

Note for Record

**By: Shoaib Sultan Khan
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Subject: Visit to Baltistan

General Manager AKRSP, Abdul Malik invited me to the LSO-Youth Convention 2013 at Skardu on October 6-8, 2013. Fortunately, the PIA flights did operate and my daughter Roohi, who was visiting me and I made it to Skardu and also returned to Islamabad as planned.

Malik put us up in Shigar Fort Residence, a thousand year old Fort, belonging to Rajas of Shigar, restored by Aga Khan Trust for Culture and now managed as a hotel by Serena Chain of Hotels. It was a most exotic stay. I had the privilege of staying in the Royal Suite. The Residence is being managed better than a Five Star Hotel down country and to add to it is the mystical incredible setting. It is indeed an experience of a life time.

The LSO-Youth Convention was attended by more than 175 participants from Gilgit, Baltistan and Chitral Regions of AKRSP.

The highlight of the Inaugural Session was the speech of the Chief Guest – Commissioner Baltistan Mr. Abdul Qamar Shezad (AQS) who took us all by surprise by narrating what happened on December 12, 1982 when in his native village Japuka, he saw a group of strangers walking near his house with snow falling outside. It turned out the group was led by Shoaib Sultan Khan (SSK) and they had come to introduce AKRSP. AQS led them to his house and gave them a cup of tea. SSK explained briefly what AKRSP planned to do but requested all the 110 households living in Japuka to assemble to enable him to hold a dialogue. He promised to return a few days later. Japuka was recently connected by a bridge to cross the river but there was a mound of earth immediately after crossing the bridge and there was only a footpath leading to the village causing great hardship to the residents in bringing in things to the village from outside or taking their agricultural or horticultural produces outside for marketing. AQS wondered how in this inclement weather with snow fall, these down country people had braved everything including the perpendicular climb on the mound to come to Japuka.

AQS narrated on the appointed day SSK and his team again came to Japuka and he took them to the house of the Mukhi where a few people had gathered. SSK asked where are the villagers. Due to a death, a number of people had gone for the funeral. According to AQS, SSK got a bit annoyed and said he had not come to drink tea, he had come to hold a dialogue with all the residents of the village. AQS immediately sent out people to assemble the residents and in a little while took SSK and his team to the Jamaatkhana where a sizable number of residents had assembled. SSK explained the terms of

development partnership between AKRSP and Japuka village including the rights and obligations of both sides.

The villagers identified link road from the bridge right through the village connecting the farthest house as the priority need. All the residents agreed except one and AQS wondered how we were going to form an organization but SSK advised not to worry about dissenters, you should go ahead and form a village organization of the willing residents. Having overcome this hurdle, this visit was followed by the AKRSP Social Organisation Unit comprising the Social Organiser and the Engineer, who carried out the survey of the link road including cost estimates and maintenance cost. SSK came again and it was accepted by the VO to complete the link road in three months with the monetary and technical assistance given by AKRSP.

AQS proudly declared that Japuka was the first village where AKRSP initiated its activities and the people of Japuka fulfilled all their obligations. Today Japuka is a prosperous village with each and every house linked with outside world thanks to the first project undertaken by AKRSP.

I added that Japuka completed the road in fourteen days instead of three months and the question arose if they were entitled to the full cost estimates which was worked out over a period of three months. I asked Hussain Wali Khan (HWK) to get a survey done if the link road has been done according to the specifications laid down in the cost estimates. On HWK's verification of this fact, I ordered full payment to the VO. The fact was that the cost estimate was based on 20 persons working for 8 hours a day. Here the entire village worked on the link road for 12 hours a day.

The example of Japuka spread like wildfire and all the villages wanted to have dialogue with AKRSP to get organized and enter into a partnership with AKRSP. Overnight from a buyers' market, AKRSP was in sellers' market.

For me personally AQS narration of what happened at Japuka was like a sentimental journey in the past. To have such a supporter of AKRSP as head of Divisional Administration in Baltistan, was indeed a most powerful and auspicious inauguration of the Convention.

The LSO representatives made highly attractive and informative powerpoint presentation from Chitral, Gilgit and Baltistan. The achievements of LSOs were most impressive. The two main issues which will require constant monitoring and review are:

- i) The sine quo non of LSOs is their roots in VOs/WOs. It is because of this that they are different from civil society organisations (CSOs) or NGOs. LSOs represent a very large majority of the households in the Union Council through organized VOs/WOs. None of other CSOs or NGOs can claim this distinction. If LSOs lack this characteristic, then they

are not credible organisations and no different from other CSOs or NGOs. To lay claim to being Institutions of the People, the LSOs should not lose sight of this fact. If they do then LSOs are like CSOs/NGOs only Institutions for the People; and

- ii) Financial viability of the LSOs. This can only be ensured if VO membership displays ownership of the LSOs. The only way this can be ensured if the membership of VOs meets the recurrent monthly expenditure of the LSOs. AKRSP has so far been supporting LSO by paying their monthly recurrent cost. This is not going to be sustainable. The burden on VOs membership for this expenditure if worked out by respective LSOs, comes to an infinitesimal amount sometimes no more than the cost of a cup of tea per month. If the VOs membership was not even willing to pay this insignificant amount than one can draw only one conclusion that the VOs membership does not own their LSO for reasons, only LSO concerned would know best and they should try to rectify the situation. The LSOs might think of raising this amount by other means which no one wants to stop them from but VOs membership's contribution should be non-negotiable for their financial sustainability. This would also make LSOs accountable to VOs, otherwise why should LSOs feel accountable to VOs.

The presentations by Youth representatives were not only most refreshing and inspiring but extremely encouraging. It was for this reason that I advocated giving a voice to Youth by encouraging VOs to form Youth Wings and afford them enough space to give vent to their feelings, ideas and plans which should be discussed in combined meeting of VO and Youth Wing to assess the feasibility of such ideas and plans.

The idea that youth should be inducted in VOs and allowed to give vent to their feelings and plans is not going to produce the same results as the previous alternative. The youth in the presence of elders suffer from inhibitions to give frank and open expression to their ideas and plans.

On my request Malik had asked Kalsoom Farman, Regional General Manager AKRSP Baltistan to arrange for a field visit for me to a Local Support Organisation (LSO). Kalsoom took us to KISAN LSO of Union Council Shigri Khurd comprising ten villages and 3540 households. Sher Mohammad Khaplo, the Manager of the LSO gave a briefing regarding composition of the LSO consisting of 94 VOs and Women Village Organisations, in almost equal member plus 7 representation of local NGOs. The VOs/WOs have a savings of Rs. 4.3 million in the First Micro Finance Bank, which till recently was giving them 4% profit and has now agreed to increase it to 6%. The VOs/WOs are also doing internal lending with some of their savings. The savings can only be withdrawn through a resolution countersigned by LSO. I dissuaded the Manager from using VO savings for business to be run by LSO instead I urged to encourage VOs to do internal loaning.

The LSO has a General Body of 101 representatives of VOs/WOs and NGOs and Board of Directors of 20 which includes 5 women. The LSO has forged linkages with almost all Heads of Government

Departments especially with Colonel FCO and Deputy Director Agriculture and also succeeded in getting Girls College Laboratory and ensuring 100% enrollment of girls at primary level.

Through European Commission funding, 50 landless poor have been provided one kanal of land each. A good number of entitled women have been ensured receipt of BISP. Women have been trained in apricot oil processing and nut cracking machines, have been provided to them. The future plans include self help projects, youth programmes and introduction of fodder as a second crop besides development of nurseries, orchards and green houses.

There was an interesting discussion on LSOs monitoring government projects. When I asked LSO BoD member how successful he was in this area? His response was 5% explaining the departments listen and promise but do nothing. I exhorted the LSO with the backing of almost 90% of the households of the UC behind them, how come they consider themselves so weak. Unless the LSO mobilises community pressure, the BoD of LSO will never be able to persuade the departments to listen to them.

On the issue of the financial sustainability of the LSO, the Manager informed that their recurrent monthly expenditure is about Rs. 30,000 which for the last five years is being met by AKRSP. However, now AKRSP is only prepared to provide matching grant, which LSO is trying to work out.

I enquired of the Manager how viable are the VOs and WOs? The female Social Organiser employed by LSO informed that of the 45 WOs in last two months, she had visited 30 WOs and checked their records and they are meeting and saving regularly. The consensus was that all the VOs/WOs are active.

I asked the BoD members of LSO, with nearly 3,000 members of VOs/WOs, is it not possible to raise Rs. 30,000 a month, the cost of one cup of tea for each member a month. They felt it should be possible. I exhorted that they must create ownership of the VOs/WOs of the LSO and it will only happen if they have share in financial viability of the LSO, as well as this would also instill a feeling of accountability by LSO towards VOs/WOs. The LSO BoD members present as well as their professional staff promised to do something about it. I explained this does not preclude them from getting matching grant from AKRSP or donor funding but irrespective of that the members of VOs/WOs who have set up the LSO, must also be seen to be participating in the sustainability of LSO.

Our next stopover was at Shangrilla. I was sorry to see its sorry state of affairs. The place was run down with the bright red roofs weather beaten and paint peeling away everywhere. In my 12 years stay in Northern Areas, my family and I had enjoyed the amazing hospitality and mystique of this place. It was sad to see in this state. The owner Arif, legendry Brig. Aslam's son, was there and extended usual hospitality as in the past. I only wished business picks up and Shangrilla regains its past glory.

Malik's invitation to participate in the LSO/Youth Convention at Skardu turned out to be one of the most memorable visits of the many that I have made to Gilgit-Baltistan and Chitral over the last two decades since I said adieu to AKRSP.

The love, affection and respect that the participants, AKRSP staff and representatives of the Administration and the people at large showered on me completely overwhelmed me. I sometimes

wonder can anyone ask for anything more in this world. How can one ever repay so much love. It is all due to their greatness, not that I did anything out of the ordinary.

I was particularly grateful to see how Malik is taking the agenda of fostering sustainable Institutions of the People, namely, VOs/LSOs forward. My visit to KISAN LSO was most heartening and what I heard at the Convention both from LSO and Youth representatives was most encouraging and inspiring. I wish and pray for Malik's success. This would be Malik's lasting legacy to AKRSP.

Roohi joins me in sending our gratitude and thanks to all for organizing this dreamlike visit. Please convey my deep appreciation to Kalsoom and all the Baltistan Regional AKRSP staff for the wonderful arrangements they made and kindness and courtesy they extended to us. It was nice to see Yasmin so active. Above all I am greatly indebted to Malik for organizing this visit.

Mr. Inayatullah Faizi, Director AKRSP BoD greatly appreciated how all the community leaders are giving credit to SSK for achievements of AKRSP and SSK is emphatic that the credit fully belongs to the activists and communities and the dedicated professionals and field staff of AKRSP.