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## Potato can be a source of so much

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*“Our potato crop is our life line, our bank. If I summarize my experience with potatoes, farmers, LPH, institutions, companies and markets; it is not just a story of the Potato Association but is an account of 220 farmers and their families, and I am among those contented farmers. The Potato Growers’ Association over the years has gradually evolved on more strong footing. The proper business plan along with the concept of member farmers holding the shares in the association has worked well; promoting the ownership and finance for investment. The membership of association has reached 220 famers and we have PKR 1,000,000 profit by following a business plan. Now Gobor valley is not only self-sufficient in potato seed but is also selling it to the company named Abul Ghafoor Bhatti Seed Corporation that produces potato seeds and is the distributor of Paramount variety. Potato serves as the guarantee for fulfilling our deeds and needs. I am constructing my own house!”*

**Majeed Khan, farmer, activist, now an elected Naib Nazim under the new local government system, village Birzin, Gobor valley, District Chitral**

There are 24 villages in Gobor valley with a population of around 8,000 persons. About 98% of them have agricultural land on which they grow wheat, maize and potato. As you can see, apple, apricot and walnuts are abundant. People also raise livestock (goats, sheep and cows). The population of village Birzin has increased by 50% since 1990s. The land holdings decrease due to the division on inheritance. My father was the only son of his parents so all the land rested with him. Now we are five

brothers. This means that the land for each one of us will be small once it is divided. For the next generation, the land holdings may be even further subdivided and shrunk.

Girls are usually not given the share in the land as according to the traditional custom high expenses and expensive gifts are made on their weddings. In case a couple does not have a son as a descendant, then all the property goes to the daughter. Of course, we value our women, they keep us in a strong tie of family. They run the house and also help us in the farming from planting, weeding to harvesting and packing.

Potato is the main cash crop of the farmers in Gobor, contributing to 70 % of their income. In the past, the farmers could not yield high production on potatoes and the reasons were not known. In 2008 the LPH project came to our valley.

A preliminary assessment of our valley revealed many underlying causes of the low yield: farmers did not have direct access to the potato market, seed quality was poor and agricultural practices were conventional (no fertilizer or little irrigation). Before LPH, we used to sell the produce to the middle man and had no idea of market price, potential markets or how to bargain. We were not organized and everybody



worked for himself. The seeds available were often infected and transported to the valley by the middle man from Gujranwala (a city in Punjab province). The potatoes often contracted disease like potato blight and we had no idea why this disease suddenly popped up and what to do against it. In this disease the potato blemishes and develops stains. The concept of certified seed was not known to us.

Prior to LPH we used to grow only one variety of potatoes as we were completely alien to the idea of cultivating different varieties that are suitable for certain areas. We would just cultivate whatever the middle man brought us, didn't even know the variety's name. With one bag of 100 kg seeds, we used to get a yield of 4 bags. But now owing to the relevant interventions by the LPH the story is different. In collaboration with Agriculture Research and Extension Department and local farmers, the LPH facilitated us in conducting potato varietal and seed multiplication trials. During these trials, different varieties of potato like Roko, Paramount, Sante and few more were tested under the environmental conditions and it was found that Roko and Paramount were high yielding varieties. We were informed by the agriculture experts that during the trials in the valley, from one bag of 100 kg seeds of Paramount the yield obtained was 20 bags which is a world record. Now we grow the new certified varieties as recommended by the department; they also informed us that uncertified seed has the potential to bring in diseases and insect pest infestation in the valley. I personally prefer Roko as it has more shelf life while the Paramount is a bit weak during transportation.

The LPH experts also told us that the climate of this valley is ideal for potato seed production and they suggested that we grow the seeds. Now the valley is not only self-sufficient in potatoes but is also selling seeds to the company named Abul Ghafoor Bhatti (AGB) Seed Corporation that labels potato seed and is the distributor for Paramount variety. To avoid the possibilities of infections, diseases and insect pest infestations, and to improve soil fertility, the government agriculture officers also shared with us the concept of crop rotation with sweet peas. For the last 2-3 years our potato production has

increased with the use of best varieties of Roko and Paramount that are well suited to the valley. We used to sell the produce to the middle man at the rate settled per bag regardless of its weight and therefore it added to the farmer's loss. Now we prepare bags of standardized weight. As we were new to proper marketing and negotiations over the price of potato produce, we organized ourselves in the form of Potato Growers Association (PGA). This association was responsible to look out for possible solutions to any issues faced by the farmers. Till 2011 it was only serving to bring in information from the markets to the farmers and assisted in sending the produce to the potential markets jointly and therefore saving the cost of transportation.

As the Association gradually evolved; we started thinking about its sustainability and also making the farmers resilient against the recurrent losses in the produce due to floods. In order to support the farmers in such situations, we decided to make the association financially strong. For this purpose, we devised a strategy of starting the share system. Intercooperation had cooperated a lot in this learning process. They helped us learn through workshops and trainings. And then we practiced by ourselves. The association called upon the membership of the farmers and asked them to buy shares in the association. One share was worth PKR 600 and additional PKR 100 were to cover for the registration and other official expenses. In the first year, we sold shares of about PKR 100,000. The membership reached up to 160 in the first year. The first year, we developed a proper business plan to invest in but could not implement due to the flood in 2013. But the following year we made a new one yet again and with the share money we bought gunny bags and sacks for packing the potato produce and this made a good profit for us and our Association. Looking at the success, more farmers joined in and we increased the share. At present we have 220 farmers as members.



Today on the average every member farmer has a share of PKR 50,000-60,000 and so far it has made a profit of about PKR 1,000,000. In this value chain the role of the middle man is also crucial. Previously



we used to trust blindly but now we negotiate on the basis of information we have. Due to this market awareness, we are now able to make PKR 2000-2500 profit per bag. Despite all such achievement, what really hurts is the bad condition of the road. Roads play a critical role in the economy, businesses flourish when the farm to market roads are in good condition. In year 2000 I remember that the trucks

used to come and pass by our village easily but now they can hardly reach Garam Chashma the

nearest main town to the valley. The floods have contributed a lot in damaging the roads. In the snow bound winters it becomes near to impossible to commute even for our basic necessities and then our part is completely cut off from the rest of the world. In every potato growing season almost 8.5 thousand tons of potato is produced which has the potential to easily bring PKR 25,000,000 from Gobor valley only and if the access to the other markets is improved this business has the potential to make profit manifolds. The rugged transportation of the potatoes also affects the quality of the produce as the potato develops bruises and scars on the way to market hence its market value diminishes.

Our potato crop is our lifeline, it is our bank. Farmers often buy groceries and other necessary items on credit from the shop keepers and then pay back when the crop is sold. This serves as a guarantee for fulfilling our deeds and needs. If the crop is damaged, the whole family economy is disturbed as the farmer will not be able to pay back loan and that will directly affect the whole family. For example, I am constructing my house but my potato crop is not ready to be sold yet. On the basis



of the guarantee that my potato crop will be sold at a good price once harvested, I picked up construction material from the market. I'll pay back the amount once my crop is sold.

Unfortunately, our valley is victim to climate change and global warming. Due to this phenomenon, floods are more frequent than ever and have the tendency to engulf anything that comes its way. The year 2015 flood posed heavy damages to the villages Gufti, Oughti, Birzin, Gohek in Gobor valley; our crops and forests were destroyed. But this year, thanks to the LPH as they helped us construct protection walls at the most critical locations, the damages were quite low and these walls remained intact in protecting our villages from massive loss. As the flood was gushing at full speed into the river, I was standing near the protection wall to monitor the situation and see if it is going to work. I admit whole heartedly that the protection wall has done a wonderful job in diverting the direction of flood. It saved the three villages from massive destruction as it saved the agricultural land, crops, forest, fruit plants, school building and mosque. Another sign of climate change that I observe, is the seasonal shift and change in the rainfall pattern. Now the heavy rains pour in at times when these are more harmful for the crop rather than being beneficial. Excessive rain can affect the quality of potato and some of the diseases like potato blight can develop easily. I have also observed that my apple trees blossom more flowers than before but then the fruit gets detached from the tree and fall off at a very nascent stage.

Having said that, I am a contented man. From a common farmer, I am one of the founding members of the Potato Growers Association, Ex-general secretary of the same, and now have recently won the local government elections as Naib Nazim (similar to a mayor). And in all this a big credit goes to the LPH!

