Membership-Based Organizations as a Reflection of Power Structures in Rural “Community”:
Experiences and Observations from Sindh Province, Pakistan

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A Note on Methodology

The analysis and reflections presented in this paper are the outcome of the authors work in various districts of rural Sindh between 1996 and 2002. The nature of this work has revolved around working with grassroots, village-based social development organizations. These organizations in particular have been selected on the basis of the author’s sustained interaction with them in the course of various initiatives during this time frame. All observations, information, and findings have been gathered through numerous field visits to the respective field sites and through informal discussions with the CBO office bearers, members and villagers.

Glossary

- **aangan**: courtyard
- **autaaq**: meeting place/room
- **biradari**: kinship group
- **choolha**: stove (literal)
- **deh**: administrative unit
- **goth**: village
- **para**: neighbourhood
- **wadera**: landlord
1. Introduction

It is almost impossible to imagine development theory and practice without the use of the term “community”. The esteemed reputation of this term can be attributed to the discovery that the multifarious problems faced by the world’s poor, need to be addressed by the poor themselves, rather than by those who observe them from a distance, i.e policy-makers. To achieve this, the poor need to be organized and draw from within their own ranks, a group of like-minded individuals who can then accurately identify and suggest solutions to their economic and social woes. In other words, it is the members of a (poor) community who hold the key to their own development.

This is possibly why the last decade has seen a rapid increase in the number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) in poor countries. These groups normally work in sectors related to social services as diverse as health, education, political empowerment and women’s rights, among others. Such groups seek to play the role of an intermediary and more recently, as outright service delivery mechanisms, where others have been less than successful. They seek to strengthen the concept of collective action, as their membership consists of people with common needs and objectives. Simply put, their main purpose has been to bridge the gap between state and society, and to provide services to the poor in areas where the state has been unable to do so.

Another main attribute of these organizations is that they represent a particular group of people at various levels with shared interests. However when one moves further down to the more grassroots level, these interests are narrowed down even further to represent the needs of self-contained communities, i.e. low-income urban areas, squatter settlements and rural villages. It is these communities that then define the purpose, scope and approaches that such organizations choose to follow, in order to best fulfill the needs of their respective members.

In rural Pakistan the term “community” takes on a meaning of its own. It is not just a group of people with “common aims and objectives”, as the literature so likes to point out1. It is a multi-layered structure, complete with hierarchies of the dominant and castes of the subservient, a far cry from the universal belief that a community is or has the potential to be a model of uniformity and cooperation. Subsequently, this impacts on how membership based organizations of the poor (MBOPs) operate in such areas.

These community-based organizations or CBOs as they are commonly referred to in Pakistan, are local, village-level groups, which survive on the patronage of their fellow members. They fall within the definitional purview of non-profit organizations (NPOs). There are currently almost 45,000 NPOs in Pakistan, comprising of private, not-profit distributing, self-governing and voluntary organizations, with an estimated membership of about 6,000,0002. These organizations represent a particular geographical territory (the Karachi Welfare Organization), issue (the Education Development Society), caste group

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1 See Wignaraja et al 1991; Khan. S. S, 1997; Banuri et al; 1997
2 Ghuas-Pasha, Jamal and Iqbal; Dimensions of the Non-Profit Sector in Pakistan; SPDC; 2002; p11
(the Khaskheli Development Organization), occupation (the Farmer’s Welfare Association) or demographic group (the Youth Welfare Association or the Group for Women’s Advancement). The underlying assumption in all these groups is that they operate for the benefit of one particular section of society, or as for the purposes of this paper, for one particular “community”.

How does such exclusive representation impact on the credibility or objective of MBOPs, when the problems of the poor remain common to all social and ethnic groups? The main perceived disadvantage such exclusivity could have, is that terms such as “community-based”, “community-empowerment” and “community participation”, tend to be used in development discourse as reflective of positive outcomes of CBOs and MBOPs. However, not enough attention has been paid to what these terms actually translate into on the ground. This has subsequently led to ignoring a vital element that would make membership based organizations successful, i.e. the traditional role of rural village structures in dictating routine norms and practices that govern its survival. It is therefore very important to identify and articulate the context we are referring to when we talk about “the community”.

This paper takes the opportunity of making some observations about firstly, how one can view a “community” within the existing traditional structures of a rural village in Pakistan. Secondly, it looks into how this can impact upon the presence of MBOPs within these “communities” and whether such organizations reflect the realities of those that they represent. It does this by using experiences of various CBOs in rural Sindh Province and the position occupied by them within their respective “communities”.

2. The Community: Who are we talking about?

In the Pakistani context, Banuri and Mehmood present us with a detailed, but highly accurate definition of the term by far:

“Define a community on the basis of relative spatial proximity, like a village or an urban abadi. This very largely also defines the community in terms of common requirements for social services, like education, health, housing, water, sanitation, roads, energy needs, and the environment. It may also define the community in terms of basic classes, and therefore employment and income needs. If a community has a set of common social requirements, then its perception of the problem is likely to be the most accurate, and its solution to the problem will be the most relevant and useful under any given set of constraints. Finally, the community’s response to the problem will also be the fastest…thus, a

3 While each of these organizations and in fact NPOs as a whole, reflect a different class and type of community, this paper will only focus on membership based organizations in rural village communities, where majority of Pakistan’s poor reside. It must also be noted, that in Pakistan, most MBOPs are small, grassroots level organizations, with limited geographical coverage and membership and there is no organization that could be compared to the size and structure of SEWA. NPOs that work on a much larger or national scale such as Rural Support Programmes, often are not made up of individual members, but are rather a collective of various groups.
Ian Smillie furthers the view that the community is more than just a provider of services. The new “community”, he argues, is also a way of organizing the provision of integrating power that many governments now lack, a way of restoring active citizenship and the participation of individuals in their own future.

The concept of the community taking charge of its own affairs is now a popular one with the rise of more and more group-based activism. Theorists such as Bookchin, Illich and Schumacher have reasserted the primacy of small communities taking responsibility for their own condition of life. Across a range of disciplines, thinking has turned to biology, the nature of living systems and to principles of self-organization as the only viable way to cope with change and complexity.

Geoff Mulgan puts forward three basic principles at the core idea of community; the recognition of people’s social nature, scale and the reassertion of ethics. He says “community is deliberately a different word from society. In order to be meaningful, it must imply membership in a human-scale collective, at which it is possible to encounter people face to face”. This provides the community with its own individual identity as a living, breathing organism, with the ability to evolve, rather than a static concept only witnessed on paper. Therefore, communities can now be seen as both homogeneous as well as heterogeneous.

The disadvantage of such definitions however, is that they tend to perhaps, over-generalize the term. What needs to be recognized is that firstly, communities are fluid and evolving entities that whose membership base can increase or decrease based on choice, force or need. Secondly, a community cannot be represented by just those who tend to be more vocal and vociferous, but by each and every individual residing in it, i.e. it must be “inclusive”.

This then takes the definitional notion of the term into more complex issues such as territory, caste and class. For example, a village can be considered as a community by itself. But within that village exist a number of different caste and kinship groups, each a community unto themselves because of their individual histories, backgrounds and class status. Furthermore, it is commonly found that even though different communities will come together with the same general objectives, they will each have very different ideas of how to achieve those objectives. Achieving common ground is not as simple as it is made out to be.
Robert Chambers points out that within communities, there are many obvious differences. He quotes Alice Welbourn’s (1991) four major axis of difference; age, gender, ethnic or social group and poverty. Even within these categories, one can perceive a separate community. Because of such discrepancies between traditional definitions and ground realities, a number of changes have been occurring regarding the way people now look at communities. The conventional notion that those who come together for a common cause, are representative of every other member of that cause, is now being challenged. Poverty or unemployment may be endemic to the world’s poor. However, not every poverty eradication initiative may be able to include each and every member affected by poverty, not by reason of geographical or physical outreach, but by reason of social, cultural and economic differences reflective in different “communities”.

3. Multiple Identities of “Community”

In Sindh, the main contributor of social capital in a rural village, has been the biradari or kinship system. This is what provides a social safety net to the poor in times of need and what defines an individual’s identity. These biradari divisions come in the form of tribes or castes coming down for generations. Most villages in Sindh are inhabited by the members of single caste communities and all go by the same surname such as the Solangi’s, Khaskhelli’s, Talpur’s or Ujjan’s. Here there is open intermixing of men and women. However some villages are made up of a number of surnames. In this case, clear divisions are formed and intermixing is not the norm. Women in such villages for instance, are particularly docile and subdued, as their level of interaction does not even go beyond the confines of their household, let alone to other parts of the same village. Group formation in such circumstances is very difficult.

Using this analysis as a benchmark for our initial hypothesis assumes, we begin with the assumption that a village is a homogeneous entity. However, upon entering the village, one realizes that it is actually made up a number of different groups. These groups are physically divided into neighbourhoods (or para’s as they are called in Sindh province), each characteristically different from the other. For example, para A consists of rich landowners, para B farmers and labourers and para C by a minority caste. Even though the former two paras are made up of the same caste group, they still do not mix with each other due to class differences, or as Welbourn pointed out earlier, because of social and ethnic differences. Similarly, the minority group, even though being part of the same village, is considered a non-entity due to its status as a minority group. It is even physically separated from the rest of the para’s in the village by being situated in a far corner.

In order to be able to understand how these various levels of “communities” are linked or de-linked from one another, one can take the example of community-based organizations

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8 In Chambers; Whose Reality Counts? Putting the Last First; 1997; p183.
9 GoP; Pakistan Participatory Poverty Assessment. National Report; 2002; p77
10 For a more detailed analysis of MBOPs made up exclusively of female members, see study by Khan, T; NGORC; 1997 (mimeo)
or CBOs, who often form a focal point for bringing people together in a village\textsuperscript{11}. The various perceptions of what a community entails, has had a major impact upon the way these CBOs think and function. To the outsider, it would seem that such organizations often represent their village as a whole, considering that they target generic services such as health, education, sanitation etc. However, it is interesting to note, that in many cases, members of such organizations also belong to one particular and more importantly, more dominant caste group. In a village where caste is evenly homogeneous, the benefits often reach far. However, where there are multiple castes inhabiting the organizations geographical coverage, the tendency is to veer towards the one closest to the organizations own, as examples in the next section will demonstrate.

\textbf{Box 1: A day in the life of a \textit{para}}

\textit{Ali jo Para} (Ali’s \textit{para}), is one of the smaller \textit{paras} of a village in Sindh. It is made up of about 22 households\textsuperscript{12}. It is located in the centre of the village, bounded by two larger \textit{paras} that together form a triangle. In a corner of the \textit{para} are two or three Sayyiad households. Most of the houses here are made of brick, however about 10 years ago they were still made of mud. Hand pumps were common in the \textit{para}, as one could see women and young girls pumping water for drinking, washing clothes, bathing or for animals. There are three shops in the \textit{para}, selling items of daily household use. There is one hotel with a VCR and a satellite dish that covers only this \textit{para}. Timings for film showings on the VCR are fixed, however, films are shown throughout the day on the satellite dish up till midnight. People come from nearby villages to see these film shows. The hotel also screens private showings at a cost of Rs. 250.

There is a small \textit{chakki} (flour mill) in the \textit{para}. Those who harvest wheat bring it here to be ground into flour. There are a number of ditches in this \textit{para} where villagers excavate mud for their homes. Most of these ditches are filled with wastewater. People living in this \textit{para} often dump waste matter in front of their livestock pens that they set afire in order to protect them from mosquitoes.

One cannot and should not generalize this assumption, as cases vary from village to village. However it has been seen that members of many CBOs often limit themselves to areas that are inhabited by their own caste members, as the paper will further illustrate. The effects of class and wealth also come into play here. If the CBO members belong to a richer caste group, they will have less to do with members of a poorer caste or vice versa. Which or whose “community” then do these organizations represent?

\textsuperscript{11}CBOs in Pakistan are primarily formed as a response by concerned members of a village or urban neighbourhood, to either a specific issue (health, education etc.), or for the general uplift of their surroundings. Membership of these organizations, is limited to only the village in which the CBO originates, i.e. those belonging to one village are normally not members of the CBO of another village and vice versa.

\textsuperscript{12}In Sindh province, the concept of a “household” defies conventional norms. This will be explored further in the next section of this paper.
On a more academic and theoretical level, such divisions have created multiple levels of hierarchies and sub-communities, which go deep beyond the surface of what a rural settlement has traditionally stood for; i.e. earlier a village was considered to be made up of a single (shared) identity, but now it is seen as a constantly evolving entity, made up of a number of varying groups, all with their own individual histories and identities\textsuperscript{13}.

4. Hierarchical Notions of Community

The most obvious forms of community structures are the geographical and physical divisions that constitute a rural village in Sindh Province. This structure begins from the deh (administrative unit; See Box 2), filters down to the goth (village), further down to the para (neighbourhood) and finally to the household.

Administratively, this structure operates from top-down. However, if viewed from the vantage point of a community, it moves bottom-up, with the needs of the household and the village being the most important. This is also where the idea for membership based organizations of the poor takes root. However, class, caste and income have created an inflexible and remote structure within which only the more privileged tend to prosper. This is most apparent in the way the rich treat the poor. It is virtually impossible for a farmer to speak in the presence of a landlord, or for a landlord to have any sort of personal association with his farmers. Similarly within gender relations, wives of the landlords will not necessarily mix with those of farmers or labourers, even though they may belong to the same caste group\textsuperscript{14}. Such factors do much to influence the composition and priorities of membership based organizations.

Box 2: The story of the Deh

The deh is the lowest administrative unit in Sindh devised for revenue collection purposes. A deh however, does not correspond well to the notion of a self-contained community or a village. The main point worth noting is that an administrative deh can comprise several self-contained villages that are commonly referred to as “goth”. The most striking feature of the deh is the sheer number of distinct villages within its boundaries. Individual villages or goth’s have some official recognition as places of residence but not as units of administration. The record of the revenue department recognizes some of the villages within the deh as officially sanctioned, but this is largely a matter of land record and does not readily translate into development interventions. Some of the villages, however, are not even recognized in this record. These are mostly small hamlets, and some of them are relatively recent, dating to not more than ten years.

\textsuperscript{13} Some interesting asides also help to shed further light on this notion. For instance in one village, the members of a particular caste group separated themselves from another caste group after facing severe social differences and set up their own new village in the lands across the road. Similarly, a new “village” altogether was created when one particular patriarch decided to move away from his native village to settle on his inherited lands a few kilometers away, followed by members of his extended family. Thus new “communities” were born.

\textsuperscript{14} In this regard, a very interesting finding has been that during the harvest season, women belonging to all levels of households, i.e. landowners, farmers and labourers, will all work in the fields for wages. Therefore, the issue of status and caste becomes irrelevant in this case.
For instance, visits to the dehs in some districts of Sindh have led to the discovery that there are a number of discrepancies among the recorded and given names of the villages. Whereas in the list of names provided by official sources the names are one, upon arriving at those villages one discovers that they actually go by another name. The main reason for this is, that the village is named after a particular person. Upon that person’s death, his or her son would be declared the “un-official” successor and the village would be then known in the son’s name. In the official government list however, the village would still be known by its original name under which it was initially registered. Therefore, if the local community would be asked the name of their village, they would give the current successor’s name, rather than the original registered name.

The dehs themselves seem to expand and contract. Some dehs are as small as encompassing only three or four villages, while some are as large as having more than fifteen villages within their boundaries. New villages spring up over the years and although unrecorded in many cases, ultimately expand the size of the deh and its various village “communities”.

Each class also has its own public space. The autaaq (meeting room) of the wadera (landlord) for instance, is a very prominent space that is reserved exclusively for the wadera and a very select gathering of his acquaintances. Similarly, the government school in the village (if there is one), is a gathering place for many of the social activities conducted by the less “well-off” groups such as farmers or salaried workers. Indeed, even CBOs tend to use school premises after hours as a meeting place for their members or outside visitors.

Households are no less excluded from such hierarchical dictates. In most of rural Pakistan, there is no concept of a nuclear family. Most households consist of a number of families living within a single shared “aangan” or compound. What sets these families apart from each other, is the “choolha” or stove. This refers in all practicality, to the functioning kitchen of a household. In each “aangan” are a number of “choolha’s” or kitchens. Each kitchen indicates the number of individual families that inhabit that compound.

Take the case of one patriarch. He has a total of seven choolha’s within the boundary of his home. One for his own household and one for each of his six sons and their respective families. Each son’s living quarters and kitchen is clearly delineated from the other, although all seven families share the same open compound and water tap. One son drives a Datsun van, one maintains a shop in the village and the rest of the sons are all haris (farmers). Therefore, each son maintains his own household financially. In total, there are over 30 people living within the walls of this aangan. The concept of a stove or “choolha” then refers to the number of earning members of the family.

An interesting deviation occurs in households that use gas stoves as opposed to wood stoves. In most aangans, there is only one gas connection which is shared by all the different households within that aangan i.e women take turns to use the gas stove for cooking for their respective families. So while only one gas stove may exist in that compound, the costs of using that stove are divided between each

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Certain hierarchies extend even beyond the village. For instance, if a farmer wishes to take a loan from a moneylender in the market, he will need to go through his local landlord for surety. The caste and class hierarchy established in his village will dictate which landlord the farmer will go to for assistance. This need not necessarily be the one he works for, as there may be a much larger landlord in the village who is more powerful. Ultimately, it is factors such as caste, religion, occupation and wealth that dictate who manages what and how in a rural village (as undoubtedly in more developed areas as well). It also ultimately dictates how membership based organizations operate in such a complex environment. The more land a person has, the more powerful he is. In some villages, the para of the wadera is considered to be the most important as he has the most lands in the village, despite the fact that it may have fewer households than other paras. In instances when the membership based organization or CBO is headed by that particular wadera as well, benefits will most often be skewed towards the wealthy and influential. Matters are further complicated when another more marginalized group surfaces in the same village with their own CBO. As a result there are now two organizations working in most cases, on similar issues, but for the benefit of their own respective members. While competition is always healthy, where class and caste conflict, the results could possibly be damaging to both.

### Box 3: The Marginalized Community

Whether we accept households, paras, or villages as one or separate communities, the minority classes in Pakistan have always been considered as being located outside the boundaries of Muslim villages. Two cases are stark contrasts in how such minorities, in this case low-caste Hindus, have been viewed as separate from the “mainstream” communities.

A tiny hamlet of 14 households makes up a Hindu community whose inhabitants work as hari’s (farmers) on the lands of the neighbouring wadera’s. Although the village has a Muslim name in the official records, it is known in the area after its leader from the Bheel caste. A formidable man in his fifties, he has risen the ranks in the eyes of his community. He successfully contested the local elections as a minority candidate and is responsible for handling the hari’s of his local wadera. Well respected and well known throughout the deh, he has converted his tiny “community”, into one that can claim a geographical and cultural identity of its own, despite its marginal status.

Another group of low caste Hindus, have a different story to tell. Their tiny community is located in one of the para’s of another village that is hardly ever recognized as such, by the other inhabitants of the village. Members of the community have to travel far into the desert area to work on daily wages on lands of wadera’s, as there is no work available for household. Therefore, in such cases, even though the physical presence of the choolha will not exist, the concept of household division within the aangan remains the same.

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16 For a detailed in-depth study of land tenure systems and rural livelihoods in Sindh and Punjab, see Gazdar, Khan and Khan; 2002 (mimeo)
them close by. They live under fear of the local landlord and are not forwarded any facilities for their families, so much so, that they complain that the Muslim families in the village do not even let their children use their toilets. Their case symptomizes the concept of communities existing with communities, most of them isolated and forgotten.

5. Membership Based Organizations: Ground Realities

Once we have established the complex and multi-layered structure of rural Pakistan, we can now shed light on the impact that that these structures can have on membership based organizations of the poor and ultimately, on the lives of their members and beneficiaries. This can be achieved by looking into the functioning of some CBOs in Sindh Province, all of whom work in various areas of social sector service delivery and consider themselves as representatives of their village or “community”.

It must be clarified at the outset, that the objective of this paper is not to judge which organization is better than the other, but rather to view the various social and economic factors, which condition their attitude and operation. This will enable us to look at more closely at membership based organizations of the poor as evolving entities, rather than just as static service delivery mechanisms. It will also help us to analyse exactly how such organizations and their interventions, impact on rural society and economy.

a) Profiles
The CBOs referred to in this section primarily fit the same profile. They are comprised of a membership base ranging between 80 to 200 individuals. In most cases, the members are male however, they do have a small percentage of female members, who are part of what is known as the CBOs “women’s wing”. By and large, these women belong to the households of the male members. A number of these CBOs are named after the dominant caste of the village (Solangi Welfare Association) or even after the name of the village itself (Jindodero Village Development Organization). There is no written or legal rule that prohibits those of other castes or villages to join the organization. However even a cursory glance at the membership-base of such CBOs, makes it apparent that membership is by and large homogeneous, even in multi-caste villages.

These CBOs are governed according to a set structure set out under NGO registration laws in Pakistan. They consist of an Executive Committee of office bearers and a General Body membership. Elections are held every 2-3 years to induct a change of guard and it is compulsory for the CBO to have documented financial accounts. The primary areas of operation of these CBOs range from setting up primary schools, to dispensaries, to micro-credit programmes to providing clean drinking water and sanitation facilities. Most of their finances come from project-related funding provided by either international

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17 See Note on Methodology for further clarification
18 For a detailed explanation of the structure of CBOs in Sindh, see A Situation Analysis of NGOs in Sindh: NGORC; 1997
19 Ibid.
donors, large national NGOs or through private philanthropy. Membership fees form a very negligible amount of their total revenue\textsuperscript{20, 21, 22}.

\textbf{b) Findings and Observations}

Most CBOs in Pakistan have certain similarities that are common to small community-based organizations. There are some major differences in terms of scale and infrastructure, however the most succinct finding has been that of the attitudes of those the organization attempts to serve and even more so, the attitudes of the organization members themselves towards their goals and objectives.

In one single caste village, it was found that most people thought that the CBO present actually did not cater to their needs, let alone consider them. For instance, there were some non-Muslim families that were living in the village for more than two years, but when questioned regarding the various ethnic and caste groups of the village, members of the CBO omitted to mention them. Similarly, in one \textit{para} a woman directly addressed some of the members of the CBO saying “\textit{you come all the time and write things and leave and we don’t get anything. Whatever you get you eat it up yourselves and we get nothing}”\textsuperscript{23}. Members of the CBO chalked this angry response down to an on-going feud of this family with certain CBO members and clearly showed that they were not part of their beneficiaries.

In discussions with the women of the village, who were made up of a variety of the same caste but poorer class, members of the CBO who were present constantly prompted the other women to respond to the line of questioning\textsuperscript{24}. It was later discovered that these women felt intimidated by the CBO members, because they belonged to more privileged families in the village. Similar instances have occurred in other villages, especially where minority castes reside. In one such instance, women belonging to a minority non-Muslim caste, refused to even speak in the presence of CBO members of their village. Suffice it to say that these women were neither included as members of the CBO, nor were the CBO’s village development projects such as micro-credit extended to them. When the CBO was asked why this was so, the reply was, “\textit{we have approached them, but they are not organized enough to be able to participate in our schemes}”\textsuperscript{25}. The minority group had another story to tell. Apparently, they were not even aware of what the CBOs activities were in the village.

While most of the families in another single caste village were very forthcoming regarding the CBO’s activities, some did not behave well with the CBO Social

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} In reality, the case is quite different. Capacity is a major issue for many of these CBOs. While their structure is evidently visible, it is generally textbook in nature
\textsuperscript{22} For a detailed explanation of the financial structure of CBOs in Sindh, see NGORC; A Situation Analysis of NGOs in Sindh; 1997 and Ghaus-Pasha, Jamal and Iqbal; 2002
\textsuperscript{23} Personal discussion; 2001
\textsuperscript{24} In one very interesting faux pas, on the question on internal conflicts on land a woman said that decisions were taken by a certain landlord. It is worth noting that this gentleman had passed away about eight or nine months ago.
\textsuperscript{25} Personal discussion; 2001
Organizers. One Social Organizer was asked to leave from a house saying that “you people come and write down information from us and we get nothing in return. So we won’t tell you anything”\textsuperscript{26}. A number of people from other \textit{para’s} indicated that they were not happy with the CBO and made negative remarks about them\textsuperscript{27}. One woman remarked, “all those who benefit from them are the President’s relatives. Even her workers are related to her”\textsuperscript{28}. It is interesting to note, that in this particular village, all families belonged to one kinship group. However, the differences occurred in terms of sub-castes, occupation and wealth. About 70\% of the male villagers thought that the CBO did not do anything for the poor and was a one-person show only\textsuperscript{29}.

In many projects undertaken by CBOs on behalf of their members and beneficiaries, there is an underlying assumption that these local organizations are the most effective representative of their parent community. In one particular project which involved bringing together parents and teachers for school improvement, local CBOs were recruited to carry out the task of community mobilization and training. While the CBOs, which were typical membership based organizations, were fairly successful in bringing together parents and teachers in their own village, they faced a great deal of resistance in other villages of the selected district. It was soon discovered that a CBO may be representative of and recognized by the members of its own organization, community or village, but not in another. Indeed, in some villages that had their own CBOs took the implementing CBOs to be rivals in “their” territories. They staked their claim to their respective territories and on many occasions refused to let the selected partner NGO work in the area\textsuperscript{30}.

On the other hand, another CBO belonged to yet another village that was made up of multi-caste groups. This local CBO was actually a collection of individuals belonging to a less dominant caste group. While members of their own caste in the village were very favourable towards them, others in the village who belonged to higher castes, paid them virtually no attention. This proved to be a hindrance to the project at hand, since the objective was to mobilize all parents of the village in school improvement, rather than just a select few\textsuperscript{31}.

An analysis of the structures of all these CBOs shows that they are very much the product of their main founders, rather than their membership base as a whole. This serves as a deterrent to the organization’s growth needs, among others. In one of the CBOs for instance, as much as its President and founder has been the driving force behind the organization, he has inadvertently also been the cause of stagnation for the organization as a whole. Where his confidence and the groups' performance had gained accolades from

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{26} Personal meeting; 2001
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Ironically, this was a \textit{para} from where no one was a member of the CBO, as they belonged to a caste different from the CBOs own and thus felt excluded from its activities
  \item \textsuperscript{28} Two CBO Social Organizers turned out to be cousins and the daughters of a CBO office bearer’s brother. One Social Organizer is the CBO founder’s niece. One member is the founder’s cousin’s brother-in law, while the CBO motivator is her cousin’s wife.
  \item \textsuperscript{29} Various group discussions; 1996-1997
  \item \textsuperscript{30} Internal project documentation; 1997-1999
  \item \textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
NGOs and donors alike, the structural development of the organization had remained the same. The reasons for the groups’ prominence are related to a number of other social factors as well. Their village is located on the main National Highway, so access to cities and market places is not difficult. It is a homogeneous village, so there is freedom to intermix and social constraints are comparatively fewer than in other villages. But what is missing in this organization, is the ability to sustain itself, both financially and structurally.

Similarly, in the CBO working for school improvement, the dominant personality who also headed the project team, was a very powerful and politically connected man. He belonged to one of the most powerful clans of the area and was well-known throughout the district. This had its own share of pros and cons. While his political power and patronage allowed him to access human and financial resources for his organization, the same power and patronage also posed as a threat to other organizations in the area who belonged to smaller and less politically connected clans or kinship groups.

On the other hand, in another CBO, its President and founder was not the only prominent member of the organization, although he did command most of the attention. A number of others were identified as being very active as well and did not need his guidance to make decisions. Although in his presence they do tend to look more towards him for support.

Even above and beyond the idea of representation, is that of providing benefits and services. A number of villagers were unhappy with their CBO primarily because they felt it had not done enough for the village. In fact, villagers were more of the opinion that it was only the CBO staff members who were benefiting more than the General Body members. This has been illustrated above, but can be further demonstrated by the fact that one particular CBO that was run by a husband and wife team, managed to build a concrete and brick house for themselves out of funds they received for project related work, with the CBO’s offices housed in the ground floor. While the issue is not that the CBO grew from a small village organization, to a much larger entity with much more power, it does reflect the fact that this power is more so being used for the benefit of only a few. A further illustration of this observation is that despite a growth in power and finances, the CBO membership remained the same as it was a few years earlier. So why aren’t new members joining on?

Such issues raise concerns about firstly, the credibility of the CBO as a fair and representative entity. Secondly, it raises concerns about exactly how the CBO is functioning in terms of its organizational capacity and decision-making structure.

6. Are MBOPs the Solution?

These examples very appropriately attest to the challenge that CBOs may or may not be the most appropriate representatives of their community. These cases have tried to illustrate the various social and economic factors that condition the responses of organizations that identify themselves to the world on the basis of their membership base.

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32 This is more in terms of caste. However, intermixing is made difficult by the varying levels of wealth and status
All these organizations have certain commonalities associated with small community-based organizations, such as their internal membership base, legal registration modalities, their limited geographical coverage, their dependence on external sources for revenue generation etc. While they do differ on grounds of scope and outreach i.e. some CBOs being larger, more exposed and better financially equipped than others, their contribution to their respective villages has to be looked at socially and not just organizationally.

Putting forward a case for membership based organizations as benefiting the poor, these CBOs have managed to bring forth some exclusive qualities that rural CBOs possess. The most important of these is their ability to mobilize a membership base around a common issue, whether exclusionary or not. Secondly, because of their membership base which allows the organization to be legally registered, such CBOs are able to access external resources that would otherwise not be accessible to the poor e.g access to credit, social services, infrastructure, foreign funding etc.. Thirdly, CBOs have managed feed on the hierarchy of rural power structures, on the basis of caste and historical prominence, in order to survive and be recognized both in and outside their village. This combination has allowed these CBOs to successfully operate despite opposition and animosity from within and outside their communities.

This also proves that instead of looking at CBOs simply from the purview of its organizational framework, one needs to look closer at its location within the society in which they operate. All CBOs used their ties to caste as a way to gradually raise themselves within the social hierarchy of their respective villages, and to be able to provide better services to their members. Thus while in comparison to more landed castes they may still be less influential, but within their domestic constituencies, they wield great power.

Such power, as mentioned earlier, has also enabled these CBOs to tap into unconventional sources for their members, such as obtaining funds from international development organizations. NPO critiques have been challenged here, as this has had less to do with the NPOs organizational capacity and more with their leader’s personal network of social relations. Normally such personal “networks” would be seen as being inappropriate for a professional institution to make use of. In such a case, these actions can be considered as justified, if it actually was providing positive economic gains to members. However where CBOs demonstrate exclusivity in their membership, it may not be entirely beneficial. For instance, in the case of one CBO, most of the beneficiaries of the organizations projects, were the office bearers own family members and the remaining members primarily belonged to the majority caste group. This brings up the vital question of whether NPOs and MBOPs are representatives of just their own “communities” or their village as a whole.

Observations of the CBOs, also reflect a typical pattern that helps to support the thesis that membership based representation within a community is influenced by a number of factors. For instance, in all villages, many non-members were of the opinion that the CBO did not

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33 It must be clarified, that although these CBOs are made up of individual memberships, in effect, these individual members represent their respective households.

34 Ironically, observations have shown that in turn, these caste groups have now begun to dominate other more oppressed groups, such as the low-caste and minorities, thus perpetuating the myth of power.
fully represent the whole village, but only a select caste and class\textsuperscript{35}. When asked why they were not members of the CBO, responses included “\textit{we were not asked to become members}” to “\textit{they belong to a higher caste}” to “\textit{they only associate with their own kind}”\textsuperscript{36}. Similarly, in the case of another CBO, all members belonged to one caste and the remaining population of the village, although aware of the organization’s existence, was partly oblivious of its activities.

Similarly, all CBOs were found to be centered around one individual, rather than their members. That the founding members had retained the main positions within the CBOs governing body since inception, showed that members did not have much say in how the organization functioned on a day-to-day basis.

Gender plays an interesting part in this scenario. In development thought, women have always been seen as an independent “community” whose needs and problems require separate and more detailed attention. This has prompted the formation of exclusively women’s groups. Despite this fact, however, women belonging to marginalized groups in the village (minority groups), are still excluded from the group’s membership, let alone its benefits. This worrying fact continues to raise serious questions about the marginalized (rural poor), further marginalizing the marginalized (the low-caste).

Unfortunately, it is factors such as these that pose a risk to the benefits that CBOs and MBOPs can provide to rural economies. It is only they who are best aware of how to deal with the complexities of their village. In addition, as legally registered formal organizations, they can act as much needed intermediaries between their community members and those more powerful such as landlords, and even donors.

If looked at in this light, then the role of CBOs and those within them becomes a vital element of poverty reduction. Instead of basing decisions on the size and composition of organizations, the emphasis needs to be placed instead on how such organizations can utilize the existing system of social relations and hierarchies within their communities. If CBOs can manage to integrate such traditional systems with more formal organizational frameworks, then they have the potential to be very successful in addressing the complex issues related to poverty.

7. Conclusion

These complex sets of social relations are what govern rural “communities” in Sindh province, Pakistan. Going back to Banuri and Mehmood’s definition of the term, it is then not so simplistic to be able to define a community in terms of just spatial proximity or common requirements. While these may be useful in identifying an area within which to concentrate efforts for change, they may not necessarily identify the most accurate way in which to bring about change. One particular group in the village may cite education as the need of the hour, despite the fact that a school does exist in their village. However, it

\textsuperscript{35} It is worth noting that this CBO works only in two \textit{paras} of the village, which belong to the landowning class and majority of its members belong to the \textit{para} of the CBO’s founding President.

\textsuperscript{36} Various visits; 200-2001
is because that school is not accessible to their particular class or caste group that the need arises. If the CBO concerned with the state of affairs in their village belongs to a dominant caste group, they will perhaps be able to address the issue and ensure equal access. However, if members of the CBO are mostly poorer farmers or labourers, then they will either need access to more powerful social representatives, or they will simply come up with their own school, exclusively for their children, thus further pronouncing the caste and class divide. Is this the solution to poverty?

It is questions such as these that MBOPs in Pakistan and ultimately policy-makers have to grapple with. While these issues do not have to hamper the generic definitions of community as being a common nucleus for organization and service delivery, they do come into question when one talks about who is advocating for change within them, i.e. membership based organizations. This is not to undermine or disregard the work of such organizations, but it is important that their inputs be critically analyzed in context to their social and political surroundings, as this undoubtedly only influences their work. Representation is then not only limited to farmers and water user’s associations, but also women’s groups and minority rights groups.

Such social systems exist in all the provinces, and in both rural and urban areas, albeit with differences in the structures of hierarchies and governance. It is not possible or feasible to assume that the so-called “ripple effect” of development will pervade through an entire region smoothly and uniformly. For practitioners and policy makers, it is vital to recognize and acknowledge the barriers of caste and class, so that there may be more of an opportunity for membership based organizations to achieve pro-poor growth. But before one can come up with ideas for poverty reduction, it is vital to firstly try and understand these social structures, in our evaluation of why poverty exists in poor countries. The answer is not always to rid us of these sorts of relations, but perhaps if we take a closer look into some of the issues above, it may even lie in the institutionalization of these relations. The “community” then just might know what is “best”. 


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