

SESWA: dreams realized

Lying north of the Mardan-Swabi highroad, Sheva is today a village of swept streets, paved and partially covered drains and a general air of tidiness where droves of children, boys and girls alike, neatly attired in school uniforms can be seen morning and afternoon on their way to or from school. A bridge spanning the river flowing past connects the village to the link road. Outside the village, seasonal crops sway with the breeze. Every which way one looks at it Sheva, with its air of calm fulfilment, easily passes for a model village. And it might well be.

But back in the early 1980s, things were different. Divided along two distinct political lines the village, the village was held together not by design of man but merely good fortune. The *jirga* that once effectively governed village affairs had gone the way of anarchy because of its own internal differences and had created rifts within the community. Education was the worst sufferer in this situation. For one, it was commonly said that education other than in religion was one's guarantee to hell. Secondly, taking their cue from the general attitude, teachers in the few existing government schools in Sheva remained mostly absent.

Its streets unpaved and sewage overflowing from the broken drains running through them, Sheva was like a rubbish dump. In place of the bridge across the stream, there was a causeway that went under in times of spate. Consequently, it was not unusual for people to be stranded on this or that side of the river – sometimes for a couple of days on end. The political arena was divided between two strong parties and infighting was so intense that development schemes were killed even before they could begin: if the party in power launched a project, the opposition ensured its failure and vice versa only so that the other side did not get any credit. In either case, the trickery continued regardless of the benefit the community could accrue without it.

Such was the situation that saw the birth of Sheva Educated Social Workers Association (SESWA) in September 1986. As its name suggested, the forces behind it were young college graduates who having despaired of the situation prevailing in the village hoped to set things right. The issues that featured highly in the association's agenda were internal friction and the overall lack of disregard for education. Good intentions alone are not enough, however. The association lacked a method of going about this business of putting things right.

Without a strategy and with no model to follow, the young men set to correcting all that was not right in their view. On the weekly holiday, they went about the village as a team armed with shovels and baskets to clear out the drains and clean up the streets. The rest of the village looked on in open-mouthed wonder at this unprecedented spectacle. Within weeks, however other men began to join in to help. The big boost to their image came when these young do-gooders got the village electricity transformer repaired in double quick time by the concerned department. Earlier, such a situation called for village-wide donation collection to be paid as bribe to the lineman. This time around, it happened free of cost by the simple method of relentless pressure on the department concerned.

With a little bit of goodwill behind them now, the association began daily evening rounds from *hujra* to *hujra* to lecture on the importance of education. Simultaneously, they also began to mediate to resolve the various minor and major quarrels in the village. Trust grew and a time came when people began to petition the association for conflict resolution. It was only natural for detractors now to crop up and condemn the association for being spawned by this or that political party. In a village long divided by conflict, distrust was the foremost emotion and even the *jirga* rose up against them.

In 1990, SESWA was invited to a meeting in Mardan with SAP-PK. Rooh ul Amin, one of the founder members, attended and came back excited: there were other people speaking the same language as them and they seemed to have a method to make the SESWA dream come true. Consequently, when the invitation to attend the RDP training came, Rooh ul Amin was ready to go. Though SESWA failed to meet the condition of equal gender representation, Rooh ul Amin came back with new light in his eyes. In a meeting after the first RDP session, Rooh ul Amin apprised the NGO's general body of the difference between welfare and development. He told them that it was an explicit fault that the SESWA constitution declared it a welfare organisation. The constitution was duly amended to make SESWA a development organisation.

One of the tasks assigned to RDP participants was to carry out a survey of other organisations in the area. In the course of 1991, SESWA surveyed and recorded over one hundred village organisations. This exercise served as an asset and shortly thereafter Mardan-based GTZ took SESWA on as a partner to create organisations in six villages. In the three years the project lasted until 1995, SESWA oversaw the birth of sixty-seven men's and twenty-seven women's organisations. In the strictly segregated society of Swabi district, the latter were only possible through the newly raised SESWA Women's Wing that worked out of a separate office.

If RDP had taught SESWA a few things about organising social groups, the importance of linkages was another lesson. The NGO therefore created the umbrella of the Regional Council for Development at the divisional level while in the district Samaji Behbood Rabita Council connected all CBOs with the wider network. This was just as well and in good time. By 1997, a vicious anti-NGO campaign was underway to curtail the work of the development network by an act of the parliament. The voice against this move coming out of Mardan was orchestrated by SESWA.

Meanwhile, between the years 1993 to 1999 the GTZ-SESWA partnership that had opened with a donation of Rs 25,000 to build a flood protection wall grew. It enabled SESWA to pave the streets and line the drains and change the very outlook of the village. It also raised SESWA considerably in the estimation of the people of Sheva village.

Ever mindful that education is the most effective catalyst for change, SESWA had not lost view of its commitment to raise its standard. In 1989, the village had a primary and a high school for boys and one primary school for girls. Education was generally disregarded and girls' education positively frowned upon. Not surprisingly, enrolment in

the girls' school had never risen above forty. The SESWA campaign for education was on two fronts. On the one, they canvassed with local politicians and the education department for new school buildings up gradation of the old. On the other, they got the *jirga* to allocate several plots for schools. And so when the government released funds for schools, the plots were in place for work to begin forthwith.

From three schools in 1989, Sheva has now moved on to nine boys' schools and five for girls from primary to secondary school levels. As well as that, the village today flaunts a degree college going on to post-graduate studies as of 2010. Quantity was not the end-all of it, however. Years of daily meetings in the different *hujras* has precipitated a marked attitude change about education. It is no empty boast when SESWA members claim that boys notorious for parading firearms in school have been weaned away to schoolbooks and sports instead. Likewise, the full classrooms of the girls' schools owe it to the tireless efforts of the Women's Wing with the mothers of Sheva. No longer is education the way to hell.

The *jirga* that had condemned the young workers of SESWA only a few years earlier for overstepping the boundary of good form was by the late 1990s supportive of the NGO. It is noteworthy that this council that traditionally comprises of two members from each *mohalla* now has two members from SESWA as well. The change in heart was due in a large part to the major improvement in the village infrastructure brought about by the GTZ-SESWA partnership.

The Farmers Development Program was the other reason for enhanced acceptability. Funded by a SAP-PK seed fund of half a million rupees, the program helped poor farmers obtain agricultural inputs at affordable rates. Its success in Sheva brought demands from nearby villages for it to be replicated there as well. But half a million rupees can only cater for so many and no more. With an infusion of Rs 2.2 million from Catholic Relief Service in 1999, the program was expanded. Now there was one innovation, however. SESWA gave out revolving funds to eleven CBOs to operate their own Farmers Development Programs. With SESWA keeping itself in a supervisory and monitoring role, the program continues to this day.

It was high time now to overhaul the *jirga* that had accepted SESWA as partner. Without being obtrusive, SESWA re-organised it with a proper governing body comprising of president, secretary, and treasurer, posts to be democratically contested for every year. Until then, its fund of close to Rs 7.0 million was distributed among the members for safekeeping. A bank account was now opened to be operated by two signatories from the board. The Sheva *jirga* thus became the first ever in the country to work with proper record keeping. Word spread and several nearby villages followed suit.

If development entails reclaiming lives, there is no better example than the case of the illiterate Fazle Khaliq. Built like a wrestler and with a stern set to his mouth, the man was to be feared. Strutting about Sheva with a Kalashnikov rifle as though a very appendage of his body, he was the local hoodlum. When the young men of SESWA first began to clean out the gutters and streets of the village, he came to watch. By and by, without

being asked, he joined in to help. Over time, becoming better acquainted with the group, he was invited to their meetings. From there it was an easy step to become part of the mobilisation team for village development organisations

His rifle was gone and so was his swagger, instead Fazle Khaliq excelled in his new incarnation as social worker. His outstanding performance in raising village development organizations won him a GTZ award. When he first came in contact with SESWA, never once was the man told to change his ways, never was he shamed for his ill deeds. He saw good being done and followed the example and today he is a steadfast supporter of the NGO. A life that may have been wasted in the line of thuggery and petty crime was redeemed.

Success is when others wish to emulate an example. Even as early as 1994, SESWA was approached by neighbouring communities for help in setting up 'SESWA' in their respective villages. Unaware of it being an acronym, the good people thought it was an English language word signifying progress and development. Today the few dozen copycat organisations that replicate SESWA's work across Swabi district symbolise the NGO's success.