

The Pamirs: recollections and thoughts for the future

Robert Middleton initiated the Aga Khan Foundation programmes in the Pamirs in 1992. In a lecture in Khorog on 24 July 2019, he recalled some of the key moments in the humanitarian relief programme and the development initiatives that followed - as well as the remarkable support given to the AKF programme by international donors, the Tajik government, the authorities of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) and the local population.

On his retirement in 2003 he devoted himself to the promotion of tourism in the Pamirs with his website www.pamirs.org and his research for the first international guidebook on Tajikistan published in 2008 by *Odyssey Books and Guides*. He has also set up two funds for student scholarships and aid to needy families in remote locations in the Pamirs.

He was awarded honorary citizenship of GBAO and Khorog for his services during the Tajik civil war. He recently donated his library and private research papers to the University of Central Asia.

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Носири Хусрав - Саодатнома
Беҳин коре, ки андар зиндагонист,
Накӯхоҳӣ ба кас роҳатрасонист.
Накӯхоҳу ба кас роҳатрасон бош,
Ба сахтӣ чораи бечорагон бош.
Ба корафтода коромӯз мебош,
Ба ҳар дилсӯхта дилсӯз мебош.

Nosir Khusro - Saodatnoma (1)
The best job that one can do in life is
Well-wishing and serving other people.
Be a well-wisher and service-provider to humans,
Be a solution to the poor in the hardship.
Be a teacher to those who are powerless, and
Be a shoulder to every one whose heart is in pain
(Translation Sarfarozi Nyozi)

When I drafted the contract for the first consultants who travelled to GBAO at the end of 1992, I never imagined that this would become my project. Apart from my own family, this was the best thing that happened in my life - and I thank you all.

At the prize-giving ceremony of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in Samarkand in September 1992, a delegation of Tajik Ismailis met with His Highness the Aga Khan and drew his attention to the consequences for GBAO of the break-up of the Soviet Union. As many of you remember, during the Soviet period survival in the Pamirs depended on massive shipments of food and fuel from other parts of the USSR, some through Dushanbe, most (in the winter) through Osh.

His Highness immediately requested that the Aga Khan Foundation initiate studies on the development potential of GBAO, for which the very successful programme in the Northern Areas of Pakistan might serve as a model. I contacted the Swiss government agency for emergency situations, which provided the names of possible consultants. The Foundation also contacted the World Food Programme.

At the end of 1992, two missions were undertaken to GBAO by Swiss and WFP consultants. Both reported that before any development initiatives could be taken, a solution was urgently required for threatened food and fuel shortages due to the interruption of supplies from the states of the former Soviet Union.

Approaches were made to donor agencies for funding an emergency programme for 48,000 people considered to be most at risk during the coming winter. Commitments of some 3 million US dollars were obtained from USAID, the European Communities, a European NGO (EURONAIID), a Dutch NGO (NOVIB) and the Swiss Government. In the case of the USA, I was able to convince the government representative that, although AKF had no experience in emergency aid, it was the most competent partner. I had in my hands the only map available, the one that was published in the 1970s guidebook of the Soviet All-Union Automobile Club, that I had bought in a Moscow subway.

At the end of 1992, the civil war in Tajikistan led many thousands of people to seek refuge in GBAO. It also resulted in a breakdown of food supplies from Dushanbe to the province. The AKF emergency food programme had to meet the needs of the entire population of Gorno-Badakhshan (approximately 242,000, including an estimated 55,000 internally displaced persons still in the region).

My visit to the Swiss aid agency was full of surprises. I explained to Dr. Lorenzo Amberg that I was on a mission for a region of which he had probably never heard. "On the contrary," he said, "in 1991 I was the Red Cross delegate in the Pamirs and travelled all over the region." The Swiss remained good partners in all phases of the programme.

I travelled to Moscow in December 1992 to meet with a GBAO delegation (Daulat Khudonazarov, Khudoberdi Kholiqnazarov, Dalier Rakhmatulloyev and others). We agreed that a new NGO, the Pamir Relief Programme (PRP - PPP in Russian), should be set up, through which humanitarian aid could be channelled. PRP should be managed by local people under the supervision of AKF. Daulat and Khudoberdi travelled with me to Aiglemont on 25 December 1992 to meet His Highness and got his blessing for setting up the programme.

DAULAT - KHUDOBERDI 3

PRP was registered in Moscow in April 1993 and in Khorog shortly afterwards. PRP became PRDP when funding was received later in the year to add a development component to the humanitarian programme. PRDP became MSDSP when the programme was extended beyond the Pamirs (to Garm and Kulob).

Working from the opulent office of the President of the All-Union Film-makers' Association, I appointed Yuri Khubonshoyev as programme co-ordinator in Moscow with primary responsibility for procurement.

YURI 4

In February 1993 I travelled to Osh to meet with the heads of the various GBAO government agencies involved in the distribution of food and other supplies in order to assess immediate needs. On the basis of their recommendations, I began looking for money and Yuri for sources of supply in Moscow, Dushanbe, Bishkek and Almaty. AKF entered into an agreement with PRP/PRDP for it to act as an AKF agent in concluding contracts.

Thanks to the positive support received from President Emomali Rakhmon at a meeting in August 1993, permission was given for the initiation of the Foundation's activities. Similarly, total support and understanding were expressed by the Russian authorities.¹ President Rakhmon invited His Highness the Aga Khan to make an official visit and appointed Qozidavlat Qoimdodov as the government liaison officer with AKF. I am happy to see Qozidvlat again in his new capacity as AKDN resident representative; we spent many hours together co-ordinating activities in GBAO: his help was vital.

The Osh operation was set up on the basis of a letter from Askar Aitmatov (then deputy Foreign Minister of the Kyrgyz Republic, later Foreign Minister) dated end-1992, that had been dictated by the US Ambassador, Stanley Escudero, who remained a good friend of AKF. At the beginning, it was a joint operation between AKF/PRDP and the GBAO government transport companies, using the latter's storage facilities for food and petrol arriving by rail in Osh. Monitoring was however undertaken by PRDP Osh (Yuri) and an expatriate monitor (Peter Burgess). Without Yuri's negotiating skills in dealing with suppliers, rail transport mafia and police and customs administrations in Moscow and Osh, there would have been famine in the Pamirs.

OSH PHOTOS 5-6

The first deliveries of wheat began in the spring of 1993. I well remember an article in the local press by Halima Khushqadamova, then working in the Tajik Embassy in

¹ With thanks to: Foreign Ministry (Deputy Ministers Anatoly Adamishin and Albert Chernyshov; Alexander Vladichenko, Yuri Mikhailovich Kotov, Viktor Zotin and Sergei Nikolayev in the Central Asia division); the Military (Lt. General Leonid Grigorievich Ivashov); the Ministry of Emergency Situations (Col. Gennadi Vasilievich Filatov); the Embassy in Dushanbe; the border guards in Khorog and Murghab (various commanders during the period 1993-2003); and Vyacheslav Alexandrovich Mikhailov, Minister for Nationalities Affairs. (It is interesting to note that, until 2001, Russia had a Ministry for Nationalities Affairs, successor to Stalin's People's Commissariat for Nationalities, now the Federal Agency for Nationalities Affairs; Minister Mikhailov received me in 1994: he was very well informed about the people of the Pamirs, expressed great interest in the plans for Aga Khan Foundation programmes in Tajikistan and set up meetings for me.) In Moscow, during negotiations for the preparation of the Aga Khan's first visit to GBAO in 1995, the head of the border guards, General Andrei Ivanovich Nikolayev, was asked how his troops would respond if there was a sudden influx of the Aga Khan's followers from Afghanistan over the Panj. "We would shoot", he said - long pause - "in the air." In Dushanbe, the Russian Ambassador, Mecheslav Ivanovich Senkevich, made a (French-speaking!) translator available for my first meetings with Tajik officials (as did the US Ambassador, Stanley Escudero).

Moscow, describing the excitement of the people in Khorog as the first trucks arrived from Osh. The wheat was not the best quality, but the programme had started.

In 1995, I strengthened the Osh operation by putting Zulfia Safarmamadova in charge. She was an excellent manager.

Between 1993 and 2001, the Aga Khan Foundation delivered an annual average of 23'000 tons of humanitarian assistance from Osh. Deliveries peaked at 34'000 tons in 1996. The main donors (by order of magnitude) were government agencies in the USA, Germany, the European Union, the United Kingdom, Switzerland and Canada. The heroes of the programme were the drivers who drove in all weathers from Osh to all destinations in GBAO in 5-ton 'Zil' trucks: 4'600 round-trips per year at an average of 1'500 km per journey. I worked out once that the total kilometers travelled by the Zil trucks corresponded to a journey to the moon and back!

DRIVERS - TRUCKS 7-8

Once the first food shipments had been organised, it was possible to begin preparation of the development programme.

A consultant of Afghan origin from the Austrian refugee committee came to GBAO in the Spring of 1993 and began the search for personnel for a Khorog office. I made my first visit in July with Pat Peterson, the AKF agricultural specialist. One of the last persons we recruited was Yodgor Faizov. He was not convinced that the Soviet Union was finished and wanted to stay on in the Komsomol. I hope he now sees that it was a good decision.

YODGOR - HUKUMAT VOMAR 9-10

As you know, we obtained from the government of GBAO an agreement to privatise progressively the state farms. I am particularly happy that the first on the list was the Dzerzhinsky sovkhos; it is a name that will always be associated with the worst excesses of the Soviet Union. However ironic it may appear, however, we conveyed the message to the farmers that we were following in Lenin's footsteps in giving them back their land. Yodgor was the new Lenin.

DECREE - PHOTO 11-14

We returned in September 1993 with a team of international experts who produced a comprehensive report on a development strategy for GBAO, that was endorsed by the AKF Board at the end of the year. The remarkable thing for my colleagues and me was that the "Pakistan model" was not relevant. Instead of bringing in large numbers of expatriate experts, we found we could rely on the very high level of education and professional competence among the GBAO elite.

MSDSP 15-18

There were only two problems: budgeting and dialogue. On budgeting, I had to insist that the figures proposed should be realistic. Yodgor's answer: "But we always used to ask for double what we needed because the government organs cut it in half any way."

On dialogue, the Pamiri people are much too polite to say "No!". On one occasion Yodgor said he did not agree with something I had said, and immediately apologised. He was surprised when I told him that this was my happiest moment in the programme so far, because now we could really have a dialogue.

My thanks go to all the remarkable people who were involved in the programme from the beginning, particularly President Rakhmon; on the occasion of His Highness's visit in 1995, he was gracious enough to say to me: "You see, this is what we began in 1993."

Above all, I must thank the wonderful people that I met all over GBAO - especially the children: a community that has such beautiful children is blessed indeed.

CHILDREN 19-33

I made a point of visiting the highest and furthest villages in the valleys, because it was there, in Ghudara, Poi Mazor, Jamak, Djavshangoz, Bachor, Sagirdasht and Shirgin, that the people were the poorest and needed AKF help the most. I also made a point of taking people from Khorog with me because they had absolutely no idea how the people lived and survived there; if life was not good in Khorog it was precarious in most places elsewhere.

VILLAGES 34-42

I had great pleasure from two very special programmes.

SCHOOL UNIFORMS 43-44

First the "school uniform programme". Visits to the villages just mentioned showed that some families could not send all of their children to school regularly, because there was only one set of clothes for the whole family. On seeing a photograph of Manucher from Ptup, the European Commission representative in Brussels immediately made a grant that enabled us to give work to the sewing factory in Khorog and provide uniforms and shoes for almost all children.

TENNIS BALLS 45-46

Second, my personal "tennis ball programme." Having seen at a very early stage that not only did many children not have enough to eat or wear, they also had nothing to play with. I distributed about 5'000 tennis balls in the villages - several of you may have received one. One of the first went to boy in Pish who bit it, thinking it was an apple!

SHODIBEK FAMILY GHUNT /KHALIFA YOGED/MOHIJEHAN 47-53

For those coming from Western Europe and North America, your hospitality is something extraordinary.

MUSIC AND DANCING 54-69

I learned very early that to be listened to during my visits to the villages, it was most important to dance with the welcome committee on arrival.

HASSAN-HUSSEIN PILLARS 70

I soon learned also the appropriate seating arrangements in the Pamiri house, always leaving a place next to the Hassan/Hussein pillars for the Khalifa in case he joined the celebration - and to dance as often as possible.

Sheep's eyes were a problem - until I negotiated with Rais Idris Shajanov that foreign guests should be allowed to choose symbolically any small piece of meat from the head (the ear, for example), leaving the eyes and the (very fat) tail for our Murghab hosts. I remember receiving the Swiss Ambassador and his wife in Abubakir's yurt south of Murghab and giving strict instructions that the toilet should be hygienic for our guests. On arrival, Abubakir proudly showed me the "White House" - wooden posts wrapped in white flour sacks from the United States Department of Agriculture.

ABUBAKIR'S YURT 71-74

Beginning in 1994, the GBAO Hukumat, under the leadership of Alimamad Nyozmamadov, accepted, with the agreement of the government in Dushanbe, that the sovkhos could be privatized. The first distribution of land began in Bartang and was such a success that the other districts quickly followed. Ishkashim was the last; I used to ask as a joke why only the men greeted me when I came to the villages in Ishkashim. The answer was that the men were all standing in the road while the women were all working in the fields. Gradually, local wheat production increased and the humanitarian programme slowed down.

You are, today, still dependent on remittances from your family members working in Russia and elsewhere, but the markets are full and food production is relatively high.

What does the future hold?

The opening of the Khorog campus of the University of Central Asia is a beacon of light, showing the way not only to intellectual achievement but, through the School of Professional and Continuing Education (SPCE), to the improvement of practical skills and entrepreneurship (especially for women).

Economic development is, however, a long process. You have and are developing the skills and the initiative. Outside help is necessary to bring in capital. Perhaps a Chamber of Commerce or a trade delegation to the main European, Asian and North American capitals could be organised with the help of the central government and AKDN.

In 2013, I was invited to make presentations at the Shanghai Forum and Fudan University. During my stay, I had several conversations with senior professors and advisers to the government and suggested some form of co-operation between GBAO and the Kashgar Prefecture. Obviously, this is a highly political question for both governments and I understand that there is some reticence towards Chinese investment: the Road and Belt initiative brings not only benefits but frequently heavy

financial obligations. Co-operation in the field of tourism should however be relatively risk-free.

During one of my first visits to Khorog in 1993, I had the privilege of addressing the Majlis. The little I had seen of the beautiful Pamirs, combined with the spontaneous hospitality of the people, suggested that tourism could become a useful source of income. I said, partly as a joke, that I would like to become an honorary member of the GBAO tourism board.

Strangely enough, this is more or less what happened.

When I retired from AKF in 2003, I thought hard about how I could continue to help the people of GBAO and decided that a website on the Internet would be the best way of advertising the attractions of the region. Thus was born www.pamirs.org, which soon became the primary Internet source of information on the Pamirs. Through the website I was able to help local travel companies establish contacts with European and other travel agencies, and advised these agencies on itineraries.

When I began the website in 2003, there were just three foreign agencies organising trips to GBAO, all in Switzerland. Today, there are nearly one hundred. In 2003 there were no local tour operators; today there are more than a dozen. I allow them all to advertise freely on my website. You can see the results on the streets of Khorog: mainly young people with backpacks but increasingly older adults who are willing to pay more for a comfortable homestay and an air-conditioned jeep.

In 2007, I laid the groundwork for the creation of the Pamirs Eco-Cultural Tourism Association (PECTA) and drafted its constitution and guidelines for its programme. In 2008, PECTA was formally incorporated and continues to do an excellent job of promoting tourism, with an emphasis on "community-based" activities. PECTA members made me an honorary member, of which I am proud.

I am also proud to have helped to obtain funding for the protection of archaeological sites and the publication by UCA of the GBAO sections of Mira Bubnova's *Археологическая Карта Таджикистана*, a comprehensive survey of all archaeological sites and artefacts in the Pamirs.

MIRA BUBNOVA 75

I greatly admire Yorali Berdov's work for the promotion of local handicrafts and was able to find small amounts of funding for the start of these activities.

YORALI 76

I congratulate all the homestay owners who receive guests, the drivers who take them there and the guides (especially my favourites, the Women Rocking Pamirs). Many things have also changed since 2003 in the urban centres. Not only are there lively markets, but also restaurants and hotels. My congratulations to all these entrepreneurs who are bringing profits to GBAO.

HOMESTAYS 77-78

In 2006, I was approached by Magnus Bartlett, the publisher of the Odyssey tourist guides. Odyssey had guides on Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan. He was planning the first ever guide to Tajikistan: would I be willing to act as a consultant to the editor? I travelled to Liverpool with Peter Burgess to meet the editor and we agreed in principle to help, but within a few weeks the editor had resigned. The publisher asked if I would take over. I said "Yes, for a book on the Pamirs."

And so began my collaboration with Huw Thomas, my co-author who wrote on the other regions of Tajikistan. Huw had also worked for AKDN and was programme Director of the Aga Khan Health Services in Khorog from 1999-2003. Sadly, Huw died in 2018, but his sections of the book are a monument to his love of the country.

I obtained a grant from the Swiss government and the first edition was published in 4'000 copies in 2008. Remarkably, after only two years, almost all copies had been sold (of a guidebook to a country that was certainly not a top tourist destination). A second edition of 5'000 copies was published in 2011, again with some Swiss funding.

As you certainly know, there is in Europe a large group of lovers of the Pamirs, many of whom have worked here at one time or another. Two of the most active are Markus Hauser and Roman Droux from Switzerland, but there are others in Germany and Britain. Markus Hauser's map of the Pamirs was the first for the non-Russian speaking market and is now in its second edition. Roman Droux wrote a dissertation on hydro-power in the Bartang valley and continues to fund projects there, most notably in Bassid. He also founded an association called PamirLink, that offers "unconventional journeys into the remote mountains of the Tajik Pamirs: Their focal point is the mutual exchange between the local inhabitants and the tourists," with emphasis on ecology and sustainable development.

I have recently decided to transfer my website www.pamirs.org to the PamirLink association and you will soon see it in a new format, with even more useful information.

Tashakur 79

This has been an adventure. Many thanks for sharing it with me.