

Faces of *change*



For a quarter century, Aga Khan Foundation U.S.A. (AKF USA) has been investing in people, extending a helping hand to communities and individuals so they may live with dignity and hope.

Successful Business Enterprise: Growing Apricots

Nestled amidst some of the most formidable mountain ranges in the world, with extreme climate conditions, the Northern Area and Chitral in Pakistan face arduous challenges in development. The geographic isolation of the region, a fragile infrastructure, low population density, weak access to social services and a cultural bias against business, collectively make the Northern economies vulnerable. Sixty percent of income comes from farm sources, yet small and scattered land holdings place increasing pressure on the need to explore other livelihood options. The limited public and private sectors offer insufficient opportunities for the burgeoning numbers of educated youth who have rising aspirations. Cultivating interests in entrepreneurial ventures offers an attractive alternative route to sustainable livelihood opportunities.



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The Enterprise Development Programme (EDP) of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) is working to address these limitations by developing market support mechanisms. The program's objectives focus on creating income generation and job opportunities through diversification of the economy, adding value, introduction of appropriate technologies, import substitution, strengthening ties with the down-country markets, and promotion of a business ethos.

Much of the enterprise development in the Northern valleys of Pakistan has been stimulated by AKRSP, which is an integrated rural and social development program that has been operating in the Northern Areas and Chitral since 1982. The economic and job opportunities created by small enterprises contribute directly to AKRSP's overarching mission of reducing poverty in the Northern regions.

For demonstration effect, AKRSP also established wholly owned private businesses. This approach has boosted growth and interest in entrepreneurial ventures. It is also creating demand for business development services and opportunities for their provision by commercial local intermediaries/business development service providers.



AKRSP launched an experiment in 1999 to introduce a new method for drying apricot—the abundant and delicious fruit of Northern Areas and Chitral. The experiment of drying whole apricot proved successful and the product was able to meet the stringent international quality standards while meeting an export order from a UK-based company, Tropical Wholefoods. Based on the encouraging demand from the market, AKRSP launched a separate project named Dry Fruit Project to train apricot farmers in the new fruit-drying technology and run the project as a business. The project was able to break even in 2002. In 2004 Dry Fruit Project was formally registered as a business entity with the name of Mountain Fruits Limited. Providing seasonal jobs to 50 women and benefiting a total of 1500-2000 apricot producing families, Mountain Fruits Limited sets precedence for the creation of professional and profitable businesses with social conscience.