

Notes from the Field
Karimabad, Hunza, Pakistan
July 19

Getting there

We set out for Hunza on July 11 and finally arrived on the afternoon of July 16th. We lost a day crossing the International Date Line, spent almost a day in Bangkok waiting for our flight to Islamabad and arrived in Islamabad on schedule the night of July 13th. We were booked on a morning flight to Gilgit—the northern provincial capital of Gilgit-Baltistan and the nearest regional airport to Hunza. Alas, we were bumped to standby, and we didn't get a flight. We were "confirmed" for the next day (July 15), but the flight was canceled due to bad weather. So, some time after noon on the 15th, we began the 15-hour drive to Gilgit.

Around 10:30 at night we reached the summit of Babasar, at about 4,200 meters. Just on the other side, we were stopped at a police checkpoint and told the road was closed during the hours of darkness (neither our travel agent or driver had heard of this closure) and we would have to wait until 7 a.m. to continue. We were offered "accommodation" in a humanitarian aid tent, which an enterprising entrepreneur had converted into a "hotel" for \$20 a night. It had a foam mattress, clean sheets and warm blankets. At almost 14,000 feet, it was very cold and windy, but our tent was warm enough.

At 7:00 a.m. we set out for Gilgit and arrived at 11:30 a.m., including a stop for breakfast. That same afternoon, a driver from KADO (our partner organization) met us and drove us another 2 1/2 hours to Hunza. About 50% of the road was dirt track, filled with holes and big rocks, narrow and winding, and clinging to the edge of steep drop offs, requiring speeds of 20 to 40 kilometers an hour. Still, we made the 550 km journey from Islamabad to Karimabad in 17 hours of actual driving.

We share this detail to give you a feel for the level of effort it takes just to get to our project area. Actually, we arrived feeling fairly strong and really happy to finally stop and just be somewhere.

As most of you know, we are here to work with the HiMaT Indigenous Leadership and Development Program—a project dedicated to peace building through constructive development. The project really got rolling in 2010 (though we spent a year prior to that building the foundation). In brief, HiMaT is an integrated development program focused on lifting participating communities out of poverty. In much of our target area, people are living on less than 1 or 2 dollars a day, and have food security of only 3 to 4 months (i.e., the food they can grow or purchase from earned income lasts only 3 to 4 months, after which they need food aid). Essentially, we now are engaging approximately 90 high mountain villages scattered across some of the most achingly beautiful, but also harsh and sometimes inhospitable geo-climatic region of the world.

As you know, we were unable to make our planned spring visit in March (or April or May) due to inter-sectarian violence between Shia and Sunni peoples, resulting in the shut down of the roads, airports, cell phone and Internet service and the declaration of martial law. This unrest is totally abhorrent to 95% of the population, who only want peace and development and are very relieved that order has been restored. As this is being written, we are sitting in a workshop with Shia and Ismaili people who are eager to work together.

What we've been up to

We spent the first 2 days with our 5-person HiMaT team preparing a work plan for the next 18 months. We also evaluated some of the impacts of the past year's work. Here are a few highlights.

- During the past year we have expanded our reach from 34 villages to 87, covering 9 different geographic clusters.
- Approximately 2500 people are now participating in action-learning circles in their villages using the course books we have developed and introduced to the communities in our quarterly development forum.
- At least 90 small projects focused on economic and social improvement have been initiated by groups of men, women or youth and these cover everything from turning rocky, barren land into productive fields, building a women's store whose profits support the capacity of all children to go to school, and building a computer lab for a village school. In addition, some 20 small businesses have been created and many more are planned.

We then traveled from our team's offices, across the landslide that has created a lake where there used to be a highway. We had the opportunity to visit 7 small projects such as the ones described above and to meet with community leaders to hear from them about what the HiMaT project has achieved. We also had a one-day women's conference in one of the villages that was attended by about 70 women from across the region. The main theme of the conference was what can be done to improve food security, given that now many families can only grow enough food for 2 to 4 months. For the rest of the year they are living on food aid from China, a situation that pains them psychologically and has introduced a lot of unhealthy food into their diets. We also sang songs and shared stories and poetry.

During our time in the northern villages, we also had many opportunities to share hospitality in people's homes and to get to know the families of our team members. It is exciting for us to see these men and women mature into such capable and well-respected development leaders.

After re-crossing the landslide, we spent more time in team meetings reflecting on what we learned during our field visit and planning for the next phase of the work. For example, when our team reflected on food security, we devised an exciting new project idea. 2 to 3 early adapter families will be selected in the 4 clusters of upper Gojal (behind the landslide, where cash crop farming is dead and people have been plunged into poverty). These families will be encouraged and guided to produce themselves all the food they will need for a year, using a combination of organic farming and permaculture methods, new food crops will be introduced, a strong focus on livestock management, and small scale meat, eggs, poultry and dairy production. Working closely with the families, a big emphasis will be placed on food preservation (drying, canning and food storage). Community kitchens will provide the needed infrastructure and model the food preservation process. We will need lots of help from our Canadian supports to make this idea a reality. Money yes, but also expertise.

On July 24th we traveled back to Gilgit with our senior team members to meet with some of the organizations with which we collaborate—the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP), the Government of Pakistan's Agricultural Department, and the Karakorum International University. We also held a project steering committee. Then, on July 27, we took the long drive back to Islamabad since there still were no flights. Yesterday we had the opportunity to catch up on some paperwork and visit with a friend

who is a pioneer in creating opportunities for rural women to earn a reasonable income doing on-line work. Today, we facilitated a workshop about social and economic development for a very diverse group of people at the Baha'i National Centre. Tomorrow we have meeting at the office of UN Women, the World Bank and the Aga Khan Foundation before catching a red-eye flight to Bangkok. We have just over 24 hours there before proceeding to Hong Kong, Vancouver and finally Calgary. Monday is also Michael's birthday, which he will have to celebrate navigating the chaotic check-in procedures at the airport and trying to get some rest in a tin can hurdling through the sky at hundreds of miles an hour.

We look forward to connecting with all of you in the weeks to come. Because of your wonderful support, we feel that this is your project too.

With warm regards,

Michael and Judie