



The Operation of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) in Central Asia

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Abstract

The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) was founded in 1967 by Aga Khan 4, the spiritual leader of the Shi'i Imami Nizari Ismaili Muslims. Guided by the Islamic ethics of helping the needy, the AKDN seeks to improve the quality of life of the poor in 30 countries. While inspired by faith, the organizations of the AKDN are secular in nature and reject any kind of proselytization. The AKDN has been present in Central Asia since early 1990's where it manages concerted and integrated developmental programs to attain economic, social and cultural development. Operating in Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, the AKDN has been striving to create projects that will enable the local population to attain self-reliance and develop their conditions of living. The work of the AKDN in Central Asia ranges from finance, tourism, agriculture, infrastructure, education, healthcare and habitat, to music initiatives and renovation of historical sites. The AKDN stresses the importance of multidimensional approach to development with the goal of making the local population masters of their own destiny. It embodies hope and support for the poor in the region which is known for entrenched poverty and lack of stability in some specific cases.

Keywords: AKDN, Central-Asia, development

Introduction

Central Asia is one of the most understudied areas in the world despite its historical and current geopolitical and cultural significance. The focus of this research is the operations of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) in Central Asian republics of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan. This research contributes to the academic world in illuminating the operations of the fast-growing civil-society of Central Asia that is mostly residing in harsh economic and geographically isolated regions. This research is based on the information collected during my research field-trip to Central Asia from May to August of 2018, and on relevant online sources that relate to the research. The civil society organizations studied in this investigation are driven by the various organizations of the Aga Khan Development Network which is based on Islamic ethics and is chaired by the spiritual leader of the Shi'i Imami Nizari Ismaili Muslims, Shah Karim al-Husseini Aga Khan IV. The Aga Khan inherited the Imamate, a religious institution that is primarily concerned with the spiritual interpretation of Islam and the quality of living of

it's adherents, from his grandfather Sultan Muhammad Shah, and traces his ancestry to Muhammad the Prophet of Islam. The personal wealth of the Aga Khan is separate from the office of Imamate that comprises tithes payed by the followers of Aga Khan.

The socio-economic and political situation in Central Asian countries ranks low with the young and educated people leaving the region for better standards of living either to Russia or the Persian Gulf countries. Tajikistan and Afghanistan have passed through major wars with thousands of people left handicapped and psychologically injured. While Tajikistan reached the end of its civil war in 1997, Afghanistan is still remaining a politically and socially endangered country. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan rely heavily on remittances earned by the seasonal migrant labor force working in Russia. International NGO's are operating in all three countries under rigorous pressure from the respective governments and are in some cases subject to being denied permission to operate. The AKDN Network organizations however have had stable and friendly relationships with the different governments of Central Asia.

AKDN seeks to create hope and grass-root mobilizations for the betterment of the quality of life through the civil society. This research demonstrates that the AKDN manages concerted and integrated developmental projects to attain economic, social and cultural development in Central Asia, thus enabling itself to empower civil society as a major force for development alongside the state.

Ethical Underpinnings and Development Approach

Ethical underpinnings of the AKDN

In order to understand the ethical underpinnings of the AKDN one has to look at the words of the spiritual leader of the Ismaili's, the Aga Khan 4, who has made it clear in a number of his public speeches and interviews that Islam teaches about the necessity of bridging the spiritual and the material worlds. The Aga Khan sees it as the continuation of his role as an Imam to help people to develop their quality of life:

The engagement of the Imamate in development is guided by Islamic ethics, which bridge faith and society. It is on this premise that I established the Aga Khan Development Network. (Aga Khan 4, 2004).

Seeing the world and faith as inseparable, the Imamate of the Shi'i Ismaili Imam has established the AKDN in 1967 as a way of helping the poor in different societies despite their ethnicity, faith, and race. The Islamic ethic which calls for the necessity to manifest ones work through being an active participant in worldly matters has been central to the founding of the AKDN and it is mirrored in the mandate of the AKDN as published by the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London:

The institutions of the Network derive their impetus from the ethics of Islam which bridge the two realms of faith, *din* and *dunya*, the spiritual and the material. The central emphasis of Islam's ethical ideal is enablement of each person to live up to his exalted status as vicegerent of God on earth. (IIS, 2000)

The underlying Islamic ethics that inform and inspire the AKDN are grounded in spirituality but they manifest themselves through secular institutions in the societies where the AKDN operates. The AKDN is operating in more than 30 countries with a strong emphasis on the poorest areas of Asia and Africa. The ethical framework of Islam inspires AKDN to enable people to gain control over their destiny and become self-reliant, thereby upholding human dignity. Thus, the AKDN upholds the importance of human dignity by: creating an environment that is inclusive and acknowledges the value of diversity; nourishes the spirit of inquiry, tolerance, compassion, sustainability, self-reliance and ethical governance; by shaping concern and consideration for life, health and ethical self-expression (IIS, 2000).

Development Methodology

The development approach used by the AKDN incorporates the human aspect and non-measurable variables of development that seeks to extend beyond mere economics and prosperity. The Network seeks to find, nourish and invest in local leadership, opportunities, capacity, resources and human force to gain maximum efficiency in development. Being inspired by Islamic ethics of recognizing diversity as an inherent and positive norm of humanity, the AKDN is highly aware of the potentiality of homogenization via development projects; therefore, AKDN seeks to limit itself to creating enabling environment and letting the local leadership define for itself the concepts of modernity, development and progress with the set of world-wide best researched practices available at their disposal (Miraly, 2016).

AKDN Development Endeavors in Economy

The AKDN has been active in economic development in Central Asia since the early 1990's when the Central Asian countries gained their independence. The programs of the AKDN's economic development are subsumed in the Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development (AKFED). The AKFED is a transnational organization that seeks to bring economic development via creation of fertile ground for economic prosperity. The AKFED encourages other international investors to invest in Central Asia; thus, it "acts as a magnet for capital" in Central Asia (Ruthven and Daftary, 2011). The AKFED looks over the following programs of economic development in Central Asia: Industrial Promotion Services (IPS), Tourism Promotion Services (TPS), and Financial Services (FS).

The AKFED and The Industrial Promotion Services (IPS)

Through the Industrial Promotion Services (IPS), the AKFED has managed to help Central Asian countries to make a relatively smooth transition to privatization from Soviet centralized planning-system of resources and industries. For example, in Tajikistan the IPS has created the public-private energy producing plant "Pamir Energy" in an isolated mountainous community of Eastern Tajikistan. The IPS has also financed the final phase of the vital infrastructural route, the Pamir Highway (road M16), that connects Kyrgyzstan's Osh to Tajikistan's Murghob, Khorogh and Kulob (Figure 1). The AKFED's initiatives of building other physical infrastructures such as the bridges that connect Tajikistan and Afghanistan over Panj River in Ishkoshim, Tem and Darvoz serve as a catalyzer for economic development by linking the immediate economies of the peoples of these areas. These initiatives increase the mobility of the people and give them better access to markets. Besides physical infrastructure, through ISP the AKFED has also helped Tajikistan and Afghanistan to build critical mobile telecommunication infrastructure such as TCell, Telecom Development Company, and Roshan Mobile Company in respective countries. Thus, by establishing physical and communication infrastructure alongside energy producing plants, the Industrial Promotion Services (IPS) of the AKDN has contributed

tremendously in the economic development of Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan.



Figure 1. The Vanj Bridge built by AKDN connecting Tajik Badakhshan with Afghan Badakhshan. Wilton-Steer, C. (n.d.). *The Vanj Cross-Border Bridge*[Photograph]. AKDN, Vanj, Tajikistan

The AKFED's Financial Services (FS), and Tourism Promotion Services (TPS)

The AKDN's Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development (AKFED) has other programs operating in Central Asia such as Financial Services (FS), and Tourism Promotion Services (TPS) in order to provide economic development. Through the Financial Services (FS), the AKFED has helped Kyrgyzstan to launch the Kyrgyz Investment and Credit Bank (KICB) which have contributed significantly to the economy. The AKDN also operates the First MicroCredit Company (FMFB) in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan. Having visited the First Microfinance Bank in Dushanbe during my research field-work in Tajikistan, I have talked Khursand Mavlonazarov who has worked at FMFB as a senior audit. Khursand Mavlonazarov was mentioning that FMFB is the only bank in Tajikistan that provides microfinance for small business entrepreneurs who are unable to go to other banks due to lack of credit history. The Tourism Promotion Services (TPS) is an affiliate of the AKFED and it seeks to give tourists an access to the natural landscapes of Central Asia without causing ecological harm to nature. The TPS also operates in Afghanistan and Tajikistan by building tourism infrastructure, such as the Serena Hotels in Kabul, Dushanbe and Khorog.

Visiting the Serena Hotel in Dushanbe, I have noticed how Serena has assumed the role of physical cultural ambassador that presents Tajik culture and tradition through hosting various events such as art exhibitions, folk-concerts and other social events that represent Tajik culture. However, in the summer of 2018 the hotel also hosted an event that might not be considered

“traditional”. During the field-trip in the summer of 2018, I visited an art exhibition by a young Tajik artist Marifat Davlatoova that was hosted in Serena. Due to the content of the art, the exhibition provoked public debate about women in Tajikistan and whether this sort of art was appropriate in the Tajik context considering the fact that the paintings were depicting Tajik women in revealing clothes. Ultimately, the AKFED’s programs of Tourism Promotion Services, Financial Services, and Industrial Promotion Services that we have covered in the earlier paragraph, are all part of AKDN’s concerted endeavor to provide economic development to the peoples of Central Asia.

AKDN Endeavors in Social Development

The Aga Khan Development Network represents itself as a force of social change that has a multidimensional approach by bringing social development through various interconnected organizations. Helping the society in self-realization is a mandate of AKDN as a developmental network; however, this mandate goes beyond immediate responsibilities of a developmental network as the AKDN claims that it roots its mandate in the ethical responsibilities of Islam that uphold the wellbeing of the society and those who are less fortunate. Uphold the wellbeing of the society and those who are less fortunate. The AKDN is operating different organizations that concern education, healthcare, habitat, environmental issues, and humanitarian assistance for the social development in Central Asia.

Education

The AKDN places a special importance on providing quality education to the societies in which it operates. Intellectual inquiry is one of the main foundations of the Shi’i Imami Ismaili Imamate; therefore, it puts a strong emphasis on the conquest of knowledge as a means to learn about Allah through his creation, and indirectly as a tool to improve the society:

In contemporary Ismaili thought, then, the ethic of learning encompasses both mystical knowledge and civic education. Following this view, education becomes an important focus area for the AKDN, whose self-articulated goal is to realize the social conscious of Islam by enabling the poor to achieve self-realization. (Miraly, p. 172, 2016)

The AKDN’s endeavor in social development via education includes such initiatives as the University of Central Asia (UCA), Aga Khan Academies (AKA), and Aga Khan Education Services (AKES). The University of Central Asia is one of the most transformative and largest

initiative taken by the AKDN that is of great importance for the region in terms of research, innovation, and investment into the civil society of Central Asia. The University of Central Asia (UCA, Figure 2) has campuses located in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. UCA is an international university with world-standard education and living conditions. I visited the Khorog campus of UCA where I witnessed the transformative force of the University for Khorog City. The University employs hundreds of local residents in various capacities and has created a multiethnic student community that interacts with the local population through various programs. Interviewing Tolibsho Muborakshoev, a student at UCA who studies economics, I found out that the diversity of the student body plays a positive role in the lives of the students by exposing them to diversity and thereby erasing the lack of knowledge about the other.



Figure 2. Students studying at the University of Central Asia, Khorog campus, Tajikistan.
 Source: UCA. (n.d.). *UCA students study local vegetation in the laboratory.*
 [Photograph]. University of Central Asia, Khorog. Akhmatbekov@UCA

Healthcare

Healthcare is another important field in which the AKDN invests for the social development of Central Asia. Taking into consideration the needs of each Central Asian country, the AKDN has put varying emphasis on investing in the healthcare system of each country. For example, in Afghanistan the AKDN's Aga Khan Health Services (AKHS) has established the Bamiyan Hospital (BH), the French Medical Institute for Mothers and Children in Kabul (FMIMCK), and various Community Health Centers that target the reduction of infant mortality and other health related issues. In Tajikistan the AKDN operates the Aga Khan Health Services (AKHS) in Dushanbe and Khorog, where it has opened a Medical Center in 2018. When visiting the Aga Khan Health Services in Dushanbe, I talked to the medical staff and found that the AKHS Center is receiving medical equipment, donations and expertise from the Ismaili communities residing in the West, from countries like Canada, the USA, and the UK. While researching the operations of the AKHS in Tajikistan I met Dr. Marvesh Mendhi who, alongside three other doctors from

the USA, had visited Tajikistan to help build capacity for the medical providers in the Khorog new hospital. Interviewing Dr. Marvesh, I found that she is doing this as a voluntary service that she considers to be part of her spiritual worldview. The AKHS is also working in Kyrgyzstan where it runs a Medical and Diagnostic Centre (AKMDC) and various community related health promotions.

Habitat and Environmental Issues

Lastly, the AKDN has established programs that deal with habitat and environmental issues to contribute to social development in Central Asia. AKDN's initiative in promoting living environment that will foster development in society is enhanced by Focus Humanitarian Assistance (FOCUS). This initiative enables people in environmentally hazardous places to efficiently and safely use natural resources that are otherwise hard to exploit. The Habitat Agency of the AKDN contributes in reducing the fatality of natural risks by introducing various programs that keep the society safe from avalanches, floods, rock-falls and other natural disasters. One of those programs is the Mountain Societies Development Support Program (MSDSP) that is active in Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The MSDSP provides a variety of projects that seeks to enable mountain societies to thrive in isolated and environmentally harsh conditions.

There are also other programs that the AKDN has established in Central Asia to promote social development and security. The AKDN has put a strong emphasis on Early Childhood Development (ECD) and has been rigorous in promoting this initiative through the Aga Khan Foundation. The ECD enrolls children of 3 to 5 years old, and seeks to provide the best enabling environment to enhance early, pre-kindergarten education. Through the MSDSP, AKDN also operates projects that provide food security in otherwise geographically isolated and climatically unfriendly environments. The food security projects also include Natural Resource Management (NRM) and Participatory Governance (PG) that promotes and sustains independent civil society. Thus, the AKDN takes a multidimensional approach to social development in Central Asia that enables it to create a fertile ground for social progress and prosperity.

AKDN Development Endeavors in Culture

The AKDN sees culture as an integral and crucial element in development of societies. The AKDN has established the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) in 1988 that manages different programs to revitalize the cultures of Muslim civilizations. The purpose of the AKTC is more than simply to preserve Muslim cultures, but to build upon it and to use it as a catalyzer for development of the peoples to whom it belongs:

The Trust works to preserve the cultural heritage of the Muslim world -- not as a bulwark against the contemporary world, but rather to ensure that the rich heritage of these cultures endures...Done well, these collaborations can have a catalytic effect on the revitalization of communities -- raising incomes, restoring pride, improving the quality of life and, most importantly, restoring hope. The evidence shows that culture is clearly not an add-on or a luxury, but an integral part of overall development in both the developing and developed worlds. (Aga Khan, 2007)

The AKTC's programs in Central Asia include the Aga Khan Music Initiative (AKMI), and the Aga Khan Historic Cities Program (AKHCP) that foster cultural development.

The AKTC and The Aga Khan Music Initiative (AKMI)

The Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) started to operate in Central Asia immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union and its music initiative has been working there since then. The music initiative (AKMI) of the AKTC is active in all three Central Asian countries that this paper is covering and has been producing teaching and learning centers, ensembles, international events and many other initiatives that fosters the preservation and revitalization of folk music. The Badakhshan Ensemble and the Maqam Academy of Tajikistan, the Master-Apprentice Center in Kabul, and Kyrgyz Umtul Ensemble are few examples of the AKMI's projects in Central Asia.

The AKTC and The Aga Khan Historic Cities Program (AKHCP)

AKDN's initiative in restoration of historic sites has been crucial in helping the peoples of Central Asia in the preservation of cultural heritage and in using it for development. The Aga Khan Historic Cities Program (AKHCP) has been heavily engaged in Afghanistan. The AKHCP has been involved in restoration projects in Balkh, Kabul and Herat, where it had helped to restore: shrines (Figure 3), mosques, old-city areas, historical energy supply complexes, mausoleums, parks and palaces. The restoration of Afghan cultural sites by AKDN has fostered economic burst around the restored centers, enabling the local population to find new

opportunities to increase their financial fortune and to gather and share ideas, ideals and hope with each other.



Figure 3. Restoration of the Abu Nasr Shrine and Park by the AKDN in Balkh, Afghanistan. Source: Norfolk, S., & A. (n.d.). *Abu Nasr Shrine and Park*[Photograph]. Balkh restoration projects, Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme, AKDN, Balkh, Afghanistan.

In Tajikistan the AKTC has heavily invested in creating new public spaces that aim at producing stimulating environment for cultural development. The AKTC is actively engaged in the city planning of Khorog, a Tajik city at the border with Afghanistan. Following its approach of creating public-private initiatives, the AKTC is seeking to turn Khorog into a cultural hub that will inspire, attract and sustain talented Central Asians who will become the driving force of cultural development. In Khorog, the AKTC has renovated and expanded Khorog City Park. The Khorog City Park serves as a place for hosting various cultural events that ultimately seek to inspire and foster cultural and indirectly economic development. In Dushanbe, the capital city of Tajikistan, the AKDN has established the Ismaili Center of Dushanbe (ICD). The Ismaili Center of Dushanbe (ICD) is a multi-million dollar investment in the cultural and spiritual life of Tajikistan as it embodies the central building or office of the Ismaili's in Central Asia. During my research field-trip to Central Asia, I have visited ICD numerous times and have witnessed the role of ICD in providing space for various national and international organizations, thereby acting as a bridge between Tajikistan and the outer world. Through hosting various international-scale socio-economic and cultural events, ICD has been active in the social and cultural life of Tajikistan. The ICD has been also promoting Tajik culture and modernity by proudly combining its historic architecture with new experimental designs. Thus, besides being an ambassadorial office of Ismaili's in Central Asia, the ICD is also part of the top touristic visiting sites in

Dushanbe due to its architectural genius and its cultural significance for Tajikistan. The architecture of ICD is inspired by the historical Tajik hubs of Bukhara and Samarkand; thereby the ICD is a cultural site in the capital that embodies the historical identity of Tajikistan via its architecture. Thus, the AKTC has been active in promoting cultural development in Central Asia through its numerous programs that not only preserve cultural heritage, but turn it into development force.

Overall Analyses

The AKDN is an international development network that has been operating in Central Asia for almost three decades and has heavily invested in the development process of the region. Being an extension of the Shi'i Imami Ismaili Imamate in the secular field, the development network is directly inspired by Islamic ethics of upholding human dignity and self-realization. Thus, the work of AKDN in Central Asia is the Ismaili Imamates' initiative to bridge the spiritual and the physical; to manifest faith in action and to enable human beings to execute their duty as God's vicegerent on Earth, as it is believed in Islam. The AKDN has been managing numerous interconnected and internationally affiliated programs that seek to ignite economic, social and cultural development in Central Asia. The approach taken by the AKDN is multifaceted and multidimensional in nature as it seeks to bring development by investing in local leadership and taking into consideration the prevailing local social, economic, and cultural dimensions. Investing in the civil society, the AKDN strengthens stability in the region by reducing the risk of socio-economic and political distress in case of governments' inability to provide services to all people. The research field-trip I have carried in Central Asian demonstrated that rather than a substitute, the AKDN acts as a compliment to Central Asian states in providing enabling-environment, services, prosperity, hope and overall development. The research also found that the significance of the AKDN is recognized both by the peoples and the states of Central Asia, and there are ongoing attempts to build more cooperation in bringing development to the region.

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