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Gilgit-Baltistan Area Programme

Programme Scope/Objectives

The goal of the programme is sustainable development through culture and strategic investments. These are social, economic and institutional processes that aim to protect, manage and promote cultural heritage as an integral part of sustainable development. The hope is to enable effective and participatory community stewardship of heritage and environmental resources, and to create income and enterprise opportunities for communities based on proactive cultural heritage management. This has entailed the restoration of monuments and the improvement of living conditions through housing, sanitation, local capacity building, revival of arts and crafts, and the creation of new employment and income opportunities.

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Defining the region are the Karakoram Mountains and the Indus River with its several tributaries, with the Himalayas extending in the south and the Hindu Kush range in the east while the Pamirs cordon the north.

It is home to the high mountain valleys of Hunza and Baltistan, located in the upper catchment area of the Indus River and deep within the Karakoram, where nature with its peaks, glaciers, rivers and streams is omnipresent. Terraced fields draw water from a great distance through extremely well-engineered irrigation channels, attesting to efforts to make the best use of nature under harsh living conditions.

The location of the region is sensitive and strategic because of its boundaries with Afghanistan (Wakhan territory), with China and with Indian-held Kashmir. The construction of the Karakoram Highway (KKH), connecting Islamabad with Kachgar over the Khunjerab Pass (over 4700 metres), added to its importance, while the construction of further roads connecting Skardu with the KKH has given this region even more significance. The hydroelectric power potential of the Indus river system in Gilgit-Baltistan is another reason for the region’s significance.

The area may be perceived as impenetrable, but it has historically provided conduits for trade between Central Asia and South Asia, with some of the strands of the Silk Road passing through it. This vast mountainous region is populated by heterogeneous communities and tribes of fairly distinct ethnic and linguistic groups, deriving their origin from Aryan, Scythian, Mongolian, Tibetan, Turanian and Caucasian stock.

The earliest forms of religion reaching this region seem to be Hinduism, in time supplanted by Buddhism, before the spread of Islam between the ninth and the fourteenth centuries. The languages spoken in the region are Shina around Gilgit, and Balti, a form of Tibetan in Baltistan. People of Hunza and Nagar speak Burushaski. Other languages or dialects spoken in Gilgit-Baltistan are Wakhi, Khowar, Turki, Kashmiri and Gujri. Urdu is understood and spoken in almost all areas, while English is gaining ground, particularly with the young.
Over time these peoples developed life styles that meshed fully with local environmental conditions. Frugality, self-dependence, optimal use of resources, and community endeavour emerged as their bedrock. The mountainous terrain is such that barely 1.5 per cent of the land is available for habitation. Water, though running in mighty rivers, was too far down to be readily harnessed. Streams were tapped and brought to parcels of land such as alluvial fans for seasonal crops through ingenious water channels. Only ‘useful’ trees were planted and looked after, with the apricot being a favourite, while quick-growing poplar was preferred for use in construction. The insufficiency of precipitation and the consequent lack of natural forests, particularly in Hunza, coupled with the burden of creating stone from huge rocks and the scarcity of available land resulted in the construction of multi-purpose single-room dwellings. These, typically, have a storeroom attached, and are made of mud and stone with no chimney or window, only a square hole in the centre of the roof over a fireplace where the cooking was done. Walls are tied in at various levels by wooden beams. A typical Hunza house presents a unique architectural design combining space, security and comfort, with a second storey for summer use. These houses clustered together to form settlements built on barren land that was of no use for the cultivation of crops. Their small size helped conserve energy required for heating as well as other resources. The cluster was also intended to provide security, as protective walls and watchtowers witness.

The first habitations in Hunza are reported to be those of Ganish, Altit and Baltit (since 1960 Karimabad), where khuns (fortified settlements) were formed, and water from the Ultar was taken to irrigate land. Over time watchtowers were added and the forts at Altit and Baltit took their present form. Skilled artisans from Baltistan reportedly carried out the work.

With easier access to and from Kashmir and having historical links with Tibet, Baltistan developed at a faster pace than Hunza. It generally also has bigger open spaces compared to Hunza, and has better resources in terms of land, or tree cover. Of the five valleys of Baltistan, Shigar is perhaps the most attractive. The valley is fertile with abundant water. Situated at an elevation of over 2440 metres, Shigar and the Shigar River drains the waters of the glaciers, feeding into the Indus. The Baltoro glacier, one of the largest in the Karakoram, begins at the north-west end of the valley. This is the main route for mountaineers headed to K2 and the Gasherbrums.

The other important valley in the area is Khaplu, which has borders with Ladakh (Indian-held territory). The average elevation of this valley is 2740 metres. Mountaineers on their way to the Masharbrums and the Saltoro range have to pass through Khaplu. Traditional housing here shows a great range in the use of timber, and has larger spaces as well as two-storey structures that use innovative wooden pillars. The palaces and forts are better developed and places of religion also testify to the rich architectural heritage that is regionally standard. A number of these forts or palaces, though relocated to lower sites during the Dogra regime, offered opportunities for restoration and adaptive reuse.

Our inventory of important cultural buildings in Gilgit-Baltistan includes eight major forts and palaces and nearly twenty minor ones; forty-five khanqahs (Sufi retreats), 150 mosques, over fifty archaeological sites, thirty important tombs and fifty traditional polo grounds. Gilgit-Baltistan contains a very rich and pluralistic heritage – representative of Muslim cultures, but also of Buddhist and Hindu influences.

As mentioned, strands of the Silk Road passed through the Hunza and Indus valleys. Commerce, art, skills, ideas, religious faiths, languages and technology passed between East and West through these mountains. The cross-fertilization that occurred facilitated
The revival of traditional crafts, such as weaving and embroidery, has been an important part of the socio-economic programmes. Trades such as carpentry have been fostered, and the handing down of household traditions has been encouraged.

Cultural development necessitating the involvement of local partner organizations, such as the Town Management Societies, the Karakoram Area Development Organization and the Baltit Heritage Trust, proved essential to building ownership and sustainability in the future for these projects. Between 1992 and the present, not only have the three forts of Baltit, Altit and Shigar been conserved and put to use for the benefit of the communities, but work on Khaplu Palace is continuing, with completion expected in 2012. Sixteen historic settlements have been rehabilitated, a number of monuments and houses have been stabilized, and seven public buildings built, demonstrating traditional construction techniques and the use of local building materials. Two major enterprises were established: one in Hunza for embroidery and rugs, and one in Baltistan for apricot kernel oil and production of wood products (carving, construction and furniture). These efforts were backed up with the establishment of a number of new institutions.

The experience of conservation of Baltit Fort, and rehabilitation of the traditional settlement just below it, indicated that meaningful restoration work needs to be associated with rehabilitation of traditional settlements as well as promotion of building techniques that can thus have an area development effect. Conservation of the Fort/Palace and the improvement of living conditions in the adjoining settlements was started simultaneously in Shigar and Khaplu, while in Altit, community-based built-environment upgrading and rehabilitation – a process for conserving historic villages and settlements by providing basic sanitation, water supply, electrification and street paving – was undertaken. Community spaces were restored prior to the conservation of the Fort itself. Economic empowerment of the community involving the revival of skills, particularly those of masons and carpenters, and the creation of modern skills, such as engaging young men and women in documentation functions, were part of the process. It became clear that a broad range of activities was needed to complement these efforts, including the revival of arts and crafts through an enterprise process. Meaningful cultural development necessitating the involvement of local partner organizations, such as the Town Management Societies, the Karakoram Area Development Organization and the Baltit Heritage Trust, proved essential to building ownership and sustainability in the future for these projects.

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Background

**BRIEF HISTORY OF PROGRAMME AREA**

Hunza, nesting in the shadows of the Karakorams, first gained notoriety and fame from its location, the possession of which was coveted by the two expanding rival empires during the 18th century in Asia. Russia under the czar in Central Turkistan advancing towards the Indian borders, and the British Indian empire expanding to the north. In 1842 Sikhs who held Kashmir as part of their domain entered Gilgit, opening the way for the Dogra rulers to get a foothold in the region. The latter had acquired Kashmir after the British had broken the Sikhs' power in the Punjab and the treaty of Amritsar was signed, in accordance with which Kashmir (which included the territories of Baltistan and Astore) was transferred in 1846 to Maharaja Gulab Singh, the latter had acquired Kashmir after the British had broken the Sikhs' power in the Punjab and the treaty of Amritsar was signed, in accordance with which Kashmir (which included the territories of Baltistan and Astore) was transferred in 1846 to Maharaja Gulab Singh, the Dogra chief from Jammu. Realising its strategic importance, in 1842 the area was taken away from the maharaja under a treaty by the British. The region was directly administered by the British, while Baltistan continued to be administered by the Kashmiri Sisak as part of Ladakh, which was conquered by Sikh and Dogra troops before 1842. In December 1831 a successful campaign was conducted against Hunza/Nagar. The main battle was fought at a place called Nil T Nilt in Nagir. In 1935 the Government of India arranged with the maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir to lease a for 90 years whereby all the territory except Baltistan and Azore areas would be administered by the British Raj. In 1947 Independence of India and Pakistan) the whole area was returned under the control of the maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir who appointed a Governor in Gilgit with military garrisons in Gilgit and Baltistan. On 31 October 1947, the control of the Jammu and Kashmir administration was vested in the maharaja's representative in Gilgit and his troops were ousted by a successful War of Liberation in favour of Pakistan. On the request and invitation from the committee of Gilgit-Baltistan, the Government of Pakistan took over the administration in mid November 1947 which in 1948 was extended to Baltistan following its liberation.

**Challenges**

**DEMOGRAPHICS**

In 1991 the overall population for Gilgit-Baltistan was estimated to be 2.5 million. In 2002, the rate of population growth is estimated to be 2.5%. Gilgit and Skardu are the main towns with populations estimated at 102,020 and 90,000 respectively.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

The construction of the Karakoram Highway (KOH) which connected Islamabad to Khaplu, and the construction of other roads linking all the major towns with Gilgit, also opened the area up to outside influences. The ease of having construction materials at hand, such as cement and corrugated iron sheets, had a major negative impact, as, rather than relying on local materials such as stone, proper wood and mud bricks that were suitable for the extreme climatic conditions, these so-called modern constructions started to encroach into the area. Arising this trend and leaning design and construction to respect local materials and traditional construction techniques is an area of focus for AKTC work in Hunza and Baltistan.

Significant Issues and Impact

**MASTER PLANNING PROCESS**

In Hunza, the process was based on participatory inputs. Meetings and detailed follow-ups by experts with the community and with government planning departments were held and options explored, resulting, in the construction of a Master Plan. In Shigar, with the community and government representatives on board and in collaboration with other agencies such as World Conservation Union (IUCN), land-use plans were generated.

BASELINE STANDARDS

These relied on Aga Khan Rural Support Programme’s (AKRSP) surveys in most cases for data on the socio-economic conditions. For physical surveys, teams were trained locally and employed. Some of these teams, especially women-based ones, were further supported and have since 2005 been carrying out excellent survey work.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC INITIATIVES

The first initiative was the Swiss-funded ‘Karakoram Handicraft Development Programme’ (KHDP), with a focus on reviving the traditional art of embroidery work, which has since been subsumed by the Karakoram Area Development Organization (KHADO). KHADO, on the other hand, was initiated in 1996 as an action research programme, when the community in Hunza, the Swiss Development Cooperation Agency (SDC) and AKSP decided to revive crafts and promote entrepreneurship and economic development with a special focus on women. The success of the action research phase in 1996 and the formation of a regional body – KHADO as a local institutional body representing Hunza Valley – offered AKSHP the opportunity to transfer the operational responsibility for KHADO to KHADO in a staggered manner. Capacity building for KHADO during the early phase of the project, especially in administrative and financial skills, facilitated this handing-over. KHADO advised 300 women, working out of their homes, to enhance their income through production of embroidery work – a craft which Hunza women had prided themselves for over generations but which was dying out. In Baltisa

ant, a similar organization, the ‘Baltistan Enterprise Development and Art Revival’ (BEDAR) was set up by the Baltistan Culture Foundation (BCF) and AKSHP with

funding from the SDC. BEDAR is the Urdu word for ‘awakening’ and was chosen for its symbiotic connections with regard to the resurrection of traditional values. Initiated in July 2003, BEDAR selected a number of production lines. Of these, woodwork has achieved the best results, while responding to a local and regional demand using the comparative advantage strategy to effect. In woodworks, woodcarving and production of skis (often considered) – a traditional skill that was recently on the verge of extinction – have been revived by apprenticing young trainees with masters (‘masters’ and the products they are being sold in the markets. The small workshop was expanded and now furniture and construction carpentry are the main products. The allure for substitution of imported goods, since furniture items were trucked in all the way from Ismailabad, a road journey of ten days. Producing local proper wood furniture of a reasonable standard in Baltistan helps the local economy. The large numbers of positive parallels with the help of AKRSP have become an economic resource, and plenty of wood-related employment opportunities are emerging.

QUALITY OF LIFE

In order to meet the ever increasing needs for proper sanitation systems, an initial project was conceived and launched in Karimabad to cater for the needs of people living in the historic settlements. Based on positive results, these efforts were extended and through a community-based initiative the historic villages of Karimabad, Gahib and Altit now have these facilities. In Baltistan, the Shigar community decided to use traditional community toilets; these have been improved through better design and better locations. In Altit, Shigar and Khaplu clean drinking-water projects were launched that provide water for the restored landmark monuments while also supplying water to the adjoining settlements.

**Partners**

**COMMUNITY PARTNERS**


**Authoritative Framework**

Frameworks – known as ‘Term of Partnership’ (TOP) – were negotiated for each of the project interventions with the beneficiary community. These TOPs laid down the roles with AKSHP’s mission having technical responsibility, while the community would be responsible for the social aspects and for subsequent use of the project.