



INTERVIEW: SHAMSH KASSIM-LAKHA

Shamsh Kassim-Lakha is the Executive Chairman of the Board Executive Committee of the University of Central Asia (UCA), and is leading the planning and building of UCA's three campuses in Tajikistan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Kazakhstan. He has had a long association with UCA since the 1990s and developed the concept document for the university with Tajikistan's Aga Khan. In 2014, Kassim-Lakha was appointed the Aga Khan Development Network's diplomatic representative to the Kyrgyz Republic and Open Central Asia went to find out more in this exclusive interview.

OCA: Please give us an introduction to the work of AKDN.

Shamsh Kassim-Lakha: For more than 60 years, the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) has been building institutions and delivering essential services by creating schools and hospitals, newspapers and electricity generation plants, and social programmes helping improve the lives of hundreds of millions of people in places as varied as Cairo, Kabul, Delhi and Bamako. AKDN has been operating in Central Asia since 1995. Cooperation between Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic began earlier, however, following the famine in Gorno Badakhshan Oblast (GBO), Tajikistan. At that time, His Highness the Aga Khan was requested to supply food and basic resources for the region which was in great need. The Kyrgyz Government was instrumental in AKDN's relief efforts by facilitating this aid delivery through its territory because poor infrastructure from Dushanbe to Khorog required transport through the Osh, Kyrgyzstan corridor.

In principle, AKDN only undertakes development programmes when invited by a country, so we came to the Kyrgyz Republic at the invitation of the Government. The Kyrgyz Government

appreciated the outcomes of AKDN's efforts in Tajikistan, and in 1995 when His Highness the Aga Khan came to Bishkek to thank the Government for its assistance in famine relief, the authorities requested AKDN to assist the newly independent country with economic, social and educational projects. His Highness responded very positively to this request from a friendly nation. Similarly, the Government of Tajikistan also requested His Highness to help in fields of education, financial services and rural development as AKDN has considerable experience in all these spheres of development. Be it in northern Gilgit-Baltistan in Chitral provinces of Pakistan, in India or in Africa, we have extensive experience working with rural communities to promote development through self-help community based programmes that focus on sustainable interventions. For example, in rural development, AKDN offers scientific support for animal husbandry or agriculture and engineering training in irrigation for water infrastructure. The eventual outcome of the request by the Kyrgyz Republic was the establishment of the Aga Khan School in Osh, which is now 15 years old and the establishment of the Kyrgyzstan Investment and Credit Bank (KICB), now the second

largest bank in the country. We also established the First Micro Finance and Credit Company (FMCC) headquartered in Osh, which operates around the country.

In Tajikistan, we have similar financial services institutions as well as the Aga Khan Lycee and Family Medicine and Diagnostic Centres in Khorog. Dushanbe also has a similar health centre, as well as the Serena Hotel, which is part of the Serena chain, with locations in Pakistan, Eastern Africa and Kabul. The Aga Khan Foundation's programmes in the rural areas of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are amongst our most successful programmes in Central Asia. AKF's programmes for improving early childhood education, self-governance in the rural community, and advice to farmers to diversify their crops have now become role models for many others including civil society organisations. For example, greenhouse crops were not grown or very well known in Kyrgyzstan, so we introduced greenhouse technology a few years ago. This model has since become ubiquitous, like wi-fi, and farmers are now growing cucumbers all year round. Earlier, we never had cucumbers or tomatoes in the month of March. Now these farmers enjoy good profits because nobody can typically find cucumbers or



tomatoes in March and April. So this greenhouse technology has significantly enhanced farmer incomes.

AKDN's largest single investment in the region is the University of Central Asia (UCA). It is an institution established by the Governments of Tajikistan, Kyrgyz Republic, Kazakhstan and the Ismaili Imamat under an International Treaty signed in 2000, ratified by the respective parliaments and registered with the United Nations. Under its Charter UCA as a secular, not-for-profit, private University and will offer an internationally recognised standard of higher education, especially to meet the needs of the mountain societies in Central Asia.

OCA: Why does AKDN focus on the mountains?

SK-L: Globally, many universities are focusing on desert,

coastal regions and islands, but mountain regions remain underserved. If you look at high altitude societies around the world, there is a common phenomenon: the higher the altitude where people live, the higher the level of poverty. This is because remote communities lack the means to earn an adequate living during the short seasons and face challenges in accessibility to education, health and other services that keep them marginalised. There is a greater risk for people in these marginalised societies to become radicalised. If you can bring that marginalised population into the mainstream by providing access to high quality education as well as professional and vocational skills, they will become job creators and not solely job seekers.

Take a look at Switzerland. Switzerland is a mountainous region, which experienced similar limitations: snow in the winter, where you can't grow anything. As a consequence in the past, many Swiss migrated, much like Central Asians who now migrate to Russia

and elsewhere in search of livelihoods. But Switzerland no longer has those levels of out migration. Thanks to high quality education, they have strengthened their human resources and diversified their skills and talents. Now Swiss youth are in engineering, banking and pharmaceutical industries. The Swiss discovered ways of making a living through tourism, earning income while confined to the mountains during winter months. People go to the mountains to ski in the winter, hike in the summer, buy cheese and local products, and enjoy mountain air and scenery. So we believe that promoting entrepreneurship and offering the highest standards of education will support the people of Central Asia's mountain regions to shape their own destinies. Our objective is to help create the capacities and opportunities for economic and social development through jobs and businesses that suit the culture and environment of these unique communities and turn current liabilities into future assets.

The UCA Campus in Naryn, in the Kyrgyz Republic, has already admitted its first undergraduate residential students and offers degree programmes in Computer Sciences as well as Communications and Media. In Tajikistan, UCA will specialise in Economics, especially for small and medium businesses, and in Earth and Environmental Science. UCA selected these majors following a detailed market survey established demand for these specialisations. We have not chosen them randomly; we want UCA degree programmes to have strong ties to the job market and prepare graduates to be gainfully employed professionals. Recently, when some people learnt that UCA would be in Naryn, entrepreneurs from Bishkek indicated plans to set up a software development company nearby, allowing businesses to employ our Computer Sciences students as interns in the summer. The study of Earth and Environmental Science is also vital to the future of the region.

Climate change has a significant effect on Central Asia. The more severe climate change becomes, the greater the likelihood of extreme weather events such as heavy rain, floods and avalanches. These events result in much loss of lives. Earthquakes are very frequent and can trigger avalanches in the mountains. Part of UCA's objective is to teach students how to study, research and predict some of these climate related changes to minimise their impact on society.

OCA: How do you select locations for your organisation and why Naryn?

SK-L: For reasons explained earlier, sites for the main campuses in Naryn (Kyrgyzstan), Khorog (Tajikistan) and Tekeli (Kazakhstan), all in mountain regions, were put forward to

the three Presidents during deliberations on establishing the University in 2000. The Presidents and His Highness the Aga Khan agreed that because the capital cities of each country had multiple institutions of higher education, the greatest impact of this new university would be felt if campuses were located in mountain regions of each respective country where communities suffer from lack of good quality education. Inhabitants there have access to fewer resources and are more socially vulnerable than citizens living in large cities. In these mountainous regions, high levels of poverty often leave populations marginalised, creating an environment where radicalism can gain a foothold. In Naryn, the collapse of the Soviet Union meant a collapse in local economic life. But despite being one of the most economically depressed places in the country, Naryn is also the fountainhead of many cultures and heritages in the Kyrgyz Republic. It's good to be in a place with such a storied history of diversity, exchange and new ideas.





OCA: When will the University admit its first undergraduate students?

SK-L: Classes at the Naryn campus begin this September for 72 students, admitted entirely on merit from the three Founding States and a small number from Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Khorog campus opens in Fall 2017 and Tekeli is to follow a couple of years later. This is just the first of four phases at each of the three campuses. When fully completed, the cost of each campus is estimated at US\$500 million, a total regional investment of US\$1.5 billion. In Naryn, UCA has already made additional investments to improve citizens' quality of life of by strengthening social infrastructure. A town park, a Family Medicine and Diagnostic Centre and a Centre for Early Childhood Development are the first to come on line.

OCA: What is the language of instruction and mode of communication at UCA?

SK-L: After an extensive review of many countries, including the needs in Central Asia, the Founders of the University came to the conclusion that English should be the me-

dium of instruction. Today, English is not only the language of the United Kingdom but of the world. In Europe, English is a predominant language of research on the Internet and in books, magazines and academic articles; in Russia you will find many universities teaching courses in English, for example at the Higher School of Economics, Moscow. The big challenge of locating campuses in mountain areas is the recruitment of the right quality of teaching faculty, because living in small mountain communities is a significant commitment. But we are truly an international institution, and we continue to attract candidates from universities in Central Asia, North America, Europe, South Asia and elsewhere. We have already sent 42 Central Asian scholars abroad to obtain their PhD degrees and prepare to be teachers and researchers at UCA.

Among the other major challenges UCA faces is the incoming students' level of preparedness. In the UK, for example, students enter universities after completing 12 grades of education; in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, high school students graduate after 11 grades. So we need to prepare our students for a rigorous university level education. To achieve this, we introduced a one-year preparatory programme focussed on upgrading science, critical thinking, English and

maths skills. A minimum standard of English is required of all students who apply to UCA.

OCA: Are you satisfied with UCA's progress and where do you see the University in the next five years?

SK-L: We signed the agreement in 2000 with the three governments and then selected campus locations in Naryn (Kyrgyz Republic), Khorog (Tajikistan) and Tekeli (Kazakhstan). We put forward a proposal to the three Presidents and made the collective decision to open this university. Then came land selection and appointment of architects. This process is now in its 16th year with our doors opening this September. This progress is not only limited to the University's campus site; we are also helping to transform Naryn into a vibrant university community. We are building a Smart Park in the heart of Naryn, offering green space, exercise areas and wireless Internet to create a public space for use by all residents. We are also improving the quality and access to health care with the newly established Family Medicine and Diagnostic Centre, Centre for Early Childhood Development. We are also helping Naryn authorities with town planning. *It is very difficult to build in these areas, so opening the UCA Naryn campus is a significant accomplishment in scale and scope; UCA has employed hundreds of local employees and engaged local and regional contractors.* The cost of construction in Naryn is around US\$85 million, and a bit more expensive in Khorog and Tekeli because of logistics and higher construction costs. We are satisfied with our progress, and while there is always room for improvement, as an academic institution we have the good fortune of documenting these experiences and learning from our successes and setbacks. *Of course, the opening is just the beginning: Oxford is 800 years old and Harvard is 375 years old. It will take time for UCA to gain global recognition.*

Fortunately, we have some experience building universities. I myself was appointed by His Highness to build and operate the Aga Khan University (AKU) and its large teaching hospital in Karachi, Pakistan. We went on to build and operate campuses in Africa, in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, and established a campus in UK, for the AKU-Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations. AKU programmes are working in Egypt, in Syria until recently and in Afghanistan, where we have quality health service and education facilities. Medical and nursing graduates of AKU are highly recognised in North America, Europe and elsewhere. So we have experience offering quality higher education. It took almost 20 years to achieve that status, and required a significant level of commitment

and sustained hard work. I hope it will take less time for UCA, but this only be possible with hard work and dedication to towards high quality research, teaching and service to the community. And in five years, we will see our inaugural class of undergraduates from across Central Asia complete their degrees and graduate, while new students continue to enroll and receive a world class education at each UCA campus in Tajikistan, Kyrgyz Republic and Kazakhstan. Our results can only be judged on the basis of the performance of several graduating classes as they enter their professions and demonstrate their creativity and entrepreneurship.

OCA: How will you best prepare students for the future?

SK-L: The opening of UCA's first campus in Naryn is only the first phase. Undergraduate students will be heavily engaged in community service, developing social projects in our campus towns and launching student businesses. During summer breaks, students will complete a compulsory internship placing them in positions within businesses, government departments or non-governmental organisations. These vital real world experiences will be attractive to employers and prepare the graduates to transition into the job market. Our goal is to develop our students into entrepreneurs with the skills and experience to become job creators and unlock the region's economic potential.

In the coming phases, UCA will work with the Founding States to further strengthen the public education system and improve the quality of their secondary school graduates. This is a major challenge given resource constraints but we are encouraged by our partnerships with the Founding States, which are strongly committed to improve school education. Meanwhile, UCA will continue to offer a five-year undergraduate degree programme so that students are adequately prepared for the University's rigorous international academic standards.

OCA: How do you see UCA's growth in the coming years

SK-L: It is too early to predict UCA's growth trajectory at this early stage. However, we are already undertaking studies and consultations to determine the next phases of growth in terms of new disciplines, introduction of graduate studies and strengthening of UCA's research capacity. After all, an important aspiration of UCA is to become a leading research university that is recognised for its contribution to creating knowledge.