

Coping with Local Power Structures

The Case of Jared in Kaghan Valley

Report

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Preface

SUNGI Development Foundation and its associate Community Based Organizations (CBOs) frequently come in contact with local power structure while working with disadvantaged groups in the rural areas of the North-West Frontier Province. SUNGI's mandate of promoting equity and of working towards social change underscores the need to maintain this conflict. One cannot always be reactive approach to deal with power structure and conflicts.

Effective engagement with power structures requires a deep understanding of local conditions as well as advanced mediating skills along with an effective support mechanism. SUNGI is at the moment developing its capacity to work with power structures, and deal with conflicts, largely through a "learns-as-you-go" process.

Our interaction with local influentails in the Kaghan Valley came to a head when SUNGI and its associate CBO, Welfare Association Jared, effectively gave a voice to the marginalised communities in decision-making, particularly women. Religious leaders, local level politicians, landowners, timber merchants and a section of the media were deployed to disrupt the process of social mobilization. We feel that resistance to change is part of the process. It is because of the strong support for the social transformation process by the marginalised communities themselves, in the face of resistance that SUNGI and its partners have been able to establish an extensive network of village-based organization of woman and men who are involved in social mobilization programmes.

This report documents SUNGI's experience of dealing with power structures and conflict in the Kaghan Valley. The primary reason for commissioning this investigative report was to see what lessons can be learned. Based on these lessons, SUNGI has undertaken a number of initiatives. It has, for instance, started a civic rights programme, which includes training on how to deal with power structures and conflict. It has set up a Communication Unit which is presently developing a communication strategy focusing on networking with civil society, the media, local government departments and the local administration. More attention is now focused on maintaining cultural and gender sensitivities in staffing SUNGI chalking out partner training, advocacy and social mobilization programmes.

In Kaghan itself SUNGI has set up an office (In tehsil headquarters, Balakot), and has simultaneously initiated work around Union Council Jared to broaden its reach in the Kaghan Valley. It is in the process of strengthening local support groups through networking with the local press, forming Area Coordination Councils, forestry networks, and urban citizens' groups in Balakot.

SUNGI was fortunate to have the support of local community activists of Jared, SUNGI staff and partner organizations during the conflict in Jared (June – September 1997). Many withstood threats and intimidation. One has to acknowledge the support and participation of members of the women's organization in Union Council Jared, office-bearers of Welfare Association Jared, members of village-based organizations and their Supreme Council, the Sarhad NGO Ittehad (SNI) fact-finding team and mediators, and of course, the SUNGI team.

Omar Asghar Khan
Executive Director

Background

Jared is a Union Council in the Kaghan Valley of the North Western Frontier Province (NWFP). During the 1992 flood a local Community Based Organization, Welfare Association Jared (WAJ) requested SUNGI Development Foundation to provide emergency relief to the affected people. This marked the beginning of SUNGI's works in that area. Over the years, the work earned SUNGI a fair bit of popularity and support in and around Jared. But at the same times it also faced recurring resistance from certain quarters particularly to its advocacy and social mobilization efforts. On 28 June, 1997 this resistance took a violent turn. A small group led by Taj Mohammad, an ex- Chairman of Jared Union council, physically attacked Omar Asghar Khan , SUNGI' s Executive Director, in Jared. A tense period followed this incident wherein SUNGI had to exercise political acumen to deal with an extraordinary situation. A rapprochement between Taj Mohammad and SUNGI, was however, reached on 24 September 1997 but it is difficult to predict how long the truce will hold and whether similar conflicts will not arise form other groups and individuals.

The conflict in Jared has many lessons for SUNGI and other organizations working on a similar agenda of social change. To draw out these lessons SUNGI invited Zafrayab Ahmed, a well – known journalist, to conduct an objective analysis of the action. During May 1998 Zafrayab met major players in the conflict including Taj Mohammad, members of Welfare Association Jared, local religious and political elements, residents of Jared and Omar Asghar Khan and other SUNGI staff members. This report is based on the analysis drawn by Zafaryab Ahmed from the interviews conducted by him. It aims to present perspectives of some individuals involved in the conflict and analyses motives and outcomes. The view presented in this report does not necessarily represent those of SUNGI Development Foundation.

Attack on Omar Asghar Khan

On June 28, Omar Asghar Khan, Executive Director, SUNGI was on a routine visit to Jared. While he was in a meeting with SUNGI's local partner, WAJ, he received a message from Taj Mohammed, former chairman of Union Council Jared, to discuss grievances about development work in the area. Taj's attitude in the preceding months indicated that he intended to escalate rather than resolve his differences with WAJ/SUNGI. This was evident in Taj's concerted agitation and a campaign to malign WAJ and SUNGI. The day he sought a meeting with Omar Asghar Khan, Taj gathered some people and provoked them into an aggressive mood. Given these circumstances Omar Asghar Khan decided not to meet Taj Mohammad at the place and the time suggested by him but invited him to the SUNGI office or at a place and time that was mutually acceptable.

After concluding the meeting with WAJ, Mr. Khan was leaving the area when his vehicle was intercepted in the main Jared bazaar by a group of locals including Taj Mohammed. He was manhandled. The group raised slogans and shouted that Omar Asghar Khan was an Ahmadi. They asked Mr. Khan to recite the Kalima and denounce Ahmadis in the local mosque. Mr. Khan refused to be pushed into denouncing another faith. He did, however, assure the group and Taj Mohammad that he would look into their grievances about SUNGI.

Taj Mohammad later claimed he would not have taken this step had Omar Asghar Khan not refused to meet him. He also claimed that some participants at the WAJ meeting told him that Sabir Husain, a resident of Jared and a SUNGI staff member who was at odds with Taj.

Two questions about the June 28 incident remain unclear. Was this incident premeditated or spontaneous? Was it Taj Mohammad's personal initiative or did he have the backing of the "timber mafia"? WAJ members believe it was a local incident. Taj Mohammad also gives the impression that the incident was related to local residents' wish to register their protest with Omar Asghar Khan about certain aspects of SUNGI's programme and activities of some of its staff members, particularly Sabir Husain. However, the possibility of the "timber mafia's" involvement, considering its past response to SUNGI's advocacy work on deforestation, cannot be ruled out even though it may be difficult to prove beyond reasonable doubt. But even if it was a local case, it is important to recognize that incidents such as this have the potential of galvanizing collective resistance to SUNGI by all those who feel threatened, including the "timber mafia", by its development initiatives in the conservative settings of Kaghan.

WELFARE ASSOCIATION JARED (WAJ)

Jared is a village in the Kaghan Valley located about 50 Kilometers from Balakot. It has an estimated population of 3,000. According to a legend, migrants from Central Asia settled here nearly five hundred years ago. Much later, through the 1872 Land Settlement, this land was allotted to the village and was in 1946 equally distributed among five Swati Pathan tribes: Bishgrami, Dudal, Punjghol, Arghoshal and Shahmati. These tribes are peaceful. The area, even today, enjoys a low crime rate. Despite a relatively high literacy rate the area is underdeveloped according to traditional development standards. For instance Jared is still without electricity and cooking gas; and supply of clean drinking water is scanty.

A local community activist, Sabir Husain and others established Welfare Association Jared in 1988 as a social welfare organization. Sabir Husain worked in Karachi as a driver. While he was working with businesses owned by Memons and Sudaagran-I-Delhi, two well-known traders communities, for about ten years he could not help observing with admiration the compassionate interest within the communities. Sabir was also influenced by Maulana Edhi's self-less efforts to help the poor and the destitute regardless of caste, religion, community or creed. In 1985 he quit work in Karachi and decided to return to his home village, Jared.

On his return to Jared, Sabir Husain took up employment with a local transport owner as a conductor. He witnessed chaos at bus stands and quarrels that wasted passengers' time and often led to brawls. Sabir Husain persuaded the owners to set a timetable for the company buses. The owners agreed and gave him the responsibility of managing the bus stand. They agreed to pay Sabir Husain Rs. 5 for every bus that used the bus stand. The system worked and Sabir Husain's organizational abilities were quickly noticed as people started using his mediation and conflict resolution skills.

Sabir Husain's father and younger brother died within a year of his return to Jared. At this bereavement, Sabir, Husain was disappointed with the rather indifferent attitude of the Swati pathans, which sharply contrasted with the community support he had seen in Karachi's trader communities. Community solidarity in his hometown appeared to be in short supply. Instead there were feuds and rivalries-mostly of a petty nature. Undaunted, Sabir decided to organize people in Jared. He wanted to develop the kind of community bonding which he had witnessed in Karachi. Sabir had laudable intentions but little experienced in such social process which is perhaps the reason for his inability to fully appreciate that the social glue which binds an urban trader community in Karachi is likely to be different from what might work to bring together a rural community.

During this critical formative period Sabir met a few educated young people in Jared who later became his fellow-organizers. He shared with them his experience of community-based welfare organizations in Karachi. This inspired the formation of WAJ in 1988, which a year later went on to get registered. The Association promoted the concept of self-help and demonstrated its value by reflecting it in its own work.

Often people from different class backgrounds face the warmth of natural calamities. This sense of sharing has the potential to turn such interaction into social movements. The 1992 flood brought WAJ and SUNGI together. The deforested areas in the Kaghan valley were hit by the floods underscoring the tragic and devastating effects of unscrupulous tree cutting by local influential. After working together to deliver emergency relief during the floods SUNGI and WAJ became partners in local level development, including advocacy to check deforestation. The collaboration on advocacy between SUNGI and WAJ influenced a shift in WAJ's approach to community work: changing its orientation from delivering welfare services to advocacy.

SUNGI's post-flood rehabilitation interventions like repairing water channels were welcomed by many in Jared, including people like Taj Mohammed. The effectiveness of these initiatives set standards against which the Union Council's past development work fared poorly. Comparing the work done by the UC and the work done by SUNGI ensured a lively debate in the area. Locals were critical of the former's performance. Sabir Husain and his supporters in WAJ joined the critics. This move by WAJ alienated some members of the defunct Union Council from the Association. Taj Mohammad, who had been chairman of the Union Council, and others, gradually distanced themselves from WAJ and as counter-offensive began criticizing WAJ. Taj Mohammad also attempted to establish a parallel organization. Relations between Taj Mohammed and WAJ worsened when the latter opposed the former's nominees to local zakat committee election in 1993.

After working for three years in Jared, SUNGI opened its office in the village in June 1995. This decision was taken in response to request made by WAJ and to meet logistic challenges SUNGI faced in managing this cluster from Abbottabad. Sabir Husain was SUNGI's Assistant Field Coordinator and became its full-time employee.

These developments represent a significant turning point in the Jared conflict. The multiple implications of SUNGI's physical presence in Jared created the feeling of insecurity in Taj Mohammed and his supporters. They feared an increase in the interaction between SUNGI and the local people. They were also apprehensive of expansion of SUNGI's programme in

the Kaghan Valley. All this could, they feared, enhance SUNGI's influence in the area possibly at the cost of their own influence and power.

Sabir Husain's employment with SUNGI was irksome for Taj Mohammed who feared it would improve Sabir's economic status leading to increased local influence. SUNGI's decision to recruit Sabir Husain as a staff member was strategic but it also had serious implication for SUNGI. Strategically, it helped consolidate SUNGI's programme implementation as Sabir Husain provided a trusted local link. But Sabir Husain's de facto position as head of WAJ resulted in blurring the distinction between SUNGI and WAJ i.e. the president of WAJ is based in SUNGI's office in Jared.

In 1996 WAJ facilitated the creation of the Supreme Council of local elders. WAJ and the Supreme Council took upon themselves the task of exposing Taj Mohammad's abuse of power as union councilor. Both organizations shared a good rapport and understanding. Together they presented a great threat to Taj Mohammed's questionable activities and his influence in the locality.

Local Players

In the early 1960s, the military government introduced an electoral system of local representation – the local bodies – and allocated development funds to them. The small landlord and peasants (landless or small landholders) in agrarian village economies follow a voting pattern that virtually facilitates bringing big landlords into power. The local bodies reinforced the influence of the landed elite. And a democratic process and system was thereby manipulated by traditional power alliances based on land ownership, caste and biradari.

In rare cases individuals not belonging to the big landholding classes manage to get elected, often due to direct or indirect support of the landed class. Such elected representatives become allies of the traditional power bloc. Instead of addressing the needs of their constituencies then work for their own benefit or for the benefit of those who support them. Taj Mohammad was not a big landlord but was supported by landlords to look after their interests.

Taj Mohammad was elected a councilor in 1979 and successfully retained this position in the subsequent local council elections held on non-party basis. He is an archetypal union councilor, shrewd and scheming. Through his political career Taj Mohammad established his own timber business and made money. He also used the development funds of the union council to establish and strengthen his local level authority. As elections to local bodies have not been held since 1989, the union councils have become defunct and the flow of development funds remains suspended. The erosion of his constituency and power embittered Taj.

Taj Mohammad has a long list of grievances against WAJ. He claims that his difference with WAJ began in 1993 when the Association opposed nominations suggested by him to the post of Chairman Zakat Committee. He complains, "WAJ has been on the side of my opponents ever since it has come in contact with SUNGI. "He sees Sabir as a threat to his power. Sabir's contact with Omar Asghar Khan is a good person. I have nothing against him. In fact respect him. It is Sabir who is the source of all than working through locals such as Sabir; Omar Asghar Khan should work directly in Jared through his own people. Omar Asghar Khan, being an outsider, does not pose a direct threat to my power and influence. "Taj is also critical of the Supreme Council. He believes it is composed of defeated elements, i.e. people who couldn't win against him. "They are playing on Sabir's ambition to contest the local elections" he claims.

Tag has used many tactics to damage WAJ's credibility, including an attempt to antagonize people against it on the issue of residential arrangements of SUNGI staff based in Jared. At one time he also alleged misappropriation of funds by WAJ. But after his unsuccessful maneuvers of June (a SUNGI employee)" he now concedes.

Taj is unhappy with SUNGI. "Women from cities come without proper purdah. They take women from here to Abbottabad and other cities where they freely meet namahrums. People here don't like it. I know this is accepted in big cities but we want to save our area from this evil." Prior to June 28, Taj unequivocally opposed all programme of SUNGI, which involved women. But now he says, "I am against their women's program-but not completely. "He emphasizes he is not against education and income-generating activities of women. As a proof, he quotes his support to Master Bashir for starting home schools in Jared sponsored by the bonded Labour Liberation Front. He claims he only opposes activities that incite women to go out of their homes, challenges their homes, challenges their husbands and make their own decisions. "This is against our cultural and tradition. No one likes it," he stresses. Taj now claims that he dose not personally know if Omar Asghar Khan is a mirzai. "Jehanzab and Babu Khalid, the WAJ members who have left the organization, told me that he was a mirzai

Taj also has grievances against Abbas Shah, a local political figure and Taj's one-time benefactor. He believes Abbas Shah promoted Omer Asghar Khan to register the case against him. This, he calms, was because he did not support the Syed of Kawai in the general elections of 1997. Taj explains that he parted ways with Abbas Shah because electricity was not provided in his area despite his supports to the Syeds. They want us remain poor and ignorant" he alleges.

Muhammad Qasim , one of the main characters of the June 28 episode-who intercepted Omar Asghar Khan's vehicle by standing in front of it-not only supports Taj Mohammad's grievances but also has some of his own disputes with WAJ members, including Sabir. "I intercepted Omar Asghar Khan to complain that SUNGI staff was not keeping its commitments and was bringing a bad name of Omar Asghar Khan," Qasim presents the rationale for his actions. The WAJ members were not being fair to me. I was told that SUNGI would construct water Channels in my neighborhood if each household deposited RS. 300. I deposited Rs. 1,800. On behalf of six households, including mine. My part of the village is still without the facility. No work has been done deposit my repeated reminders." WAJ members deny this and claim that this is a trumpeted up story.

Wali Hussain, another associate of Taj Mohammed complained of a land dispute with Sabir. Two other individuals, Dur Rehman and Khushhal, said they had long-standing disputes with Sabir. We supported SUNGI when the forest society was against them. It is Sabir who has created these problems. He himself wants to contest the elections. That is why he is doing all this.

Religious Leaders

Qazi Khalil of Balakot

Qazi Khalil of Balakot wields substantial influence over khateeb in the Kaghan valley. He claims that local people also seek his help in resolving disputes. People call me for jirgas throughout Kaghan valley, claims Qazi Khalil.

He is critical of development NGOs. "SUNGI is one of the NGOs active in the area along with Sarhad Rural Support Corporation. SRSC is better as it is run by the government. SUNGI has no government control. It has its own rules and code of conduct." But Qazi Khalil points out, "the way men and women mix in SRSC is objectionable too from our point of view."

Qazi Khalil is also suspicious of donors who provide financial support to development NGOs, "I have told the Deputy Commissioner and the Assistant Commissioner that if they think aid agencies give money for development and for betterment of the poor they are mistaken. To serve humanity is not the goal of the donors. They have ulterior motives. They want to take our people away from Islam. When they see poverty they claim to work against it, when they see people are uneducated they start working on improving literacy. If development work undermines our religion and tradition we will have to do without it."

On the Jared incident Qazi Khalil explains; "last year when I visited Jared, people complained that a boy and a girl [SUNGI Staff] who were not related were living in one house. Neither was from Jared. I contacted Omar Asghar Khan and told him that people in the area were religious and warned of serious repercussions." In those days I spoke against SUNGI in my Khutabs, but now I suppose Omar Asghar Khan and Taj Mohammed have settled the dispute and women no longer do what they were doing in the past. I feel the issue has been settled."

Khateeb of Mehandri

The khateeb of the main mosque of Mehandri was a virulent critic of SUNGI and Omar Asghar Khan after the incident of June 28. But now he does not fully recall the speeches he delivered from the pulpit against Omar Asghar Khan and SUNGI. "Some months ago I heard that Omar Asghar Khan and Taj Mohammed had a problem. Someone then told me it was settled. All that I know is hearsay. The matter was brought to the notice of the Prime Minister on his visit to Naran. What happened afterwards we do not know."

He does, however, recall that he labeled Omar Asghar Khan an Ahmadi. "A lot of people have told me about Omar Asghar Khan and his father's religious beliefs so I have to believe them. We have to believe in the things that we do not personally experience, like the existence of God."

The khateeb of Mehandri stresses that he has no misgivings against Omar Asghar Khan but he will continue to oppose SUNGI's focus on women in its program. "I have nothing against Omar Asghar Khan. Taj Mohammed also does not have anything personal against him. When I have heard is that he told Omar Asghar Khan not to go against local values and traditions. Their women have stopped coming. If they start again we will resist. I am aware men and women work together in big cities but we cannot allow this in our valley. Purdah is part of our culture. The people in Lahore and Peshawar do not care about it. They call our lifestyle jehalat. It is a very delicate matter. We care about these things and are quite strict about them. Those who come here will have to accept our ways. Men and women working together are against our religions, and the Holy Quran is replete with warnings against this.

Intermixing of men and women is wrong and we are not going to tolerate it. People here do not like it. They consider this to be a bad thing.”

On Taj Mohammed, the Khateeb said, “Taj is a good man and is religious. He knows how to serve the people. He had done a lot for the uplift of the area. He initiated schemes like roads, provision for drinking water and construction of water channels. Most of the schools in the area were constructed while he was the chairman. (Note: the headmaster of the school pointed out that Mehandri does not come under Union Council Jared and therefore was beyond the jurisdiction of the Chairman Union Council Jared).

The Imam – Khateeb of Jared Village

The Imam - Khateeb of Jared village was the only Supported of WAJ and SUNGI amongst the powerful local religious elements. “People goaded me against WAJ saying that I am tolerating what our religion strictly forbids. I have known Sabir and others form their childhood. They all grew up in front of my eyes. They are good boys. They believe in God and the finality of the prophet hood. This is what I have told all those who came to me with complaints against them.”

He appears to have withstood enormous pressure from other khateebes to speak against SUNGI or WAJ thus affecting the designs of the local religio-political leadership to agitate the matter. The tablighi jamaat and many others asked me to condemn them [SUNGI and WAJ] from the pulpit on the basis of the preaching of Islam on purdah. These people have even been warning me that I will be held responsible on the Day of Judgment for this connivance. In Quran injunctions on the purdah are so strict that it does not allow the second of a women’s feet to be heard. Women have been told to offer their prayer in darkness. But I told all these people that our religion preaches rectification and forbids violence (share and fasad) against coreligionists. They even accused me of having taken money form Sabir because they believed that I was not speaking the truth. They insisted upon my conveying the message of God regarding purdah in my khutba. They kept coming in groups every second day with a mission to correct me.”

The Imam Khateeb was also approached by Taj Mohammed. “Whenever Taj met me in the bazaar he pointed out that all the khateebes described the importance of purdah. He asked me why I didn’t do the same? My personal opinion is that a majority of people does not appreciate women’s projects. They all complain about immoral practices. They came to seek my support for violence but I pacified them by saying that the WAJ people were Muslims too. I did my best to ensure that no shar spreads and there is no fratricide. They asked me to deliver a khutba condemning them for their un-Islamic practices. I refused because this would have lead to bloodshed and violence,”

The Imam Khateeb’s support to WAJ and SUNGI is clear and unshakable. However, he does share reservations on women and men working together. “Rights of women in Islam do not mean they can work together.” My education in religion shows that purdah should be strictly observed by women. God has asked men and women to lower their sight to avoid illicit liaison in order to keep the society clean of sins.” He continued, “Women who come here to work are generally not liked by the people of Jared.” These are not my personal views. All I am saying is based on how Quran guides me. Women have been directed to stay in their homes. The SUNGI staff tells women you are human beings. You also have rights. Tell your husbands that you are free. I was under tremendous pressure. It is me and my God who knows how I resisted.”

Political Elements

Saved Abbas Shah of Kawai is a local political figure. He claims he rescued Omar Asghar Khan on June 28. He expressed his disappointment with Omar Asghar Khan and SUNGI for not acknowledging his “merciful act”. “I took personal interest in resolving the

dispute. I went to Jared thrice, but no one came to me. They should have come to me after the incident and explained the situation. They didn't," Abbas Shah complained.

Assessing the June 28 incident he said, "what happened to Omar Asghar Khan is because of the local feud between WAJ and Tag. I scolded the local people for misbehaving with guests. People in our area are narrow-minded and have parochial approach. People have petty rivalries. They observe each every move of their rival and if it threatens them in anyway they react. A rivalry can start on small things,"

He confessed he did not have much information on SUNGI. "What is this organization doing and what are its objective; what kind of development is it doing in our area and what it its concern for the people here?" were some of his question. Nevertheless he confirmed, "I supprot them because they are working for the development of our area. If these schemes help the poor in our area or help a girl to earn something, we support it."

Local Administration

The Deputy Commissioner, Manshera, does not think that the 28 June incident was Taj Muhammed's own initiative. He believes that local influentials who subsequently approached him on behalf of Taj Mohammed were behind his campaign against SUNGI. But the local administration's position in this particular incident appears to reflect the personal choice of the local administrator, which was apparently influenced by the supportive letters received by SUNGI and Omar Asghar Khan. The situation may have been quite different if Omar Asghar Khan's political and social influence had not come into play. "I had to resist a lot of pressure. Allegation "like aurton mein be-hiaee phaila rahey hain" (they are spreading obscenity among the women) have a lot of weight in the conservative atmosphere of this district. All I had to do was write a two-line order against SUNGI's women's program and that would have been the end of it. But I resisted the pressure. I wouldn't have done this for any ordinary citizen or for that matter for an NGO not run by a person as influential as Omar Asghar Khan."

Lesson for SUNGI

SUNGI's mission is social transformation for equitable, just and sustainable development. Its approach to development is a unique blend of meeting immediate practical needs, like drinking water supply and credit facilities, and mobilizing action on strategic issues, like enabling political participation of the marginalized. This approach, a distinctive feature of SUNGI, has presented many challenges to the organization. The strategy is, by definition, a slow and difficult agenda compared to the practical. Too often the intense demand for meeting the practical needs overwhelms the organization's ability to work for strategic, long-term concerns. Maintaining a balanced focus on both is a constant challenge.

In meeting this challenge, experienced in Latin America and Asia may be instructive. Political movements in these regions were responsible for enhancing the effectiveness of strategic efforts of local organizations. In the absence of such powerful mobilizational forces in Pakistan, achieving similar results is an even more difficult proposition.

Another challenge is the need for forming and managing multiple alliances with supporters and opponents. For example, SUNGI found allies for its advocacy on deforestation amongst those who are opposed to the focus on women in its programme. At the same time it found a sympathetic response to its women's programme from within the "timber mafia". Apart for alliances, SUNGI also has to deal with apparently conflicting expectations. For example, local influentials are willing to cooperate with SUNGI as long its activities are perceived to be benign – for example, construction work or capacity building – and do not challenge their power base. But as SUNGI's Executive Director, Omar Asghar Khan, comments, "equitable development require fundamental shifts in power, which almost always generates conflicts with existing power brokers. The challenge is to sensitively manager these emerging conflicts."

Dealing sensitively with power-related conflicts requires a fair understanding of socio-political dynamics at the local level and its connectedness at the macro level. Political acumen is key in this context. In SUNGI, Omar Asghar Khan, its dynamic Executive Director, and Mohammad Taj (not Taj Mohammed: editor), its seasoned head of Field Operations take primary responsibility for the political management of SUNGI's programme. It is essential that a critical mass within SUNGI, particularly at decision-making level, develops similar in-depth understanding of, and ability to manage the complex mosaic of socio-economic and political processes in the areas where it works. At present, although conscious of possible retaliation by vested interests, most staff members either do not fully appreciate the extent of hostility their interventions may unleash or have a cavalier attitude to the dangers their mission entails to themselves and their partner communities. Acquiring greater sophistication in such matters will enable SUNGI staff to appreciate the strength of apparent as well as seemingly hidden vested interests that may be opposed to their work.

The need for understanding political nuances is essential as the agenda for social change pursued by SUNGI is a political process, often entailing an engagement with mainstream political power structure. "We are not interested in political office and are also not involved in mainstream party politics. But our efforts at working with the marginalized communities inevitably requires changing traditional power equations and structures that usually threatens the local elite. This is very much political process," explains Omar Asghar Khan.

While SUNGI is clear about its non-involvement in mainstream party politics, it is increasingly called upon to deal with the political role of its partner organizations. WAJ is an interesting case in point. WAJ is considering taking a more active role in mainstream local politics. The impending elections to local bodies will provide them an opportunity for such involvement. It believes that mainstream political office facilitates local development processes as it entails access to funds and state institutions. This hypothesis is not supported by experience on the ground. Institutionalized power politics uses and believes in means and ends different from participatory non-government development. And the ethics and mechanics of political office, e.g. a local councilor, are quite different from, and at times in conflict with, that of development organizations like NGOs and CBOs.

Notwithstanding the relevance of WAJ's logic for its involvement in mainstream politics, their decision on this issue has important implications. Its significance is clear if one considers a scenario in which Taj Mohammed instead of being former Chairman was a serving elected public representative at the time of the June 28 incident. Undoubtedly the local level dynamic would have been quite different. Conceivably many local people and even the administration may have backed Taj Mohammed against SUNGI and WAJ. Even if WAJ decides against entering politics it will have to deal with elected councilors as they are likely to demand a say – and even the proverbial "cut" – vis-à-vis development programmes in their constituency. There may also be competition for development funds and its use between union councils (which would receive funding from government sources). This will make competing elected representatives even less tolerant towards catalysts for social mobilization and change like SUNGI and WAJ.

WAJ's intention to join local politics also needs careful consideration by SUNGI as decisions and actions by WAJ will no doubt have an impact on SUNGI. Omar Asghar Khan maintains: "We recognize that WAJ's involvement in local politics is one reason for the present escalation in the conflict. But empowering communities to influence political decision making at the micro and macro levels is needed if we are to work for democratization. The question is what role will communities play in influencing political decision making. This one feels must be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. In the Kaghan Valley situation WAJ is inclined towards entering mainstream politics. SUNGI's support to WAJ would be in the form of raising issues vis-à-vis the efficacy and implications of such involvement. Beyond this, SUNGI will not play a role in WAJ's political plans."

The conflict in Jared is not an uncommon experience for advocacy-oriented organizations like SUNGI. A key strategy for coping with such conflicts is building alliances. "Drawing on

our alliances – within and outside Hazara – was crucial in managing this conflict,” reflects Omer Asghar Khan. “During this episode we strengthened links and developed new contacts with many civil society actors like trade unionists and journalists. Unfortunately, some NGOs remain isolated from the larger circle of civil society. The solidarity shown by alliances known to us and even from unexpected quarters and individuals was a source of strength and support. This was from within and even outside the ambit of civil society.”

“SUNGI’s work of creating space and autonomy at the micro level for disadvantaged groups needs to be connected from above, thus making real change possible. This is also an important rationale for SUNGI’s efforts at developing and nurturing alliances with like-minded civil society groups and even with the state,” explains Omer Asghar Khan.

SUNGI’s internal organizational dynamics are also an important factor in enhancing its ability to cope with conflicts like the one it experienced in Jared. SUNGI’s staff, old and new, is confident and committed. A large critical mass in SUNGI maintains admirable clarity about SUNGI’s objectives generating overall organizational motivation. A key challenge for SUNGI will be to maintain staff motivation and dedication as it continues to manage a high growth rate. From a staff strength of about 6 in 1992 SUNGI has evolved into an organization which employs about 100 in 1998. A related challenge is maintaining mechanisms for consensus building on key issues as staff increases. This is particularly critical when SUNGI is managing conflicts like the one in Jared.

Another internal aspect related to SUNGI’s experience of managing local sensitivities. Generally, SUNGI staff’s interaction with local communities reflects maturity in dealing with local traditions and its related sensitivities. This does not imply shying away from challenging unjust customs. That is also done, but usually in a responsible and sensitive manner. However, in certain cases SUNGI staff’s trusting attitude has invited manipulation. For example, SUNGI’s policy on residential arrangements for its staff in Jared was aimed at cost effectiveness. But Taj Mohammed was successful interests to malign SUNGI and its work. This experience should instructive in a critical assessment of SUNGI’s management of local level sensitivity.

As SUNGI expands, it will also need to manage its relationship with local long-term partners like WAJ. The older partners will need to share SUNGI’s time and attention with other new partner organizations. In such a situation seemingly innocuous decisions like the shifting of SUNGI’s office from Jared to Balakot can be played up by individuals like Taj to gain political ground by presenting it as his victory.

The most strident allegation in the maligning campaign against SUNGI related to the focus on women in its development work. “SUNGI tells women to have a say in household decisions and to defy their husbands if they do not listen to them. They argue them to go out to the bazaar for shopping and cook food that they want to eat even if their husbands don’t like it,” was a recurring theme in the interviews with local men in Jared.

Qazi Khalil of Balakot quoted a story narrated by a local truck driver who is mostly away from his home. “On his return home from work the truck driver found SUNGI’s female staff talking to his wife. They were explaining the concept of nikah as a social contract. They were inciting her to go out and work to gain economic freedom and self confidence.” The truck driver reportedly requested SUNGI’s female staff “not to incite women to rebellion as they look after the household and protect its honour while men are away.” This narration by Qazi Khalil, even if concocted, is indicative of the explosive nature of the version. SUNGI’s staff denies the quoted incident. They also claim that the other quotations about women’s rights attributed to them are not true. They are conscious of difficulties in raising issues of gender equity and equality in a predominately male society where a particular interpretation of religious reinforces male prejudice against women.

The maturity of SUNGI staff on this issue is oddly at variance with their approach to the campaign against SUNGI in Jared. They tend to be slightly dismissive of the seriousness of

the Jared conflict and believe that even if it was of some consequence it is now over. They also appear confident that Taj Mohammad's campaign has been totally ineffective and that women are still welcoming them. "They talk to us very happily and willingly as always," they claim, apparently disregarding the fact that, without permission from men, women in Jared are not even able to visit their neighbours.

SUNGI staff needs to appreciate local sensitivities related to women, local and foreign. For example, it is a significantly unusual occurrence for outsider women to work and live in a village. Such instances are normally greeted with suspicion and affect the entire social fabric. A case in point is that of SUNGI's gutsy female field coordinator based in Jared who was from Abbottabad. Taj attempted to malign her by insinuating lack of propriety in her interaction with her male colleagues. She maintains local women believed she was innocent because she offered her prayers regularly and covered herself properly. This assertion appears to be deceptive and cursory. But even if true, SUNGI staff needs to be mindful that such individuals opinion and support would be difficult to voice if perceived to be in conflict with accepted norms and traditions.

Women injured, like in many other parts of Pakistan, observe strict rules set by men. For instance they take long and cumbersome detours through woods to avoid passing through the bazaar. Women who choose to step out of their homes alone are rebuked. And most women accept such male prejudices without question. The social cost of not doing so is high. The constraints faced by SUNGI's Assistant Female Field Coordinator, Naureen, a local resident of Jared serves as a useful example. She has her family's permission to work but that is probably because she is related to Sabir who chaperons her even to the local SUNGI office located close to her home. He also accompanies her when she is required to make work-related visits to Abbottabad where SUNGI's head office is located – a practice considered quite outrageous by local people. Naureen is frequently rebuked by her parents on this issue even though she is obviously mindful of local sentiment regarding her professional commitments. She strategically attempts to conform. For example, for her visits to Abbottabad she does not travel in the SUNGI vehicle from Jared. Instead she boards the public transport a little away from the main stop in the bazaar, gets off at the next stop and then gets into the SUNGI vehicle.

Normally silent and reticent in Jared, Naureen does open up once outside the village. She appears to be quite a different individual outside Jared: confident articulate and frank. "We go and talk to them local women and ask them if they agree with what we say. We tell them about our SUNGI programmes. We talk about organization building. If they agree with the idea we form the organization. We tell them about our credit program. We tell them about the importance of self-help," Naureen confidently relates.

Advocating gender sensitivity is no doubt a thorny issue, fraught with difficulties. But it is a key aspect in SUNGI's program. Omar Asghar Khan maintains that "gender equity and equity is a non-negotiable objective of SUNGI's program. We try to strategically pursue it. "He explains that entry points used by SUNGI like health training and craft promotion for income generation are well received by local women. "Besides giving us valuable opportunities to build alliances with women these interventions also meet some of the immediate practical needs of women", he asserts. "We attempt to use these interventions to raise more tricky issue like gender discrimination and women's rights. I am confident that the support and opportunity for this work is there."

Strategizing for gender sensitization is crucial, as Omar Asghar Khan conformed. Often less-mature NGOs and many donors adopt a "bull in-chine-shop" approach to gender and women's rights, which may in fact strengthen retrogressive forces. The prospect of this is apparent if one considers that the linchpin of the campaign against SUNGI in Jared was its women's programme. Taj Mohammad used this aspect of SUNGI's work to mobilize the agitation of imams and khateebes against SUNGI and Omar Asghar Khan. And his campaign was successful. It galvanized considerable opposition to work related to women in SUNGI's programme. WAJ members and Master Bashir were among the very few resisting Taj's

machinations. In the mid-1990s Master Bashir started school for girls, which were later closed down due to a similar campaign waged against them by local khateebes and Taj.

A majority of SUNGI's male staff and partners have experienced social conditioning which is the basis of gender discrimination in our society. SUNGI has made impressive efforts to promote gender sensitivity through training its staff and partners. However, they continue to deal with many dichotomies. They appear to work well with their female colleagues but may still find it difficult to allow women from their own households to work. "I believe that within SUNGI there is an emerging clarity on gender. But it is important to allow people time and space to internalize the concepts and its implications. After all SUNGI staff are also from within the same society that perpetuates gender discrimination. They have also been subjected to the same social conditioning that we are all trying to understand and change. I am confident that a process of self-reflection and change has begun. It needs to be continued," observes Omar Asghar Khan.

Conclusion

The conflict in Jared is a classic case of traditional power holders struggling to retain their eroding power base. Its purpose was to prevent empowerment of weak sections of the society. Maintaining the status quo appears to have been a key objective. It is a political act.

Taj Mohammed is resentful of his withering hold over local decision-making. He is fearful of a pliant constituency transforming itself into a vocal group demanding equity and accountability. The strife in Jared was created by Taj to retain his hold on local leadership. Although fear may be a motivating factor, it would be an error to consider Taj Mohammad weak or insignificant. He remains a shrewd and powerful opponent.

In the early period of the conflict he was normally a step ahead of SUNGI and WAJ. Taj skillfully used the volatile issues of women and religion to provoke people against SUNGI and WAJ. He intelligently picked up weaknesses, like the residential arrangements of SUNGI staff to serve his interests of stimulating agitation against the organization. As the maligning campaign received response locally, Taj moved quickly to incite the influential religious lobby into escalating matters. Gaining support from religious elements was an important strategic move for two reasons. The effective religious network rapidly spread the maligning campaign against SUNGI and WAJ. And, perhaps more importantly, the campaign gained currency as the self-proclaimed custodians of religion alleged religious impropriety. At the same time he was also able to use the local press to spread misperceptions about SUNGI.

The involvement of the "timber mafia" remains shrouded in mystery. However, tacit support should not be ruled out. It is important to recognize that even if the support may have been low-key this time round, there is every possibility of the "timber mafia" using such opportunities in future to dent the credibility of organizations like SUNGI which lead effective advocacy campaigns against deforestation and the role of the "timber mafia" in it.

SUNGI's management of the conflict presents interesting insights. After the incident of 28 June it acted swiftly and skillfully. Demonstrating sophisticated political astuteness it took quick action on several fronts. It took legal recourse by registering a case against Taj Mohammad and his supporters for attacking Omar Asghar Khan on 28 June. It communicated the true story to a large number of individuals and organizations. This move proved invaluable in galvanizing support from within and from civil society. If Taj used the local press, SUNGI approached local and the national press. Statement in the press, letters to the editor, letters to SUNGI, NGOs and NGO coalition meetings and resolutions on the issue provided support and solidarity.

SUNGI staff also kept close contact with partners in Jared. Senior staffs from SUNGI were present in Jared, talking to people, supporting their local partners. This gave important

signals to those attempting to malign them. And finally, when Taj Mohammad approached SUNGI for a rapprochement they were magnanimous and gracious. In essence, SUNGI used a good blend of offense and defense, of aggression and reconciliation.

Through its management of the conflict in Jared, SUNGI has gained tremendously in terms of profile, in and outside Hazara. Locally, the political clout of SUNGI and Omar Asghar Khan has been established. Omar Asghar Khan is seen as an influential person able to mobilize support at various levels: Thana, Kutchery, administration and the government. Nationally, and even internationally, SUNGI emerged with an image of a politically astute organization able to deal with retaliation of power structures opposed to their agenda of social change.

But political management by SUNGI is precariously dependent on a few individuals. SUNGI needs to develop a larger critical mass which is able to handle such conflicts. This is important and urgent. As SUNGI expands and deepens its programme it will no doubt face similar retaliation from the diverse area in which it works.

SUNGI's performance after the incident of June 28 is sterling. But there were several lapses before that event at which time Taj Mohammad was calling the shots and SUNGI was forced to react to his machinations. His maneuvers follow a steady graph since 1993, making him a long-time and known adversary. It would have been prudent for SUNGI to keep a close watch on Taj and counter his campaign much before it gained the slightest currency.

And finally, the conflict in Jared had important lessons for WAJ. A successful, rapidly evolving CBO, WAJ is now mindful that perhaps it opened up too many battlefronts too quickly. Taking on Taj Mohammad was courageous but risky. WAJ needs to do careful risk assessment to ensure that its bold initiatives are considered and not impetuous.