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Women's involvement: a switch in thinking, Hoto, Pakistan

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• Introduction

One of the greatest barriers to improving the water situation in Hoto in Northern Pakistan has been a heated dispute on water rights with the village of Pakora. The origins of the conflict lie in the history of a water supply scheme implemented by the government 11 years ago. A spring was constructed in Hoto without considering the traditional water rights in this hilly region. Pakora began using the water as well by diverting it from the distribution pipeline from the Hoto scheme. The dispute became increasingly heated and was finally taken to a lower court in Skardu, the regional capital of Baltistan, where it continued for seven years.

The Participatory Action Research team came to Hoto in Pakistan in 1994 in order to learn if the community of Hoto would be interested in participating in a process to improve their water supplies. Hoto was a complicated choice for PAR, because the village did not have a positive reputation in the region. The community-development activities in the village had all failed and NGOs in the region had labelled it as a 'bad' village in which to work, because of the lack of successful projects and the lack of community organisation. However, the PAR team decided that this could be a village that would offer many lessons about communal action to improve drinking water.

The most important lesson was that with a little 'push' and motivation from outsiders, the

people were able to 'switch their thinking' in order to address their water problems. This was a major achievement that came out of a process of dialogue.

Not just a duty for men

The initial meetings were held with the male members of the community (see Figure 1), who did not allow the PAR team to meet with the women. The men distrusted these 'outsiders' and feared that they would prove to be 'agents of negative change' in a village in which the women follow a strict form of purdah (the system of excluding Muslim women of rank from public view) and are not allowed to meet with people, especially men, from outside the community.

The women were initially invisible to the PAR team. For a year, the men would not give permission for the PAR team to meet them. However, as confidence and trust eventually developed between the PAR team and the community through a long process of dialogue and meetings, the female PAR team member was allowed to meet with the women. At this point the women were brought into the dialogue on drinking water. However, the women did not perceive their involvement to be important or even essential to the process, as they told the PAR female team member: *'We did not know any information about the meeting. The men didn't tell us about the meeting, otherwise we were free to come. Anyway, what are we supposed to do in the meeting? What concern is it of ours? This is the men's duty and not ours.'*

Figure 1. A female PAR team member discussing with male villagers (Photo: by M. Lammerink)



But once the women started participating in the meetings they began to see that they have an important role in the process of improving water supplies, and they quickly realised during the problem-solving exercises that decision-making regarding the water scheme is not just the duty of the men.

• **The Pani Ki committee**

At first the PAR team had a lot of difficulties in approaching the people because the village is spread out and has many internal divisions. It is a large village of 180 households divided into five *mohallahs* (wards). The community is divided between the following: Sherpa, Fishpa, Gon, Gandapa and Auzapa, and these wards are largely based on family or clan membership. Each clan has its own identity and way of looking at their position in the community. The first strategy the PAR team applied, to get to know the village and to begin a process of dialogue, was to approach the traditional leaders of each *mohallah*. Then the traditional leaders, assisted by the Community

Research Team, started organising *mohallah*-based water committees. These committees would then be responsible for communicating with the households in their *mohallahs* and for organising their *mohallahs* at times of community-wide meetings. It was decided to organise the community according to *mohallah* divisions in order to reflect the traditional social organisation of the community.

The younger and more educated members of the community became the leaders of the five *mohallah* water committees. This decision was made because the traditional leadership felt that people with an education would be better prepared to take on the responsibilities of implementing a water supply scheme. This marked the beginning of the traditional leadership giving power to other people; something which was not easy for them to do because it required a new way of thinking as well.

But a vacuum remained because the individual *mohallahs* water committees could not organise all activities and responsibilities for

the entire water system. Two members from each committee were then appointed to be members in a community research team (CRT) that would serve not only as the research team, but also as the organising body to co-ordinate the activities of the *mohallah* organisations (see Box 1). The community refers to this organisation not as the CRT, but as the *Pani Ki*

Committee (Urdu for Water Committee). This hierarchical structure of village teams was a very new idea for them. It allowed information sharing and capacity building. The separate women's committee was also structured on the bases of the *mohallahs*. This was the only way to have women participate in the PAR process.

BOX 1
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ACTORS

In Hoto, the water is owned and managed by the community itself. While women are the ones who are largely responsible for domestic water work and some of the irrigation work, the men have traditionally been responsible for making decisions which affect the management of water resources. In the past, the village elders and the *numberdar*, a traditional leader who makes decisions regarding communal resources, were responsible for the management of water in the community and for assuring that all members of the community received an equal allotment of water. However, this traditional organisation of elders was ill-equipped to deal with the management of new technologies and the institutional structures required for the management of an improved water supply.

Since 1994, the Community Research Team (CRT) has filled the institutional void in the community and has become the primary organisation for managing the improved water supply scheme. It has become the catalyst of change when it comes to improving drinking water. The CRT has maintained a good working relationship with the traditional leadership structure in the village and has made a point of holding meetings which do not exclude the traditional leaders from participating.

There are also several external actors which influence water management and community development in Hoto. One is a government agency called the Local Bodies and Rural Development Department (LB&RDD) which was the first agency to attempt to improve the drinking water supply situation in Hoto about 11 years ago. The scheme which was built at that time originally led to the bitter conflict between Hoto and the neighbouring village of Pakora. LB&RDD remains one of the main agencies working in the rural water supply sector in Northern Pakistan. While they do provide technical and financial support to villages, they do not give much support in developing the internal capacity of villages to manage their water supplies themselves.

Another development actor working in Hoto is the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, the most reputable NGO working in the region. On the basis of their self-help approach to community-development, AKRSP helped initiate a Men's Village Organisation and a Women's Organisation in the village and tried to encourage various income-generating activities. However, these organisations were not sustained by people in Hoto until recently

AKRSP has found work in Hoto frustrating because they feel the villagers are 'lazy' and uninterested in community development. The Hoto villagers, however, felt that AKRSP was trying to convert them to another Islamic sect and was attempting to change their culture. They felt the AKRSP staff had not respected local culture when they came to the village. This sentiment had a negative impact on the PAR process in the beginning and the PAR team had to overcome these views in order to meet with the women of Hoto.

The women's strategy is selected!

Both the men and women met together to develop strategies to solve the drinking water problem. The male members allowed the women to participate in a joint meeting. The men decided that the best strategy would be to extend the distribution pipes of the old government water supply scheme to all of the households in the unserved area. The women argued that this was not the real issue at all. What they felt was needed was a new water tank built on unused land, which would first provide water to the presently non-functioning public standpipes.

In the end, the community chose the women's strategy rather than the men's. The women convinced the men by arguing, '*What is the point of a new pipe if the present pipe is not already being used?*'. The construction of the tank, which the women proposed, came to a cost of Rs. 20,000 and would benefit 70% of the community. The laying of new pipe would have been more expensive and would still not have ensured that water would be secured for the system. The men gave up the idea of putting in pipes and instead focused on the construction of the new tank.

The selection of the women's strategy marked a major change in thinking. Traditionally and religiously, the women in Hoto were not supposed to play a role in public meetings or in decisions about problems in the community. This change was particularly dramatic when compared to the beginning of the PAR process, when the traditional leadership feared that women's participation in the PAR team meetings would lead the women towards becoming *baipurdah*, which means taking the women out of their traditionally ascribed purdah existence.

Changes in women's lives

At the beginning of the project, the women seemed passive in their attitudes towards improving the drinking water situation. The men were not interested in the water problems because domestic water work was not 'their' problem. The women have changed from being passive to active participants (see Box 2). Women observe that significant changes

have been made in their lives because of their involvement. One village woman said recently, '*We do not have the burden of bringing water now. We can stay home and take care of our children.*' In addition to this time that has been freed up from mundane water work, they feel that they are able to spend more time paying attention to personal hygiene. '*We are washing our clothes in the water now that the water is available from the nulka (water) system,*' states one of the women members of the *Pani Ki Committee*. These female members are making new demands on behalf of the women in the community such as asking for hygiene education, and are themselves selecting the subjects that they are most interested in learning about in the future. Women are paying attention to the storage of water, they are taking care of personal hygiene and they feel their knowledge and understanding about disease transmission has increased.

BOX 2

ANOTHER CASE OF WOMEN'S INITIATIVE

The women of the *Pani Ki Committee* took it upon themselves to begin collecting money for an operation and maintenance fund for their water system. They went from house to house collecting Rs. 10 (approximately US\$21). This money provided the basis of the fund. Today the *Pani Ki Committee* members are exploring other ways to sustain the fund rather than collecting money from each household. They feel strongly that households in Hoto are too poor and will not be able to make monetary contributions on a regular basis. But money does not have to be the only form of contribution, they suggested. The Committee President explains, '*We are going to collect one kilogram of apricot kernels from each household; this will be easy for every house to give because every house has apricots. We (the Committee members) will sell the kernels and the money will go to the fund* '.

Probably the most significant effect is the demand by women for the education of their daughters. When the PAR team was discussing different hygiene conditions in the community, one of the women said, *'I wish my daughters could have got an education, but there were no schools in the village when they were young. When we see you, we want our girls to be educated too. But we know that the older girls cannot go to the school now so we are sending our young daughters to schools. We don't want them to live like us but much better than us'*. In 1998 a new school was opened in Hoto, to which girls are being sent.

• **Taking the approach to other villages**

Local traditional leaders have been very impressed by the results of the PAR approach. Sheikh Ali Ahmad, the traditional leader of this village, commented that *'The PAR project has helped the community in solving the biggest problem which was once impossible to think about. We have learned how to organise our resources and bring them together to put them to use'*.

When Sheikh Agha Saheb,, another traditional leader living outside of the village, visited the village and discovered that households were using tap water and that the people themselves had solved their water problem, he became very impressed. The Pani Ki Committee too were very pleased by his impressions, stating,

'Hamara Sheikh bahut khush hua la log saffani pi raha hei' (*our Sheikh became very impressed that the village people were drinking tap water*).

He decided to take what was learned during the PAR experience and use the team as a model for another village-based organisation. He formed the Al-Muntazeer Organisation with the goal of applying the same participatory approach to other issues of community development.

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