



## RESEARCH PAPER

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## Development and disaster risk reduction: a case study of Bagrot Valley in Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan

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### Abstract

This paper draws from an anthropological study (multi-sited ethnography) of disasters in the Central Karakoram National Park (CKNP), Gilgit-Baltistan with a major focus on perceptions amongst dwellers in the CKNP region about disasters as well as development. The data comes from field work, in-depth interviews and focused group discussions in four valleys including the Bagrot valley near Gilgit. The high mountain communities of the Karakoram have lived in agro-pastoral settings with unique socio-cultural legacy and limited mobility. Dwellers of the valleys have received outside interventions cautiously with a gradual approach and have been able to appropriate the development projects in their contexts with varying degrees of resistance. The dynamics have however changed ensuing the culmination of local kingdoms replaced by government institutions, opening of the Karakoram highway and intervention by Non-Governmental Organizations such as AKRSP. Another dimension of development is the evolution of an institutional mechanism grounded within the valley. The rhetorics about disasters and associated risks are also changing from a predominant notion about disaster as “Act of God” to the concept of mitigation, prevention and preparedness. For the community of Bagrot, the development agenda oscillates between culture, environment and modernity. On one hand Bagrot community is in a bid to regain the ecology of 1970s or before i.e. forests all around with less risks from floods and on the other hand a progressive society of 21st century where the young generation is capable of embracing emerging challenges whilst keeping the cultural values intact.

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## Introduction

The study aimed to explore the perception of local people about development and the way disasters are understood and managed by the local communities. The paper offers an account of development as a global phenomenon, the Pakistan perspective, the context of GB in terms of development and efforts for DRR as part of the development agenda. What follows is the background, materials and methods, results and discussions and finally conclusion.

Development is a contested concept, as in the wake of bringing equality in the society, development itself is breeding “inequality” (McMichael, 2010). The connotation of development may differ across contexts and disciplines. From anthropological point of view, the development initiatives are “colonial narratives” challenged on the grounds of representing “remote or developing” societies with “irrational” practices in their routine such as “agricultural practices” as opposed to the “mechanized” West (MacDonald, 1998, p. 4). Ranging from the Western perspective of modernity to the Eastern perspective of neo-liberal hegemony, and an ongoing quest for managing change at local levels, the development agenda has so far attempted to resolve many problems and has also resulted in new challenges (Settle, 2010). In this backdrop; development practitioners, academia, researchers, donor agencies, governments, civil society organization or precisely in the developmental terminology ‘stakeholders’ have been struggling with ways and means of developing a sense of ownership amongst communities and making the results of interventions relevant and sustainable.

While the development interventions concentrate regions with poverty and violence, a report of the World Bank reveals that “on average, a country that experienced major violence over the period from 1981 to 2005 has a poverty rate 21% higher than a country that saw no violence” (World Bank, 2001, p. 15). With the decades of experience, the politics of development cannot be ignored as indicated by a recent study from the New York University which suggests that in the post-2015 development agenda,

inclusion of peace and governance is “contentious” among the members states perhaps on “political grounds” (Elgin-Cossart, 2013, p. 4). Said that, under-developed or developing countries, by and large remain appreciative of the otherwise conditional aid coming to provide the economies some oxygen and to enhance the economic activities at a larger scale. The word conditional refers to the mutual agreements between donors and recipients in line with the “strategic and economic interest of donor countries” (Hirvonen, 2005).

In the context of Pakistan, foreign aid has remained volatile over time (Ahmed, 2013). For example in 2011, net official development assistance in the shape of “grants, loans and technical economic assistance” was “1.6 % of the GDP” (P. 6). The foreign aid to Pakistan has been fluctuating invariably, for example, after several years of decline of aid from the US to Pakistan, it was reinstated in 2001 when Pakistan became a front-liner again for US-led war in Afghanistan (Kronstadt, 2013). By the way, USA is one of the leading donors to Pakistan besides some European countries, Japan and UAE. Pakistan has received much aid from different countries but those have failed to bring “fundamental political and economic reforms” which is necessary for a “sustainable progress” (Nancy Birdsall, 2012).

Receiving aid is one factor, however properly spending the money and getting the desired results is a tall order for countries like Pakistan where the systems of governance and management are flawed. In Pakistan, corruption became more “systematic” with the “nationalization of banks, use of foreign aid and infusion of drug money into the economy” (Khan, 2012). Alternatively, numerous Non-Governmental Organizations have taken the arena to create models of development cooperation engaging the government and civil society and one such pioneer model for rural development is AKRSP (Bennett, 1998). AKRSP had its debut from GB and then the model was replicated in rest of the country and abroad.

GB is the so-called fifth province of Pakistan but it is actually a federally administered area, and precisely 'part of a larger conflict-ridden region of Kashmir' between Pakistan and India since their independence from the British rule in 1947 (Hunzai, 2013). With a population of 1.2 million, the "ethno-linguistic" variation in GB shows a clear demarcation of "language, sect and ethnic lines" (Zain, 2010). The cultural values of hospitality, fraternity, caring and sharing are innate to the people of GB, however all this becomes subdued under the shadow of religious intolerance and divisions become so clear in the shape of communal clashes between the two major religious groups i.e. Shia and Sunni mainly since 1988 (Stöber, 2007). Because of its topography, the area was not easily accessible until the opening of Karakoram Highway (KKH) in 1978, which connects Pakistan with the Peoples' Republic of China via Khunjerab Pass. This highway has "important impact on society in terms of links and communication" (Sokefeld, 2012). Because of its strategic importance, the government of Pakistan invested heavily on the 'physical infrastructure' in Gilgit and Baltistan (Benz, 2013). However, the social side needed much more attention hence the gap was filled by AKRSP. In a way, besides the government in GB, a "significant agent of change has been AKRSP" (Ibrahim, 1994).

As a pioneer in rural development, AKRSP, was established on the model of cooperatives propounded by a German Mayor Friedrich Wilhelm Raiffeisen (Khan, 1991). In the 9th year of its operation, Shoaib Sultan Khan as General Manager of AKRSP reflected back on the social mobilization process in GB and shared the three principles that led the foundation of Village and Women Organizations (VO/WOs) under AKRSP. Those principles were: "(a) organize and cooperatively manage their affairs; (b) generate their own capital through savings; and (c) upgrade their human skills" (p. 249).

Development initiatives have been received or perceived in different ways across GB across communities. The sectarian divide within geographic lines can be broadly categorized as Shia dominated Skardu,

Sunni dominant Diamar and Ismaili dominated Ghizer and Hunza (Sokefeld, 2014). Gilgit (including Nagar) is a mix of all three with Shia in majority and Astore with a mix of Sunni and Shia. AKRSP began its projects from Ghizer and Hunza valleys and then expanded to other areas such as Nagar, Baltistan and Asotre. In the context of areas such as Baltistan, in the initial stages of AKRSP's intervention there was a resistance and "skepticism to AKRSP, due to the Ismaili background of the organization" however, gradually "AKRSP has earned respect and trust with the communities" (Ambro, 2006). While referencing Nyborg (2002), Ambro also mentions about the "fatwa" or religious decree against the foreign funds as forbidden or haram which still continues in certain pockets albeit not much pronounced. These responses are quite natural in any social or cultural setting where they have set norms and values and any idea or product from outside may be challenged or resisted. However, the level of resistance and the process of adapting to emerging situations may differ from area to area. For example in the Diamar area, the resistance still remains as compared to areas such as Bagrot, Nagar, Astore or Skardu.

In the discourse of development, disaster risk reduction is getting coinage whilst much needs to be done in order to make DRR as part and parcel of the mainstream development activities. As suggested by Amy (2012), due to a strong focus of disaster studies on technological dimensions the social dimension of risks has often been overlooked. Hence, scholars and practitioners need to pay attention to disasters as holistic phenomena in order to balance out physical and social dimensions of disasters to which the development agenda is not an exception.

## Material and method

### Study area

The study was conducted in the CKNP area of Gilgit-Baltistan in a catchment area of around 10,000 square kilometres. The CKNP came into existence in 1973 and covers parts of four districts, namely: Hunza-Nagar, Gilgit, Skardu, and Ghanche (Saeed Abbas, 2014).

As a result of the new administrative setup that came to force in 2015, the CKNP area now comprises of six districts i.e. Hunza, Nagar, Gilgit, Skardu, Shigar and Ghanche. The park area is inhabited by 97,608 people spreads over nearly 230 villages with 13,159 households (Calligaris, Poretti, Tariq, & Melis, 2013). The fieldwork took place in four valleys of the CKNP areas including Bagrot valley which lies at a distance of 40 kilometres from Gilgit, the capital of Gilgit-Baltistan.

#### *Data collection*

This was an ethnographic study combining participant observation, In-depth interviews, and Focused Group Discussion (FGDs). The fieldwork about disaster risk management and spanned over a period of 14 months with regular visits and stays in villages and valleys in the study area. This exercise involved different strategies as described by Atkinson & Hammersley (2007), “participating in peoples” daily lives, watching what happens, listening to what is said, posing questions using formal, or informal interviews and gathering the “whatever data are available” for in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (p. 3). Between 2012 and 2014, researchers also got opportunities to facilitate capacity building and awareness sessions for representatives of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). The researchers also attended consultative sessions and meetings of practitioners and stakeholders in the field of DRR. Visits to different local organizations and discussions with officials and volunteers offered insights regarding the field experiences of such organizations with special reference to development and DRR.

#### *Data analysis*

The researchers employed grounded theory as an approach to organise and handle data from the field. Grounded theory is a research approach or method which “calls for an interplay between data collection and data analysis to produce theory during a research process (Bowen, 2006). The entire data from field notes, interviews and FGDs was transcribed and imported to software called MaxQDA 12. The data was then coded which made basis for different themes and concepts.

### **Results and discussion**

As part of a doctoral field work in Askole, the farthest village in Braldu, Baltistan during the early 1990s an anthropologist realized that the intervention of AKRSP had not yet reached the last village, however in the town areas, imported seeds were provided to farmers for improved production. To the surprise of the representatives of AKRSP, the residents of Askole had already acquired seeds through their own contacts from the town area and tested those in their context before an intervention by AKRSP (MacDonald, 1998). It is therefore interesting to see that from the perspectives of many locals, it was an opportunity to go for alternatives and improve their lot. The same tendency of encountering the process of change by the locals was noted by a German anthropologist during her field work in GB where she noted that the local people of Gilgit, Hunza and Bagrot embrace the process of change wisely and “constantly interpret foreign ideas and goods along locally established values” and “either discard, appropriate, or adopt” those according to their own context (Walter, 2014, p. 46).

To this end, the case of Bagrot valley is presented in order to understand the dynamics of community’s response to outside intervention over time and the gradual process of negotiating along the lines of socio-cultural intricacies of norms and values. In a collective manner, the community of Bagrot is making its way towards addressing all dimensions of emergent problems irrespective of the general episteme of the development per se.

#### *From skepticism to cooperation*

During the field work aimed at understanding the perception of communities about disaster risks, we realized a general expression of willingness to cooperate with organizations or outsiders to diminish the stigma of resistance albeit minor apprehension of Ulema or religious leaders is still inherent. Members of the community ascribe the general shift in response to the outer world to the growing level of education,

awareness and exposure especially for the educated cadre and youth. One of my interlocutors compared the developments of Bagrot with Hunza valley narrating that the people of Hunza have not resisted change hence a more educated and developed society. This can also be seen as a healthy competition for creating an enabling environment making pace with the changing times. He further elaborated that in 1967 the government was planning to establish a primary school in Bagrot but the local people were not in favor perhaps considering it as a threat to their cultural values and norms. Another interlocutor shared that now the struggle for education is quite impressive and mentioned of his nephew currently pursuing doctoral studies. In fact until 1991, there was no concept of girls' education in Bagrot when a German anthropologist arrived and established girls' primary school for the first time in the valley with the help of the head master of the boys' school and other community members (Dunsby, 2013). Many of the residents pride for their swift progress in education despite the initial resistance and unwillingness to access education and the positive effects of education on the social fabric i.e. increased awareness about disasters and other phenomenon. This happened because some men had the opportunity to access education in the Gilgit town and upon their return, they motivated the community for education and social development through community organization. This does not mean that they have challenged their social values of cohesion and mutual support. For example, one of my interlocutors mentioned that they still live in joint families.

The young, educated and social activists of Bagrot are extending their support to visiting organizational representatives and researchers with a hope that their efforts will contribute to the well-being and safety of Bagrot valley. One of my interlocutors shared that a team of researchers from Peshawar wanted the community members to accompany them up to the glaciers and they did so happily. Another lady was of the view that in 2012 the attention of government agencies and media was drawn to the threats of GLOF in Bagrot because of his brother's articles on the internet and blogging about the emerging risks from GLOF.

There is a general feeling amongst community about the lack of interest of government in the affairs of the community including disaster risk management. In major disaster events over the last decade, community members have responded on their own and have done the rescue, rehabilitation and reconstruction through community action but have received little attention from the government. However, some training sessions were organized and stockpile of items for emergency situations was provided by Focus Humanitarian Assistance Pakistan, an affiliate of AKDN.

During the flash flood of 2007, 2010, the GLOF events which have been occurring time and again, community members have worked together to overcome the situation. However, they realize that without preparedness and absence of a well-resourced institution, it becomes very challenging to cope with disasters. Hence, the community response and institutional action can be seen as a drive to fill the gap and pull resources from potential sources. Based on past experience of the Village and Women Organizations (VOs/WOs) introduced by AKRSP, the local activists took another step to form a valley level organization name Dubani Development Organization (DDO).

DDO is a valley level organization however, there are also village level organizations or committees for example in Farfu and Bulchi, many years back the community members had formed Forest committees to control illegal logging. The forests of Bagrot are "officially state owned" but the usage of right lies with the community however for cutting big tress, they are liable to get permission from the Forest Divisional Officer" based in Gilgit" (Schmidt, 2000). Until the 1970, Bagrot was accessible only on foot or on the back of horse (P. 219), however, with the road access; there was a growing tendency of selling timber from Bagrot in the Gilgit and surrounding markets for additional income. The social activists of Bagrot realize that degradation of the mountain forest has become a serious threat for the dwellers and a precursor of increased devastation from floods.

Elders of the valley have great concern about the diminishing trend of forest by people who are in a drive to become wealthier. An urgent need for afforestation is strongly emphasized by men and women both old and young. An elder narrated that for afforestation project, requests have been made to the government Forest department but to no avail. They are also expecting DDO to attract funds from resource organizations for this cause.

As a response to the growing trend of Glacial Lake Outburst (GLOF), the community of Bagrot entered in an agreement with the United Nations Development Fund and the District Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) Gilgit for the GLOF Project which is for a period of four years. The agreement was signed with the community of Bagrot valley through DDO (UNDP, 2013). The project works towards a collaborative venture with the local communities in order to reduce the risks from GLOF and enhancing community resilience. For example a course was organized for selected volunteers from the community and some technical information about the “glacial topography” was shared whereas the participants shared their emergent concerns regarding glacier such as “over a ton of glacial ice being cut” by people for selling in the Gilgit market (Lead, 2013).

Through the GLOF project, community members are making efforts to reduce risks from the glacial lake, which brings loss to assets and settlement areas. During my field work, I noticed a heavy dozer working in the middle of the river to make passage way for the prospective flood so that the flood loses intensity before passing by the settlement areas. As part of the project, some protective walls have also been made in order to reduce soil erosion, divert the flow of the perspective flood and reduce its speed and intensity. In May, 2014 there was an event of GLOF and one of my interlocutors narrated his experience as under.

In the recent days, while we were working on the protective wall, there was a sudden burst in Hinarchi glacier. The bund {protective wall} was almost at its final stage but the flood took one part of it.

Thanks God, at that time we were not working on the river side rather we were at an elevated place when the flood came, so there was no loss of life as such. The flood took away many of our tools and equipment also but the village was safe mainly because of the other wall which we had completed just before. The wall which remained intact really saved our village... otherwise; it would have been repetition of the disaster of 1902 which had taken away the whole village.

A Hazard Working Group has been formed under the project so that they provide information to the communities downstream in case of a sudden breakage of glaciers or floods (Bangash, 2015). A latest media report testifies the importance of the hazard watch group and how it has helped in saving 900 lives by informing the villagers well in advance about the potential lake outburst. This is considered by Hussain a local farmer “no less than a miracle” (Reuters, 2015). The paper further describes the experience of the villagers in the following words: “Hussain, 45, was busy weeding his land in the Bagrot valley when young members of a local "hazard watch group" rushed up to him and other villagers, advising them to leave quickly due to the risk of flash flooding”.

The committee members and social activists under the patronage of DDO have been making deliberations on various strategies for risk reduction according to their experiences. For example, regarding flash flood, they have an idea to do some excavation work in the common routes of the flood and make those deeper so that in event of any flood the spillover of debris could be reduced. This suggestion or recommendation came to me time and again from different individuals and sounds a practical solution. DDO has plans to make request to the government and NGOs for resources and the community share would be in kind i.e. labor work and some administrative support through the platform of DDO. This does not diminish their internal strength of facing a situation of disaster with much more courage when they “roll up their sleeves, pull together” and “shelf” any internal conflicts or social differences in order to help each other (Hannigon, 2012, p. 8).

A perception amongst majority of elders visualizes disasters as a wrath-project from Allah mandated to revenge bad deeds or sins and this fear has been increased by the religious leaders to fix the social issues. However, this this is not common to all elders. For example the response of a social activist (80 years) was quite in contrast with other elders as he said:

“Wise and literate people think that it is a scientific phenomenon. They also understand that because of ruthless deforestation, the weather is also changing. For example reduced quantity of rain as well as snowfall is mainly because of lack of forests. And they also understand that more floods are because of naked mountains which used to have thick forests before”.

### Conclusion

To this end, the dynamics of community with special reference to disasters can be seen as an interesting encounter with the “development” project which is part of the problem and solution. Members of the community have realized that how the development interventions create new risks and have also understood how to use development interventions for reducing risks. More precisely, the facility of road was provided to the community in the 1970, a better facility for mobility and social services, but as a first threat to the deforestation project which is still on the go and has enhanced the vulnerability of communities especially in the event of flash floods. Over the years, the encounter of communities with disasters have created a sense of realization about the preservation of natural resources such as forests and engaging with government and development agencies for disaster risk reduction on the other hand in order to promote a safer and progressive society in Bagrot valley.

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