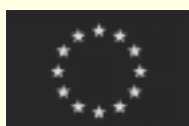


Village Older Peoples' Association in the Thar



Formation, Working and Benefits

Gravis



Edited By: Dr. Prakash Tyagi

Purpose of Study

This study attempts to document the various facets of formation and initial working of the Village Older Peoples' Association in the extreme conditions of the Thar Desert. It is hoped that the some of the issues that are highlighted in this document would promote cross learning and replication of the initiative at other places.

The document also serves to highlight the capacity of older people to come together and work for their own benefit and also that of the community.

Methodology

The first part of the study was conducted through a desk review of the existing documentation available on the various issues pertaining to the Thar Desert in general and the 'Promoting older people led community action to reduce poverty among vulnerable groups in Rajasthan, India' (POC) project in particular. A broad framework was drawn based on which a field visit was conducted in the month of March 2010 to the GRAVIS headquarters in Jodhpur and selected villages of Baap block in Jodhpur district and Fategarh block of Jaisalmer district where VOPAs have been set up. This document is largely a result of the contribution made by GRAVIS community workers and the members of the VOPAs who were interviewed. Participatory tools such as key interviews, focused group discussions and transect walks were used to note the opinion of the people. This document reflects on the qualitative aspects of the project.

About HelpAge International

HelpAge International helps older people claim their rights, challenge discrimination and overcome poverty, so that they can lead dignified, secure, active and healthy lives.

The organisation is driven by a fundamental understanding that older people have the wisdom and the personal drive to contribute to their own wellbeing and that of their families. Its work in over 75 countries is strengthened through our global network of like-minded organisations – the only one of its kind in the world.

Helpage has offices in London and Brussels, six regional centres coordinating its work in Africa, East and South Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean and Eastern Europe/Central Asia, and a number of national programmes and emergency response programmes. Further information can be found at: <http://www.helpage.org>

About GRAVIS

Founded in 1983, GRAVIS is a development organization working for the empowerment of the Thar Desert communities, in Rajasthan, India. GRAVIS is based on the Gandhian philosophy of self-reliance and works toward the rehabilitation of drought affected and marginalized rural communities, enabling village ownership and control over its environment, institutions, and relations. Till date, GRAVIS has worked with over 50,000 desert families across 850 villages in Rajasthan reaching a population of over 1 million, and has established over 1,100 community Based Organizations (CBOs).

GRAVIS' actions focus on poor, backward and marginalized section of the community with particular emphasis on women, children and elderly and it believes in blending the traditional wisdom with new techniques to create long-term, sustainable and cost effective means for improving the lives of rural inhabitants. Further information can be found at <http://www.gravis.org.in>.

ISBN 978-81-968611-7-9

Foreword

Since we are currently observing a continuous upward trend in the ratio of older people in many countries and in India as well, it is highly essential to make this group of the society more active and involved in the life and current issues of local communities. According to the information collected for this report, the VOPAs have already proved to be very successful, not only in improving the conditions of living of the elderly, but other groups, such as children as well. The older people, because of their vast experience and wide practical knowledge can help in developing many important skills and features among the youth and through the idea of VOPAs improve the cross generation cooperation.

There are however some challenges that VOPAs will have to face in the near future, e.g.: organizational and technical issues in terms of current operations of VOPAs or the low level of literacy among its members.

The report focuses on the issue of development of Village Older People's Associations (VOCAs) in the region of Thar Desert in Rajasthan and the very significant contribution they have recently made to the improvement of the situation and standard of life of the local communities. The report's main goal is to provide the proof for hitherto successful operation of the VOPAs and the necessity of the existence of such an organizations in the Indian society, especially in the extremely difficult region of Thar Desert.

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Abbreviations

CPMC	Central Project Monitoring Committee
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
NREGA	National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
OPA	Older People's Association
SDM	Sub Divisional Magistrate
SHG	Self Help Group
VOPA	Village Older People's Association

Glossary

Adhyakshya	Presiding officer
Dhani	Scattered habitation usually in clusters named after the community
Gram Panchayat	Local elected body of representatives
Gramkosh	Village Common Fund
Khadins	Runoff based farming system constructed for individual or a group of farmers
Naadi	Village pond that serves the drinking water needs of human beings and the livestock as also the wildlife
Panchayati Raj	Local self Government
Sarpanch	Head of elected members of a group of villages
Taanka	Underground water storage and harvesting structure
Thar	Desert in Western Rajasthan, India

1. Older People

Older people form a vital part of the population of all countries. Older women and men are those aged 60 or over, according to the United Nations. However, the notion of old age is also dependent on the cultural and social factors and thus varies from one context to another.¹ Older people are perceived in various ways; sometimes uncharitably as a burden on the family and the society. However they are also seen as care takers, resource managers, income generators and a resource bank of knowledge and preservers of the community's cultural and social identities.

Global Trends

The 20th and 21st century have shown some rather interesting demographic trends the world over. Reducing fertility rate and enhanced life expectancy, especially in the developed countries, are leading to a situation where the ratio of older people in the population is getting larger. In many regions of the world, the number and proportion of people 60 years and older is growing faster than any other age group. By 2050, the old and young will represent equal proportions of the global population, with the proportion of those aged 60 or older expected to double from 10 per cent currently to 21 per cent.² Europe is currently the world's major area with the highest proportions of older persons and is projected to remain so for at least the next 50 years. About 37 per cent of the European population is projected to be 60 or over in 2050, up from 20 per cent in 2000.³

These demographic trends are being discussed in by the various governments over the world. The present and the projected percentage of older people in the population of a country or region has implications on the revenue collected by the governments in terms of direct income tax; which is normally further used for developmental purposes. Though older people share a lot of resources to the society, they might not always be able to contribute in the form of direct income taxes as they might not have the physical capacity to work any further. In addition there are costs associated with the various social security and pension schemes that older people rightfully deserve.

¹ Sphere Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response, 2004, p. 11.

² HelpAge International; Establishing and working with older people's association in Cambodia: a practical guideline, 2006, p.1.

³ <http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/worldageing19502050/pdf/80chapterii.pdf>

Indian Trends

India, since independence from the British colonial rule in 1947, has developed on many counts. Incidents of deaths due to epidemics, drought and malnutrition, which were a common feature in the pre-independence period are comparatively much lower. This factor coupled with an explosive population growth rate has led the population burgeoning to a billion plus. The older people in the Indian population are also substantial and growing. As per Census of 2001, the number of older persons in 2001 was 70.6 million (6.9% of the overall population) which was projected to be 83.5 million in 2006 (7.5%). As per the projections the percentage of older persons will be 94.8 million in 2011 (8.3%), 118 million in 2016, (9.3%) 143.7 million in 2021(10.7%) and 173.1 million in 2026 (12.4%). A comparison of rural elderly and the urban establish the fact that around 74.97 per cent of older persons live in rural areas and 25.02 in urban areas.

The increase in life expectancy in India due to better health care, nutritious food and economic security has led to a demographic transition. This necessitates targeted interventions to address old-age related social, economic and health issues. This need is more so for the 62.5 million older people who are living in the rural areas of India. The needs of the rural elderly as to access to health system and socio- economic security suffer from the same malice that trouble any other person living in non-urban areas of India.

The Government of India's National Policy on Older Persons of 1999 reaffirms the development and support to the old aged in the holistic manner. It talks of safeguarding the interest of the elderly in terms of financial security, health, legal, social and psychological security, also envisages a productive partnership with them in the process of development by creating opportunities for their gainful engagement and employment. However, most of these provisions as yet have to be fully implemented and remain inspirational to a large extent.

Older People in the Thar

The Thar Desert, is one of the most inhospitable and arid regions of the world. Searing heat in the summers, perpetual lack of water and frequent drought like conditions make it difficult to survive in such conditions. It occupies 0.21 million square kilometers of land and has a total population of 22.5 million people.⁴ The mean annual rainfall over the Thar is around 450 mm at the eastern margin and from here it declines to less than 100 mm to the west, over a distance of 450 kilometers.

⁴ Gravis; Harvesting the Rains in Thar, Strengthening self-reliant water supplies to the desert poor, p. 14.

The region suffers from geographical and existential vulnerabilities, a lack of access to resources, poor economic growth and inadequate infrastructure. Lifeline services are limited and the access to them is not always easy. Agriculture is limited, due to the harsh hydro-meteorological conditions. Thar Desert also presents one of the bleakest economic scenarios, with scarce opportunities. This leads to an exodus of mostly young men out of the region to other parts of the state and country in search of seasonal employment. This has implications on the roles and responsibilities of the elderly in the Thar.

The older people in the villages in the Thar not only have to manage on their own affairs but in addition have the responsibility of taking care of young children and women who are left behind by the young men of the family. The vulnerability quotient of these older people, young children and women is high due to a lack of basic social security measures and lifeline services.

Strong social bonds and a rich and vibrant cultural ethos in the region make it possible for the older people to network, share responsibilities and carry on with their responsibilities. This ethos of cooperation and mutual care is now being further strengthened by the village older people's associations that have emerged in the many village of Jodhpur and Jaisalmer districts. These associations have reenergized the older people to actively participate in overall governance of their villages and to help the younger people to learn from them.

The POC Project has helped in establishing 12 continuously operating VOPAs. Main goal, the activation of the older part of local communities has been achieved. It turned out, that there is a huge potential in this group of the Indian rural society that might and should be used for the benefit of the all inhabitants of the region of Thar Desert. The most significant achievements of the VOPAs in Rajasthan are as follows:

- the establishment of Gramkosh (Village Fund), that helps to fund many essential issues for the local communities and most vulnerable people
- supervision of Government-led programmes and projects (e.g. NREGA scheme)
- the establishment of assistant and advisory bodies like: CPMC, PMC or TAC
- significant contribution in drought mitigation by VOPAs

2. Older People's Issues in the Thar

The older people in the Thar suffer from most of the problems that come along with an arid zone where surviving is a perpetual struggle. However these issues get exacerbated when the elderly people's special health and psychological needs are taken into consideration. Disruption of livelihood strategies, isolation and family and community support in the constant drought like conditions lead to enhanced vulnerabilities derived from chronic health and mobility problems.

Lack of Political Awareness and Activism

The older people do not have much political awareness as to their rights under the overall governance framework. This is due to the lack of access to information, ineffective micro governance framework, health issues, lack of mobility and illiteracy. The older people are not organized in such a manner as youth groups, women's groups' et al, where their collective voice can be heard and their concerns are addressed. There is a general lack of awareness about particular issues that older people face among the various government and non-government officials. Targeted interventions for the elderly are there mostly on paper and as such the older people are seldom aware of them.

Existential and Geographical Vulnerability

The people in the Thar do suffer from existential vulnerability. With a population of 22.5 million people and 110 persons living per square kilometer, it is one of the most densely populated arid regions of the world. Administratively, the Thar region covers 12 out of the 32 districts of Rajasthan state, with an area of 0.21 million square kilometers. The arid region is starkly beautiful, with rolling sand dunes and a vibrant culture. However, living in the Thar Desert is very difficult. Getting the basic necessities of life, like potable water, on a daily basis is a huge struggle. It is normal for women in the region to trudge miles together, in the scorching heat, to fetch water for their families, in pots over their heads.

The education level, here is low due to the lack of teachers in the few schools that are available to serve a rather large area. Life line services are poor. Health care is in a pitiful condition with the region suffering from a sever lack of doctors and qualified health practitioners. People from the rural areas, when they have capacity, usually have to travel long distances to the cities to get even minor ailments treated. Employment opportunities are limited. The scenario is further complicated with the deep caste and gender divide that exists in the society. Both the natural and the man made challenges are huge to surmount in this region.

Policies not focused on Older People

The developmental policies, as such limited in the Thar region, do not particularly target the vulnerable people; the older people among them. The special needs that vulnerable groups and sub-groups might have are seldom addressed by generic policies not particularly targeting them. The situation is complicated by the prevailing drought conditions.

In addition complicated rules and regulations, paperwork and cumbersome bureaucracy do not allow vulnerable older people to access the pension and welfare schemes that they are eligible for. Considering the difficulty of life in the region it could be safely assumed that the Government should implement specific administrative and developmental policies in Thar. Unfortunately such policies did not occur and consequently Thar region became one of the most backward regions. The overall grave situation also badly reflects on the older people of the region.

3. Village Older Peoples' Association (VOPA)

The Village Older Peoples' Associations (VOPAs), aim to promote mutual support among older people, reducing their isolation and vulnerability by creating a social support network that can facilitate community development activities. The VOPA model utilizes the skills and experiences of older people to enable them to help themselves and their communities. The VOPAs have been set up by GRAVIS in Baap block of Jodhpur district and Fategarh block of Jaisalmer district; the heart of the Thar Desert.

Under the POC project ("Promoting older people-led community action to reduce poverty among vulnerable groups in rural Rajasthan, India") there are currently 12 successfully working VOPAs that actively help to deal the most important issues in the region of Thar Desert.

The VOPA's provide a framework in which the older people can play an active role towards their own betterment. It is a platform that brings the elderly women and men together to discuss, deliberate and implement. The basic purpose of setting up the VOPAs is to give the older people a voice and a sense of purpose. It provides the older people much deserved recognition in their families, communities and society. Being a member of the VOPAs also boosts the self esteem and confidence of the aged women and men. Considering the VOPAs are a platform without any caste or bias, they help in removing many of the ills that prevail in the societal setup in rural Rajasthan. In some sense its a form of a self-help group, with an additional function of a committee to deliberate upon issues and provide opportunities and guidance to the community at large.

The VOPAs, though fairly informal in their functioning, have developed a structure and process to regulate their functioning. The basic units are the sub-committees which function at the *Dhani* level. They further form the Village Older Peoples' Association (VOPAs) to deliberate upon the affairs of the older people in the village and the progress of the community. The VOPAs are advised by the Central Project Monitoring Committee, which has a representation of two members from each of the VOPAs and meets on a half yearly basis. External support to the VOPAs is provided by the Technical Advisory Committee of experts in various fields. There is also a central fund to provide the finance requirements of running the VOPAs.

Contextualization of VOPA in the Thar

The VOPA model has been contextualized to first and foremost target the economically deprived among the older people. The social conditions of the Thar are such that so called lower

castes, who invariably are also the economically the most backward in the village, are not always visible or heard in social and formal gatherings in the village. This condition remains true also for elderly women from the lower castes. Therefore it becomes imperative to include them in the functioning of the VOPAs. This aims at addressing the vulnerability of some of the older people who tend to suffer the most and are as such not always seen.

Representative VOPAs

It is also seen that the VOPA has a good balance of older people from various castes; especially the backward castes, the poor among the older people and both women and men. This is done so as to ensure better representation of all groups among the older people. It has been seen that the element of bias is minimal in the functioning of the VOPAs despite the caste dynamics and the social barriers in the context of rural Rajasthan.

4. VOPA's role in Community Welfare

The VOPAs have substantially improved the quality of life not just for its members, but also for the community at large. The body of elders has been quite active in recognizing the various issues that their communities face. The VOPA members have deliberated upon the various socio-economic issues that the community members face, in their various meetings. It has been seen that with the help of community workers from GRAVIS, VOPAs have reached out and attempted to address the problem in league with panchayat and government officials. These actions have legitimized the VOPAs in the eyes of their people and their support base has increased.

Social Engagement

The VOPAs have provided the older people with a greater sense of responsibility. VOPAs keep the older people engaged and self motivated. It has helped them earn respect through self reliance. The VOPAs have provided the older people with the opportunity and space to come together on a common platform, regardless of caste, class, gender and religion. It is a forum that gives these people the opportunity to raise, discuss and deliberate upon the various issues that might involve them, their families and community members. The VOPA also provides the older people with a social security net, and consequently in case of any difficulty, it is a good platform to approach to help in addressing the issue.

Some of the larger issues that the VOPA members have started discussing, and many a times taking action on in their villages, are:

- Education of girl child
- Construction and desilting of *naadis*
- Allocation and construction of *taankas*
- Afforestation in their villages
- Monitoring of the construction of *khadins*
- Pension benefits and disability benefits
- Monitoring the work of the *sarpanch*
- Distribution of horticultural plants, cows and goats to the most needy

Establishing Linkages

The VOPAs have provided linkages for the older people with the various formal and informal structures present in their region, village and community. The VOPAs are now closely associ-

ated with the Panchayati Raj Institutions, to the extent that the local *sarpanch* would many times attend the VOPA meetings and VOPA members would attend the panchayat meetings. The VOPAs have made representations before the local, district and state officials and in return have been recognized as a body of the older people by the concerned officials. Meetings between the VOPA representatives and Panchayat block officers have been held where the VOPA members were provided with information as to the various governmental schemes that can be availed by the older people and their family members.

Rahim Khan, VOPA Adhyaksha (President) Village Degawadi, Block Baap, District Jodhpur

'We have successfully lobbied with the Sub-Divisional Magistrate to set up a fodder depot in our village, as the other fodder depots are far from here. Everyone in the village is going to benefit from it, as it will ensure enough fodder in the lean season for our cows and goats. The poor especially will benefit from the fodder depot in our village as they would not have to depend on depots in other villages. We at the VOPA are looking at how best our activities can benefit the community as a whole.'

It has also been seen that many of the SHGs being run by the older women have established linkages with the SHGs being run by women of a younger age. This has helped in information and knowledge exchange and has also served as an inspiring initiative for both the old and the young.

Capacity building

Though the VOPA members are fairly conversant with the negotiation skills now, they initially had to be trained by the GRAVIS community workers about their rights and duties. The trainings are conducted through regular camps and concentrate on government schemes that can benefit the older people and others in the society, gender rights and inter-generational aspects of life.

The project has strong focus on improving food and fodder security through various interventions as well. That is why VOPAs participated and supervised in the construction of khadins, establishment of seed banks or distribution of organic manure, fertilizers and bio-pesticides.

The trainings have enhanced the knowledge of the older people to a large extent, as observed through interviews and focused group discussions. The discussions that are generated

through the training and capacity building camps provided a platform for the older people to interact and exchange ideas as to how they can contribute to their villages through the knowledge they have gained in the training camps.

Mota Ram, Chipasariya Village, Block Fategarh, District Jaisalmer

Mota Ram is an elderly person who takes active interest in the functioning of the VOPA in his village. He belongs to the Meghwal community, a Scheduled Castes group. During the interview with him at his house, he came across as a very knowledgeable person on lot of governmental schemes. He knows exactly why he is not eligible for the old age pension scheme; *'the pension scheme is meant for the poorest of people who have no source of income and no earning members in the family. Since I have other earning members in the family I do not qualify for the pension scheme.'* This is interesting as the rules and regulations governing such pension schemes do need a certain level of deciphering and goes on to reflect the simple, yet effective trainings that the older people are being provided.

Mota Ram is very much active in the various events that are organized through the VOPA. Last year, in 2009, Mota Ram along with his wife Hawa Devi participated at the *International Day for Older People* event that was held at the District Rural Development Agency hall at Jaisalmer. Mota Ram says, *'it was a very big event and I along with my wife were there. My grandson, who works in the District Administrative Office, saw us at the event at the district headquarters and came and touched both our feet. We felt so proud of the fact that we could attend such a forum and our grandson was there to see us.'*

Giving Voice to Older People

The VOPAs organize and assemble older people in such a manner that it provides them with a voice to raise their various concerns and address them. The VOPAs have provided the older people a forum to discuss and question policies of the Government that have an influence on their lives. The older women are now much more visible and involved in decision making. This is revolutionary considering the strict and orthodox norms that are followed in rural Rajasthan regarding women's participation in public life.

The active participation of women in decision making and representing the VOPA can be very well seen from the case of Kesari Devi, of Jaitadasar village of Baap block in Jodhpur district, who was selected by her VOPA members (who were predominantly Muslim males) to represent them at an international meet and exposure visit to Bangladesh. The cost of her travel was partially covered with the village fund and coordinated by GRAVIS. When asked as to why Kesari Devi was selected, Laldin, the *Adhakshya* of the VOPA had no hesitation in saying that she was the most able candidate, as she has a good understanding of affairs of public concern and could speak clearly on behalf of all of them.

Village Fund

The village fund (*Gram Kosh*) is a savings scheme that has been established under the VOPA structure and binds and sustains its efforts. The VOPA members have access to it when necessary. The VOPA members decide who is eligible to get a loan based on the application submitted and the economic condition of the applicant. It functions as an economic security net for many of the VOPA members.

Peer Support

The older people, through the VOPAs can meet and discuss various issues pertaining to their rights and benefits. This also acts as a brainstorming forum where ideas are churned and implemented. The psychological benefit of addressing issues along with their peers is of

immense value to the older people. This also harnesses the productive capacity of older people. It provides them with a sense of purpose; as they not only contemplate about their own problems, but also those that their community is facing. Now the VOPAs have reached such a stage that they are pursuing these issues and trying to address them on their own.

Mariam ammo

Mariam ammo is a frail old lady who lives in Ghator village, in Baap block of Jodhpur district. It is understood that she is about seventy seven years old, when one calculates from the traditional dates she mentions as her year of birth. She is a widow and has no one to take care of her, apart from a daughter who is also widowed. Life has been difficult for her all through, with the death of her husband and six of her children. It has been fairly difficult for her to manage her day-to-day affairs. Such was the state of affairs that she had to fetch water for herself by walking for an hour to the ground level reservoir each day. Four of her goats died, last year, due to the prevailing drought like conditions. She has had to depend on the charity of her community members for food and medicines.



The VOPA in Ghator village took special cognizance of her case and has been proactively trying to help her on various counts. Now they have secured the widow pension scheme for her. The VOPA also recommended her name for the construction of a taanka, which she is the proud owner of. This ensures that she has enough water for herself and the few goats and sheep she has, even in the lean season. Moreover, the VOPA adhakshya for Ghator village has also arranged a small room for her to stay in his residence, so that she has someone to take care of her whenever she isn't feeling too well or in need for a bit of company. The next thing on the agenda for the VOPA is to get her enrolled in the below poverty line by the Gram Panchayat

Social Changes

It has been observed that the formation and running of the VOPAs has led to the community and family members accepting the older people in a more inclusive manner. This could be because of the economic security that the older people have started enjoying through the ownership of cows, goats, horticultural fields and *taankas* that the project has been instrumental in providing them with. Many of the older people, who needed it the most, are owners of valuable assets.

Dhora Khatun, VOPA member, Village Degawadi, Block Baap, District Jodhpur

'Since I have got the taanka constructed in my name from GRAVIS, my bargaining power with my family has gone up. Now I can tell my son – 'seva kar tabhi paani milega, nahi to Meghdasar se pani bhar ke la' (serve me so that you get water from my tank; else you can go and get water from Meghdasar; a big pond in Baap town, quite a distance away from Degawadi village).

Decision Making

The VOPAs have capacitated the older people not just to take decisions for themselves, but also for their family members and the village. This is a result of the enhanced level of confidence generated through sustained hand-holding and trainings by the GRAVIS community workers, peer support, small scale livelihood interventions and higher acceptance of the opinion of the older people by the community members.

Political Consciousness**Ghator Village, Block Baap, District Jodhpur**

The VOPA members decided to take count of all the disabled children in the village. This was in response to a training that was conducted on the rights of disabled persons by the GRAVIS community workers. Once they had recorded the disabled children in the village, the VOPA members took them to meet officials of the Medical and Health Department of the Government of Rajasthan, at Jodhpur. The first of the success stories of this initiative has been that of 14 year old Bacchu Khan, who has received a disability certificate from the department, which entitles him to several privileges like a bus pass, allowances from the government and reservations for public posts at a later stage. Bacchu Khan's mother gives the entire credit to the VOPA members and says she is thankful to them for the effort they have made to get the special needs of her son recognized by the government. This successful initiative has also boosted the morale of the VOPA members as they realize their potential to decide and act not only for the benefit of themselves but also their community members. They are really proud of their effort! Meanwhile 43 disabled children, identified by the VOPA members in Baap block, have received crutches and tricycles from GRAVIS.

The older people have a standpoint in the micro political dynamics due to the organized framework that the VOPAs provide. The VOPAs are seen as a bloc of votes that need to be harnessed by the political parties. There is political and social activism generated by the older people during VOPA meetings which is noticed by everyone, right from the local *sarpanch* to the area's Member of Legislative Assembly, to state level political leaders. Such is the level of political consciousness, that during the interviews, the VOPA members talked about approaching the Chief Minister of Rajasthan if the need be, to address bothersome issues that cannot be addressed at the local level. This also shows the level of confidence that the elders in the village now have.

Rahim Khan, VOPA Adhakshya, Village Degawadi, Block Baap, District Jodhpur

'We told the local MLA to get the primary school in the village, which is till class 5, upgraded to class 8 or we would not vote for him in the next elections. Since everyone in the village listens to us elders, the MLA has promised that it would be done. There is no metal road coming up to the village. This makes driving up to the village very difficult. We are going to look into the fact that the road is extended up to the school in the village once NREGA works starts again this year.'

Economic Empowerment

Small scale livelihood interventions, e.g. cow and goat rearing, horticultural units and para-vet trainings have been provided by GRAVIS through the VOPAs to alleviate extreme poverty among some of the older people and make them self reliant. The older people have started enjoying the benefits of many of these interventions and bargain for a better position in their families and community.

Another dimension of the economic empowerment has been a marked increase in the negotiating capacity of the older people in the villages. They are aware of their rights under law and are able to negotiate from a position of power.

Chanda Khatun and Kesari Devi, Village Jaitadasar, Block Baap, District Jodhpur

'Under NREGA projects we were supposed to get Rs.100 per day but were getting only Rs. 50 or 60. In addition we had to wait for 2 or 3 months before we would get the money at the Post Office. The manager at the Post Office responsible for the disbursement of the NREGA payments would always make an excuse that there wasn't enough money to pay us all sufficiently and in time.'

'So we all decided that we have to teach the manager a lesson!'

'Some 60 of us women; led by the VOPA women members, led a procession to the post office. We went and agitated against the manager at the post office and threatened him that if the payment problems continued henceforth, we all would go and report against him to the Sub-divisional Magistrate and the District Development Officer.'

'The manager was generally used to seeing all of us pleading in front of him for our wages. This time, he was shocked to see so many women coming together and agitating against him. He relented and cleared the pending funds the next day itself. Nowadays, he is even scared to see us coming together!'

Benefiting the Community

The VOPA acts as a monitoring body for the developmental affairs of the entire village. It observes the implementation of various public schemes, like NREGA. Since the younger people migrate to cities in search of employment, the older people have the responsibility to see the running of the village affairs. The entire village is taking advantage of the activism that the older people have shown through the VOPAs and are immensely benefitting through the process. The older people, for instance, have turned into very strong advocates for universal primary education. They are motivating their communities to send the children to school, especially the girl children. It has also been seen in some of the schools that older people visit the schools and also act as recourse persons. They teach the children through plays and stories.

The experiences and traditional knowledge of the older people are also benefitting the community as a whole. Though there might be an initial resistance to newer ideas and way of running the affairs of the village, the people do come around to see reason and start supporting the endeavours of the older people. The people have now realized that it is for the benefit

of all that the older people have come together in the VOPAs.

Within the time span under review the formation of 12 Village Older People's Associations (VOPAs) in Degawadi, Andasar, Mandali, Ghator, Sanwra, Bhojoo di Baap, Jaitadasar, Rawra, Bhadali, Chipasariya, Kohra and Nimbli was successfully completed. There are currently 142 members actively participating in the work of the VOPAs mentioned above. Although still 68% of all members are males, the fact that increasingly more important part and role is being performed by the females, has to be perceived as a very positive sign. Especially interesting in terms of gender of its members are the VOPAs in Ghator and Degawadi, in which the division between males and females is almost equal.

As far as the caste factor is concerned, all groups of society are represented in VOPAs. The most significant number of members come from the Scheduled Castes – almost 30%. Slightly smaller representation is the part of Other Backward Castes and the General Castes – both equally 21 members (approximately 15%). When it comes to the religious minorities it is worth noticing, that a strong representation among VOPAs comes from the Muslim minority - 58 members (41%).

Since the beginning of VOPAs functioning, its members succeeded on many grounds, by prompting various actions and projects in the cooperation with local communities. First of all during the regularly held monthly meetings they focused on help in organizing trainings and awareness sessions. The very significant success in the hitherto operation of VOPAs is undoubtedly the funding of Gramkosh (Village Fund), which was frequently used in community welfare programmes and projects. Apart from fundraising for many important issues like pension schemes for children and handicap people, VOPAs members played a significant role in observation and supervision of implementing NREGA scheme or Government's Water Supply or Plantation Programmes.

Apart from these, VOPA members organized the events like International Day of Older Persons (IDOP) and International Women Day. Remarkable was the fact, that many older women took part in these events and spoke on the issues like promoting girls education and the problem of continuous droughts in their villages.

Last but not least VOPAs have also collaborated in the medical camps organization, from which more than 600 elderly people could benefit.

The VOPAs have also formed two monitoring bodies – Community Project Monitoring Commit-

tees (CPMCs), in Jodhpur and Jaisalmer Districts. Until now there were 4 meetings held in order to supervise the progress in the entire project.

One of the main purposes of VOPAs functioning is also to work for mitigation of droughts in their area. That is why it is essential to highlight huge contribution of VOPAs to the development of this issue. VOPAs supervised the construction of the 225 taankas, 192 khadis and 2 naadis in the Jaisalmer and Jodhpur districts, which helped to bring significant positive change in life of many families in the region.

5. Challenges for the VOPAs

There are as yet quite a few challenges that the VOPAs have to face in their day-to-day functioning in order to sustain the initiative which has gained quite a bit of momentum now, e.g.:

- Low level of literacy among the VOPA members hinders them in gathering information about the outside world through government circulars, newspapers and other sources. Younger members of the community have been involved for supporting VOPAs for such supports.
- Documentation of the proceedings of the VOPA meetings for the sake of transparency and institutional memory is an issues again because of low level of literacy among the members
- Sustainability of the VOPAs, beyond the project period, depends on the momentum that they gain in the next couple of years and the linkages that they can establish with the governmental and civil society. The core funds of the VOPAs would also have to be taken stock of and seen if a sustainable business model is developed.
- The Central Project Monitoring Committee, consisting of VOPA members from different villages, has to gather steam in the next few years and effectively monitor the activities of different VOPAs. The programmatic and financial monitoring of the VOPAs would flag issues, encourage cross learning and make the whole organization more transparent.
- The model is not fully recognized by the Government to be replicated elsewhere. Though there is de facto acknowledgement of the VOPAs by various bodies and representatives of the Government, the VOPA model still has to cove some distance before it is recognized by the Government.
- Conflict resolution through VOPAs is a function that needs to be further strengthened. The village elderly have the capacity make the others sit together and listen to their reasoned views as to how the limited resources of the community can be distributed in an equitable manner.

Way ahead

- The functioning of the VOPAs has to further reinforce social equity in the villages where they have been formed and are functioning. Messages on no barriers based on gender, caste, class, religion, age have to be internalized.

- The VOPAs in the near future are going to have to audit the opinion of the community as to their work and foreseeable future. This would help in determining the future framework, roles and responsibilities of the VOPAs and help them sustain the initiative.
- The future of VOPA from the member's perspective also needs to be recorded. The present generation of members of the VOPAs is pioneers and the views, challenges and experiences need to be recorded so that the future generation of members to refer back to it as and when required.
- Rules and procedures need to be crystallized as to the engagement of newer members to the VOPAs. The present VOPA members would have to leave behind a legacy and enough institutional memory so as to seamlessly handover the reins to the newer members who qualify over the years as older people.

Conclusions

The POC project proved to be a very successful initiative, which mobilized the older part of Thar Desert community to the stronger involvement in current issues and life of the society in Thar Desert. On the other hand it has also turned out, that older people may enrich others with their experience and knowledge building a fruitful intergenerational cooperation. Thanks to the establishment of VOPAs and their intense activity the entire community of Thar benefited on very large scale, e.g. by gaining an access to the additional resources of the potable water and faster development of agriculture. At the same time, there are gaps and challenges that lie ahead as this relatively new interventions enters next phase.

To empower older people, an important part of the community at present or more even so looking at future, is a long process. The VOPAs are a tool and an initiative that need to be strengthened further. Dedicated field work, continuous field work and appropriate research and strategic planning are going to be the crucial elements in strengthening VOPAs further and in the future steps of developing older people's community.

Annexure:

About the Project – POC

The 'Promoting older people led community action to reduce poverty among vulnerable groups in Rajasthan, India' is being implemented by HelpAge International and GRAVIS with support from the European Commission.

Project period: 54 months starting from June 2008

Project location: 12 villages in Rajasthan (8 in Baap block of Jodhpur district and 4 in Fatehgarh block of Jaisalmer district)

Target group/population: 1,500 vulnerable older people (at least 60% women) and their families (7,500 people)

Specific Objective:

Improve the socio-economic status and social integration of marginalized and vulnerable groups in 12 villages in Jodhpur and Jaisalmer districts through older people led community action

Main Activities:

1. Increased capacity of older people and the partner NGO to initiate and sustain older people led action
 - a. Recruit and train project team and establish project office
 - b. Project management, monitoring and training
 - c. Technical advisory committee meetings
 - d. Baseline survey
 - e. Formation of Village Older People Associations (VOPA)
 - f. VOPA capacity building trainings
 - g. Midterm and final external evaluation

2. Increased access to clean and sustainable sources of water for project communities
 - a. Construction of 420 Taankas (water tanks)
 - b. Construction of 2 village ponds called Nadies
 - c. Desilting of 10 Nadies
 - d. Training of taanka beneficiaries

3. Improved food and fodder security for project communities

- a. Construction of 360 khadins
 - b. Trainings of khadin beneficiaries
 - c. Establishment of 12 seed banks
 - d. Distribution of organic manure, fertilizers and bio-pesticides
 - e. Establish 420 horticulture units
 - f. Training on horticulture unit maintenance
 - g. Establish 6 fodder banks
 - h. Establish two demonstration pasture land
4. Increased income security through improved livelihoods for older people and their families
- a. Distribution of 240 milch cows with insurance
 - b. Training for livestock owners
 - c. Training for paravets
 - d. Distribution of paravet kits
 - e. Formation of 36 older women SHGs
 - f. SHG capacity building and vocational trainings
5. Improved health status of older people through increased access to health care services
- a. Training on provision of age-friendly care for Village Health Workers
 - b. Distribution of health worker kits
 - c. Age friendly health camps and health education in coordination with government health system
 - d. Publication on the status of geriatric health in the that desert
 - e. District level workshop on geriatric health needs
6. Increased government and community awareness of entitlements for older people, low caste and tribal groups through advocacy and training
- a. Awareness raising camps on government schemes
 - b. Training on rights and entitlements for community members
 - c. International exchange visit on older people led monitoring of entitlements
 - d. Rights and entitlements information kits

- e. Awareness generation camps on intergenerational harmony and gender rights
- f. VOPA and Panchayat/Block officers meeting to represent older people's priorities
- g. Good practice manual on working through VOPAs to achieve water, food and income security in the Thar desert
- h. IEC materials on older people's issues in project areas
- i. Project visibility actions: four media events, four international women's day celebrations, and four International Day for Older Person's celebrations
- j. Five project impact awareness workshops at district (2), state (2) and national (1) levels
- k. Publications on impact assessment
- l. Website development

Expected results:

1. Increased capacity of older people and the project partner to initiate and sustain older people led actions;
2. Increased access to clean and sustainable source of water for project communities;
3. Improved food and fodder security for project communities;
4. Improved income security through improved livelihoods for older people and their families;
5. Improved health status of older people through increased access to health care services and
6. Increased government and community awareness of entitlements of older people, low caste and tribal groups through advocacy and training