

FIELD OBSERVATIONS

The Field Trip to AKRSP, Gilgit

Some of the Workshop participants took part in a field trip to Gilgit and surrounding villages along the Karakoram Highway. The field trip was arranged by the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme whose Headquarters are located in the town of Gilgit. AKRSP covers a total of three districts: Gilgit, Baltistan, and Chitral in the Northern Areas of Pakistan. The Programme Area is 70,000km² with a combined population of 800,000. AKRSP initiated its activities in Gilgit in 1982. The programme is supported in part by the Aga Khan Foundation and in part by a number of bilateral and multi-lateral agencies. Although the activities of the AKRSP in the initial phases covered mostly villages with a predominantly Ismaili population, the programme itself is free from sectarian or ethnic biases. As a result, the initial scepticism of other religious groups such as the Sunnis and Shias, has gradually been overcome. We were informed that only about a third of the population, covered presently by the AKRSP, was Ismaili.

Upon arrival at Gilgit, the field trip participants were briefed by the General Manager, Shoaib Sultan Khan, and other AKRSP staff. AKRSP has championed the idea of induced institutional innovation and the field trip was an opportunity to see this process at work. Unlike government agencies, AKRSP does not provide outright grants for local development. It seeks to develop first the sense of partnership between the villagers and the programme. The partnership comes to fruition through a series of dialogues held with villagers. The precondition for such a partnership is the formation of a Village Organization (VO) -- a broad-based organization in which all households with similar interests participate in decision-making as well as implementation. As soon as the village organization is functional, AKRSP provides funds to initiate the productive physical infrastructure (PPI) project chosen by the VO. Technical feasibility and cost estimates are made by the AKRSP staff. All VO members participate in the work, for which they are paid wages. A part of the wages goes into the VO's collective savings' funds. The savings' fund, as it grows, becomes the basis for collateral that helps the VO in seeking additional credit from AKRSP. The AKRSP also trains local villagers so that they can provide the necessary extension support in ongoing development efforts. An institution that can articulate local needs and is collectively accountable in the implementation of projects is thus created. Local resources are mobilised, primarily through group savings, and a pool of trained manpower is created. All these contribute to the sustainability of the VOs and the process of local development which they initiate. AKRSP provides technical support, and Social Organisers at the village level provide a continuous link between the VOs and the AKRSP.

The field trip included visits to two villages where the concept and philosophy of AKRSP has been translated into action. The first village, Hanuchal, is about two hours' drive south of Gilgit along the Karakorum Highway. The village is typically semi-arid and is situated along the valley floor. Irrigation had been a wishful thought for these villagers and attempts to attract government attention for investment had met with repeated failures. When the AKRSP arrived on the scene, the 65 households of Hanuchal proposed that an irrigation canal be built from the base of a glacier to the village, several kilometres down the valley. With the PPI grant made available by AKRSP and a technical feasibility study for the proposed canal undertaken by AKRSP staff, the 65 members of the village organization started the construction of the canal along the steep and barren rocky hill side. It took five years to complete the canal. During that period, the members of the VO were paid wages and a savings' fund was also started. Simple tools and small sticks of dynamite were used in the construction of the canal. Today the canal stands as a testimony to the indomitable strength and ingenuity of the VO of Hanuchal. We could feel the sense of pride, confidence, and achievement that the villagers of Hanuchal had acquired for themselves. The leader of local village activists, Mohammad Khan, gave an account of how he had used the legendary story of Shirin and Farhad to inspire his friends to work on the canal. *"If Farhad could build the bridge for the love of Shirin,"* he had said, *"don't you love Hanuchal as much, to build the canal and water the thirsty fields? Farhad did it single-handed. Why can't sixty-five strong hands put together this mere canal?"* Indeed, the Hanuchal Irrigation Canal is a fitting monument in memory of their collective hard work.

As a result of the canal, several hectares of land in and around Hanuchal were newly brought under cultivation with maize, wheat, fruit trees, and alfalfa for feeding the livestock in winter. Since the reclaimed land was common property, the VO apportioned the land on an equitable basis to each of the 65 participating members of the VO. Increased land holding and productivity and access to credit and extension have not made the villagers of Hanuchal prosperous in any dramatic way, but they have made a positive, lasting impact on their social and economic life. The VO at Hanuchal had clearly demonstrated its potential.

The second trip was to Aliabad, about three hours' drive north of Gilgit along the Hunza River. Here the VO was about to embark on a new venture: VO Banking. As indicated earlier, the VO's (and there were several VO's that had come to meet with the AKRSP team) collective savings were the basis on which the AKRSP offered credit to the village organization at seven per cent interest. The VO's in turn could decide on their own rate of interest to prospective borrowers from among their members. This rate is naturally higher than that charged by AKRSP. In this particular meeting at Aliabad, the office bearers of different VO's reported on their group savings. The amounts ranged from PRs 20-25,000 to over PRs 200,000. The VO representatives reported on the project activities for which the credit requested from AKRSP would be utilised. A detailed justification for each activity was given and answers to all queries by AKRSP staff were duly provided. It was of particular interest to see women participating in the meeting with equal zeal and enthusiasm. Three Women's Organizations received credit from AKRSP, on that day, in recognition of their savings. These will be used in activities that they determine for themselves. The meeting ended with the distribution of credit cheques to eligible VO's. It was clear from the meeting that everything that happened in the VO was

transparent to all members. Even misappropriation of VO loans by some individuals was openly discussed. A real sense of participation pervaded the entire proceedings. The field trip helped us a great deal in exploring, understanding, and appreciating the reality of what can be achieved with the participatory approach to local development. Also, the field trip vividly demonstrated the esteem and confidence in which the villages in the Northern Areas held the AKRSP.

The Field Trip to the Pak-German Self-Help Project, Baluchistan

The trip began with a long journey across the desert area north of Quetta to reach Muslimbagh, a small town where PGSHP maintains an office. There, the group met with leaders of the union councils who explained the organisational structure and responsibilities of the Department of Local Government.

Union councils were established to provide a link between villagers and government line agencies. The 160 Village Organisations, cooperating with nine union councils under the Project, are thus assisted to organise themselves and mobilise savings and labour to undertake projects in accordance with their own needs. Social Organizers provided by PGSHP are instrumental in assisting communities to identify their needs and resources, then communicate their plans to the union councils. Union councils meet monthly with the line agency staff of the health, education, livestock and irrigation departments to put forth their demands for services. Lump sums are provided (PRs 100,000) to each union council for transfer to village organisations to use as they best see fit. There are no restrictions on the types of project this money can be used for.

Out of the original VOs, there are now Self-Help Organisations (SHOs) arising that are formed mainly around the specific interests of their members. These SHOs, such as the Farmers' Association and Para-Vet Association, are receiving special attention from the Project.

The tour group visited two villages, one in which the community was constructing a ground water supply system using the villagers' traditional knowledge related to the building of deep wells and transportation of water. In the second community visited, the members were about to embark on a housing construction project for residents who are cave-dwellers.

Group members were introduced to a recently trained local Para-Veterinarian during a tour of the store established to supply agricultural commodities. Villagers' demands for vaccination and health care services are increasing as they realise the value of maintaining the livestock herds on which their livelihoods depend. So far, training has been limited to this type of preventive and remedial health care. There has, however, been no discussion on how conditions of livestock can be improved through nutrition. The vast landscape of Baluchistan and the migratory practices of its farmers make pasture land improvement programmes difficult to implement.

This field trip gave seminar participants a real appreciation of the limitations faced by the Project in trying to extend services to the residents of Baluchistan. Villagers are situated in remote places far from Quetta and from other villages. The scarcity

of water and vegetation for livestock feed and fuelwood means a life full of hardship for the Baluchis. Indeed, where water has become available, small green "oases" arise and orchards bring new income to villagers.

The exemplary hospitality demonstrated by the Pathan communities visited allowed group members to see a glimpse of the social world of these proud tribal people. Visitors gained at least a sense of the significant role Pathan values and religious beliefs play in their relations with each other and the outside world.