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history and the role of community activism

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## Changing Gilgit-Baltistan: Perceptions of the recent history and the role of community activism

Anna-Maria Walter

*“Like an unwanted ghost, or an uninvited relative, ‘development’ haunts the house of anthropology. Fundamentally disliked by a discipline that at heart loves all those things that development intends to destroy, anthropology’s evil twin remains too close a relative to be simply kicked out.”*  
(Ferguson 2002:160)

Just as Ferguson points out, the concept of development seemed to haunt me during my last two-months stay in Gilgit-Baltistan in the summer of 2013.<sup>1</sup> Often it came masked as narratives of ‘change’. During the last 20 years, Gilgit-Baltistan has undergone a major transformation from a remote, agricultural mountain area to a highly literate rural society with its urban conglomeration of Gilgit that is connected to the markets of Pakistan and China through the Karakoram Highway (KKH). This shift is a pressing topic for locals when conversing with foreigners and came up in discussions at the local university in Gilgit, when talking to friends and informants about my research on mobile phones, when searching the media, such as the online newsblog *pamirtimes.net* and even in the rural valley of Bagrote. Without raising the subject myself, local people told me about their recent history: the increase in education, the economic dependency on the Karakoram Highway (KKH), the introduction of bathrooms and agricultural projects through the globally operating but locally run Ismaili Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) as well as improved means of communication like the mobile phone. The term used to describe such recent changes is ‘development’ and many young, educated people seem to evaluate nearly everything – traditional views, education, attitudes of locals, women’s rights, job opportunities, research topics – according to the established development concept.

Why am I so disturbed by this rhetoric? And how come so many local people actively discuss the topic and even participate in actively seeking change Gilgit-Baltistan? Having read much criticism on theories of cultural evolutionism and modernization from the anthropological perspective, local people’s ease of handling the unchallenged positive connotation of development poses a real challenge. I felt I could not escape a thorough reflection on my interlocutor’s perspectives on ‘development’ and ‘change’ and me associating it with the concept of modernity. I also realized that I had to resolve this topic for myself before I continued with my fieldwork on the new technol-

1 Fieldwork was generously funded by the DAAD.

ogy of mobile phones. People in Gilgit-Baltistan are thoroughly influenced by 'modern' ideas and such ideas also shape my interlocutors' views on the use of mobile phones. With the help of two case studies from the field, *Monika Girls School* in Bagrote valley and Ismaili community activists, I will examine the perception of development and discuss its association with the concept of modernity.

### Talking of change and development

In order to understand the use and meaning of 'development' and 'change' in this article, one has to realize that in Gilgit-Baltistan the two words are mostly used interchangeably. All of my interlocutors used this English vocabulary, no matter whether they spoke Urdu or English with me. This points to the introduction of the two concepts of change and development from outside. Nevertheless, it is difficult to speak for the whole region as it is very diverse, containing various language, ethnic and religious groups. Most of my interlocutors were either from the Shiite rural valley of Bagrote or young community activists from predominantly Ismaili Hunza, who often passed through the region's capital of Gilgit on business matters.

Talking to my interlocutors about social change was not as easy as I supposed. Only when I insistently asked them about the difference, they acknowledged the terms as separate but still interrelated concepts. Sher Ali<sup>2</sup>, a young community activist from Gojal, Hunza, explains *development* as bringing the community forward.

*Sher Ali: "For me, development means when someone serves the community. Also, change is there in everything, in everything is change. But when some things happen good to the community, it's change and good development, I can say."*

*I: "So, it's more like... development is a targeted change. And change just happens with everything all the time and then you have to figure out yourself whether it is good or bad."*

*Sher Ali: "Yeah, if it's good then we can call it a development, [...] when it increases the income of the people."*

A friend from Hunza also described *change* as perpetual process and *development* as a certain aspect of it: "[Change and development] go both together, you can't divide them: if there's development, there's change, if there's no development, there's also change!"

Thus, when local people talk about "development" they mean development, when they say "change" they can mean both, either development or mere change. In this article, both concepts address social aspects of develop-

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2 For reasons of confidentiality all names are changed.

ment and change, not economic, political or infrastructural ones. But what is the root of this dual meaning? Why are the associations with both concepts so much alike? What lies really behind the idea of development? How is it connected to concepts of modernity and modernization? And why is the involvement of local people emphasized so much by Sher Ali (and others) when talking of development?

Development in Gilgit-Baltistan clearly seems to target *community*, not society as a whole. This can be interpreted as typical characteristic of a heterogeneous region like Gilgit-Baltistan where a great deal of an individual's identity derives from the lineage, local valley or language group (Sökefeld 1997). The difference between community and society was introduced by the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Merz-Benz 2006). In general, the term *community* is defined as the perception of a common bond, feeling as a collective whereas a *society* refers to a larger group of people who belong together because they supposedly share the same values and aims, it is rather a means to achieve something than an emotional sense of a shared identity (Salomon 2006: 8). Nowadays anthropologists recognize that neither communities nor societies are homogenous unities; different structures, orders and meanings always co-exist and the feeling of sameness is only imagined (Castro 2002: 521ff). Nevertheless, Tönnies, and after him Max Weber, already stressed a community's constructed nature and the interrelatedness of the individual and the societal level (Merz-Benz 2006: 39). In Gilgit-Baltistan, "community" is the prevalent concept used: People rarely talk of the whole society – wherever its boundaries are – but orientate themselves towards their village of origin. Therefore "community" often simply stands for the village level.

Generally speaking, many people of Gilgit-Baltistan welcome change.<sup>3</sup> Most campaigns for development, such as programs on infrastructure, health, education and women empowerment, during the last 25 years followed a traditional modernization approach that is based on the assumption that Western<sup>4</sup> modernity should – and will – spread across the world and thereby eliminate poverty. The clear contradistinction of negatively connoted terms like 'backward' or 'primitive' with 'modern' and 'developed' also shapes local people's perception of progress. A newly-married woman from

3 An exemption to the enthusiasm for progress in this sense is the region of Diamer. Since the majority of the population belongs to the Sunni sect of Islam, it takes a special stance within predominantly Shiite and Ismaili Gilgit-Baltistan. Its ties to the revivalist Deobandi Islam do not necessarily preclude developmental approaches but many people of Diamer seem to be skeptical to changes from the outside and programs presumably following Western ideals.

4 I am conscious about the controversial term "the West". To leave it open for debate and interpretation, it is only used as descriptive adjective, not an outright noun that represents an allegedly objective geopolitical unity.

Bagrote drew a sharp contrast between the rural valleys and the ‘modern’ city of Gilgit where, with shops, gas and electricity available, daily routine is much easier for women. The geographer Halvorson refers to women’s accounts from Oshikhandas, a suburban conglomeration close to Gilgit, of their mothers’ hard, arduous lives in the mountains (Halvorson 2011: 279). Such narratives reflect the perception of ‘traditional’ and ‘advanced’ as opposites, with the last one being clearly more desirable.

The generally positive connotations of development are rarely questioned in Gilgit-Baltistan. But the recent rapid adoption of mobile phones creates cracks in the narrative of beneficial change. An interlocutor from the telecommunications industry and a community activist from Gojal both mentioned that the mobile phone has many disadvantages such as distracting young people, leading to moral decay or to poor people spending too much money. The respected *lambadar* (village head) Mohmad Aziz from Bagrote drew a more differentiated picture of self-responsibility: He claimed that it is not the technology itself that is good or bad; what matters is what people make of it.

*“Bijli achhi hai lekin bijli ko touch karke log mar jate. Side effects ho giya.” (Electricity is good but when people touch it they die. There were side effects.)*

*“Vo ghalti istemal kar sakta hai, sahi istemal kar sakta hai.” (One can use it [new developments] wrong or right.)*

In the following argument, I will try to outline the close interrelationship of change and development for the people of Gilgit-Baltistan; I will show how they perceive change and history after twenty years of intense development aid. Due to immense influences from developmental projects, social change cannot be considered independent of development anymore. In recent history, most significant events – except sectarian tension in the city of Gilgit – are related to developmental campaigns. Thus it is not surprising that these overwhelming changes level off the difference between change and development. With the example of the *Monika Girls School* in Bagrote I will show how change has become synonymous with development.

Secondly, I want to draw the attention to the new phenomenon of *community activism*. Especially young Ismaili actively advocate what they understand as their contribution to the very progress of their society; they promote a lively scene of community activism, which is supported by international donors and the Aga Khan Development Network. I will show how local people have appropriated an allegedly (post-)colonial concept of ‘targeted change’ in order to take the reins of their own fate and raise their voices by means of the established development discourse. Social scientist Björn Wittrock describes the project of modernity as a two-step process: New assumptions of morals and values are introduced to and adapted by a society; while these abstract

models do not change anything momentarily, they come with “promissory notes” that entail far-reaching structural or institutional changes over time (Wittrock 2000: 36f). The ground for development needs to be prepared in advance to reap the benefits. This means for Gilgit-Baltistan that development agencies – and additionally information channels, such as the media – have spread ideas of a better, a more desirable life; the implementation of related projects is thus the second step to achieve change.

### The controversial relationship of anthropology and development

From a social science perspective a critical analysis of the development concept is indispensable. At the beginning of cultural and social anthropology in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the discipline was deeply entangled with evolutionist ideas about “savages” representing earlier stages of culture that preceded Western civilization (Ferguson 2002: 155). When later former colonies struggled to establish themselves as sovereign nations, European and US-American politicians saw the roots of their difficulties in their ‘backwardness’ and wanted to lead them to Western ‘modernity’ through “programmes of directed social change” (ibid.: 157). The concept of modernity, emerging from the philosophic tradition of Enlightenment, is closely related to rationalism and secularism (Arce & Long 2000: 4; Duara 2012). The opposition between supposedly traditional and modern societies and, connected to it, *modernization*, has led to a cultural program of dissemination of Western ideas and hegemony and is often perceived as homogenization (Bonacker 2007: 10). In the 1970s the Neo-Marxist critique denounced these agendas of ‘developmental aid’ as capitalist expansion. Global development organizations were slowly forced to reorient themselves and to introduce a more humane, social program (Ferguson 2002: 158). To the disapproval of many scholars, social scientists also practiced applied research and worked in and for the development “*apparatus*”, thus contributing to reproducing and transporting its ideas all over the world (Escobar 1991). In the age of globalization, feminism, constructivism and postcolonial studies, modernization ideology is contested and often rejected. Globally operating developmental schemes nowadays take more participatory or even grassroots approaches. Although development is the means through which visions of modernity are supposed to become reality, local people and even developmental actors usually do not have this greater framework in mind but see development simply as direct improvement. The following case study of *Monika Girls School* in Bagrote will serve as an example of a traditional modernization approach that has been embraced by the local people. Describing my findings from the field, I will stress the fusion of development and change in people’s understanding.

For the present situation of Gilgit-Baltistan, an anthropological twist of Wallerstein’s *world system theory* is more fitting than linear modernization

themes: peripheral areas interplay with expansions from the 'core' (cf. Thomas 2002). What needs to be acknowledged is the creative and active involvement of local people who participate in their history rather than being only passive victims to whom charity is delivered. This conception is emphasized by Hans Peter Hahn's theory of *appropriation*: He argues that globalization does not overrule everything but that global phenomena – and therefore also developmental programs – are actively adopted and adapted by the local people within their own cultural frameworks (Hahn 2008). Nevertheless, anthropologists still find themselves fighting against the prevalent idea of development as modernization and many are confronted with this idea in the field. Despite the postmodern critique of development, there are obviously still major misconceptions about the need for progress to be resolved: People all over the world look back to a rich history – for example in Gilgit-Baltistan the history of local rulers, caravan routes and migration histories (Ali 2010, Kreutzmann 1998, Stellrecht 1997). Additionally, there is no justification to direct people's destiny on the basis of one's own, presumably outsiders', believes; even if it is meant well, Westerners' views follow different ideals than local people's values or needs. Therefore development approaches might not benefit locals in the desired way, confront them with introduced issues and even force them into a certain direction.

To be sure, change itself is not negated or ignored by cultural anthropology; change is always an integral part of culture and forms the basis of current research questions. But what academics struggle with is the postcolonial, imperial way of prompting people to 'develop'. Maybe as a reaction to the widespread propaganda of Western ideas and because scholars are convinced of the activism of local people themselves, social and cultural anthropologists have continued to stress that not everything is new; changes are rather interpreted within the frame of established values. In her keynote address at the *Mobile Telephony in the Developing World Conference* in Finland in 2013 Julie Archambault argued against technodeterminist and confident developmentalists' ideas of total change and emphasized continuity, arguing that the mobile phone solely serves as catalyst that affects prevailing issues in a society (Archambault 2013). This was also my impression of many changes in Gilgit, Hunza and the Bagrote valley: They took place within an established social framework, which is always contested and stretched, yet not explicitly challenged by a new idea or technology. Rather the people themselves adapt these changes to their lives. Additionally, history is always greatly shaped by complex interdependencies among various phenomena and counter-tendencies that contrast mainstream society as described by Norbert Elias (Elias 2012). The perception of change cannot be looked at without considering the wider framework of the local society, global involvements and the relatedness of development and modernization; there are always many factors and aspects that interplay with each other in forming a complex web of interre-

latedness. No society or community is ever homogeneous; there are always different interests and people who challenge dominant conditions or values. Looking at a community from the margins can be very rewarding in order to understand its very structures (Duara 2012, Arce & Long 2000: 9). The second of the following two case studies will serve as an example of appropriated development by local community activists from Hunza. They fit the model of targeted change into the locally established value set and conception of community, thus (re-)interpreting the complex, ideological ‘cargo’ of modernization and actively contributing to the construction of their communities’ current history. But just as Archambault, I have to admit that change is there when people conceive it – only anthropologists’ outside perspective sees it in the wider framework of continuity (Archambault 2013).

### Bringing about change – Girls’ education in the Bagrote valley

The individual perception of history and change is both a personal and a collective cultural process. As the German anthropologist Monika Schneid<sup>5</sup> showed in her article on the perception of history in Bagrote, history is not necessarily remembered in chronological order but people emphasize the most important events (Schneid 1997:83f, 105ff). I, too, experienced this phenomenon during my three weeks’ visit in Bagrote where all recent changes are traced back to Schneid’s own social commitment to establish a local girls’ high school. There, almost any recent event is interpreted against this background.

At the time of Schneid’s research in the early 1990s only a few boys went to school in Bagrote. Education was not accessible for girls. Shortly before Schneid left, she agreed to fund a neighborhood initiative of the local *lambadar* and paid a teacher for young girls. When the number of students increased, rapidly a more formal setting was needed and Schneid’s school was established as *Monika Girls School*. Ever since, she has been involved in the decisions of the institution and contributed to teachers’ salaries and scholarships for students through funds raised in Germany (Schneid 2009). Although this example resembles a traditional ‘maternalistic’ development approach, Schneid has always struggled to include locals in the organization.

This story of Schneid’s great personal commitment is recounted again and again by the people of Bagrote; Monika Schneid is seen as the great ‘knight in shining armor’ and her close friend Mohmad Aziz, the *lambadar*, even said with a smile that there ought to be a statue of her at the entrance of the valley. All stories of development in Bagrote circle around Schneid; by promoting women’s education she has apparently connected Bagrote to modernity. As a local man puts it: “The people in Bagrote valley were poor and weak. Then Monika came and fed us. Today we are strong and rich” (Schneid

5 She conducted eighteen months of research in the Bagrote valley in 1990 and 1991.



2012). Nobody mentions the KKH, the road to the valley, the introduction of electricity, the mobile signal, programs from the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN),<sup>6</sup> or anything else as parameters of change. Only when I explicitly asked about them, people also considered other factors but in their consciousness it all dates back to Schneid's efforts: After her school was established, things started to change for the better.

Experiencing this "development" in an otherwise relatively isolated valley has shaped people's minds. Especially women perceive immense changes through the introduction of a schooling system for them. Thus, it is not surprising that recent history is perceived exclusively as developmental change. When anyone talks about change in Bagrot, it is ultimately about Monika Girls School. Development and change go hand in hand.

Interestingly, hardly anyone questions girls' education and schools anymore. In the beginning many parents expressed concerns about male teachers, the empowerment of women, or did not see the need to invest in girls' education. But this hesitancy changed within a few years as girls were enthusiastic about this chance and parents were involved in decisions concerning Monika Girls School.<sup>7</sup> Schneid reports from Bagrote that today's girls are confident, they improve their family's hygienic standards, nutrition and child care, get married later, have less children and may even contribute to the household's income as teachers (Schneid 2009: 3). Although these changes are measured against Western standards and coming from Western values, I understand that they are great developments for the local people and that everyone wants to be healthy and to improve one's status. The disturbing aspect for anthropologists is that "Western patterns of modernity are not the only 'authentic' modernities, though they enjoy historical precedence and continue to be the basic reference point for others" (Eisenstadt 2000: 3). Overall, the traditional set-up of the community has not been overthrown by increased education and even developmental programs. Therefore, literate and confident girls are nothing to be worried about or to be ashamed of, people are rather proud of their improved social life with women intellectu-

6 AKDN's works in Gilgit-Baltistan started in 1982 (Clemens 2000:3), just four years after the KKH was opened (Kreutzmann 2004:201). The connection between development projects and infrastructure cannot be denied as they often follow established and accessible routes (Kreutzmann 2004:204). The same is the case for the still unpaved road to Bagrote valley: before 1972 it took two days by foot to reach Gilgit, now it is not even two hours by jeep or motorcycle which has greatly improved the connection to the center for more economic activities and educational facilities and has attracted researchers and developmental programs to the valley.

7 When boys' education was introduced in the Bagrote valley in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was only accepted reluctantly, partly because people did not feel the need for it and partly because they repelled the control by outsiders, in this case teachers sent by the English colonial or later Pakistani authorities from Gilgit (Schneid 1997: 98ff).

ally equal. As the *lambadar* Mohmad Aziz complains with a smirk, the most negative effects are mild irritations:

“Vo [bacche] apne kam karte the, koi dispute nahi tha. Ajkal kamra chahie, furniture chahie. Mai apko kehta tha, chai nahi pio, chai nahi piti thi. Abhi [bacche kehte hain] ,mai chai nahi pion, kyo?” (The children did their work, there was no dispute. Now they want a room, they want furniture. I did tell you not to drink tea and you didn’t drink. Now [they say]: ‘I should not drink tea? Why?’)

Since the schools could successfully be fit into the established social framework and are greatly valued as means to support a family’s future income, many local people have established further initiatives to improve the level of education, introduce college classes or private English medium schools. In Bagrote the people are very thankful to Schneid’s efforts and continue to be closely related to her but they also have their own demands and requirements. They have adopted the idea of girls’ schools over the last 23 years and now appropriate the school system to cater further to their own needs through a private school initiative. As in other places of Gilgit-Baltistan, all families who can afford it send their children to private English medium schools. Many of these schools are not necessarily sponsored by NGOs but are run by neighborhood initiatives, such as *Bagrote Association for Social Enhancement (BASE) School* in Bagrote where the curriculum is taught in English and even co-education is not an issue in an otherwise gender-segregated society (Dunsby & Dunsby 2013: 12).

### Actively changing Gilgit-Baltistan from within

Nowadays, development is a much desired virtue in most parts of Gilgit-Baltistan and many people take actively part in changing their society from within. The works of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN)<sup>8</sup>, especially the *Aga Khan Rural Support Program (AKRSP)*, are omnipresent throughout the districts of Hunza-Nagar and Gilgit, to a lesser extent in the rest of the region and excluding the Diamer area: one meets members of the *Local Support Organizations (LSO)*, which have been established within the framework of AKRPS, finds the organization’s logo on the iodized salt packages or listens to stories about the introduction of clean water supplies through the *Water and Sanitation Extension Programme (WASEP)*. In order

8 AKDN is part of the *Aga Khan Foundation* run by the Aga Khan, the religious leader of the Islamic Ismaili sect. It is a global non-governmental organization to support the religious community in various countries worldwide and since 1982 manages its developmental campaigns on health, education, agriculture and civil society in Gilgit-Baltistan from its headquarters in Gilgit and many regional offices.

not to overemphasize the role of AKDN one has to add that also the media play a big role in propagating knowledge about supposedly modern virtues; and religious persons, sheikhs or imams, teach at local mosques about matters of health and hygiene (Halvorson 2011: 285). In the districts of Gilgit and Hunza, however, the most important focus is on education; leading to high literacy rates among the youth.

In many regions of the world, people eye change rather suspiciously. But why are people so enthusiastic about ‘development’ in most parts of Gilgit-Baltistan? I met quite a few young community activists<sup>9</sup> who could barely make a living from their short-term projects within the development sector. In most parts of the world young people look for a well-paid career after university. However, the more I talked to young men and women from the mountain area, the more I understood that here the social norm is clearly to serve one’s community through one’s job instead of simply pursuing personal interests.

Foucault’s conceptualization of modernity as an attitude can help to understand the relatively new phenomenon of community activism:

*“[...] I wonder whether we may not envisage modernity rather as an attitude than as a period of history. And by ‘attitude,’ I mean a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task. A bit, no doubt, like what the Greeks called an ethos. And consequently, rather than seeking to distinguish the ‘modern era’ from the ‘premodern’ or ‘postmodern,’ I think it would be more useful to try to find out how the attitude of modernity, ever since its formation, has found itself struggling with attitudes of ‘countermodernity.’” (Foucault 1984: 39)*

By depicting modernity as an attitude, Foucault draws the attention to the actors who struggle to become and feel modern rather than referring to a certain developmental stage of a society. He also suggests looking at movements that are directed against modernity, in our case, against agendas of development. Nevertheless, those counter-tendencies are based on the idealistic baggage of developmental agencies, especially AKDN, which have worked in the region and set the ground for a wider conceptual change of people’s minds as described earlier by Wittrock’s “promissory notes”. In Gilgit-Baltistan this struggle against a perceived foreign hegemony is taken up by community activists from Gilgit and Hunza: They distance themselves from the traditional development approaches in the region and creatively design an own future

<sup>9</sup> Community activists create and engage in projects that intend to raise awareness and lead their community into a better social, economic or political future.

for their communities. I identified four major factors that motivate activists to take up a strong commitment for social change:

- In Gilgit-Baltistan, the authorities hardly take care of social concerns. Besides maintaining schools, which are often considered as substandard, the Pakistani state is hardly present in the social sector; this fact is often considered to lead to increased frustration among the educated youth.
- People want to fight off established prejudices about the backward mountain areas.
- The long-standing activities of AKDN gave a positive example of development work and taught the people to organize at the community level in order to “make a difference”.
- The most important motivation is the makeup of the society, the network of family ties, which creates a basic feeling of interdependence and responsibility.

In Germany, social problems are expected to be solved by the state; since people pay a lot of taxes, they expect this in return. However, this reduces individuals’ engagements for social concerns. Quite the opposite seems to be true for Pakistan, especially the long neglected “disputed territory” of Gilgit-Baltistan. Due to this area’s entanglement with the Kashmir question, the people still lack full citizen rights and a representation in the Pakistani parliament (Ali 2013). The inhabitants have always stressed the need to struggle for their rights and catch up with the richer ‘down country’ of Pakistan, where the average income is still twice as high as in Gilgit-Baltistan (Sökefeld 1999, Aga Khan Foundation 2007: 3,40). During recent years, political activism was supplemented by local projects of “community development”, agendas set up by local activists to “develop” their own communities; both scenes fight for a better representation of Gilgit-Baltistan. Especially the young generation of college and university educated males engages in social programs: They facilitate workshops to promote civil society, teach courses in community journalism, record short videos, comment on recent news from Gilgit-Baltistan and work in projects of AKDN. So far, there are only few girls present, yet their number seems to increase as a glance on the editorial board of *pamirtimes.net*, for example, suggests.

On the newly introduced internet platform *Mountain TV*, a group of community activists professionally collects general background information, recent news and media, such as short videos about the region or its expats. The activists also organize meetings and workshops to involve more and more young people and spread their ideas of community activism, as the following quotation from a project report of the *Mountain Youth Resource & Social Welfare Association* (MYRO) shows:

*“Under the project [Digital Social Governance: Engaging Youth through Technology, implemented by MYRO], 22 young men*

*and women from five villages in upper Hunza (Shishkat, Gulmit, Ghulkin, Hussaini and Passu) were acquainted with international human rights practices and trained in using their camera equipped cell phones to capture and document events and success stories in their surroundings.” (MYRO 2013: 1)*

The strong and active participation also serves as emotional outlet for frustrations over the Pakistani state or the territory’s administration, which do not fulfill their responsibilities. This was pointed out to me repeatedly and is also confirmed by Salman Hussain, a young social activist from Hunza who lives in the Punjab:

*“Changing a society for betterment is not an easy task and I think activists are like a catalyst who play their role in a very polite and decent way. I am personally motivated and think this is my social responsibility to play my role in generating awareness and to fight for the poor and neglected people. From a long period of time GB is neglected and deprived of constitutional rights; that’s why some youth groups show anger and want to play a role in this regard. Human rights violation in GB is very rarely reported in the mainstream media of Pakistan and every day we watch talk shows about the issues of Pakistan and different provinces and very, very rarely there is something discussed about GB. This attitude develops anger in youth and they start activism.”*

Many young, well-educated men from Gilgit-Baltistan are angry about prejudices from ‘down-country’ Pakistan and about self-descriptions of local people that often define the mountain region in evolutionistic and modernist terms. Activists feel a need to ‘enlighten’ society in order to counter those who label the mountain people as being *jangli* (wild) and *jahil* (ignorant, illiterate) people. Due to the omnipresence of discourses about the area’s backwardness, people want to fight the long-standing prejudices by reinterpreting the established discourse themselves, either by “modernizing” their communities or by converting the ascription of primitiveness into nostalgic images of tribal and traditional heritage that is something to be proud of. Both approaches (unconsciously?) rest upon a certain assumption of modernity that must have been growing over time (cf. Wittrock’s “promissory notes”). Additionally, many locals have the feeling that their mountain areas are often falsely associated with the Taliban; an image that is strictly rejected all over Gilgit-Baltistan. Sometimes I had the impression that people explicitly pointed out their ‘modern’ achievements to me in order to stress that there is more than the poor, violent, and Islamist Pakistan as depicted in the global mainstream media. For the purpose of setting the picture straight, commu-

nity activists explicitly make use of the mushrooming social media, the internet and mobile phones to symbolize their ‘modernity’: Although they live in a remote area, they are up-to-date and linked with the rest of the world.

Many of the community activists I spoke with originally come from Hunza, Gojal and Ghizer and belong to the Ismaili community, which is guided by their spiritual leader, the Aga Khan. The Aga Khan has been propagating education, gender equality and bottom-up approaches for nearly sixty years and continuously encourages his followers to take their life into their own hands:

*“Philanthropy is very close to the notion of charity, giving away. And in Islam it’s very clear: charity is desirable, necessary, but the best form of charity is to enable an individual to manage his own destiny, to improve his condition of life, or her condition of life, so they become autonomous, they make their own decisions.”<sup>10</sup>*

These guidelines have been implemented by the community-based development programs of AKDN. They use and welcome bottom-up approaches. This goes hand in hand with a shift in the general approach to development: not to force something on the local people but rather to involve them in projects.<sup>11</sup> AKDN started its schools, Local Support Organizations (LSO) and women’s organizations (WO) or infrastructure, agriculture and sanitation programs in the predominantly Ismaili regions but have extended their projects to bordering regions and therefore greatly influenced Shia and Sunni communities as well (Malik & Hunzai 2007). The guidelines of AKRSP’s development involve the village community as a whole:

*“The concept of social development is one of the pillars of the overall and inclusive development strategy of AKRSP in the area, especially in the context of rural life. Principally, it refers to positive changes in the behavior, norms, traditions, practices, interactions, systems, institutions, and capacities of communities towards the ownership, and management of their collective village development.”* (Aga Khan Foundation 2007: 5)

Dating back to the Aga Khan and international development agencies, the idea of targeted change was experienced as betterment of daily life. The bot-

<sup>10</sup> Interview with the Aga Khan on October 5th 2013

Available on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XFNYCoiRaro>

<sup>11</sup> The US Village Aid Program already practiced a similar approach as early as 1956 (until 1962) in Gilgit and mainly financed infrastructure projects, such as bridges, with a strong emphasis on village participation (Kreutzmann 2004: 201). Since the introduction of the former Northern Areas in 1974, a cooperation between the Rural Development Department of the government in Gilgit and local District Councils was established to support projects on village basis.

tom-up, community-based approach fits well into people's lives, was adapted and appropriated by local communities. Because of the strong emphasis on self-help, local people have learnt to act within the development machine and developed their own creativity and agency. Sher Ali describes his personal process of learning from AKRSP; he now organizes his own projects:

*„AKRSP introduced these things. And before everything was regulated by AKRSP. When AKRSP saw that these organizations had become self-sufficient, AKRSP gave all power to these village organizations, they can run them themselves. Now you will see that everything is governed and run by these people themselves. [...]I was working with these LSOs and got to know how everything works. I learned so many things, I had so many relations with different people, different organizations, my network has become very wide. But I still felt some restriction, for example, I had to ask the others on the board when I'm going to do this, whether it's good. In so many things I was bound. So due to this we thought we can make our own [organization], then you have freedom and then you're not limited to your villages.”*

Moreover, there are not enough jobs for qualified persons in Gilgit-Baltistan, so the youth create their own jobs in the development sector. Funding is usually obtained from the various institutions of the AKDN or foreign donor agencies. Such funds are sufficient to pay the organizers a small salary. Since the salary for one project is not enough to support one's life, they engage in various activities at a time. Also many teachers consider themselves as community servants; this is especially the case for those working in private schools without the popular security of a government job.

The model of “community development” has been so successful in the area because it perfectly fits into the local people's concept of society. Extended family ties are the basis of everyday life and social relations. The social network within villages is very dense. Therefore the community is actually tangible and can be experienced through everyday encounters with relatives and neighbors at the local level of the village. No matter whether Sunni, Shia or Ismaili, or the different language groups, this perception of communitarian togetherness and devotedness seems to be a consistent characteristic in all of Gilgit-Baltistan. A group interview with young men from various parts of Hunza depicts the strong bonds within a community, even if people do not live in the village anymore as some of the respondents are settled in the urban centers of Pakistan:

*“From tradition, there's no private life! Due to the limited area, every day you have a connection to each other.”*

*“We want to make all equal. Due to very limited area and to family structure, it’s necessary that all are happy. We feel like we can be happy when our neighbors are happy.”*

*“We make branches, interact. Finally thousands interact and don’t fight about resources.”*

Thus, individuals feel as integral parts of their community. Because they are so thankful for the education they received, they want to return something to the community once they have grown up. As one of the community activists explained: “I only got education because of this school but the school was made by the other community people. So now you want to do something from which other people can benefit.” This attitude of reciprocity can also be transferred to other aspects of life, such as giving something back to the community because it provided a safe childhood or a feeling of belonging.

Substituting the absent Pakistani state, fighting against established prejudices of backwardness, having gone through the practical school of AKDN and feeling responsible for the community they belong to, can be summarized as the main motivations for the active scene of community activist in Gilgit and Hunza. They portray the project of creating their own version of modernity and development. Change is not supposed to be further directed by global players but it is taken over by local actors. In this process of appropriation, underlying ideals and motifs of the originally Western modernization project are sorted out and adapted, first on the community level, but then brought up to the whole society through means of contemporary social media.

## Conclusion

The concept of development had long ago been discarded by my ‘anthropological self’ and came back to me like a bouncing ball almost every day in Gilgit-Baltistan, in many conversations, in academic circles of the Karakoram International University or sitting around the fireplace in the Bagrote valley. The many changes from outside within the last twenty-five years, such as the building of the KKH by China and Pakistan, developmental programs by the Swiss-based Aga Khan Development Network or, on a local level, Monika Girls School have left a lasting impression on people’s minds. The perception of history and change is shaped by those experiences of development and therefore overshadow other modes of remembering: Late history equals development. Therefore development is widely used synonymously with change; only at closer glance it is depicted as certain mode of change.

From my European academic background, I have interpreted development schemes as continuation of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment project, which has been widely questioned by anthropology’s postmodernism. But



maybe my protagonists talked of a different kind of modernity, one that is not quite as biased. Local actors in Gilgit, Hunza and Bagrote constantly have to interpret various foreign ideas and goods along locally established sets of values. They either discard, adopt or appropriate, that is, adapt and even change them. Just like “promissory notes” they unfold their impact gradually. Due to local people’s good experiences with development, people embrace it and have started to actively contribute to it. For them development no longer follows a Western model but has been fit into the web of community relations. Or as the headline’s double meaning points out, they have good experiences because they themselves are the stakeholders.

Following Foucault’s suggestion to see modernity as an attitude rather than as an epoch, there clearly exists a modernity of Gilgit-Baltistan that is perceived by the local people as such and may even enrich the Western or scholarly perspective on modernity. As postcolonial studies show for the time of colonialism, the experiences of colonizers and colonized are not binary nor separated, but mutual interrelations and interdependencies are experienced together and must therefore be thought together, not as separate experiences of the colonizers or the colonized (Randeria 1999: 378). The same line of thought can be applied to the analysis of modernity: Although the concept originated in a Euro-American setting, its definition has to be understood in the wider framework of global interdependencies; it is not a one-dimensional historic product but can be augmented by the dialogue with the rest of the world. Modernity has long ago reached all regions of the world (Randeria 1999: 374), no matter through which channels, often in the shape of development aid; and these local experiments add more meaning to or even change the connotation of the original Western concept of modernity. I find that Eisenstadt’s concept of “multiple modernities”, which refers to varieties of modernity that nevertheless exhibit some specific ‘modern’ traits breaking with traditions (Wittrock 2000: 32ff), stays short of grasping the complex interaction between the local and the global level, which leads to appropriation on both sides: Local adaptations as well feed back to international thoughts and ideas about development and modernity; it is a never-ending constructing process, for example, AKRSP’s participatory community approach has served as model for many other development projects worldwide. Gilgit-Baltistan’s modernity is therefore not simply a reflection of the Western model but an integral part of the global project of defining our present time. This article has shed light on the appropriation of the development concept on the local level and transformations such as grassroots movements, which again influence general debates about modernization. It is still left for further research to critically analyze the local level’s stimuli on the global scholarly perception of modernity.

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