

HiMAT INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM
NOTES FROM THE FIELD
KARIMABAD, HUNZA, PAKISTAN
April 19 – May 9, 2013

Introduction

Here we are again. When the rest of the world looks at Pakistan through the lens of western media, we see danger, corruption, and a country rapidly sliding into chaos. While all of those things are, to some extent, a reality, particularly in some regions, it feels very different on the ground.

Islamabad, the capital, was surprisingly calm and orderly, even relaxed, compared to other visits, despite the fact that the country is only days away from a general election. We spent a day and 2 nights waiting for a flight to Gilgit (a 12 – 15 hour hard drive north through the mountains on bad roads). Praise God we were successful! We arrived by air in Gilgit at 7:45 a.m. on April 22. A driver from KADO, our partner organization in Hunza, picked us up and we were at our hotel in Karimabad (where the Project office is located) by noon that day.

Our Trip Agenda

After consulting with the HiMaT Program team, we developed the following agenda for our time in Hunza.

1. Team planning for the 2013-2014 work plan
2. Consultation and decision-making about a new project manager - Ajaz Ali, whom we adore, moved on to manage a much bigger (but not as interesting) project that is installing IT centres across Gilgit-Baltistan. His salary increased significantly. We selected 2 team members to play various leadership and management roles rather than hire another manager from outside.
3. Delivery of a 3-day pilot of Book 6 in our training series on the subject of conflict transformation – The site chosen for the workshop was the Chipursan Valley—the most remote cluster of communities in northern Hunza. Chipursan was our pilot area, but we have been denied access there for the past 3 years because the government closed the area to foreigners, ostensibly for security reasons due to the fact that the valley is 10 kilometers from the Afghanistan border. The workshop was very impactful for the 80+ participants, and we learned a lot about how to revise the new book to maximize impact as it goes out to study-action circles across the region.
4. Holding a consultation with farmers on the food security and agricultural crisis the area is facing
5. Holding an inter-institutional workshop in Aliabad—an urban centre in central Hunza in which our team has recently helped to organize the establishment of an umbrella support organization to coordinate the work of some 50 local voluntary organizations - The goal here is to shift from conflict, duplication and a lack of success in solving critical development challenges by many separate and competing organizations to coordinated success.
6. Continuation of fundraising efforts in Islamabad

This is not a report, so we won't try to give you details about all of these things. Suffice to say that each and every agenda item was addressed, and overall the trip has been extremely successful.

The Journey is not Over

Our team has achieved such a remarkable level of maturity and accomplishment that community leaders made a point several times of publically thanking us for training and funding their activities, and pleaded with us not to allow the team to be broken up. “We need them. HiMaT has really and truly mobilized our communities and is building our capacity to do many things. But our journey out of poverty has only begun. Please don’t stop now. Almost 80% of our families are living in such poverty that they need food aid to survive. Our economy has collapsed. Our farmers are desperate to find a new path, and HiMaT has given us real hope. Please stick with us for long enough so we can experience success.”

In words such as these, the leaders both praised us and pleaded with us to not abandon them just when real capacity and community mobilization was emerging. “You have helped us to get ready for a journey, but we need your support as we travel for at least a while longer,” they told us.

Similarly, our team members were extremely passionate in telling us, “We all have much improved our knowledge and skills thanks to the capacity development and practical experience we have received as HiMaT team members. We are becoming well known and some of us are receiving job offers from other agencies. But we believe in this project. It is for us like a mission, not a job. It is our privilege and path of service to our communities, and we feel very strongly that we need to keep working with the project.”

One difficulty our team members face is that they are away from their families for weeks at a time as they carry out their work in the communities. Ashraf Khan (our new team leader) sang a beautiful song which seeks to console the hearts of far away loved ones.

4 New (and we think very important) Developments

Women’s Small Business Development in the IDP Camps

As you may recall, the 2010 Attabad landslide flooded the homes and farms of some 500 families in our project area. A significant number of these families are still, some 3 years later, living in temporary shelter made of corrugated tin with a flimsy foam sheet of 1/8th inch insulation. When we visited these camps in October last year, we were distressed to find that many of the families were still living from day-to-day without any sense of hope. A couple of shelters had been turned into women’s handicraft centres, but these women were producing clothing or embroidery without any connections to markets. As well, they seemed to understand no option other than to ask for handouts.

Shortly after that visit, thanks to your generous support, the HiMaT team members were able to provide them with some basic training in small business development and to challenge women to work in small groups to develop business plans. Small seed grants were offered to 6 groups with the most promising ideas. We call this part of HiMaT our “quick-win” program.

We visited these quick-win projects on the last day of our stay in Hunza and the difference we saw was stunning. Instead of sitting in front of us with bowed heads and tears in their eyes, the women proudly showed us their business products and accounting books. One group opened a snack shop, selling homemade fritters, milk tea and soft drinks. Seeing another opportunity, they began carrying a small stock of shoes. While we enjoyed their food at a small table in front of their shop, we watched a steady stream of customers come in for morning tea break. This group has almost tripled their initial capital, and rather than paying themselves salaries they have used their profit to begin offering small loans (primarily for medical emergencies) to their members. This is a third business line, as they charge interest on these loans at a rate of about 15% (which is lower than the banks, which won’t lend to them anyway, considering them too risky). Only when their business is even more firmly

established will they begin realizing personal benefit from their efforts. As one women said, “I can now see how I will one day again be able to own my own home.”

The story of the other 5 projects was remarkably similar. One group of women sells second-hand clothing out of their shop, but realizing that their location in an IDP camp provided limited opportunities for business, they began carrying their wares door-to-door in one of the nearby villages. They hope to soon be able to open a shop in the commercial district of Aliabad, where they will be able to attract many more customers. They too have begun offering emergency loans to their members. This is micro-credit at its finest! Another group is sewing women’s clothing and is negotiating the lease of a central market location from a sympathetic businessman. Still another group has opened a beauty salon, and another does consignment handicrafts for tourist shops. A seventh business that was not selected for quick win funding because the group only had 3 members started up anyway (micro-lending institutions usually require borrower groups to be larger to ensure group capacity to guarantee repayment of loans, and we are preparing these groups for such opportunities). With the help of our field team, this group has started a promising embroidery craft initiative.

Several things are remarkable about these projects. In a development context in which the general practice is to give handouts, all of these businesses were started with an initial investment of approximately \$150. They are all profitable. All of them also put collective wellbeing before short-term personal benefit. The faces of the women involved in these projects are shining with pride and hope.

One thing we know for certain, however, is that the \$150 seed grant was only a small part of what made these businesses succeed. The HiMaT team members have walked with the women in the camp every step of the way, providing training, technical advice and wise council. They have also helped forge linkages with suppliers, customers, and government services. Without this component of our “quick-win” program, this little “miracle” would not have happened. Our challenge now is to be able to find the resources to greatly expand the quick-win program to ensure that it reaches the poorest segments of all the communities within which we work, so that the most successful small business can access micro-credit loans that will allow them to scale up and thus employ many more people.

Food Security Measurement

For the past several years we have been conducting participatory assessments on the level of food security in our project area. We do this because we see food security as an important proxy indicator for measuring poverty levels. The chart below shows this year’s results.

<i>No of Months of Food Security</i>	<i>Geographic Region</i>			<i>Food Quality</i>
	MASO	GRSO	CLSO	
0 – 4 months	75%	40%	51%	Basic survival (low nutritional levels)
5 – 7 months	15%	40%	35%	Some variety of food
8 – 12 months	10%	20%	24%	Relatively balanced nutrition

This chart reports on the number of months households have food they have grown or purchased from earnings. 7 months means a family will need food aid in order to survive for 5 months of the year. Similarly 4 months means they will need food aid for 8 months. This chart shows food security levels comparable to Ethiopia during famine times.

Poverty Summit

The Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF) is the principal agency for delivering World Bank money for poverty alleviation in the Country. PPAF refuses to fund in our area. They say the Aga Khan Development Network is taking care of any needs (obviously, this is not the case) and that the area doesn’t rank as a poverty region because it isn’t poor enough.

Unfortunately, they are using statistics collected before 2005—long before the 2008 global financial crisis, the 2010 Attabad disaster, and the 2010 monsoons, which combined to completely destroy 20 plus years of development progress and plunged the region into destitution.

Three national micro-finance programs refuse to offer loans to people in our region because they say that, due to destitution, the likelihood of loan repayment is too low. This is crazy—Hunza is too rich to get development assistance but too poor to get approval for micro-finance loans!

In consultation with community leaders, we have decided to launch a campaign to end extreme poverty in Gojal that will be led and driven by the communities themselves. This represents a major shift in thinking from the longstanding habit of waiting and hoping that the government or some other outside agency will come in and solve the problem. To launch this campaign, an “Ending Poverty Summit” will be held in the fall of 2013. Community leaders will invite all levels of government, micro-finance institutions and development-related agencies working in the region. A major position paper on ending poverty is being prepared for circulation as a first step.

Farmers’ Alliance

A third major development is the formation of a farmers’ alliance, which will combine a cooperative and a research and training institute aimed at improving sustainable agriculture. The collapse of the first “green revolution” approaches to farming (USA style chemical fertilizers, pesticides, engineered seed stock, and mechanized farming methods) is total and devastating in Hunza. Soil is depleted. Chemical inputs now cost far more than the farmers can afford, and market for the principal cash crop (potatoes) is no longer a viable option due to skyrocketing transportation costs over the lake.

It is interesting to note that smallholder farmers (i.e, those farming on very small parcels of land) the world over are experiencing a similar crises. What is needed in Hunza (and has been very effective elsewhere) is a “second green revolution”, shifting toward organic and sustainable farming methods.

When presented with thinking and research from farmer campaigns around the world, in which yields have doubled and farm incomes have significantly increased using sustainable (eco-friendly) agriculture methods, Hunza farmers were unanimous in agreeing to work together to make this critical shift in Hunza. The new Farmers’ Alliance will be nurtured and developed under the umbrella of recently strengthened institutions HiMaT has been supporting for the past several years. A position paper exploring this important development and the thinking behind it is being prepared for study and further consideration by farmers.

On our Way Home

As we write this, our trip is drawing to a close. We don’t know if we will get a flight or have to drive back to Islamabad but, in any case, we will be there on the 7th and 8th for meetings and we will fly back to Canada, arriving home on May 9th. We are truly grateful for your continued support—each and all of you. The little miracle that is HiMaT, getting such result on contributions of between \$60,000 and \$80,000 a year is astonishing to witness, especially when we see CIDA projects spending \$4 million a year and accomplishing very little in comparison. Our resolve to continue this work has been redoubled as a result of the hopeful progress being made, serious challenges that remain and the resounding plea from community and area leaders that we not abandon them just as they are beginning to feel hope.

Michael and Judie Bopp