of females' education at that time. The youngest daughter has completed her education till intermediate. She has also learned the art of embroidery from VTP provided by TRDP. Among her three sons, the first one has completed his bachelors and is now a teacher at the primary school. Second one could not proceed his education after his intermediate. He supported his father in shoe making, and he has his own shoe business now. His shop has shoe stock worth Rs. 300, 000 (USD 300) or more. The youngest son studies in grade 10 in Diplo. I am very happy to see my children having their lives easier than ours. Unlike us, they earn from different sources of income and have access to all facilities of life. They have machines to stitch clothes, electricity for light and electric fans, refrigerator to keep water and food fresh and cool. Cell phones to communicate with us. We now have good furniture in our house. We have access to variety of food. Also, recently from our savings, we have purchased a plot of 3-acre land which is worth Rs. 505,000 (USD 5050)."

She concluded her story with a big smile on her face, "I could make all these assets only after becoming a member of CO. Without CIF, I would not have owned livestock, without VTPs, we would not be in a position to open shops and know about business, and without TRDP's support, we would not even have a shelter. We could not achieve this success and access these opportunities without joining COs. They, indeed became a ray of hope and proved it by bringing light in our dark lives."

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