



Inter-Agency Task Force on
Social and Solidarity Economy

Enhancing Food Security, Nutrition and Poverty Reduction through Self Help Groups

An Experience from Pakistan

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**Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals:
What Role for Social and Solidarity Economy?**

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Abstract

In Pakistan, rural communities are increasingly affected by external influence and rapid change. The process has affected the economic situation and has change traditional cultures. Livelihoods opportunities are shrinking as population and land fragmentation increases. Many small farmers have no option but to migrate to the cities.

Indigenous poultry can significantly contribute to farmers' livelihoods through increased food security and cash income. In 2015, SPSD-Pakistan took an initiative to form 25 Women Self Help Groups in district Muzaffargarh, Pakistan. The objective was to build and develop a chain of Indigenous Chicken Cooperatives to eradicate poverty, enhance food security and nutrition.

A 3 days comprehensive training was given to the members of SHGs on Sustainable Livelihood Framework, Start and Improve Your business (SIYB) and Risk Coping mechanisms. Indigenous chicken rearing cooperatives have been the most successful in 25 villages of district Muzaffargarh, Pakistan. This is perfect example of SSE executed by the Women SHGs to implement the SDGs that serve the commercial objectives of a business, offering economic prosperity, as well as Food Security and nutrition.

The initiative can be scaled up at district level and national level by just bearing the training and social mobilization cost of the group participants.

Keywords

Social Economy, Self Help Groups, Indigenous chicken, Food Security, Nutrition

Bio

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Introduction

Today in Pakistan, rural communities are increasingly affected by external influence and rapid change. These processes affect the economic situation, change traditional cultures. Livelihoods in most of the rural areas are largely dependent on land-based activities, and opportunities continue to shrink as population and land fragmentation increases. The adoption of high input agriculture, including the use of hybrid seeds and agrochemicals, has led to increased costs and a reduction in crop diversity. This means that the economic margins in farming are becoming very small. Markets and government purchase centers give priority to larger quantities of produce, which also disadvantages small producers both in terms of sale and in terms of price. As a result, many small farmers often have no option but to migrate to the city. Besides this, inequalities are also widening exponentially as rapid industrialization under the neoliberal globalization trends has been set in Pakistan. Those who have fallen out of industrialization are being deprived of employment opportunities and facing severe poverty problems. Especially in the rural areas, people are migrating to the cities to find jobs, and they are being driven to unskilled labor jobs under the harsh condition. Moreover, the agricultural lands in rural areas are being taken away for establishing industrial zones such as water dams, thermal powers and waste management units. This phenomenon is being increasingly affecting people's nutritional status and access to health services. Agricultural productivity is low and there is a cyclic productivity-led poverty trap affecting the farmers. Smallholdings limit the expansion of conventional farming and the youth are reluctant to pursue farming as an occupation.

In Pakistan, smallholders, the food providers of the rural areas are becoming increasingly vulnerable to a series of challenges like the changing climate, markets, finance, input availability etc. These challenges have made crop production more risky and uncertain in an already fragile food production system, in which these small farmers operate. While majority depend on a single crop, these challenges limit them further to remain at the subsistence level. This in turn pushes them to poverty. Poor nutrition results in poor health, further affecting their productive capacities. Effects of climate change is also making the lives of small and marginal farmers more difficult. Livelihoods of the small and marginal farmers are at a greater risk. These farmers face a number of issues like poverty, hunger, drought, bonded labor, distress migration and so on. Since there is very little employment in the region, these farmers migrate elsewhere, work as labour on farms, and perform other odd jobs. Moreover, absence of appropriate, viable and competitive marketing facilities often restricts small and marginal farmers in deriving maximum benefits from development efforts. The small marketable surplus, the produce not meeting market preferred quality, poor negotiation capacity of the unorganized farming communities further complicate the situation. In such a situation, there is a need for an alternative way to nurture the economy, based on the values of cooperation, mutual respect, social entrepreneurship and social welfare.

Social and Solidarity Economy is an alternative to capitalism where common people play major role in promoting all dimensions of human life like economic, social, cultural, political and environmental. This economy exists in all sectors via production, distribution finance, exchange, consumption and governance. The main objectives of this economy are to transform the social and economic system into social justice and to overcome inequalities covering all classes of society. The examples of social and solidarity economy are cooperatives, mutual associations, and self-help groups etc. This economic system favours decentralization and local development for attaining social, economic and environmental objectives. This economic system provides a voice to the poor and marginalized communities and strengthened them socio-economically

through Self Help Groups (SHGs), participatory governance, and collective actions at multiple levels.

Social Economy is considered as an alternative economic system today, when the market economy has completely failed to bring economic emancipation for the marginalized people in both developing and developed world. The outcome from the Bretton Wood institutions, established in the last century after the World War 2, never brought any good news for the mass people of the countries of the global south. The market economy dwelt on the values of profitability only, which made the world divided between the rich and the poor and the gap ever widening. Social economy could be considered as the 'third sector' for economic emancipation of the people on the onslaught of the capitalistic hegemony. This could be the solution; however, there is a host of hindrances, which poses as an impediment for the growth of social enterprises.

It is agreed that Social Economy is the answer to bring down disparity in the third world countries and economic emancipation of the marginal communities. All it requires is the concerted efforts of our civil society organizations to effectively advocate for the promotion of social economy and involve the people to participate.

The Social Economy (SE) is rooted in a broader vision of a plural economy that challenges currently widespread views on our economic development. Rather than reducing the economy to a binary vision of either the private for-profit sector or the public sector, the social economy movement has worked to obtain recognition and support for collectively owned enterprises that serve the interests of the community and their members. Community initiated organizations, namely cooperatives, enterprising non-profit organizations and Self Help Groups have been instrumental to the development of a more humane society and economy over the generations. In recent years, a new generation of SE organizations has proved remarkably successful. Social Economy claims to be a platform to address of the contemporary challenges that the international development community has set itself like global financial crisis, global warming, gender inequality which have urged for attention from second round of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as well as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Reducing poverty, hunger, and food insecurity are essential parts of the Millennium Development Goals. The SDGs 1 and 2 call our attention towards enhancing food security, sustainable agriculture, improved nutrition and ending hunger and poverty.

Future of agriculture and rural poverty alleviation depends on how we ensure food, nutrition and livelihood security through sustainable and integrated family farming, which is resilient to uncertainties of climate and markets. Promotion of sustainable farming systems as a poverty alleviation strategy seems to be an appropriate solution. Though simple, it is still a challenging proposition. Localized food systems provide the foundations of people's nutrition, incomes, economies and culture. They start at the household level and expand to neighborhood, municipality and regions. Such food systems constitute a whole network of local organizations, each active in different sectors of the food chain production, storage and distribution. Women make up most of the workforce of local food systems. They contribute decisively to food security and local economy.

SPSD-Pakistan, a Christian faith based organization is increasingly engaging itself in social enterprises with an objective to support people for their economic emancipation. Self Help Groups (SHGs) of women comprising poor and moralized segment of the society is the basic component

and strategy of SPSD-Pakistan for transformation of rural community from life of distress to life of prosperity - a journey from destitution to economic empowerment.

In Pakistan, women play a major role in both the fight against climate change and in eradicating chronic hunger and malnutrition. Women are the ones primarily responsible for household food security. In most rural households, women are responsible for putting food on the table every day. Traditionally, women play a key role in the care of cattle, they usually take care of goats, sheep and poultry as small farm based enterprise. The majority of these women are already struggling with poverty. Life is especially difficult for the women who are already marginalized.

SHGs play an essential role in enhancing food security, and poverty reduction in the rural areas of South Punjab, Pakistan. However, women are often left out of extension activities and training opportunities. Formation of Self Help Groups has created various ways to better target women farmers. SHGs increased the participation of these women in village institutions (village Councils, School Management Committees, and Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Committees) as well as giving professional training to rural women in small business management; these women reduce the risk in livestock production and improve their household economies. Women farmers also became more confident and aware of their rights as decision-makers on the farm. Self Help Groups have been able to mobilize very large numbers of rural women into multi-tiered collectives that have provided the backbone for implementing several thematic initiatives spanning from agricultural development, micro enterprise, product marketing, health & education, poverty reduction, gender equality, and others. The Self Help Groups (SHG) mechanism became established as one replicable pathway of the women's social and economic empowerment in most rural and remote areas of district Muzaffargarh, South Punjab, Pakistan. The focus of women SHGs has broadened from savings and credit to addressing issues relating to sustainable agriculture practices. Overall, the initiative of SPSD-Pakistan for formation of Self Help Groups has helped family farmers break out of their poverty and move towards prosperity. Enhancing food security based on women's Self Help Group mechanism is being continue with significant successes. These women of Self Help Groups have paved their own way towards prosperity and empowerment.

Livestock and poultry play an important role in rural life: besides milk, meat, eggs and wool, they provide manure for growing crops, and they serve as a savings account for people. Livestock production, particularly poultry serves various crucial roles in the livelihoods of marginalized and poor people. It contributes to local diets, provides cash, draught power, organic fertilizer, and is a means of transportation of heavy equipment. Those whose livelihoods are most dependent on animal husbandry and poultry are the poor, especially women, in remote areas that have little access to information, infrastructure and employment opportunities.

In Pakistan, indigenous chicken is most popular in almost every household. Traditionally, farmers in rural areas tend to prefer indigenous birds. Indigenous breeds are self-propagating; they contribute to poultry diversity and cultural heritage and produce tasty meat and eggs. They are also well adapted to the local climate and can survive, produce and reproduce through scavenging. Because of their local origin, they are less prone to disease or predator attacks, and their cultural and sporting values secure additional income. Even their coloured feathers can bring in additional cash. Yet, meat and eggs of indigenous birds can also meet the demand in a growing niche market. The potential of desi murghi (indigenous chicken) as a source of nutrition and protein, a tool for

hunger eradication is well established. Native chicken constitute one of the oldest and favourite forms of source of food, particularly in the rural areas of South Punjab.

Indigenous poultry, normally handled by women, can significantly contribute to farmers' livelihoods through increased food security and cash income. While the returns from rearing just a few indigenous birds may not be sufficient to fully sustain a family, they will serve to generate highly nutritious food at minimal cost. In addition, these practices bestow dignity and respect on the family, which can offer an egg or the slaughter of a bird for its guests. The contribution that such practices make to heritage and cultural conservation can be regarded as a gift for society and considered the poor's main source of protein. Thus, we can say that Women Self Help Groups with little investment can contribute to implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 1 and 2 such as to eradicate Poverty; enhance food security and nutrition at Union Council level and as well as can be scaled up to district and country level.

Case Study

SPSD-Pakistan believes that for boosting sustainable development, the first step is to have an institutional development at grass root level such as to form Self Help Groups. Enabling poor and marginalized people to overcome poverty, means strengthening their capacity to access resources, services and as well as markets. The most important strategy for targeting poor and marginalized men and women farmers turned out to be mobilize them into formation of Self Help Groups.

In 2015, SPSPD-Pakistan approached the women of Union Council No. 34 Chak Frazee, hamlet Rangpur, tehsil and district Muzaffargarh to develop a project feasibility report in 25 villages to discuss various livelihood opportunities. Most of the women showed their interest in establishing a "Desi murghi" (native chicken) poultry rearing enterprise, following which SPSPD-Pakistan launch a project to enhance food security, nutrition and poverty reduction through various farm based enterprise. In 2015, with the financial help from a Church donor (Netherlands) Society for Peace and Sustainable Development (SPSD)-Pakistan took an initiative to form 25 Women Self Help Groups in 25 villages of Union Council Chak Frazee, No. 34 hamlet Rangpur, tehsil and district Muzaffargarh, South Punjab, Pakistan. As a first step, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) exercise was conducted in all the villages to collect baseline information. Information on various aspects like household income, main economic activities of men and women, agriculture practices, and trends of farm based enterprises etc.

Under the project the ultra-poor women, widows and disable people with special emphasis on Women with Disabilities (WWDs) and interested poor men were mobilized to organize them into a group of at least 25 members and have their regular savings and develop their own business plans for their individual and communal development. Each member was mobilized to deposit 500 hundred rupees (round about 4 US dollar) per month. In this way, the group collects every month 12,500/- (Twelve Thousand and five hundred) rupees per month. This solidarity amount of 12,000 (twelve thousand) rupees was given to one person of the group each month with clear sustainable business plan. 500 (Five hundred) rupees were deducted as running and administration cost. This solidarity amount was rotate among the group members each month. The group is supposed to choose and elect its at least three office bearers. Two of them must be women. The designation of these office bearers are President, secretary and treasurer. These three office bearers opened a joint bank account in their nearby town. There were three signatories of the bank account, but any two of them can operate the bank account. Each month the solidarity amount

was given to one member through bank cheque. The groups meet at least two times in a month. The secretary of the Self Help Group marks the attendance of all members and write the proceeding of the meeting. At separate register, the secretary also document the resolution and decisions of the meeting. The treasure is responsible to have all the financial record of the bank such as deposit slips and photocopies of the issued cheques with receiving receipt from the beneficiary.

Majority of Self Help Groups members were poor women depending on agriculture and wage labour for their livelihoods. Once the group has formed in each village, a 3 days comprehensive training was given to the members of Self Help Groups (SHGs) on several important aspects of their livelihood activities such as Sustainable Livelihood Framework, Start and Improve Your business (SIYB) and Risk Coping mechanisms. The training also focused on how to sustain livelihoods in the face of shocks and changes, how to deal with the complexity of poverty and how to identify linkages between different sectors and institutions. The members received awareness on business plan formulation and subsequently engaged in “Desi Murghi” (native chicken) rearing activity. During training program, the participants of SHGs learned not only farming practices but also tried to look at small existing resources as a business. While discussing their issues, they realized that their strength lies in working unitedly as a farmers’ group, as it will enables them to convert their problems into innovative business opportunities. During training, the participants will be teach that, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step - these farmers have made a small beginning with the self-belief that their future and the future of farming rests on their strong shoulders.” These members of SHGs are trained in the structure and framework of businesses, learning how working in a group can reduce their operating costs and how they can expand their marketing opportunities. Incorporating a value chain approach, the training gave the chance to its participants to have tools to examine opportunities for economic growth, from the harvesting stage to processing and all the way through to consumer sales. The women literacy rate in rural areas of South Punjab is a staggering 44 percent. The training curriculum, therefore, was designed to facilitate learning through active discussions and the use of real-life examples. Although the business training required some literacy and numeracy, the material has been trimmed down to a manageable level for the predominantly non-literate people. This is particularly beneficial to women, who have a lower literacy rate than men. Women would often allow the men to dominate the discussions, as often happens in participatory workshops. However, what proved successful was splitting the group into separate men and women groups, to make sure women’s voices were heard.

The prime objective of the project was to improve the income and nutrition of 625 households of 25 villages in Union Council No. 34, Chak Frazee, hamlet Rangpur, tehsil and district Muzaffargarh, South Punjab, Pakistan. The other objectives of the project and Self Help Groups were to advance the struggle for food sovereignty in order to combat hunger, poverty, poor health and to increase support for small-scale food producers through technical assistance in developing their small business plans. At the same time, the Self Help Groups intended to build awareness on biodiversity and environmental conservation, partly through agro-ecological practices. The objectives of the SHGs focused on agrarian reforms and better public policies for rural areas, concerning things such as sustainable livelihood, poverty reduction, food security and women empowerment. Other activities of the SHGs are preserving local knowledge and agro-ecological production by organizing agro-ecological fairs that focus on food habits and sustainable care of the environment. Meetings took place every fortnight which women could learn about and exchange their experiences of using non-commercial seed and agro-ecological practices. In these

meetings, the women improve their agricultural capacities and awareness of women's issues, in order to create a stronger network.

SPSD-Pakistan felt that it was crucial to strengthen the capacity of these women to make intelligent and sustainable business decisions that could lead them to sustainable livelihood, poverty alleviation and food security. SHGs attract and inspiring the women farmers by exposure visits, demonstration programs, hands on trainings, providing backstopping support when they faced problems. This has empowered the women of SHGs to manage the enterprise successfully and sustainably. The SHGs have confidence that Identifying key activities and building local capacities are crucial for managing the enterprise sustainably.

SPSD-Pakistan believes that Community participation is imperative for the effective implementation of the every project at every level. With the passage of time, SHGs resolved to revive the traditional cultivation models of biodiversity in farming systems. For this purpose, the SHGs worked on the approach of Seed Mapping at the cluster and village level and shared it with other community members. This process opened up an opportunity for crop enrichment in the area. Exchange of seeds became a tool to increase food production rather than a personal choice of adopting local seeds at personal will. The fortnightly meetings of Self Help Groups are the contact point for all the women and men farmers in the village. SHGs helps farmers to map their cropping pattern based on the type of land they have. The leaders of the group encourages women to raise seasonal vegetable nursery so that all the families could collect saplings from it and raise in their backyards. Over the years, the group meetings has been instrumental in organizing the annual and seasonal seed exchange among the farm families.

These Self Help Groups, as they are called, are primarily savings and credit-based groups, as these women rarely have access to banks. The savings groups give the women a sense of power, and with their own money, the groups become self-sustaining. This increases women's confidence. Later, after successfully managing the savings and credit groups, the women groups receive poultry as a means to further improve their livelihoods.

The Aseel Desi Murghi is one of the most widespread indigenous chicken breeds in rural areas of South Punjab, Pakistan, and has an ancestry steeped in antiquity. Traditionally, they are kept for their cock-fighting abilities and their relevance in social and religious functions – and that is in addition to the superior taste and texture of their meat. They are usually kept by women and sell at higher prices than hybrid chicken. Each member of SHG was facilitated in buying a flock of 25 birds; each bird weightage is round about half kilogram. These birds are supposed to rear at backyard. The project decided to train local para-veterinarians to have better care of the birds. Selected members, preferably women, were trained for 2 days on health care practices related to chicken and other livestock. Veterinary doctors of the local veterinary clinic and staff of the facilitating agency served as resource persons for training the para-veterinarians. The trained para-veterinarians provide livestock health services to the communities. Two para-veterinarians from each village are supposed to serve every 25 households in their respective village. The para-veterinarian will be paid 20 rupees per visit by each beneficiary for their services; this is generating employment to the more village people. Since deployment of para-veterinarians, the adoption of prescribed health care practices has increased reducing the mortality rate of native chickens. These members of SHGs consume chicken meat and eggs for their daily consumption

and the extra are sold to generate income in the local solidarity market of buyer and producer. These groups have transformed poultry into an active income generation enterprises.

The Challenges

The women had little faith on NGOs and the Government officials. It was very tough to build rapport when we came here. We ourselves never had any idea of what the members can and cannot do to augment their income. They wanted immediate, working solutions to earn income. With little financial base, the poor women were averse to experimentation and risk taking.

Another challenge was mobilize the women of Self Help Groups for collective benefits. Most of the member's interest was limited in their individual and personal benefits and no one was ready to think beyond her personal interests. To mobilize these women for collective benefits at community level was a big task. Low level of literacy in rural women, lack of bargaining capacity among small-scale women farmers, and no market accessibility were another challenges for SPSD staff in Pakistan.

Results of the Project

Desi Murghi (native chicken) has tremendous potential and is ideal to augment the income and nutrition of small and marginal farmers. It is easy to manage, less risky and can generate better incomes, for the poor households. It has the potential to alleviate rural poverty, eradicate malnutrition and create employment opportunities too. With a little external support, by initiating small farm enterprises can improve health and livelihoods of the rural poor. It could be promoted either commercially or as part of an integrated model involving small and marginal farmers across the country, especially in the most rural and remote areas of South Punjab, Pakistan. Small-scale farm based enterprises besides generating income and employment address issues like family nutrition and resource recycling. Being less risky, they have the potential to alleviate rural poverty. The better economic condition of the beneficiaries of SHGs brought confidence to these families. They has been honoured for their success. The leaders of the SHGs addresses the farmers, shares their experiences and attends trainings as resource person. All the members of Self Help Group are enjoying dignified life in the village. Many women groups and their networks in rural areas of South Punjab, Pakistan are now going to engage in the processes of transformation. They, and the men they work with, are generating hope and new solidarity as they have vision to globalize the struggle for food sovereignty and enhance nutrition.

Conclusion

The economic prosperity brought by the livelihood interventions has deepened a sense of belongingness and developed ownership in SHGs. This was not possible without collectives that gave them the strength to cope with internal and external risks and shocks. Representative and actively participating leadership ensured that the voices of all, especially of the most marginalized are heard. Equal representation of all caste and class in SHGs ensured representation of various issues. Mirasi (lower singing community) earlier tagged as thieves, started to deliberate and diversify their livelihood options to agriculture and animal husbandry. Increased self-esteem and confidence of the members has inspired people to participate in all the processes leading to economic and social independence. The process of Self Help Groups has strengthened the women's collective to fight patriarchy, violence and discrimination. Today, the women have established their own local market to sell their produce. Economic empowerment has been widely identified as a strategic factor in improving women's positions.

Recommendations

We need policies that are much more coherent from the local to the global. Local resources can be better used to shape food systems that are more sustainable and fair for both consumers and producers. However, very often, such local initiatives are not supported by national policies or by the global framework. Most of the time, national agricultural policies do not pay attention to local dimensions of food systems. Moreover, the global framework supports the expansion of export-led agriculture but does not support governments to take into account dimensions of food systems other than those that increase production volumes. We need more coherence across different levels of governance and much more food democracy. People must be able to hold governments accountable for the results of what food systems deliver. There is a need to move agricultural policies into food policies so that these other dimensions are taken into account. That is why issues of governance are key in achieving the transition towards sustainable food systems.

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