

## Spreading the Fragrance

Nestling in the northeast corner of Balochistan, Loralai district, home to four major Pushtun tribes, is famous for producing the highest quality coal in Pakistan. But the district is also known for its intense tribal rivalries, lack of education, health facilities and infrastructure. Lying on the highroad through Loralai connecting the Balochistan highlands with Punjab, Duki is just another typical town of the district. But whereas the district headquarters had schools and colleges, Duki was additionally deprived of anything higher than middle school education. Medical facilities were non-existent and politics was the domain only of the rich. Worst of all, the people of Duki had not the faintest clue regarding their rights as citizens.

It was in this situation that Amir Mohammad Tareen grew up. In 1985 when he was but a boy, Amir assigned himself the unique task of assisting the illiterate people of Duki. After school he would hang around the offices either of the local administration or the National Data Base and Registration Authority filling in forms and guiding people about where they needed to go. All this he did gratis. In 1988 he took his middle school exam and moved away to Quetta to complete his college education.

Six years later when he returned home with a degree and a larger worldview, Amir got back to the work he thought he had left unfinished. But this time he roped in some of his childhood friends, all bursting with the spirit to serve less fortunate people. This team of good Samaritans picked up where Amir had left off some years ago; but now was one little difference. Each of the fifteen friends in the group gave a monthly fee of twenty rupees to meet the various expenses.

Amir had always chafed about the total lack of civic sense among his Duki compatriots. He and his team now launched a door-to-door campaign in the main bazaar of Duki and among residents against the dumping of rubbish in the streets. Simultaneously they approached the municipality to launch a concerted cleanliness drive and follow it up with daily clearing of rubbish from outside shops and houses. For the first time Amir became aware of the old adage about strength in numbers: as a lone crusader his pleas may have fallen on deaf ear. Now when this group of fifteen worked together, the speed of reaction both among the people and among the officials surprised him and his mates.

Next on the agenda of this young team was the water channel that had once supplied Duki with drinking water. Having fallen out of repair, the channel had become a victim of inter-tribal rivalries: it was always someone else's fault that it was out of order and it was always for the other tribe to repair it. With the fresh water gone, the people of Duki were obligated to rely on a rain-fed pond where humans shared their water with animals. Yet the responsibility of cleaning out the system was always placed upon the other tribe.

Ten days of a dedicated campaign brought out men with shovels and pick axes and within days the spring was cleaned out and the channel flowing once again. Shortly thereafter the vegetable patches of Duki had irrigation, once again after several years, from the repaired water channel.

A collapsed bridge in Duki town next caught the attention of these people. Amir and his team set up a collection stand by the detour around the bridge and took donations from passing traffic. Within no time at all, they had the funds to purchase the necessary materials and got a contractor rebuild the bridge. Only now it was better than before.

Impressed by the work of the group, well-wishers suggested they register themselves as a CBO – a term that, in 1996, was common knowledge. Gul Welfare Organization (GWO) thus rose on the Duki firmament that year. Gul being a rose, the name was meant to spread like fragrance through the rivalry-ridden community. As everyone appreciates a rose, the founders wanted their endeavors to be approved of by one and all.

The year 1997 was when the very term NGO was drawing considerable opprobrium from the pulpit. Naturally, GWO found itself at the receiving end of a good deal of flak. Regardless, it marched bravely on. Raising donations, GWO erected bamboo poles and got the electricity department to lay the line. A large part of Duki that had always been off the power grid was lit up for the first time. More importantly they linked up with Balochistan Rural and Urban Water and Sanitation to procure in-house latrines and twenty deep bore hand pumps at various point about the village.

By 1998 though the opposition continued, GWO nonetheless had also earned considerable goodwill, especially among the educated locals as well as officers of the district administration. Cashing in on this, the group acquired a dilapidated government building from the Deputy Commissioner. From the single room loaned by a well-wisher to be used as their office, GWO moved to this ramshackle place and launched a donations campaign to restore the ruin. Named Gul Plaza in its new incarnation, the building now houses the GWO office, their gym and weight-training facility and language classes.

In 1999 a SAP-PK team visiting the district met with the newly established office. Shortly thereafter the organization received intimation to attend the next RDP session. The three, two men and a woman, who attended returned with their ‘eyes opened wide.’ By Amir’s own admission, they now had knowledge that had thus far evaded them. Speaking for himself, he says understanding of the importance of awareness raising and advocacy was the essential tool with which the training equipped him.

It was about this time that his own father’s mind had been poisoned against Amir who, so the old man was told, had joined an NGO and gone against religion. Armed with his new advocacy skill, he enumerated all the work he and his colleagues had done and asked his father if it was good work or evil. Indeed, even the hand pump in the mosque had been installed by the efforts of the GWO team. When the old man agreed all that was for the good of the community, Amir asked his father to name the evil or irreligious activity his team had been reported for. There was nothing.

‘It was as simple as that. That was advocacy. That was something missing from our repertoire of expertise.’ Amir says even now, ten years on, feeling the triumph of that moment with his father.

By now the opposition from the pulpit was in full flood with the Friday sermons raging about *kufir* (infidelity) and the shameless act of women and men working together. What Amir had already tried with his father, GWO applied to the local mullah who was taken on a tour of the work done by the NGO. The tour began at the mosque hand pump and ended at the rehabilitated spring. Asked if the campaign for eradication of drugs and AIDS awareness that GWO had launched only that year was in any way opposed to Islam, the mullah was stymied. The following Friday, Duki streets rang with the mullah's all-out declaration in favor of Gul Welfare Organization. The lessons of RDP paid the first substantive dividends.

Running the full gamut of the RDP training the GWO team emerged on the Duki horizon with ever more commitment and zeal. Back in 1985, a water supply scheme was approved for Duki town. Part of the work, including a large storage tank, was completed before internal rivalries forced the project to be abandoned. The original project envisaged a number of water taps interspersed across the town. The community however demanded a tap in every courtyard. That being beyond the cost of the project was denied. Hostile community members went up against the contractor, forcing him out and shutting down work on the project.

Late in 2001, GWO approached the provincial government for revival of the old scheme and secured a funding of Rs 2.8 million. The community laughed in the face of the GWO office bearers: the scheme had failed earlier, what magic did they possess to make it go this time? The magic, says Amir, was that of the lessons of RDP. That was not what he told the community, however; he simply applied the technique.

A week or so of campaigning made way for acceptance of the scheme and the original plan of water points, not in individual homes, but at selected spots across town. However, the contractor cut corners and when the water flowed for the first time, all along the length of the pipe from the water source to the tank, joints burst out like fountains. Undaunted, the GWO team procured the necessary tools and set to work on the faulty joints themselves. By and by, community members living along the pipeline joined them and the system was put in order.

The moment of trial came when GWO suggested a nominal monthly fee to keep the system running. The community would have nothing of that, it was declared. The NGO kept at it and even before the first month after installation was over, this seemingly recalcitrant community agreed to pay fifty rupees per household per month. The sum pays for upkeep of the system as well as the salary of an operator and continues to this day. As the community had worked together with GWO to get the scheme going, there is now a sense of ownership and all but the more technical repairs are done by the users themselves.

In 2001 SAP-PK funded a GWO health care project at a time when the ten thousand population of Old Duki had no medical facility within easy reach. Sustainability was ensured by instituting a visit fee of twenty rupees per visit that paid the salaries of the dispenser and the LHV as well as rent of the building. If there were objectors to the levy,

their voice was soon lost because of the ready availability of medical care where none had existed. Consequently, when fee was enhanced to fifty rupees, no dissenting voices were raised.

One aspect of Duki that no organization dealt with was the multitudes of coal miners in the area. As part of the largest coal-producing district, Duki town is visited by twenty thousand miners on their days off. Raising awareness concerning AIDS and Hepatitis among workers living away from home for long periods was one task GWO set itself. But more important was ensuring due compensation for the miners and their families in case of accident. Exploiting the miners' ignorance of the law, owners had long denied them this right. An extended campaign with miners and owners may not have brought about a drastic change, but it has given the miners the knowledge armed with which they demand compensation.

As SAP-PK's partner of choice for SDGP, GWO broke a barrier to bring actual women councilors to the district. Theoretically, the earlier elections did throw up women representatives. But in reality these were illiterate women backed by powerful families employing them as domestic servants. Their function was merely to fill the seats, not to represent women. The GWO campaign in the district under the SDGP banner prior to the 2005 elections has filled every single women's seat with genuine representatives.

Over twenty years ago when he started out helping illiterate people around the confusing maze of government offices, Amir Tareen had thought he would grow old doing just that. Today GWO works in the entire district of Loralai. Now it does not help them around; it shows them how to stand up for themselves.