

**Note for Record**  
**April 9-16, 2010**

**By: Shoaib Sultan Khan**

Subject: **Book Launch in Ottawa and Volcanic Ash**

AKF General Manager, Tom Kessinger's e-mail inviting me to visit Canada for my book launch at Ottawa to be arranged by Aga Khan Foundation Canada (AKFC) turned out to be one of the most stimulating and satisfying week for me both intellectually and physically. CEO AKFC Khalil Shariff's hospitality was simply overwhelming.

Prior to the book launch I had a most invigorating session with the entire staff of AKFC recalling the origin, the progress and the current status of AKRSP and its replication. I was most impressed by the interest evinced by the staff. Director Programmes Abid Mallick and Programme Officer Erin Merkel had made copious notes on each aspect of the programme and analyzed these in depth. Director Public Affairs Laurie had made the Ring of Chairs, representing AKRSP Dialogues, as the centre piece of the recently concluded travelling exhibition on AKFC work which travelled around the country over the last two months. The Ring of Chairs represented the diagnostic survey of AKRSP with a photographic projection of one of the dialogues between AKRSP and the villagers. I was greatly touched to see how AKFC has kept its interest alive in AKRSP since 1983 when CEO AKFC Nazir Ladhani brought the first CIDA mission to Gilgit led by John Martin.

My interaction with AKFC staff on the proposal for Enhancing Employability and Leadership for Youth (EELY) in Gilgit Baltistan Chitral was most gratifying for me. It was an excellently written project proposal and focused on a most crying need of the area.

On the implementation of EELY, I emphasized the importance of emerging Local Support Organization (LSO) network as institutions of the people as compared to AKRSP which is an institution for the people. LSOs have demonstrated how dynamic and effective vehicle they are for implementing

grassroots programmes in terms of equitable development. My advice would be to use LSOs for mobilizing youth both men and women which would be essential to forge a partnership between EELY and the youth on the pattern of AKRSP experience with the households both men and women. The youth would have to be given an identity of their own and if LSOs are involved in fostering the youth organizations, there is little prospect of conflict between LSOs and the youth organizations. In fact this approach would instill an spirit of ownership in LSOs of Youth Organizations, which would be immensely beneficial to both.

There being 126 Union Councils in Gilgit Baltistan Chitral (GBC) with a potential for an equal number of LSOs, EELY would be on a solid foundation if it nurtures the LSOs which would require no more than a one time investment of about three million Canadian dollars upfront. If EELY does not take this path, it would have missed a great opportunity not only ensuring successful implementation of EELY, it would also miss the opportunity of helping AKRSP achieving sustainability and self reliance by making institutions of the people VO/WOs and LSOs financially viable.

The Book launch at the recently completed building of the Delegation of the Ismaili Imamat, which houses AKFC also, was one of the most beautiful settings for the event I would have wished for. The building conceived by His Highness and translated into design by the Japanese architect Maki, truly demonstrated Maki's reputation as "Master of Light." One may be in the building but the feeling is of being outdoors bathed by natural light. The contrast is sharp as the Delegation building is sandwiched between two fortress type middle eastern embassies. At night from across Ottawa river, the Delegation Building Atrium appears throwing sparkles of light with an immense glow.

A large number of people turned up for the Book Launch comprising general audience, AKFC, CIDA, DFAIT colleagues including a Senator, the Pakistan High Commissioner and Afghanistan-Pakistan team members. I was happy to see Hakim Feerasta with Nilufer and Zahir Meghji who had long association with AKRSP, at the launch too.

The launch consisted of a conversation between Khalil and myself. I was amazed at Khalil's picking up the most pertinent and interesting questions from the book relating to corporate culture ( ring of chairs and dialogues ), conceptual package, impact of productive physical infrastructure, challenges of early years, women's programmes, equitable development, birth and evolution of AKRSP, why first four years of AKRSP were described by the world bank as the missed four year of other rural development programmes, replication of AKRSP and Andhra example, the attainment of the twin objectives of doubling income in ten years and developing a replicable model as envisaged by the founding fathers of AKRSP etc. Role of donors especially of CIDA. The conversation was most stimulating and challenging to me which was preceded by an eloquent introduction by Laurie followed by some questions and comments from the audience. It was a most elegant function and from the core of my heart, I feel grateful to Khalil and his colleagues who left no stone unturned to make the launch such a grand success.

The following morning of the book launch I had the pleasure of participating in the Roundtable working breakfast attended by nearly 25 participants representing CIDA, NORAD, USAID, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT), AKFC, Canadian NGOs, and others. Tony Breur an ex- CIDA professional acted as the moderator. I made a presentation on poverty reduction through social mobilisation with special reference to AKRSP. Khalil in his most articulate and inimitable style added the dimension of development and stability nexus in fragile context and the lessons learned from AKRSP where Gigit Baltistan Chitral are like an island of peace and security in a sea of turmoil and turbulence. What are the potential and limits of community driven development in fostering prosperity and stability and how can development and democratic governance structures be protected, strengthened and scaled up to achieve good governance and accountability of local governments to citizens.

An animated discussion followed ably moderated by Tony. NORAD was interested in the relevance of the social mobilisation approach to the Afghan situation especially to women. CIDA spoke of stability in a volatile

environment. Another view was expressed relating to the distortions and politics of power in the hands of traditional leaders and NGOs own structure, importance of gender equality. A case was made for result based management approach. How does one train a generation of young professionals committed to social mobilization amongst donors to support grassroots foundations. The issue of MDGs was also raised and the prospects of achieving the goals by 2015. An observation was also made about the devolved government in Gilgit Baltistan. Tony referred to the pressure at global level relating to MDGs and Hakim juxtaposed intellectual arrogance of professionals paling into insignificance against the tremendous potential of rural poor men and women to help themselves to better their situation.

I attempted to address the issues raised in the backdrop of my past three decades experience of working with communities in South Asia comprising over 13 million households with a population of nearly 70 million. The empirical evidence demonstrates that with the backing of a support organization empowering men and women by organizing them in their own institutions alongwith capacity building of their genuine leaders many of the obstacles brought out in the discussion can be overcome be it gender equality, local leadership, peace and security, attainment of the goals of MDGs. Of course governments have to take a lead role like the example of Andhra Pradesh where the state government accepted the inadequacy of government departments to undertake social mobilization and set up an AKRSP type organization called the Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP) and the World Bank offered to help.

The training of young professionals from amongst donors would require exposure of willing professionals to the social mobilization approach. The World Bank does it through its village immersion programme (VIP) after the visit of their Vice President to AKRSP and RSPs in Pakistan and SERP in India. The meeting at the DFAIT with the Director General and her team, which is involved in Kandahar region of Afghanistan, brought up the issue of National Solidarity Programme (NSP) and its implementation and how the social mobilization approach followed by AKRSP is different. I pointed out the difference between representative participation through committees as being

followed by NSP and community participation as practiced by AKRSP through a process of social mobilization. On their query as to what should be the strategy until there is a conducive environment to foster AKRSP type social mobilization. I commended an organic pragmatic sociological approach with the clear understanding that until and unless institutions of the people are fostered, the objectives of the project or programme of poverty reduction and peace and security would not be achieved. DFAIT expressed keen interest in the social mobilisation as implemented by AKRSP and replicated in Andhra. Abid told me in the evening that a request was received from DFAIT if it would be possible for me to come for another meeting but I was due to leave for Toronto the next day.

The High Commissioner for Pakistan in Canada, Akbar Zeb very kindly hosted a lunch for me. Khalil's hospitality was overwhelming and the arrangements made for my visit were par excellence.

I was most impressed by AKFC. The dynamism, vision, leadership and intellectual rigour of Khalil was of the highest order and the team he has assembled around him are the best I have ever seen anywhere in AKF. It was an intellectual feast for me interacting with them. I am personally grateful to Abid, Erin, Laurie, Rishma, Emily, and all others for making it a memorable visit for me.

It was all too good to last and the volcanic ash stranded me at Toronto with cancellation of my Air India flight to London, for three nights forcing me to escape to Washington D.C. hoping to catch a British Airways flight to Heathrow. However, I immensely enjoyed the interaction with the Jamaat at Toronto and the breakfast meeting at the Bank of Montreal. On hearing about my flight's cancellation, Hakim and Nelofur very kindly took me to Niagra Falls which was most enjoyable. The next day Abdul Meru and Yasmeen from the Jamaat, who had attended my presentation on AKRSP drove me around Toronto showing an exquisitely built marble and Burma teak temple, Badlands 305 million years old, and a trout and forest park. Rishma who had accompanied me from Ottawa did not leave until she made all the arrangements for my hotel accommodation in case I was stranded at Toronto

for a long time. Emily was most prompt in ensuring that I was not inconvenienced in any way and Abid did not mind my umpteen calls for SOS. Laurie gave me a very good exchange rate for US\$ when I wished to change some Canadian dollars.