

Note for Record
(August 15-19, 2018)

By: Shoaib Sultan Khan
August 29, 2018

Subject: AKRSP Revisited

I always love going back to Northern Areas (Gilgit, Baltistan and Chitral) but this time General Manager (GM), Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) Muzafaruddin drew up a programme which included visit to district of Gilgit from which newly carved out districts were of Hunza (including Gojal) and Nagar (including upper and lower areas). Besides, I also met the Chief Minister, Chief Secretary, Secretary Planning and at dinner hosted by AKRSP Ministers Planning, Tourism, Deputy Speaker, Member Legislative Assembly, Men and Women activists and retired staff of AKRSP who had worked with me including awarding meritorious service certificates to four retiring drivers.

On arrival my first meeting was with the Chief Secretary Mr. Babar Hyat Tarar. I was delighted to hear from Babar that he had done three weeks internship at AKRSP along with other DMG officers, during my tenure as GM. He was present in CEOs RSPN/RSPs meeting with PM Abbasi at Islamabad as Secretary to PM. The meeting resulted in BISP giving \$ 35 million to NRSP for graduating BISP beneficiaries out of the programme who had been in receipt of BISP monthly/ cash quarterly grants over last 5 to 10 years.

Babar Hayat expressed the desire to link up Cooperative Bank with AKRSP fostered Local Support Organization (LSO). Muzaffar brought up the approval of the proposal for financial sustainability of the LSOs along with grassroots Village Organizations (VOs) which is pending for his approval submitted by Planning Department. I explained to the Chief Secretary the unique feature of VOs/LSOs, as institutions of the people, having roots and outreach to each rural household

unlike the elected institutions or the administrative departments, who are only representative. The VOs/LSO, complement and supplement the departments by creating an outreach as well as a receiving mechanism for the services and supplies of the departments as well as linkage of Union/Tehsil/District or even legislative council to entire rural households organized as members of VOs/LSOs. The Chief Secretary had not seen the proposal, having recently joined and promised to give his consideration to it. I also requested him, whenever possible, to give some time to visit some of the VOs/LSOs to hear from them what they have achieved and what they are capable of doing.

Next morning in our meeting with Secretary Planning Mr. Babar Aman Babar we apprised him of our meeting with the Chief Secretary and he promised to pursue the proposal with him. He informed how in the last two years he has ensured full utilization of the Federal ADP grant amounting to about Rs 15 billion plus he has also been able to secure some of the CPEC funds. He sought help to manage the onslaught of tourists and his plans to add at least 10,000 guest rooms. I informed him how in late eighties AKRSP launched a home based guest houses programme persuading willing house owners to dedicate one of the rooms as a paying guest room and ensure cleanliness of the room with attached bathroom. It had proved quite popular with foreign tourists. I was confident that local tourists would equally like this. Muzaffar informed that it has been revived, as due to security situation very few foreigners were visiting, but the situation has changed now. He assured the Secretary that AKRSP will help in every way to achieve the target he had in view. We also discussed Akhuwat financing to such willing house owners who needed funds for the purpose.

I met the Chief Minister Hafiz Hafiz Ur Rehman on the last day of my stay in Gilgit as I was in the field and returned late in the evening. He was kind enough to spare time at night. He took pride in explaining how a fortnight before the end of the financial year, when he became Chief Minister, he was shocked to learn that out of Rs 7 billion federal grant, 5 billion was going to lapse. He frantically

called the Federal Finance Minister who advised him to transfer the money to NA's Consolidated Account and save it from lapsing, for use in the coming year. To his great discomfiture he found NA had no Consolidated Account, which he got somehow opened with cooperation of AGPR and thus in his first financial year, he had the balance 5 billion of previous year and the 7 billion of current year making it a 12 billion ADP. From then on he had ensured that not a penny of federal grant was lapsed by asking Chief Secretary to hold fortnightly meeting and he himself holds monthly meeting to review utilization of ADP federal grant.

He lamented that the vested interests are not prepared to pay any tax even though many new taxable opportunities are emerging like increased tourism, etc. They mobilize agitation against any kind of tax and keep GB totally dependent on federal grants. He spoke about the problem of youth employment. We informed him of the household level survey AKRSP is planning to find out the number of unemployable youth in every household and besides jobs which kind of gainful self-employment were capable of doing with outside support.

On his own he informed us that AKRSP proposal for financial viability of VOs/LSOs was delayed because certain funds to be released by federal Govt., were not released which are likely to be released now and he assured funding of the proposal.

Muzaffar also arranged a dinner at Serena at night to which Deputy Speaker Legislative Assembly Jaffarullah, Minister Planning Iqbal Hassan, Minister Tourism Fidaullah, Member LA Rizwan, an ex AKRSP employee, Noreen also an ex-employee who served as Minister besides Nargis, Parveen, Safdar, Barkat, Sultan Hameed, Twallud Shah and Abdullah Malang, poet and activist who was moving spirit behind the Hanuchal Irrigation Channel, where I used to take all visitors and take the lead in walking ahead on the mountainside along the parapet of the channel which was carved out of rocks bringing hundreds of acres of land under irrigation range. The path was narrow and down below was a steep

fall. Reluctantly they used to follow me because I never used to look back. When I took the World Bank Operations Evaluation team on Hanuchal, the team leader Donaldson enquired “Is this your softening up process?”. He was so right because this visit used to convince them how difficult and hazardous it was to work in this terrain, which any number of words would not have done.

Another dinner hosted by Muzaffar was at Passu, on the eve of visit to Shimshal where again he had invited not only my colleague Mutabiat Shah but also village activists. I was greatly touched when Saima’s grandmother who used to be an active member of Passu WO came to the dinner to meet me. She was hardly able to walk but insisted on meeting me; others included Subedar Aziz of Sust where the VO had tunneled an irrigation channel through a mountain much against AKRSP technical advice, because AKRSP Chief Engineer Hussain Wali Khan (HWK) thought it would be beyond the capacity of the VO. They tunneled 200 feet of the mountain on their own 6 feet high 4 feet wide invited me and HWK to visit it. HWK was convinced but a bit skeptical because they were planning to tunnel the mound from both sides and there was danger of both ends not meeting. However, all they wanted from AKRSP was a grant of Rs 300,000 (\$12,000) for explosives and some labour charges. It took them 16 months and one late evening I received a call from Sub. Aziz at my PTDC apartment in Gilgit that the ends have met. There was jubilation all over when I invited the FCNA Commander Major General Safdar Ali Khan and Secretary General, Economic Affairs Division Ejaz Naik to inaugurate the channel. It brought about 1000 acres of new land under irrigation range and today is a satellite of Sust village. When His Highness visited the channel tunnel, the villagers requested him to name the new village and he graciously named it Husainabad. Today Husainabad is full of greenery and laden with fruit and forest trees. It has also become the customs gateway for Chinese goods and when Chinese took about 30 acres of this land for their warehouses etc., the VO refused Rs. 18 billion they offered to buy the land instead they wanted a share from the income of the warehouse. Sub. Aziz proudly narrated all this to me.

The Sust Tunnel Channel was funded by Canadian CIDA, hence when elder Trudeau was on a private visit to Hunza staying with the Mir, I thought of inviting him to visit the channel on his way to Kashghar. Unfortunately, because of shortage of time, he couldn't do it but while passing by Sust, he saw a foreigner on the road, she turned out to be a Canadian girl and when asked what was she doing there, she spoke about her visit to the channel.

I am also reminded how at breakfast when I saw Trudeau eating Pratha and Omelette by mixing jam, I said normally we don't mix jam. He said but I like it.

The area is now being littered with new hotels and guest houses newly constructed. The dinner was hosted in a hotel called Serai in the shadow of Passu glacier, the only glacier which instead of covered with dark material used to glisten white from a distance when we used to approach Passu.

The third and final dinner was for AKRSP staff to meet me and to honour four of the retiring drivers of AKRSP at PTDC motel, my abode for the last 36 years when I visit AKRSP. AKRSP drivers were a class by themselves. I had the privilege of being driven by six drivers, two of them have sadly passed away and the rest retired except Naib Khan, my last driver who is still in service because the children of other drivers having been educated by their parents in some of the best universities of the country including LUMS and other professional institutions. Naib Khan's children were still studying and Muzaffar on compassionate grounds continues him in service. Being my last driver, I am most grateful to Muzaffar for this consideration. The four drivers who received their meritorious service certificates spoke proudly of the service they rendered and expressed their gratitude for the treatment they received from AKRSP. But for the dedication and expertise of the drivers, it would have been impossible for the professionals to visit every nook and corner of the area. Not realizing how difficult and treacherous the terrain was on arrival in 1982, since we had only one jeep

and the five members of the management group had to accompany me, one of us would take the steering when being short of space. The first time I did it coming down from Karimabad to Aliabad, the road which was not only narrow but as if I was going down on a lift, by the time I reached the flat road, I was sweating and this was the month of December and I never touched the steering again on field visits. This was the job of “precision drivers” that is what our drivers were and during my twelve years, God kept us safe through our drivers.

The helicopter squad was our second source of mobility taking us to places which would take ten hours walking up and down the hill, doing it in no more than fifteen minutes. Their contribution I will never forget although I was a bit embarrassed travelling by helicopter to help poor villagers and in fact there was lot of opposition and talk about this decision of His Highness. Actually the first helicopter arrived, soon after I had taken over as GM AKRSP in December 1982. The helicopter was kept at Rawalpindi airport by the local AKF officer, as it was thought both by Karachi and Rawalpindi AKF people that this was a waste of Imam’s money and it should only be used when there is an emergency situation. In May 1983 His Highness came to Gilgit and enquired why the helicopter was not being used. He said “I know the helicopter is like a bee in my bonnet”. It is well known that most of the people around me think it to be wasteful. However, since the helicopter has been purchased and it is here, it will not be taken back unless HH said, he was proved wrong. “If it is not used, I am losing money” whereas everyone in Pakistan was trying to save HH’s money by not using it. He added that he is aware of the terrain, how prohibitive it is for travel. He asked who is prepared to use it? Of course, I was very keen to use it. HH ordered the helicopter to be placed at Gilgit and if necessary the army aviation maintenance facilities may be used. On His Highness’ return from Gilgit, the helicopter was placed at the disposal of AKRSP. We even printed our logo on it, later when AKF became a bit wiser, they asked us to remove AKRSP logo and replace it with AKF logo. I must have done nearly 3000 hours on the helicopter but for that

assistance, AKRSP would not have achieved what it did. How HH was proved right beyond any doubt.

The only time I was surprised when Oxfam representative refused point blank to use the helicopter. Once on HH's visit to London Director Oxfam called on him and as I happened to be in London, I was asked to make a presentation to the Director who said to HH that he had come with the idea to seek assistance from AKF, however listening to what AKRSP is doing, Oxfam would like to collaborate in the programme and offered a grant of GBP 30,000 for a project in the most remote valley of the area. I had no hesitation to agree to this condition, when HH looked at me, because all the valleys were remote. Anyway, we selected a far off valley Ishkoman from Gilgit. The project was irrigation channel at an altitude of 11,000 feet. It would have taken half an hour from Gilgit to land below the site of the channel from Gilgit. We had to undertake a 12 hour round road trip and ten hour walk up and down the hill, besides spending a night out. On return when I asked Nick Gardner the real reason for his refusal to travel by helicopter. He confided that a helicopter pilot is his friend back home who always told him that helicopter is the most dangerous mode of travel. A few years later our helicopter did crash but all of us remained safe. On a visit by Peter Townsend of Princess Margaret fame, who came shepherding a group of Commonwealth students and was known to be a seasoned pilot. On asking him how safe was helicopter, he responded as safe or dangerous as any other mode of travel except a helicopter pilot should never take risk, if he does it once he will do it again and again and come to grief one day. Our first pilot was indeed a dare devil pilot. HH replaced the crashed helicopter with two helicopters and a new chief pilot and with God's grace this is 36th year of helicopter operations in the area.

Our final segment of the visit was interaction with VOs/LSOs. Besides Muzaffar, the Regional General Manager Yasmin Qalandar, District Programme Officer Saima and Institutional Development Specialist Naeema and an observer Junaid, son of my friend Dr. Amjad Saqib who has acquired international renown by

giving developmental dimension to charity accompanied me. Starting Akhuwat with Rs. 10,000 interest free loan from a mosque, it is billions of rupees programme reaching millions of people. A few days back Amjad rang me up that his son who had just taken his 'degree from McGill University happened to read my biography by Noel Cossins 'Man in the Hat' and was very keen to spend a couple of days with me in Islamabad. As I was planning to go to AKRSP, I suggested him why not ask Junaid to accompany me on this visit.

Before we set out on our field visit a group of DMG Officers now called Pakistan Administrative Service (PAS) from Pakistan and AJK were on a tour of the area, unlike previously when they used to come for three weeks' internship. Muzaffar told me that the group was keen to meet me and they were on their way back after visiting Hunza and Khunjerab pass, a 16,000 feet highest metaled road border of Pakistan-China. They were keen to know how I left CSP (predecessor of DMG/PAS) to do what I was doing. They listened my story with rapt attention for nearly an hour and thereafter we made our way to Danyore in Gilgit district.

The Danyore LSO of women WOs, had unfortunately lost one of their main activists, wife of Sher Zaman that morning. So first we went to offer condolences to Sher Zaman's home where a large number of people had assembled. I was greatly touched that despite this tragedy a large number of women members of LSO met us along with the men LSO office bearer Chairman Jan and Secretary Zafar along with a few others Sultan Hamid, Ali Mohammad, Rahmatwali were also present. Iqbal Bano manager of the LSO gave us a briefing. The 181 household member organizations had forged linkages with many organizations like IFAD, JICA, AKDN Agencies, Govt. Departments and members Legislative Assembly. They were expecting IFAD to fulfill their promise of cold storage and asked me to speak to Chief Secretary about it, which I did in my meeting with him. The LSOs greatest achievement was that they were financially viable. They had a saving of Rs 2.1 million and met all their credit requirements from their savings. They even gave Rs. 50,000 to men LSO, for a USAID funded project

valued at Rs 20 million and questioned its progress from Men LSO Secretary Zafar who tried to divert attention by mentioning about clean drinking water and sewerage schemes worth millions done by the LSO. The USAID grant has come and the teething troubles in operationalizing the project is underway. Zafar explained that 28 LSOs gave Rs. 50,000 each as their share to access the USAID grant. The WO LSO members claimed that they are no more dependent on men as they used to be previously because of the WO and LSO and their first priority is to educate their children both girls and boys. I applauded their achievements and wished greater continued progress in future.

On Muzaffar's introduction of Junaid from Akhuwat, the women requested that Akhuwat should collaborate with LSO.

Next day we visited Rahimabad LSO at Jutal village, again in Gilgit district. Jutal is part of Rahimabad Union Council with multi sects population and when I held my first dialogue, they desired to have an irrigation channel and assured me that there was enough water in the spring which used to feed the existing village population. Later on, I was distressed to note that once the channel was completed, no water used to flow through it. It turned out that under Land Act, the villagers could claim ownership of the barren land over which they constructed an irrigation channel. They diverted the water through the channel and once got the ownership, established, rediverted it to their old channel because water was enough for it only. I wonder how they duped our engineer. When in the LSO meeting where all the 8 VOs and 5 WOs members greeted us, they informed me that Rs. 150,000 (\$6,000) that AKRSP gave them, due to CPEC, was now worth millions of rupees as the land has been marked for development. There was a gender balance in the LSO comprising 7 villages belonging to all the three sects. Rozina Shaheen was the Vice Chairperson. Their savings are over 3.1 million including 1.6 million of women. They have ensured 100% enrolment of children. They were engaged in all kinds of gainful employment, like bee-keeping, apricot dehydration, poultry farming, off season vegetable and flower culture, their

gladiolas are likely to be marketed down country. The LSO has linkages with WWF for wildlife preservation, Hashoo Foundation, GIZ, WASIP, UNDP, Pressclub, Northland Foundation, Agrdeptt, Women Education Department, LG&RD Department, Khushhali Bank. On Junaid's introduction, they sought collaboration with Akhuwat. Junaid spoke about his introduction to AKRSP through Man in the Hat and promised to speak to Akhuwat team about collaboration with LSO. The LSO has its future plans chalked out, being scattered area arrangement of transport, conservation of natural resources including snow leopard and markhor and sustainability of LSO. Ex-chairman LSO Akbar Shah thanked us for the visit. I spoke about my experience in India of working with women and now in Sindh entirely with women and was happy to see women coming into the driving seat here. Muzaffar also spoke of the contribution women are making in LSO. Later I mentioned to Muzaffar about their idea of a Regional Support Bank and cautioned him against putting their savings at risk.

From Jutal we headed towards Hunza district reaching Ganesh Union Council, probably the oldest village as name indicates, a Hindu god. We were a couple of hours late but the WO members patiently waited for us. I was glad to see Jan-e Alam, the Chairman of LSO of UC. I can never forget an incident when some of the AKRSP staff revolted against me complaining annual salary increase to be unjust. In protest I told them I was resigning from GM's post and removed the name plate outside my office and asked my Peon Suleman to pack my things. Suddenly while this was going on, Jan-e Alam appeared with few other villagers. He told the staff members that they were welcome to leave AKRSP but the villagers will not allow GM to leave and put my name plate back on the office door. In my twelve years, this was my only confrontation with the staff and Jan-e Alam defused it when he heard of it at the training session of the village activists in a separate building.

There were 18 VOs with 782 households as members federated in the LSO. They had forged linkages with government Agriculture, Livestock, Education and Local Government Departments. The Deputy Director Agriculture was also present in the meeting. The Public Works Department had constructed a road and provided water supply at their request. They have also a Youth Organisation as part of Canadian funded Economic Empowerment of Local Youth (EELY) as 70% of the population is under 35 years of age with a large number of educated young boys and girls. According to a recent study, poverty in Hunza is only 2%. Their main problem is unemployment.

I suggested to GM AKRSP to carry out a survey household wise through VO/LSO to find out how many employable boys and girls are per family excluding those who are studying and a feedback from them about gainful self-employment, as giving paid jobs is not possible. This to me appears to be the main problem of Hunza Valley and AKRSP should focus on it.

The next day on return from Shimshal, we met Passu WO, who previous day had waited for us for couple of hours in their orchard planted on the new land brought under irrigation range by tapping an irrigation channel from Batura glacier, the second largest glacier after the Concordia glacier below K-2. This was also a Canadian funded project whose Ambassador recently visited the orchard and told Muzaffar that he will tell his Ambassador friends in Islamabad to come and visit the WO orchard in Passu. Unfortunately, I couldn't as it was late and they met in the village with VO members also. The Chairman of the LSO Ali Qurban told me that when we were told yesterday after a two hours wait that you will visit tomorrow, nobody said a word in complaint and happily assembled today to welcome you.

When I first came to Passu in 1983, it was a high altitude porters' village led by Ghulam Muhammad who had conquered Nanga Parbat. They all looked a class by themselves. In the dialogue they identified a PPI to save their village from

river erosion. After the engineering survey when I came for the dialogue to sign terms of partnership with the VO and asked if this project is going to benefit 75% of the households in terms of increasing their income because AKRSP's objective is to double their income in ten years, a heated discussion ensued amongst the present VO members. The majority said it will only benefit a few households which are close to the river bank and suggested bringing a channel from Batura glacier, irrigating hundreds of acres of new land. There was a dissenting note that for last few decades attempts were made by the Mir of Hunza and the villagers to bring water from Passu and Batura as well other sources with little success and getting a channel from Batura which also recedes, it would be waste of effort and money. Anyway the Noes were overwhelmed by those in favour and I had to abort the dialogue and a fresh process was started after a few weeks and the VO with their grit and determination succeeded in carving a channel out of Batura for which AKRSP gave them an assistance of little over Rs. 300,000 resulting hundreds of acres of land being converted into orchards, forestation and vegetable crops worth millions and millions of rupees.

Today WO/VO members of Passu with great pride told me their achievements. I was happy to see some of the old faces like Hunar Beg, another high altitude climber. I was sorry to hear that Ghulam Muhammad was suffering from acute dementia and not able to move out of his home. Their achievements in every field by both men and women were incredible. Muzaffar gave Princess Zahra's message to women to take the lead now. Amjad Wali who in government is propagating entrepreneurship, gave advice how they can benefit from his programme launched by government. On introduction of Junaid, they all expressed interest in Akhuwat loans scheme. Ashraf Khan gave vote of thanks and in return I apologized for keeping them waiting yesterday and thanked them for their warm welcome today.

Our last day was spent in Nagar district where in 1983 I first came, they expressed lot of skepticism about AKRSP being followers of Imam Khomeini. It

was a most conservative and backward area compared to Hunza and Gojal. Now things have dramatically changed. Not only men even women are in the forefront. At the Broshal Union Council LSO representing 5 villages with 20 VOs and 8 WOs, housed in a rented building accommodating a computer centre, an Early Childhood Development Centre, another Mother and Child Centre, a library and LSO office managed by a dedicated and educated smart youth Muhammad Baqir, who had earlier served in AKRSP but decided to serve his own Union Council. I was happy to meet Haji Ibrahim who was the first in Nagar to welcome AKRSP and organise his VO and was now Chairman of the LSO.

Later we moved to the Mountain Dew Hotel, a brand new multistoried building for the meeting with LSO members both men and women, something unheard of when I was GM. Baqir gave an excellent and detailed PowerPoint presentation after Aftab Hussain, Member LSO welcomed us. With LSO support, they achieved setting up of a College for Girls, IT Lab, Rupali Foundation helped in gem cutting and polishing, handicraft centre, Youth Development Projects, potato seed distribution, training of girls in carpentry in Hunza, linkages with AKDN organisations in water and sanitation, Education and Health and FOCUS for disaster management besides many government departments and Red Crescent. Another member of LSO Haji Ali narrated his VO Rattal's achievements.

Rizwan, who served as Social Organiser during my days and was now member Legislative Assembly promised to help LSO and the area in every possible way.

Broshal was the only village in Nagar which His Highness visited and as Geneva had asked for an unusual photograph, I requested HH to sit on VO tractor which was parked near the meeting place. He obliged me asking me how much should I ask as my wages. We got a good picture. The Aga Khan Health Services established a Health Centre and the villagers requested me to ask AKHS not to close the Centre as it is giving them excellent service. I would request Aziz

Bolani, Chairman AKRSP Board of Directors to kindly use his good offices, in case there is talk of closing the centre.

From Upper Nagar, we drove down to Lower Nagar Sikandarabad, now headquarters of the district. Here we visited Naunehal Development Organisation (NDO) whose moving spirit was a teacher Muzaffar Hussain, forming the 11 VOs of Sikandarabad to Minapin in an LSO with focus on education besides other developmental projects with linkages with donors like AKHS, AKES, SAP schools of Government, Trust for Voluntary Organisations, Tahrik Jaffaria, EELY, GB RSP, USAID and when Chris Cork, a young journalist and cyclist, offered his services to Naunehal linking up with Asia Foundation, Ausaid, JICA and others. In both Education and Health sectors, Naunehal's achievements have been amazing. I even brought President Musharraf to visit them who donated Rs. 500,000 to NDO. Muzaffar told me that starting with only 5 primary schools now through NDO's efforts, over 10,000 boys and girls have high school degrees belonging to the area.

GM AKRSP told me once AKRSP had floated an IDEAS competition and a girl from the area won first prize of Rs. 50,000. From that money, spending Rs. 11,000, she got trained as Early Childhood Teacher with rest of the money, revived a defunct government school building in Sikandarabad and imparts education to 50 children of the area from 3-5 years of age. AKRSP has now sent two of her volunteer girl friends for ECT training to help her manage the school better. It was an amazing example of a girl doing social service.

I am most grateful to GM Muzaffar for organizing an inspirational programme of visit for me and also to all the headquarters and field staff of AKRSP. It was heartening for me to see RGM, DPO and Institutions Specialist who accompanied me on the field visits, were all women. This is a change which augurs very well for the future of AKRSP.