

BONDED LABOUR

District Umerkot, Sindh

DFID Department for
International
Development



Bonded Labour

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*Issues of bonded sharecroppers and their families
is a matter of extreme sensitivity in Umerkot.*



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Like other southern districts of Sindh, bonded labour is a widely prevalent social institution in Umerkot which has strong historical roots. It is well-entrenched in the existing social and cultural milieu of the district having severe implications on basic rights, freedom, and welfare of bonded individuals and their families. In Umerkot, which is a multi-religious and caste-based society, the lower caste population of Hindus predominantly comprising of *Bheel* and *Kohli* clans are the most vulnerable and marginalised communities that constitute the population of bonded sharecroppers. The deeply rooted historical caste system in the district not only defines economic impoverishment but also social exclusion and lack of opportunities, that restrains socio-economic progress of the marginalised. Absence of these elements has caused extreme levels of poverty and deprivation coupled with subjugation and dependency to the influential land-owning class. Under these circumstances, bonded labour is a paradoxical situation of voluntary choice.

The socio-economic indicators of bonded families in Umerkot depict a despicable scenario. Household incomes of families are extremely low and ownership of assets by households is at the bare minimum. Land is a major source of livelihoods in rural settings of the districts, and land ownership is non-existent which appears to be an important factor for subjugation and exploitation by the landowners. Besides lack of livelihoods, basic social services including education, health, water and sanitation in all selected villages are virtually non-existent. The literacy rates are abysmally low among both adults and children. Illiteracy is an important factor that has further limited economic opportunities vis-à-vis lack of diverse skill-base.

In the absence of credit opportunities, collateral requirements, and high rates of return, landowners provide the most convenient way to borrowing. Amidst the severity of poverty, there seems to be other so called benefits such as provision of land for housing by landowner(s), however, in the long-run inability to repay debts results in perpetual indebtedness that continues for generations. Considering the unequal power balance between the creditor and the borrower, the debt accounts are usually tampered to further marginalise the borrower to ensure free supply of labour. The incredulousness of bonded tenants concerning debt calculations because of illiteracy also makes them victims of cheating in debt accounts. Additional borrowing by the landless tenants for contingency needs also creates a cycle of dependency on the landowner.

Like most districts of Sindh, the sharecropping system of 50:50 distribution of agricultural produce between the landowner and tenant is mutually agreed upon. However, in practice, it is hardly followed. In most instances, tenants have to bear the additional costs of agricultural inputs not decided under the agreement that further multiplies existing debt. Resistance to this exploitation can have serious repercussions such as physical abuse, displacement of families from land, and loss of livelihoods. Being the weaker party, economic exploitation is hardly resisted by the bonded tenants.

Possession of national identity cards appears to be an important concern in context of bonded labour for granting of citizenship rights. However, it hardly provides any utility for bonded families in declaring their rights and freedom from bondage. This is due to the fact that bonded families do not have the right to freely practice their right to franchise. However, these families constitute a significant vote bank to the preferential candidate(s) of the landlords.

In the absence of any permanency in residence, inter-village migration is a common phenomenon in district Umerkot. This is due to two reasons: either bonded families are sold off to other landlord(s) - usually the highly indebted ones - or bonded tenants personally arrange the sale of them and their families to clear off previous debts. This change of ownership of families usually does not make any difference in general conditions of work and often continues the process of economic exploitation.

The working conditions of bonded families are extremely severe. There are no standard days, hours, and timing of work. Usually, bonded labourers work all the seven days in a week during the day and night as well. Besides household chores, women also assist men in farm activities. The incidence of child labour is also highly prevalent among bonded families. In most instances, both boys and girls assist their fathers and elders in farming activities. Inability to work and perform also results in economic penalties which are charged on the debt account of tenants.

Physical punishment of both men and women by the *munshis* (landlord's agent/ village accountant) in particular is also existent in villages. Moreover, incidents of sexual-abuse of women are also existent but in general they mostly go unreported. Even if they come to the forefront, such issues are hardly addressed by the law enforcement officials due to the political and social influence of the landowners.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Bonded labour is among the oldest and most pervasive institution which has been prevalent throughout the history of mankind, even existing in the present world. The issue of bondage was critically scrutinised and despised principally on moral or humanitarian arguments also on the limited rationality of workers in making least-optimal decisions. Over the years, research on the subject, has extended these simple arguments by taking into context the multi-dimensionality of factors including economic, social, cultural, institutional and political which cause and perpetuate bondage. It is a complex phenomenon, which in traditional societies has been largely viewed as a consequence of economic impoverishment and lack of alternatives and is perpetuated under the disguise of social and cultural norms. In the absence of any political and institutional commitments, bonded labour appears to flourish unabated.

Bhaduri (1973) has characterised perpetual indebtedness mainly of sharecroppers to landlords due to absence of formal credit markets. Bardhan (1979) argues that labour arrangements by employers are made to avoid the cost of recruiting workers during peak seasons of cultivation to ensure risk-averse labourers. It also provides insurance against wide fluctuations in income caused by variations in the demand for agricultural produce. Daru and Churchill (2000), not surprisingly, examined poverty as the root but not the only cause of bonded labour. Lack of access to and control over means of livelihoods implies high vulnerability of workers to risks of bondage. It is further argued that rent seeking behaviour and consolidation of electoral power are additional factors for existence and consolidation of bonded labour. Bardhan (1991) has analysed the existence of strong status quo models between the creditor and the debtor which defines influence and authority of former over the latter. Genicot (2001) while analysing the causes of bonded labour considered it as a paradoxical situation of voluntary choice. In the absence of economic opportunities, bonded labour is *ex-ante* voluntary.

Amidst theoretical debates, variations in definitions and perspectives on what constitutes bondage, and the associated complexities in measuring its severity, debt bondage appears to be a dynamic process. Apart from long-term bondage of workers where in most instances not only individuals but families are kept under servitude only to work for the creditor, short term bondage may not appear to be exploitative. However, observers believe that short-term bondage can be viewed as an initial way towards long-term servitude with its more severe forms.

Like other countries in South Asia - India and Nepal in particular - bonded labour is a widely prevalent phenomenon in Pakistan. Against the general perception that it is mostly rural, there are various sectors and urban industries which keep workers under confinement and severely exploitative conditions¹. However, in view of large sectoral share of informal rural employment, landless sharecroppers and brick-kiln workers comprise a major share of bonded labour in the country. Recently, there are no estimates to suggest the extent and diversity of bondage in Pakistan, previous figures mostly of bondage sharecroppers signifies the enormity of the issue. Erceawn and Nauman (2001) using Pakistan Agriculture Census 2000 have estimated bondage sharecroppers (in Sindh and Punjab provinces) in the range of 0.55 to 0.75 million. An earlier survey of ILO indicates the existence of some 1.7 million bonded labourers in Sindh province alone (HRCP 2004).

Despite international obligations and enactment of laws, bondage of informal farm workers in Pakistan continues to grow unabated. Being a member state of United Nations, the Government of Pakistan has ratified ILO Conventions 29 and 105 (in 1957 and 1960) which primarily call for abolition of forced and compulsory labour in all forms within the shortest possible period by taking all necessary measures. Likewise, Article 11 (1-3) of the State's Constitution 1973 also indicates that²: *"no law shall permit or facilitate its introduction into Pakistan in any form. All forms of forced labour and traffic in human beings are prohibited"*. In 1992, the Government of Pakistan (GOP) has also promulgated the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act which set modalities for the abolition of forced labour in the country. However, the general scenario and lack of effective implementation to curb bondage needs a lot to be desired for. According to the reports on the State of Human Rights 2004 and 2005, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) indicates no breakthrough in reducing the incidence of bonded labour in the country. Fact of the matter remains that the issue of bonded labour gained some international and national prominence during the 1980s and mid 1990s, but in recent years appears to have lost its importance in policy framework.

¹ Recent research is indicative of the fact that various urban-based industries including bangle-making, construction, tanneries, rice mills, stone-cutting, and match-stick factories keep workers under bondage.

² Additionally, Article 37 (c) and Article 38 (a) to (e) indicates state's obligation to secure just and humane conditions of work, and general well being of all its citizens.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study has been conceptualised on the premise that civil society interventions are required to ameliorate the existing status of bonded workers in district Umerkot. In the absence of institutional mechanisms, there is a need for civil society actors to come forward to address the issues of bonded sharecroppers. Despite the extent of impoverishment, there are few NGOs that have been working in the district and almost none concerning the vital issues of bonded tenants. The study is limited in scope and confined to selected villages of Umerkot. The basic purpose is to prepare a 'situational analysis' of the existing status of bonded sharecroppers in the district. The findings of this report are anticipated to assist the Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN) and Thardeep Rural Development Program (TRDP) in developing a work plan to initiate development interventions in the selected villages.

The major objectives of the study are presented as follows:

- ↘ Understand the existing social, economic, and cultural dynamics of bondage of sharecroppers.
- ↘ Acquire multiple perspectives for diversity of information concerning issues. It involves group discussions and interviews with different stakeholders including the bonded communities, activists, landowners, civil society representatives, and District Government officials.
- ↘ Conduct a quantitative survey of bonded households for collection of information that can assist in better understanding of the issues confronting them.
- ↘ Acquire information about and learn from previous experiences of organisations which have initiated development projects concerning bonded families in Sindh. Most notably, the NRSP-ILO project titled '*Preventing and Eliminating Bonded Labour in South Asia*' (PEBLISA) has been taken as a case-study to comprehend previous initiatives, and
- ↘ Recommend possible interventions based on information and complexities surrounding the issues of bonded families in the district.

3. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

To collect information on the issues of bonded sharecroppers, both secondary and primary data sources have been used. Secondary information was obtained from previous literature on debt-bondage in Sindh, mainly comprising of research papers and reports published by the ILO. Primary data, which comprises the major component of the study, was collected in both quantitative and qualitative forms.

3.1 Quantitative Data

Quantitative data was collected through a structured questionnaire which contained information on different aspects of bonded families. This pertains to: (i) Basic respondent/household information (ii) Number of household members (iii) Ownership of assets (iv) Household income and expenditures (v) Migratory trends (vi) Labour contracts and arrangements (v) Work conditions and burden of work of both males and females (vi) Amount of debt accumulated (vii) Possession of existing skills, and (viii) Others.

The survey covered 250 households with the devised methodology of 50 percent representation from each village. The surveyed households were primarily represented by head of families who were identified through purposive sampling technique. The purpose was to identify households in villages that have incurred debt; however, no particular threshold was adjusted in selecting tenants based on the magnitude of debt to the landowner.

The survey was conducted in two *talukas*: *Samaro* and *Umerkot*. In *Samaro*, three villages including *Juloo Khan*, *Major Palli*, and *Ramu Bheel (Cheema Farm)* were selected for data collection. In *Umerkot* taluka, two villages, *Sabir Bheel* and *Dhanasar* were identified for the survey. Due to disruption in data collection process and threats by the caretakers of property in *Dhanasar*, an alternative village *Haji Ahmed Memon* was identified to cover the remaining sample³.

³ The survey team also confronted similar issues in the replaced village.

3.2 Qualitative Data

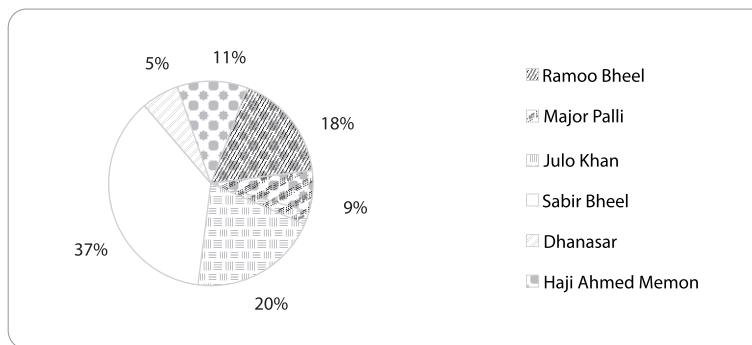
The qualitative data was collected through extensive Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with the communities and landlords. Community discussions, both structured and unstructured, were held in three villages including *Ramu Bheel*, *Sabir Bheel*, and *Major Palli*. The objective was to further explore the issues of bondage not covered in the questionnaire and also to acquire supplementary information.

In each FGD, a minimum of ten sharecroppers participated from the village. In addition, two FGDs were also conducted with the landlords to acquire their perceptions and opinions concerning the situation of bondage and how it is viewed by the landowning class. Group discussions also involved some representatives of NGOs that have been working in the region.

4. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

The distribution of sample by villages is presented in Figure 1, which approximately represents 50 percent of households in each village. As indicated previously, due to the law and order situation created in Dhanasar, only a fraction of the households were covered for data collection by the visiting team of enumerators. Gender-wise, 96 percent of the heads of households that were interviewed included male members and only 4 percent were female heads of households .

Figure 1: Distribution of Sample by Villages



4.1 Religion, Caste and Tribal Identity

In the sample, 54 percent of the respondents belong to the *Bheel* community whereas the remaining 46 percent were from the *Kohli* clan. Both these communities which belong to the scheduled castes of Hindus are major clans in the district. These communities also constitute the majority of bonded sharecroppers in the district. In addition to Hindu sharecroppers, there are also Muslim tenants and bonded Christians which, as suggested by anecdotal evidence, have usually been converted from lower castes.

Based on field observations and discussions with civil society representatives, religion does not seem to be a prominent segregating factor in the broader social and cultural milieu of Umerkot's society particularly in the urban settings. However, the centuries old caste-system is 'deeply-rooted' in the rural areas of the district. This tradition of segregating individuals appears to be a major factor that not only defines identity and

social status but also presets people's occupations which in traditional societies are inherited from ancestry. For instance, the simple truth remains that son of a low-caste bonded tenant is likely to remain a bonded labourer, having no opportunities for education and employment as the existing social and cultural set-up does not allow opportunities for lower-classes to progress. Due to extreme form of social exclusion and predetermined socio-economic conditions, there is high vulnerability and destitution among the lower-caste population engaged in agriculture in the district. Evidence also suggests that Hindu sharecroppers are more subject to economic exploitation compared to tenants of other religions. Ercelawn and Nauman (2001) have also indicated gross excesses and exploitation against the Hindu sharecroppers.

Tribal identity is also an important element which differentiates among the scheduled castes in the district. In our observational analysis, it was noted that *Bheel* and *Kohli* communities take pride over the other indicating their superior identity. It was identified that both communities reside in separate villages, social interaction between them is non-existent, and there is no concept of inter-clan social relationships. Some observers believe that coupled with other factors, significant clan differentiation among the lower-castes in southern Sindh has prevented the emergence of strong rights-based movement and collective resistance against economic and social repression.

4.2 Family Size, Composition by Gender and Age

As generally the case in rural societies, joint family system is a common norm in all the surveyed villages. The range of household size was found to be between 2-29 individuals. On average, a household was estimated to be comprised of 7 members which do not appear to be significantly high.

Distribution of family members by age indicates that adults (more than 18 years of age) constitute 56 percent of household population compared to 44 percent children (less than 18 years of age). Among adults (excluding the others category), approximately 56 percent males constitute the household size compared to 44 percent females⁴. Similarly, among children (excluding the others category) 54 percent household members were estimated to be boys compared to 46 percent girls. Others category of relatives living in the household including both adults and children constitute a negligible share in total household size (1 percent).

Table 1: Distribution of Households by Family Size

Household Members	Percentage
Households with less than 10 members	78
Households with 15 or fewer members	18
Households with more than 15 members	4

⁴ These include head of the household, spouse, parents, siblings, and children greater than 18 years.

4.3 Literacy and Level of Education

Education is an important element particularly in situations where issues are rights-based because it is a crucial factor that enlightens individuals about their basic rights. In addition, it is also a vital indicator for social and economic progress of individuals. In the survey, the literacy rate of household heads was found to be abysmally low. Only 22 percent of respondents indicated of having some level of schooling whereas the remaining 78 percent were found to be completely illiterate. Importantly, further examination of education attained by respondents also presents a dismal picture. Only 3 percent of literate respondents indicated of having primary but less than secondary level of education. The remaining 97 percent mentioned of not studying beyond Grade II.

Table 2: Literacy Rate of Respondents Across Villages

	Village	Literacy Rate (%)
1	Ramu Bheel	16
2	Major Palli	50
3	Juloo Khan	18
4	Sabir Bheel	28
5	Dhanasar	31
6	Haji Ahmed Memon	4
	Total	22

Besides head of household, literacy rate among adults in surveyed households was also estimated to be staggeringly low. Only 8 percent of adults were found to be literate. The proportion for literate females was found to be significantly lower (4 percent) compared to literate males (15 percent). Among children, the literacy rate among girls was estimated to be merely 3 percent compared to 15 percent for boys.

The low levels of education among adults and children are explained by the fact that educational opportunities are almost non-existent in most of the surveyed villages. Out of the 6 villages, only *Dhanasar*, *Sabir Bheel* and *Haji Ahmed Memon* have primary schools. However, the quality of these schools is extremely doubtful as indicated by communities in FGDs. In addition, lower levels of education can be explained by the restrictions imposed by landlords on children of bonded families to attend schools. Besides the non-existence and poor quality of education, there are no health facilities available in most of the surveyed villages except *Dhanasar* and *Haji Ahmed Memon*. However, the issue of quality of health services needs to be examined.



*All the houses of bonded families were noted as **'katcha'** constructed with mud and pointed thatched roofs.*

4.4 Land, Housing and Shelter

All the houses of bonded families were noted as '*katcha*' constructed with mud and pointed thatched roofs. The general norm in most districts is that land for construction of houses is provided by the landlord who has ownership rights of the property. He can displace bonded families whenever he intends to which puts him in a strong social position of authority. Despite the Tenancy Act 1951 which states that no tenant (and his family) can be displaced from the property without his consent, such unequal balance places bonded families under fears of displacement, anxieties of losing means of livelihoods, while also increasing their social vulnerability and susceptibility to further exploitation at the hands of the landowner(s).

In the sample, 98 percent of houses were found to be constructed on landowners' property whereas merely 2 percent respondents indicated personal ownership of houses. Interestingly, in one surveyed village, it was found that tenants have constructed houses on government's property but in the absence of any system and social and political influence of landlord(s), these families are at the discretion of landlords.

With no doubt, ownership of land - whether for cultivation or housing - is a primary asset in Umerkot that defines status, freedom from servitude, authority, and prosperity in the social and cultural milieu of the rural society. In a sample case study of individuals, it was identified that previous bonded labourers who gradually purchased land over time through savings not only repaid their outstanding debts but also freed themselves from servitude to the landowners and relatively assumed greater financial prosperity and self-reliance. These are, however, few exceptions in the general scenario of debt-bondage of sharecroppers in the district.

In the survey, 98 percent of respondents indicated of not owning any piece of land whereas the remaining 2 percent mentioned of having agrarian land which was primarily rain-fed (*barani*). The canal irrigated land which is highly productive due to acute shortage of water in the district is usually owned by the influential landowners of the area.

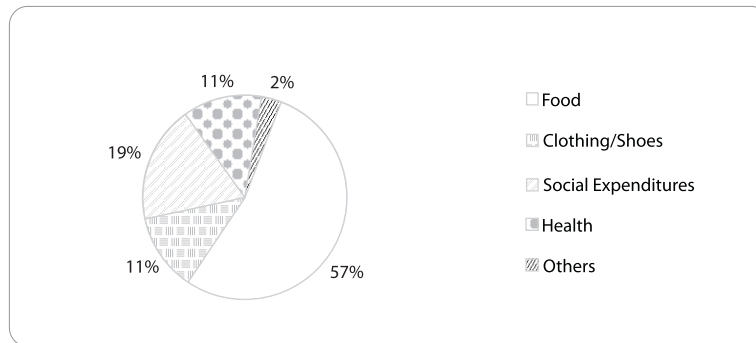
4.5 Household Income, Expenditures, and Economic Dependency

Estimating the household income of bonded families is a complex issue considering the perplexities and issues of defining family incomes. As usually the case is, income earned by bonded tenants from sharecropping is retained by the landowners for repayment of previously outstanding debts. The household needs are therefore met through in-kind provision of consumption items such as food which are provided by the landowners and also charged on the debt account of families. The income side of families is therefore usually non-existent. Households which receive net incomes (minus debts) from sharecropping, the levels are extremely low and families have to

mostly resort to additional borrowing that further increases the amount of debt. It was noted that households also generate incomes from other sources such as sale of dairy products in the market, and contribution by family members engaged in daily-wage employment. Our analysis of household incomes is primarily based on alternative sources of income generated by households and therefore excludes additional borrowing which theoretically comprises the expenditure side.

In the sample, the estimated annual household income comes to Rs. 25,709 (or US \$ 428) which is indicative of general and severe form of poverty among bonded families. In analysis of further segregation of household income of surveyed families, presumably if the average income of Rs. 25,000 is kept as a threshold point, the dispersion in household incomes of surveyed families further indicates the extent of destitution and deprivation. Based on this criterion, the annual average income of majority of households (52 percent) is estimated to be Rs. 16,233 per annum (or US \$ 271). To the contrary, the average household income (or dispersion of poor families) above the breakeven point of Rs. 25,000 comes to Rs. 36,310 (or US \$ 605) for 48 percent of households. These estimates do not reflect that these households are better in the general context but measure that 52 percent families in the survey are poorest among the poor, lying at the bottom of the heap. Considering the recently estimated per capita of US \$ 920 in Pakistan, these income estimates of surveyed households indicates severe form of destitution among households in the country.

Figure 2: Distribution of Household Expenditures



In contrast to household income, the average annual household expenditures of surveyed families in bondage have been estimated to be Rs. 36,432 (or US \$ 607). As indicated in Figure II, more than half of the expenditures are accrued on food (57 percent) followed by social expenditures (19 percent), and clothing/shoes and health (11 percent). Based on interviews of communities and activists, it was identified that although expenditures on social events such as marriages are not regular, however they appear to be seemingly extravagant in view of the extremely poor economic status of bonded families. These are primarily driven by social and cultural traditions. For example, in instances of marriage or deaths within households, the family has to

feed the whole village that further multiplies debt as expenditures are usually covered by borrowing further credit from the landowner. There is also a tendency among bonded families to borrow money from other sources of credit such as the traditional money lender. The point of this analysis is not to identify the high expenditure side but to indicate that economic exploitation (discussed later in detail) makes bonded families more vulnerable to dependency on the creditor, therefore, further limiting their prospects for social and economic freedoms

Table 3: Household Expenditures Covered by Type of Creditors of Surveyed Households

	Food	Clothing/ Shoes	Social Events	Health	Others
Landlord	96%	79%	82%	83%	39%
Shared	0	9%	9%	7%	17%
Money Lender	0	4%	4%	3%	0
Self	4%	8%	5%	7%	44%

4.6 Household Assets

Besides land which is the most important asset, livestock is also a vital asset for means of livelihoods and existence of bonded families in the district. The survey data indicates that ownership of livestock among households is at the bare minimum. Around 24 percent of households indicated ownership of cows among them with the majority possessing only one animal. Approximately, 64 percent of households were found owning goats in the range of 2-4 animals. Only 2 percent indicated ownership of sheep. Around 11 percent of respondents indicated of owning other animals whereas merely 9 percent own poultry (see table 4 below). In general, these figures imply the poor status of ownership of livestock and other animals further indicating the extent of economic deprivation of bonded households.

Table 4: Number of Surveyed Households with Category and Number of Animals

	Cow	Goat	Sheep	Poultry	Others
One animal	44	53	2	9	20
2-4 animals	14	84	3	8	8
More than 5 animals	2	22	0	5	0

Other household items owned by surveyed households are presented in the table 5. Except for jewelry, the proportion of households owning miscellaneous items has been estimated to be significantly low that is less than 8 percent. Only 11 percent respondents indicated of owning a bicycle whereas 5 mentioned of having bullock carts as assets.

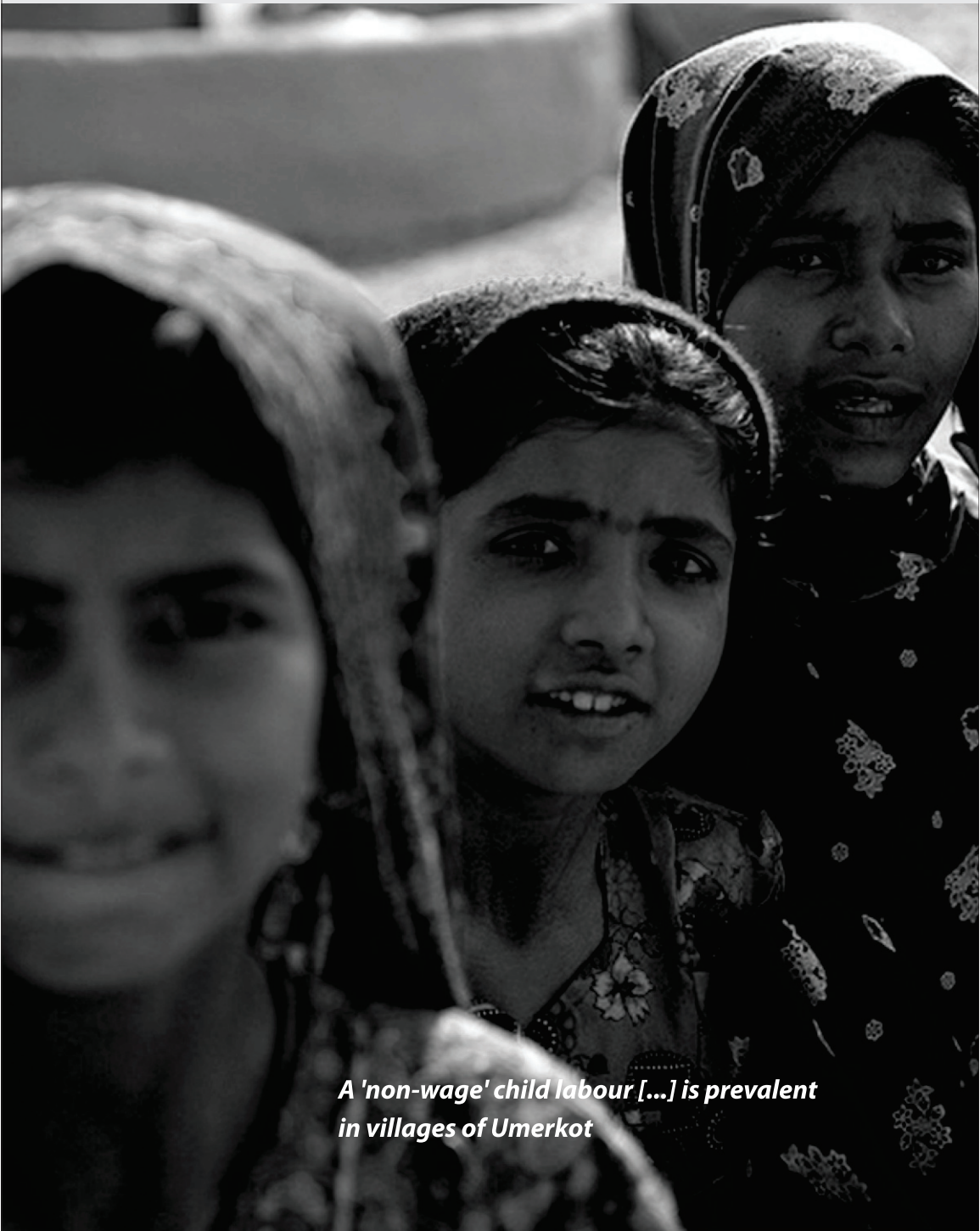
Table 5: Households with Ownership of Miscellaneous Household Items

Household Items	Number of Households	Percentage
Radio	17	7
Tape Recorder	18	7
Fan	6	2
Jewelry	72	29
Others	5	2

4.7 Possession of National Identity Cards

In the survey, 51 percent of adults had possession of National Identity Cards (NIC). Although, ownership of NIC seems to be an important issue in context of bondage as it establishes legal existence of individuals as citizens of the state and more practically is essential for all official dealings. Based on our understanding of ownership of NIC and its importance for individuals, a word of caution is advised. Despite the fact that more than half of the adults have legalised citizenship rights, these individuals have not been granted rights to freely franchise during the electoral processes. Anecdotal evidences indicate that bonded communities are threatened with serious repercussions if they do not vote in favour of electoral candidates whose names are provided by the landlords.

As generally the norm in traditional societies where political alignments are developed for rent-seeking, bonded sharecroppers in Umerkot provide a significant vote-base to the landlords that increase his social and political influence among the influential elite of the area. It is clearly evident that possession of identity cards does not provide any apparent benefits to these bonded communities as citizens of the country unless they are freed from servitude and destitution.



*A 'non-wage' child labour [...] is prevalent
in villages of Umerkot*

5. GENERAL SITUATION OF BONDED SHARECROPPERS IN UMERKOT

In our observations, it appears that discussion on the issues of bonded sharecroppers and their families is a matter of extreme sensitivity in Umerkot. Except for vulnerable families the exclusive victims of economic exploitation and servitude the issue of bondage is not recognised by various sections of the society. During discussions, it was noted that among influentials, the landowners, and certain civil society representatives, there is no recognition of the fact that bonded labour is indeed an issue that requires attention. This can be partly explained by the fact that strong cultural and traditional roots have perpetuated this social institution for centuries which disguises economic interests of the powerful and exploitation of the marginalised classes.

Despite the presence of laws such as the Tenancy Act 1951, provisions of the Constitution 1973, and Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act 1992, there are no mechanisms that have been put into place by the state to address the perplexed issues of bonded families and for granting them freedom and a dignified life as citizens of the country. This may seem to be correlated to the highly unequal power balance between the rural elite and the poor. The multiple roles of employers and creditors as social and political elites or their connections with the political and religious elite in the region is a major indicator for prevalence of bonded labour and ineffectual implementation of policies to abolish it. It is a usual case that landlords have their allies in legislation, bureaucracy and judiciary of the province and their direct or indirect influence in local elected bodies and law and order systems (police and judiciary) prevents labourers from taking any legal action if they want to take refuge from servitude. It appears that strong socio-political influence that exacerbates economic exploitation and abuse cannot be effectively challenged in the existent social and cultural milieu. Needless to say, effective mechanism to abolish bondage has never been implemented due to strong political lineages and vested interests of the influentials.

Apart from cultural factors and lack of political will of the state to grant basic rights and freedom to its citizens, the absence of socio-economic opportunities is a vital factor that compels and consolidates bonded labour as a social institution in the district. In the absence of sustainable means of livelihoods for poor families, low social investments by the state in education and health sectors particularly for the poor, and resultantly limited productive skills of the poor for income generation, there are no alternatives available for destitute families to secure sustainable livelihoods.

Poor families are therefore not only forced to migrate to relatively affluent districts in search of employment opportunities but also compelled to seek poor working conditions based on their weaker bargaining position which consequently entraps them in the vicious cycle of dependency and servitude for coming generations as well. Due to poor economic base of families and ignorance about rights, the terms and conditions which are decided and agreed upon are later grossly violated due to unequal power balance between the creditor and the debtor⁵. Although it may appear that debt is the major cause of bondage in the district, it is not the structural cause of servitude. According to Churchill and Guerin (2004) debt is a 'symptom' for bondage rather than a 'cause'.

Anecdotal evidences from FGDs with tenants indicate that most of the inputs costs including seeds and other inputs, tractor costs for ploughing, and electricity costs of tube-wells are put on sharecroppers⁶. These costs are usually forced upon them to jack up debts which can only be redeemed through future labour. Since the landlord usually pays for these inputs, hefty transaction and service costs are further imposed on the tenants, which is a continuum for putting additional debt on the tenants. It is not only the debtor who has to repay debt to the landowner but in the case of his death, the relatives have to bear the responsibility of repayment through provision of free labour to the creditor. The amount of debt accrued on the family is never repaid due to the exploitative economic conditions that are made by the creditors and the cycle of dependency continues. For instance, tampering of debt accounts is also a frequent practice by the *munshis* that does not permit bonded families to reduce the amount of outstanding debt. The continuity of outstanding debts can also be partly explained by the fact that due to high incidence of illiteracy, there is lack of understanding among most tenants about their debt calculations. In addition, the element of threats such as fear of dislocation from the village, and severe economic dependency on the landlord, are additional factors that tampered accounts are not challenged by the exploited sharecroppers.

Apart from tampered accounts, imposition of economic penalties was also notified as a frequent practice by *munshis* in surveyed villages. These penalties are imposed if the tenant is unable to perform work because of some contingency (such as illness) or in case of absence for a social event and not being able to return on the day authorised by the landlord. These penalties are put on daily basis of absenteeism from work. As indicated in FGDs, an amount of Rs. 200 onwards is charged on the debt account of the absent tenants.

⁵ Like other parts of Sindh, in most villages of Umerkot, labour arrangements are made under the share-cropping system of 50:50 that both landowner and sharecroppers have to equally share the cost of inputs and agricultural produce. However, in most instances the burden of additional costs of inputs has to be ultimately borne by the tenants where they do not receive their due share in final output.

⁶ For instance, at the market rate which is usually charged, the tractor operator charges Rs. 4,000 per hectare for ploughing land.

Besides economic exploitation of bonded workers and families, the working conditions also depict a dismal scenario. As notified in FGDs, there are also no fixed timings of work for bonded sharecroppers who are often compelled to work at odd hours of night by the landlords. A previous study indicates that engaging tenants in work is a method employed by the landlords to separate family elders to avoid the risk of families fleeing the village at night. Usually, the bonded workers have to work all 7 days in a week with no fixed hours of work.

6. SURVEY FINDINGS OF VILLAGES

6.1 Migratory Trend

Due to absence of economic opportunities for sustenance of livelihoods, migration of poor families to relatively prosperous districts is a widely prevalent phenomenon in Umerkot and other districts of Southern Sindh that has been existent since decades. In surveyed villages, we found little evidence of recent migratory trends among respondents, however most of them notified that their ancestors migrated to Umerkot from surrounding areas. Around 97 percent of respondents indicated of living in the same village since birth whereas merely 3 percent indicated that they have migrated from *Tharparkar* during the last 5-10 years. In most instances of previous and recent migrations, drought in the district of origin appeared as a major cause for migrating to Umerkot followed by seeking seasonal employment opportunities (see table 6 below).

Table 6: Reasons for Migration Identified by Respondents

	Reasons for Migration	Percentage
1	Drought	51
2	Search for seasonal employment	18
3	Sold by landlord in Umerkot	8
4	Community conflict	0
5	Others	26

Besides inter-district migration, the phenomenon of migration from one village to another is also prevalent among bonded tenants and their families. In the survey, 18 percent of respondents indicated of inter-village migration (whether as a child or adult) within district Umerkot during the last 20-30 years. Mobility of bonded families from village to village is based on two factors: (i) usually highly indebted families are sold off by financially troubled landlord to other landowners in different villages, and (ii) heads of bonded households personally arrange their sale to other landlords after taking advance payments and clearing off their debts with the previous landlord.

The first scenario of forcible sale of bonded families in legal terms is a violation of the Tenancy Act 1951 that prohibits unlawful ejection of tenants who meet the conditions of permanent rights to tenancy. In the second scenario, bonded tenants who usually do not have good workable relationship with the existing landlord, are extremely lage

indebted, and abused and exploited; are often compelled to sell themselves to other landlords on the pretext of finding a better master without having any information of what will be the new conditions of work. In the survey, the findings corroborate this phenomenon of inter-village mobility by sale of families. Half of the respondents (50 percent) were found to be living in the same village since the last 5-10 years. This is followed by 36 percent respondents who indicated living in the same village for less than 5 years, whereas 14 percent were living in the same village for more than 10 years.

6.2 Initial Loan and Debt Accumulation

In the survey, majority of respondents (98 percent) indicated personally taking the initial amount of loan from the landowner whereas 2 percent indicated that their father and brother took the loan which they have been trying to repay. The primary reason for taking loan was to meet social expenditures indicated by 65 percent of respondents, followed by miscellaneous expenditures (14 percent), and household expenditures (13 percent). The borrowing of loan as *peshgi* for cultivation of land was found to be merely 5 percent.

The range of preliminary loan taken from the landowners varies from Rs. 1,500 to Rs. 55,000 (or US \$ 25 to 917). Further segregation of data indicates that 74 percent of bonded tenants have taken the initial credit of Rs. 20,000 (or US \$ 333) or less compared to 26 percent that borrowed Rs. 21,000 (US \$ 350) or more. The existing amount of debt of surveyed households is estimated to be in the range of Rs. 2,000- Rs. 176,000 (US \$ 33 to 2,933). Due to limitations of data to correlate with time the credit was taken, it is difficult to estimate the growth of debt of bonded households. However, if the time factor is held constant, on average, it is estimated that family debts of surveyed households has increased by 128 percent. Despite limitations of growth in debt, accumulation of outstanding debt is usually unchecked by the debtors. A significant proportion of respondents (96 percent) indicated that they do not keep any record of debt that is accrued on them. This may be partly due to incomprehension to understand calculations but mostly due to the fact that there are no formal receipts provided by the *munshis* to families that how much debt has been accumulated over the years. Most of these accounts are settled verbally with no resistance from the tenants.

Due to extremely low incomes and non-existence of household savings, there is inability of bonded tenants to repay debts which are continuously accumulated over time. In the survey, 54 percent of respondents do not repay loans to the landowner whereas 46 percent mentioned of repaying some portion of debt. The majority, 93 percent of tenants indicated having no savings and they consistently borrow from the landowner. Similarly, the remaining 7 percent also mentioned continuity in borrowing from the landlord and inability to repay portion of their debts. Among bonded tenants who repay their debts, 87 percent mentioned repaying debts in-kind whereas only 13 percent indicated repayment of loans in-cash. Interestingly, since majority of

tenants indicated in-kind payment of debts, we are apprehensive that these arrangements in the midst of ill-practices are transparently made to accurately estimate the financial worth of in-kind payments.

6.3 Working Conditions, Child Labour and Abuse

The working conditions of bonded families of surveyed households were found to be severe. Around 76 percent of the respondents mentioned of engagement in work all seven days in the week. About 20 percent mentioned of working 6 days per week followed by 4 percent that work 5 days per week. On average, males spent 7 hours per day during the daytime and spend an additional 2-4 hours on the farm at night.

In most households, it was identified that female members as well as children also assist male members in farming, harvesting, and other associated agricultural activities. The data indicates that 98 percent of bonded workers in farms are assisted by womenfolk in the family. The average work hours for females have been estimated to be 9 that include multiple household chores. Similarly, 57 percent of respondents mentioned children assisting them in farming. These children are not being paid by the landlord for amount of labour they put in. Therefore, it is a 'non-wage' child labour that is prevalent in villages of Umerkot. Gender-wise, more than three-fourths of bonded tenants indicated that both male and female children assist elders in farm activities (76 percent), whereas 16 percent mentioned that only boys assist in farming compared to 13 percent of girls.

As notified by some respondents, inability to perform agricultural duties also results in physical abuse of both males and females. At times, there are no specific reasons for punishment which is usually done by the *munshis*. There are also incidences of sexual abuse of women in bonded households reported by local activists. These incidents largely go unreported due to fear of disclosure of information and also inability of law enforcement agencies to resolve them due to political and social influence of the perpetrators.

6.4 Issues of Gender

The conditions of women in bonded families of Umerkot depict a dismal picture. In addition to the excessive burden of work they have to bear in terms of farming activities and household chores, they appear to have no social and economic empowerment. As mostly a tradition in patriarchal societies, women's role in decision-making was noted to be almost non-existent. Women were also found to have no access to resources which they generate. In the survey, it was notified that although women are marginally paid for specific agricultural tasks such as picking of cotton and chilies (88 percent of households), only 34 percent keep their earned income as it is usually kept by family heads. Similar to men, there are no social and economic opportunities for women to generate incomes for households.

6.5 Level of Skills among Respondents

Besides farming, possession of skills among women and men in surveyed villages is almost non-existent. Only 8 percent of respondents indicated of possessing skills including manufacturing of handicrafts, driving vehicles and tailoring clothes. Among women, possession of skills was found to be significantly lower and exclusively limited to manufacturing of local handicrafts (2 percent).

7. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POSSIBLE INTERVENTIONS

In view of strong cultural traditions, political and social influence of landowners, and non-recognition of bondage as an issue, development interventions concerning bonded sharecroppers and their families is an arduous task. This is due to the fact that in making such interventions, sound social incentives and facilitation are required from both the landowners and the District Government who have major stakes in the general framework of bonded labour in the district. In view of the existing ground realities that indicate lack of institutional mechanisms and support, bonded labour is not only a low priority issue with little social recognition but it requires extensive workable space, facilitation and long-term interventions to ameliorate the existent conditions of bonded families in the district.

Amidst this scenario, the intervening organisations i.e. the RSPN and TRDP initially have to come out with a clear-cut agenda of how to pursue the issue and what is the extent and magnitude of incentives, programmes, and packages they can offer for development of marginalised communities.

As a starting point, we begin with four types of interventions that are prerequisites to address the issue of bondage in the district. These are not mutually exclusive and are correlated in a sequential manner:

- ↳ Awareness and political acceptance of the issue that it really exists
- ↳ Identification of bonded families and their release from bondage
- ↳ Rehabilitation of freed families, and
- ↳ Prevention of families from re-entering into bondage

Without raising political and social awareness among the rural elites and power-circles of the district, it may appear difficult to make any major breakthrough regarding social and economic interventions. However, these are long-term processes considering that raising awareness entails direct or indirect challenge to the existing hierarchy and social milieu that has been existent in the region since centuries. It may have the possibility of least success particularly in a situation where vested political, social and economic interests of the influentials are at stake. It will not only require advocacy but development of partnership with other stakeholders through provision of some incentives to avoid resistance to change. However, the fundamental question which arises considering the mandate of both organisations is that: Does social change with rights-based lobbying constitute the organisational agenda? In our analysis, the issue

appears more of a rights-based complexity which if resolved can later facilitate the development interventions. In any case, there is a need for continuity of dialogues with the District Government, landlords and other stakeholders to prepare the much needed ground for initiation of development work.

Once the discussions with stakeholders are initiated, it is important for both organisations to conceptually develop the models which are most suitable for socio-economic development of bonded families. Based on analysis of the situation in the district, there are primarily two methodologies available which include:

- (i) Relocation and rehabilitation of bonded families in an area outside Umerkot that should have no influence or interference of landlords, or
- (ii) Initiating socio-economic development within the existing social setup of the villages or relocation and rehabilitation of bonded families in district Umerkot but not in existing villages of residence

In the first methodology of relocation outside Umerkot, identification and later release of bonded families will be a key concern. It is important for both organisations to decide whether they want to buy freedom by clearing outstanding debts of bonded families or can provide legal assistance for their release. Buying freedom for bonded families surely requires dialogues with landowners for approval to free bonded families. It may appear to be a relatively easier process compared to provision of legal assistance that is a time consuming and lethargic process⁷; it also has its set of complexities. These in simplistic terms pertain to convincing landowners to sell bonded workers and families, effective identification of vulnerable households, and estimation of family debt accounts. According to an earlier study by Ercelawn and Nauman (2001), buying out freedom does not appear to be a feasible solution not only due to its perplexities but violation of the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act 1992 that forbids advances tied to labourers, denies any legal claim to such advances, and specifies penalties for violation. Whether these restrictions are applicable to organisations needs to be further explored?

Supposedly, if the organisations take legal measures, there is a likely probability that TRDP that has been working in the district will have a severe backlash from influential political and social elites of the district which can also jeopardise the process of dialogue with the local government and the landowners with severe repercussions on the general well-being of bonded families. Importantly, bonded families that were recipients of NRSP-ILO's PEBLISA project undertaken in district Hyderabad personally took the initiative of fleeing from bondage and were later provided legal assistance by human rights organisations (most notably the HRCP) through filing petitions in the Sindh High Court regarding illegal detention⁸. These families were ruled free from

⁷ Provision of legal support in filing petitions is a time-consuming process and it may not come under the ambit of agenda of both organisations.

⁸ The camps where bonded families were temporarily residing were often attacked by the landowners who once owned these families.

detention by the provincial court, and the development programmes were initiated in makeshift camps.

Relocation of bonded families outside Umerkot also has an underlying problem concerning acceptability by the communities. As indicated previously that although bonded communities do not have a residential base and their life resembles more to nomads, they have been living in the existing set-up for decades. In one FGD, the community members expressed apprehensions in relocation with preference for improvement of living conditions in the existing social set-up. Without making any generalised conclusions, this may be explained by the element of distrust bonded communities have due to years of betrayal by the politicians and the landowners. However, in opting relocation, extensive social mobilisation will be needed to rebuild trust and convince communities about improved future prospects. Anecdotal evidences and brief observation of makeshift camps of freed bonded labourers in Hyderabad indicates that although there have been marginal improvements in socio-economic conditions as these families continue to struggle with life but surely freedom has brought some joy in the lives of these families.

A vital issue in relocation of families is to avoid lags in development measures from the time of relocation. Supposedly, if families are relocated, it is fundamental to provide short-run incentives in the form of relief, social services, and economic sustenance of families. This would require provision of assistance for sustainable livelihoods parallel to quality social services including education, health, water and sanitation. However, in the long-run, prolonged innovative programmes and consolidated quality social services require solid foundations to increase self-reliance among families. These have been discussed in detail later in this section.

Under the relocation methodology, the organisations will need to acquire significant piece of land - both for housing and agricultural purposes. Social sectors investments including education, health, water and sanitation, can be initiated for provision of a comprehensive package for long-term rehabilitation. Most importantly, the comprehensive development package will require significant fiscal space for implementation and also greater institutional capacity and human resources to initiate a project of this magnitude.

A key element in process of sustainable rehabilitation is to involve households as partners rather than just recipients of services. It is particularly important to reduce the element of dependency and promotion of self-reliance among the communities. For example, under the PEBLISA project, the residential quarters were not provided free of cost to bonded families. The price of land was charged from communities in installments, whereas the residential quarter was constructed from the funds of the project. Likewise, health and education services were also subsidised by taking a portion of funds from the recipient communities.

The option of relocation outside district Umerkot seems to offer various benefits. The most important among these is presumably the change in social environment that will reduce interference from the powerful rural elite, keeping the bonded families away from re-entering the debt trap. It can create diverse opportunities for income generation and sustainable livelihoods, ensuring more self-reliance among families which does not seem possible if bonded families continue to live in the existing social environment. In addition, provision of quality social services which seem difficult to offer and also to sustain in the existing rural environment of influence and dominance can also bring a long-lasting social change and positive externalities associated to them. Previous experiences indicate that families which manage to escape bondage have relatively better economic opportunities and freedom of choice compared to those which have been living the life of servitude.

In case of interventions within the existing social and cultural milieu, it seems more of a challenging task to make them broader and meaningful. As mentioned earlier, it is primarily due to the fact that strong social and political influence of landowners will prohibit changes due to vested interests. Also, there is apprehension that in case of non-sustainability of interventions, there is a likely probability of re-entering bondage by bonded tenants and their families, which surely no development organisation accepts to happen. The benefit of development interventions would be that they would bring a change within the existing environment. This is primarily dependent on how well the organisations perform in convincing the strong and influential individuals to provide space for social and economic uplift of the marginalised.

Based on both scenarios, we propose certain recommendations for the improvement of social and economic conditions of bonded families in the selected villages. Before proceeding, it is important to highlight that opportunities for 'sustainable livelihoods' should be the key intervention which surely is more challenging compared to supplementary development interventions such as provision of social services. As mentioned previously, lack of economic opportunities is one of the primary reasons for prevalence of bonded workers in the district.

The recommended interventions include:

(i) Provision of Microfinance:

Previous experiences of countries in South Asia have indicated that microfinance has been used as an effective tool to improve the socio-economic status of poor and marginalised families. However, it is particularly important to take into context which microfinance models can be effectively utilised in the local context of Umerkot rather than just initiating provision of micro-credit for the sake of it. In our analysis, mere provision of microfinance would not work effectively unless supplementary non-financial services are also provided to clients. These services can include financial education of borrowers, training in the use of credit, and promotion of savings. Similarly, borrowers can be educated on various aspects of borrowing such as how much is the capacity of households to borrow money, purpose and intentions of

taking loan, the possible avenues and opportunities of investing money so that investments can be optimally utilised considering the existing skills of borrowers.

These services are important considering the need to educate and assist households in optimal utilisation of credit and its wastage on other spending. It is also significant for the organisation to continuously monitor utilisation of credit and its outcomes. It has mostly been observed that granting bigger loans beyond capacity of clients often results in default and spending on heads other than income generation activities. Therefore, it is pertinent to start with direct small loans which can be gradually increased based on monitored outcomes.

(ii) Provision of Land for Housing and Farming

Land which is a vital asset in the district that signifies social status. Buying land for bonded families for housing as well as cultivation can be an important instrument for reducing economic deprivation and dependency on the landowners thereby also providing an important source for sustainable livelihoods for families. Considering the scarcity of water, it is also important that agricultural land should have supplementary services of water provision through tube-wells, drip-irrigation, and other sources.

(iii) Provision of Livestock

Provision of livestock through direct provision or micro-credit initiative can be a means for generating sustainable livelihoods for poor families. It is also significant to offer supplementary services such as rearing and breeding of animals and marketing of products. Sustainable forward linkages can be established with suppliers for sale of dairy products as a source for generating incomes.

(iv) Initiation and Promotion of Savings

Promotion of savings among households is important for making further investments and generating incomes. Various innovative strategies can be used to promote savings and institutional support can be provided in terms of investment opportunities. For instance, in the PEBLISA project, communities had to put Rs. 15 in a dump box from their daily earnings which were later put in the bank accounts of tenants.

(v) Training, Capacity Building, and Imparting Income-Generation Skills

Training and capacity building of women and men for skill-generation is essential for self-reliance of families. Market-based training of skills can be provided for generating additional incomes. Establishment of vocational training centres for women can be an important prospect. Systematic marketing of manufactured products through creating linkages can assist poor households in developing additional means of livelihoods. Similarly, skill generation programmes for men such as training in carpentry, masonry, mechanics and other related professions can be initiated to diversify the skill-base in addition to farming.



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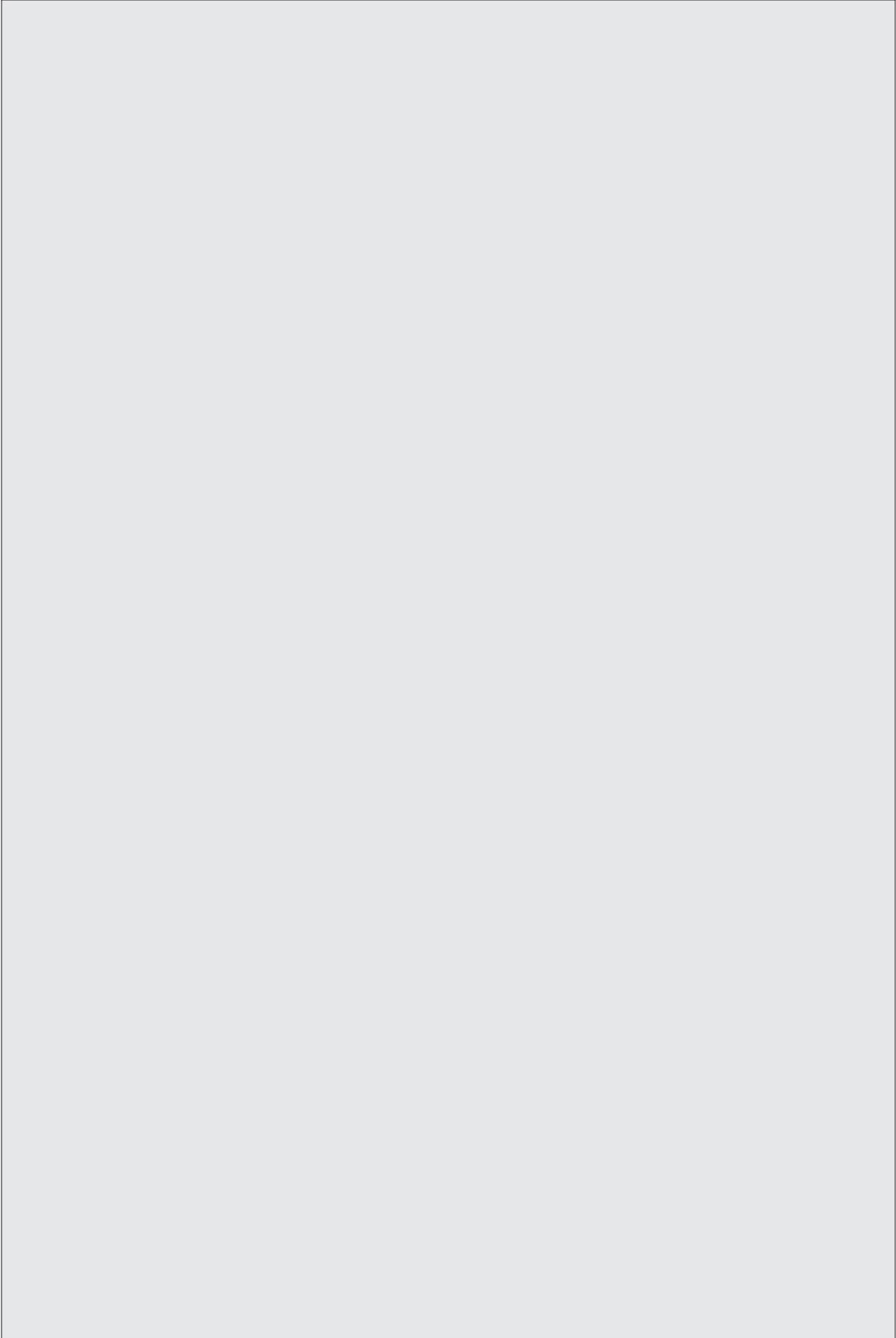
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