Human Resource Development in Community Development: A Case Study within a Religious Community

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Events like the tragedy of September 11, 2001; wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; and global efforts to combat terrorism have contributed significantly to the need for understanding issues from a broad perspective. Human Resource Development (HRD) can contribute to this understanding and needs to be examined from cultural, regional, ethnic, and religious perspectives. This paper focuses on HRD’s roles in the development efforts of the Ismaili community, a sect within the Shia branch of Islam.

Keywords: Community development, Organization development, Social reform

Human resource development (HRD) has gained more importance with the growing emphasis on globalization. The tragedy of September 11, 2001; the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; and global efforts to combat terrorism have contributed significantly to the need for understanding regional, cultural, ethnic, and religious issues broadly. Within the global definition of HRD provided by McLean and McLean (2001) is the concept of community development. The August 2004 issue of Advances in Developing Human Resources (McLean, Osman-Gani, & Cho, 2004) also highlighted the role of community development in national human resource development globally.

Problem Statement

This paper focuses on HRD’s roles in community development in general and, specifically, in the development of the Ismaili community, a sect within the Shia branch of Islam. Specific questions addressed in this paper are: what is the notion of HRD in community development? How is HRD practiced in a community setting, especially in a developing country? In addition to a literature review, an interview was conducted with Dr. Mary-Catherine Daly, an adjunct professor in the Design, Housing, and Apparel Department at the University of Minnesota, who has worked in various Ismaili community development projects abroad.

Members of the Ismaili community, called Ismailis, have prospered economically, educationally, and culturally, much more than other Muslims (Borthwick, 1995). In this paper, Ismailis are referred to as a community because they share and practice a common belief, besides maintaining a tradition of international service and philanthropy. The development of Ismailis can be accounted for by several factors, such as mobilization, continuous guidance of their spiritual leader (the Imam), and willingness to adapt to changing cultural values and political systems (Borthwick, 1995). The common variable in the development in each of these areas is long-term investment in HRD. The community has an infrastructure of projects that benefit everyone without regard to race, class, creed, gender, or ethnicity in areas of health, education, housing, rural support, and cultural development.

Purpose and Significance

The purpose of this paper is to explore how HRD has played a strategic role in Ismaili community development over the last four decades. This paper presents a theoretical framework for HRD in community development; a background of Ismailis; information about their developmental activities around the world, with a specific case in Pakistan; linkage of theory and research in Ismaili projects; challenges faced by the community in the new millennium; and recommendations for future research.

This inquiry is significant because it expands the concept of HRD in developing a religious community. It challenges cultural and religious stereotypes that may exist within the HRD community. Modood (as cited in Farnell, 2001) argued that most theorists in their attempt to favor secularism have little sympathy for efforts of religious groups that contribute to development. Faith communities, through their non-denominational developmental efforts, add unique perspectives to societies and cultures at various levels. It is hoped that this inquiry
will encourage HRD professionals to continue to extend their perspectives of HRD. In addition, this inquiry is a contribution to the literature of HRD that presently sheds little light on religious and community development.

Methods and Limitations

Methods included reviewing literature, obtaining information from presentations, and conducting an interview. The literature review comprised project evaluation reports, annual reports of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), and journal articles. Information related to AKDN projects were also obtained from presentations of project findings in Ismaili community centers (Jamat khanas, place of assembly). The interview conducted was with Dr. Mary-Catherine Daly, an adjunct professor in the Design, Housing, and Apparel Department at the University of Minnesota, who has worked in various Ismaili community development projects abroad.

One of the limitations of this inquiry is its focus on material available in the USA because of the easier access to the researchers of materials and personnel. More interviews with professionals directly involved in community projects and review of literature from other countries would strengthen this paper.

Definitions: The Importance of Context

The definitions of organization development (OD) and HRD set the context for development within the Ismaili community. While HRD has many definitions, McLean and McLean’s (2001) definition provides an international perspective that focuses on community development:

Human resource development is any process or activity that, either initially or over the long term, has the potential to develop...work-based knowledge, expertise, productivity and satisfaction, whether for personal or group/team gain, or for the benefit of an organization, community, nation, or, ultimately, the whole of humanity. (p. 322)

McLean and McLean (2001) also highlighted the importance of context within different cultures and countries. They identified Thailand as a country in which HRD is active in community development. Similar efforts to understand HRD from national perspectives have been made by various scholars recently (McLean et al., 2004). Only McLean and McLean (2001) have referred directly to community in their definition of HRD. Most definitions do not define the term, development, specifically. However, the general connotation of development is advancement or progress in terms of performance and better quality of life. Megginson, Matthews, and Banfield (1993) defined development as a long-term process, the purpose of which is to enhance potential and effectiveness. Like HRD, OD also has a variety of definitions. In all, however, the constant theme is that OD is about long-term change. The change is aimed at improving performance and effectiveness. Thus, development is used within the context of growth and improved performance.

In some contexts, like Pakistan, the home country of the first author, human development and HRD are used interchangeably. One context for development, as explored in McLean et al., (2004), is access to healthcare, food, and shelter—for a better quality of life. Hence, development is a broad term that is dependent upon many known and unknown variables.

Theoretical Framework for Community Development

HRD, as defined by McLean and McLean (2001), includes development at various levels, including community. Community development requires HRD efforts, such as training and organization development. Community development is an alternative route to educating and training citizens of a community (van der Veen, 2003). Community settings, especially in developing countries, require that HRD practitioners take into account many factors, such as cultural variables, beliefs, traditions, and gender roles before bringing about change. Practicing HRD in a community setting requires a holistic approach to development (Bernard Van Leer Foundation, 1998; na Chiangmai, 2004). By its nature community development is multidisciplinary and, thus, using theories with a narrow focus to understand community development is inappropriate (News, 2003).

Community settings offer a unique and often challenging set of conditions for planning and implementing HRD. One of the interesting aspects in a community is that its members ultimately become owners and stakeholders of change processes (Bernard Van Leer Foundation, 1998). Development in its full sense is not possible without community participation (Botes & Rensburg, 2000).

HRD in a community setting is implemented usually, if not always, by a nongovernmental organization. The primary unit of focus in a development program is community organization. Training is frequently the main HRD tool used in developing community members (Bernard Van Leer Foundation, 1998). Infrastructure development
induces community participation in a development process, which is in line with the Action Research model (Rothwell, Sullivan, & McLean, 1995). When community development fails, it is often because practitioners are unable to find an appropriate entry point (Bernard Van Leer Foundation, 1998).

There are several instruments available for performing needs analysis, yet another important part of the Action Research model. Some of the instruments used include Participatory Rural Appraisal, Triple A, and Diagnostic Survey (AKDN, 2004; Bernard Van Leer Foundation, 1998). The Action Research model is often used in community settings for bringing about change, linking HRD and community development.

According to Na Chiangmai (2004), there is a change occurring in basic economic and social assumptions with regards to HRD; from economic independence to interdependence of people, communities, and nations. Such changes require that HRD strategies be pluralistic in nature, which is possible if the societies they are intended to support comprise educated communities that, in turn, can be created by investing in HRD (AKDN, 2004). Community development helps in creating the needed social and economic organization in a community (van der Veen, 2003).

From a systems perspective, management of HRD in itself is a living system comprising many networking relationships among individuals, communities, and countries (na Chiangmai, 2004). He also suggested that HRD is a holistic and developmental process that requires appropriate facilitation of linkages between individuals, organizations, and communities. Thus, HRD efforts are not always about cost-benefit analysis. In fact, HRD at community and societal levels should be based on sufficiency economy, a philosophy with intellectual origins in Buddhism and Asian values of life (na Chiangmai, 2004). Sufficiency economy is about living in moderation and is applicable to individuals, communities, and nations. Thailand is an example of how HRD strategies for developing communities and organizations have benefited from the philosophy of sufficiency economy (na Chiangmai, 2004).

From a community development perspective, HRD is a process that facilitates and enhances the potential of individuals and communities through organization development, knowledge management, and community development (na Chiangmai, 2004). Hence, conducting further research to highlight how HRD efforts are used in developing communities will enrich the current literature on HRD, especially in North America.

Background of Ismailis

This section presents a brief introduction to Ismailis for the purpose of better understanding their developmental activities. The Ismailis belong to the Shia branch of Islam, the Sunni being the other major branch. Ismailis form a well-organized community of over 20 million, living in over 25 countries, mainly in Central and South Asia, Afghanistan, Western China, Africa, the Middle East, Europe, North America, the Far East, and Australia (Borthwick, 1995; Calderini, 1996; Saleh, 2002).

Ismailis are differentiated from other Muslims by their greater focus on esoteric (obscure) than exoteric (obvious) meanings and interpretations of religion and the belief in continuous spiritual guidance through a spiritual leader. The current spiritual leader (the Imam), the 49th in a row and a direct descendant of the Holy Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him), is His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan, one of the most influential voices in the Muslim world (Woodruff, 2002). Ismailis have established a well-defined framework of cultural, social, and economic development institutions for the common good of all, regardless of race or religion (Borthwick, 1995). Ismailis have made significant intellectual contributions in such areas as education, health, and economic development (Asani, 2001).

Developmental Activities of Ismailis

The Ismaili community, adhering to its commitment to philanthropy and voluntary service, has contributed extensively to various aspects of development. The AKDN, based in Switzerland, is the center of developmental activities. Although Ismailis represent a religious community, the AKDN …is a non-denominational, international development agency established in 1967 by His Highness the Aga Khan. Its mission is to develop and promote creative solutions to problems that impede social development, primarily in Asia and East Africa. Created as a private, non-profit foundation under Swiss law, it has branches and independent affiliates in 12 countries. It is a modern vehicle for traditional philanthropy in the Ismaili Muslim community under the leadership of the Aga Khan. (AKDN, 2004)

The network focuses on development in areas of health, education, rural communities, non-governmental organizations, culture, environment, and community participation. Figure 1 shows the organization chart of the AKDN. International teams of paid professionals and volunteers with various backgrounds test and run projects, whenever possible, in different geographic and cultural settings.
Part of what is really seductive about the AKF [Aga Khan Foundation, an AKDN agency] is that they are very well organized, they are very specific about what it is they do, they are very direct about their approach, and they are very studied and very academic about how they approach different kinds of problems. I really appreciated the level of organization and structure that they have. (M. C. Daly, personal communication, June 16, 2004)

One of the requirements of each project is replicability. The main criterion of projects is that participants be able to gain maximum and long-term benefits (World Bank Operations Evaluation Department, 1990). The network shares what it learns with the public, raising awareness of important issues facing disadvantaged sectors of the international community. The network also facilitates investment in national privatization programs, thereby creating an enabling environment for private sector initiatives (Saleh, 2002).

Countries where AKDN is currently active include Bangladesh, Tajikistan, Canada, India, Kenya, Mozambique, Pakistan, Portugal, Switzerland, Tanzania, Uganda, the United Kingdom, and the U.S.A. Support and funding for projects depend upon voluntary contributions of the Ismaili community, investments and grants from government and private institutions, and donations from individuals around the world (AKDN, 2004).

**Ismaili Community Projects: Linking Theory and Research**

This section presents an example of one of AKDN’s projects to show how theory and research are integrated in practice. Women empowerment has been a challenge in developing countries. The example below discusses how the AKDN initiated and implemented an HRD (specifically, women resource development) program in Gilgit, one of the northern areas of Pakistan that borders China, India, and Afghanistan. This area has a rough terrain with harsh living conditions. Mountain ranges of the Himalayas, the Karakoram, and the Hindu Kush sandwich the northern areas. Also called the “Roof of the World,” the northern areas have some of the world’s largest glaciers, making the region a famous tourist and mountaineering spot (Mohmand, 1999). Culturally, the northern areas are extremely diverse in politics, religion, values, ethnicity, race, and language, with a significantly large number of Ismailis. The people are very poor and do not have access to basic life needs, such as health care, proper housing, clean drinking
water, and education. Agriculture is the main economic activity in terms of both income and consumption (Khan & Khan, 1992; Mohmand, 1999).

In order to improve the status of living and replicate its developmental model, the Aga Khan Rural Support Program (an agency within AKDN) began its activities in 1982. Its approach to bringing about change is a classic example of how communities can use principles of OD, adult learning, training, and action research. The case presented here used the Action Research Model (Rothwell et al., 1995) to bring about change.

**Entry and Start-up**

In the Entry phase, the project staff had several meetings with the Gilgit villagers. These meetings were of strategic importance as they allowed the staff to build long-term professional relationships with the villagers and to hear the concerns of the villagers regarding various aspects of development.

In the Start-up phase, the Aga Khan Rural Support Program, in collaboration with the villagers, formed village organizations comprised of locals with specific foci on areas such as irrigation, economic development, and women resource development (World Bank Operations Evaluation Department, 1990). Local leadership ran all village organizations, and the Aga Khan Rural Support Program supported that process (Carr, Chen, & Jhabvala, 1996). An important aspect of development is sustainability, a major challenge. The AKF showed people how they could sustain themselves not just on short-term projects, but also in projects with long-term consequences for themselves and their communities.

The Entry and Start-up phases were not distinct from each other, a well-accepted fact in the change management process (Rothwell et al., 1995). They enabled the staff to create a trust-building relationship with the villagers, a key aspect in the OD process (Cummings & Worley, 1993).

**Assessment and Feedback**

During the Assessment and Feedback phase, the Aga Khan Rural Support Program staff worked closely, both as participants and observers, with participants (mostly women in this case). The staff, by engaging in a dialogue with villagers, obtained information from them and provided feedback (Carr et al., 1996). This strategy was in line with the fact that the process of feedback should include those who are involved in the change (Rothwell et al., 1995).

One of the things that have made AKDN very successful is that they say something and they follow through with it. And this is an important feature. They follow through to insure that the community and its leaders are stable and that the project can continue. (M. C. Daly, personal communication, June 16, 2004)

By the end of this phase, participants realized that the Aga Khan Rural Support Program would not catch them a fish but, rather, would teach them how to catch one. This created a sense of ownership among participants.

**Action Planning**

The fourth phase, Action Planning, also involved participants at almost every stage of decision making. The staff did not interfere with the formation and evolution of groups for the purpose of implementing change. Members (women) were expected to participate actively; in fact, silence indicated a lack of interest in the process—a major cultural change in itself for women of the northern areas.

**Intervention**

The fifth phase, Intervention, relied heavily on training. Almost every intervention has involved some sort of training. Training was a key component in the Aga Khan Rural Support Program’s plan. Initially, women were trained by men, but constraints, such as the cultural practice of not interacting often with men, women speaking at least five different languages, and inability of several trainers to travel to a certain area, encouraged program coordinators to develop their own training force (Carr et al., 1996). Rural programs need to be customized to the needs of participants who live in close proximity (Stromquist, 1994). The Aga Khan Rural Support Program trained these women because the success of the project depended to a great extent on these women who in some instances spoke for the program. These were some of the adult education efforts in the program that were appropriate for the structural setup of the village. According to Puchner (1991) and Stromquist (1994), structure is the most important aspect in such programs as it allows for the use of knowledge gained in the adult learning process.

… A lot depends on the level of the project. For example, women in poultry projects use the latest technology and knowledge. Women use indicators, such as number of eggs, healthy chickens, etc., to gauge productivity. Women carry little notebooks to keep records of production, budget, inventory, profit/loss information, etc. It is like a micro-enterprise developing from such projects. Such projects are started and supported based on the needs of the community. People are actively involved… One of the most wonderful things… is that, when you go to small classrooms, you see that literacy level is 95% among both men and women and children, especially English language literacy. They have computers, Internet access, and, because of technology, their world is much bigger, although they have not been outside their communities physically. (M. C. Daly, personal communication, June 16, 2004)
Evaluation

In the Evaluation phase, the staff personally met women participants and asked them about the outcomes of the project. The most important contribution of the Aga Khan Rural Support Program has been the creation of women organizations focusing on providing economic support to other women. These women experienced significant changes in their self-confidence, ability to work independently, and technical and managerial skills (World Bank Operations Evaluation Department, 1990).

One of the outcomes of these separate women organizations was that women healthcare practitioners were able to connect with those women who needed healthcare (World Bank Operations Evaluation Department, 1990). This outcome highlighted other needs, such as family planning, clean water, education, and health facilities. Based on the success of such programs, the government later decided to invest more in infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, and phone lines. Government’s support of community development efforts underscores the need to include community-based HRD efforts in national HRD policy planning. It is important that national HRD efforts be holistic and sustainable, and create an equilibrium among people in a community or society (Yang, Zhang, & Zhang, 2004).

Adoption and Separation

The last two phases of the Action Research Model, Adoption and Separation, occurred in an interesting manner. Participants were motivated enough to adopt the change process as evidenced by the fact that such projects attracted younger women, and the need to acquire education was evident (Carr et al., 1996). Given that the program prepared local women as trainers, these trainers became the champions of change, thereby making separation of the Aga Khan Rural Support Program from the process easier. The Aga Khan Rural Support Program did separate from the project, but the Gilgit and other villages, including Chitral, Hunza, and Baltistan, encouraged the staff to replicate the same model of development (Mohmand, 1999). This in itself was a measure of success of the program.

The entire change management process included adult learning programs and strategies. The success of the Aga Khan Rural Support Program efforts indicates that HRD and adult education efforts in developing countries are beneficial to people even if there is a constraint of human and non-human resources because lack of resources encourages appropriate allocation of funds (Puchner, 1991).

Now in the 21st century, the northern areas of Pakistan have schools for primary and secondary education, a micro-credit scheme for small businesses, women health visitors, and primary health care facilities. The AKDN programs cater to the needs of approximately 900,000 people living in 1,100 villages in the northern areas of Pakistan (World Bank Operations Evaluation Department, 2002). These programs exist because of a sense of strong ownership among participants. Participants were enthusiastic about the programs because they were involved in the planning and implementation phases, a strategy for developmental programs in developing countries (Puchner, 1991). According to Aga Khan, "Development is sustainable only if the beneficiaries become, in a gradual manner, the masters of the process" (AKDN, 2004). Development cannot be seen exclusively in terms of economic gains (AKDN, 2004), and, thus, HRD efforts must have a much broader perspective than just cost-benefit analysis.

Community development programs focus more on the integration of education, health, cultural heritage, and infrastructure development than on just one aspect in isolation (AKDN, 2004). The Ismailis have made considerable impact on development in the areas of culture, health, and education. Space limitations do not allow for exploration of these in the context of this article.

Challenges Faced by Ismailis in the New Millennium

The community has faced many challenges over time. Personal experience of working in AKDN activities suggests that one of the challenges is to create awareness among people that AKDN promotes pluralism and its projects are funded and run by both Ismailis and non-Ismailis, including non-Muslims. Besides, AKDN projects benefit everyone, regardless of faith, race, gender, or ethnic origin.

I have met professionals from various backgrounds, religions, and ethnicities through AKF...Jewish and Muslim doctors from Israel and Egypt, academics, sociologists, anthropologists, agriculturalists from Canada, USA, and UK. They were not Ismailis but held positions within AKF. (M. C. Daly, personal communication, June 16, 2004)

One of the plagues of community development is limited reporting of failures in community projects (Botes & Rensburg, 2000). Space limitations prevent authors from addressing failures and how AKDN addresses those failures in its projects. Based on personal experiences, it can be stated that AKDN does recognize its failures and learns from them, a fact that was supported by Aga Khan in an interview with Pakistan Television (Hussain, 2002):

We have a rigorous monitoring system, and I think that what I have tried to encourage, is to have people move away from a sense of shame if mistakes are made. If mistakes are made, the question is, can they be corrected,
how can they be corrected? But if failures of any sort are just pushed under the carpet, in the end, they eat into
the carpet and that's the carpet that's gone.

Obtaining continuous funding is another challenge for AKDN projects. While funding campaigns are launched
within the community regularly, and international organizations, such as Canadian International Development
Agency and World Bank, also partner with AKDN, the network seeks to continue its efforts to raise funds so that
projects can be expanded to benefit more people.

One of the major contributions has been by Ismaili volunteers. Both male and female Ismailis commit their time
and services voluntarily to AKDN projects worldwide. Increasing efforts to create awareness, especially in the
Western world, about the community, its activities, and the way it interprets Islam is yet another challenge.

**Conclusion and Recommendations, with Implications for HRD**

The experience of AKDN programs indicates that women in Pakistan have more constraints than men when it comes
to participating in developmental activities, an observation that is also supported by Puchner (1991). Another finding
is that HRD efforts in communities require that a holistic view of development be taken into consideration instead of
focusing on one specific aspect in isolation. Women development efforts have been fruitful because they have been
tied to structure, culture, empowerment, training, and economic assistance (World Bank Operations Evaluation
Department, 1990).

It is important for HRD professionals to broaden their vision of development and learn from the strengths and
weaknesses of projects such as those of AKDN. In the light of current global crises, the need to understand theories,
research, and practices from a multicultural perspective is even more important. People from various faiths,
communities, and societies contribute to HRD efforts; such efforts sometimes go unnoticed because they may not fit
into specific domains of the HRD community.

It is time that we as HRD professionals take the initiative and explore how culture, education, health,
arithmetic, and community support are related to HRD. Also, it is of strategic value to build on the efforts of the
AKDN to bridge the gap that exists between the East and the West, a gap in terms of religion, culture, and diversity.
In the years to come, it is the openness and understanding of professionals that will enable them to contribute
towards globalization. A framework in Table 1 is proposed as a first step towards looking at OD and change
management efforts from a community development perspective.

| Table 1: Perspectives of OD from Traditional and Community Development Perspectives |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| **Organizational Perspective**                | **Community Perspective**                      |
| “OD is planned organization wide”             | OD is planned holistically community wide      |
| managed from the top to increase effectiveness and health through planned interventions in the organization’s processes using behavioral-science knowledge” (Beckhard, 1969, p. 9). | managed by community leadership to improve quality of life through short and long-term interventions in a community’s development using behavioral-science approaches to sustain community resource development |

More research is needed in the area of HRD in community settings. Focusing on specific communities would
enrich the HRD literature, both in terms of theory and practice from a cross-cultural perspective. Also, increased
collaboration among HRD programs focusing on community development would provide new directions in theory,

… After spending time in academia and publishing research, one thinks at a certain point in time how published
research would be applicable in community settings. For example, interaction of culture and color theory as a
result of a certain project in a community could lead to application of theory and publication of new knowledge.
One of the main aspects of bringing theory, research, and practice together in a community setting is to keep
cultural traditions alive in a community. (M. C. Daly, personal communication, June 16, 2004).

Human resource development efforts at the community level ultimately contribute to HRD efforts at the
national level. There is no one right approach to national HRD (Cho & McLean, 2004), and the same holds true for
HRD in community settings for there are numerous variables influencing HRD in such settings. The need, therefore,
is to accept and understand the fact that HRD is much broader than how it is defined narrowly. HRD efforts at the
community level cannot and will not be perfect, which is also the case with national HRD (Cho & McLean, 2004);
however, attempts to understand such efforts will certainly enrich theory, practice, and research.
References


