Central Asia Institute’s Journey of Hope Volume V www.ikat.org

Central Asia Institute’s field report documenting projects in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan.
ت لور
لی رویه میانست
نور برزیری که گلی
یه نورد کی کری گل
کر کیا چه که گی
لو شیره پاقی گی
Table of Contents

Introduction ................................................................. 2

Generations of Hope: Korphe, where it all began ...................... 3
  Plus: Education crisis in Pakistan .................................... 5
  Map of CAI project areas ............................................. 7

Isolation and Hope: Wakhan Corridor and Bozoi Gumbad ........... 8

Visions of Hope: Greg Mortenson overseas ............................ 14

Hope Trumps Fear: Ghizer District ‘a soft corner for extremists’ .... 16
  Plus: History of CAI in region ..................................... 19

Documenting Hope: A project survey .................................. 20

Hope Amid War: CAI projects in Central and Eastern Afghanistan 24

Delivering Hope: CAI explores new frontiers in Tajikistan ........ 30

Hope and Last Illiterate Generation: CAI’s women’s centers ....... 34

Teaching Hope: Pennies for Peace ..................................... 38
  ‘I’ll never forget how many schools there aren’t in the world’

Hope in new places: Khyber Paktunkhwa ............................ 39

Bios and contact information .......................................... 40

Cover Photos - Cover: A young student works on her English lessons at CAI’s Haji Ali Memorial School in Korphe, Baltistan, Pakistan. In 2010, CAI built a new school to replace the original one after heavy rain collapsed the roof and caused major structural damage.

Inside cover: A student recites a lesson at the chalkboard in front of her class at Rahesht Primary School in Parwan Province north of Kabul.

Inside back: A woman sews a garment at the Khandud Women’s Vocational Center in the Wakhan Corridor in northeast Afghanistan.

Back: Children walk home at the end of the school day from CAI’s Pigish School (in the distance behind them) in the Wakhan Corridor in northeast Afghanistan.
Dear Reader,

As the children at Pushgar School in Afghanistan’s Panjshir Province say with enthusiasm, “AHHHH-Salaam Aleikum.” Welcome to the fifth volume of “The Journey of Hope,” Central Asia Institute’s annual report in stories and photos from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

I have thought a lot about hope in recent months. It’s been a tough year for CAI and its co-founder Greg Mortenson. But over and over again I have seen hope trump adversity.

That’s because I have the privilege of traveling to Central Asia to visit CAI schools and projects and drinking lots of tea along the way. And then I get to be the bridge between CAI and you, our steadfast supporters.

It’s not all a joy ride. Photographer Ellen Jaskol and I spend a lot of time bumping along twisty, rocky mountain roads in pickup trucks, sleeping on floors and witnessing heartbreaking poverty.

But there are no words, really, for the benefits. We get to visit remote villages most people never see. We are invited into people’s homes and trusted with their stories and their dreams of a better future. We witness change as it happens in communities where education is making a difference, one child at a time.

As a result, our travels are highlighted by qualities that are increasingly rare in our fast-paced, divisive Western world – gratitude and grace and hope.

Hope is, indeed, at the heart of everything CAI aspires to do in the world. I tried to find another word for hope. But other words — “wish,” “look forward to,” “desire” — don’t work; they aren’t the same. As a wise friend of mine who works in South America said earlier this year, “Hope is not the verbal equivalent of crossing your fingers.”

She’s right. “Hope is about pushing sadness aside for years in order to put one foot in front of the other,” she said. “It’s not the same as wishing or wanting or optimism. It’s about working to change a system that has failed you again and again and again.”

Her words stick with me; I see hope everywhere I go in pursuit of these stories.

CAI works in developing countries where grinding poverty, hunger, and illiteracy are real, in communities where there is no electricity or running water and where extended families live in small mud houses and breathe the dense smoke of dung fires every day of their lives.

Many survive on milky tea and bread. Women commonly die giving birth. Too many families flee the fighting in their villages and move to strange cities overflowing with thousands of others like them. Women lose their husbands, children lose their fathers, and parents lose their sons to a war that never seems to end.

In this part of the world, desperate, opportunistic people crop up without warning, demanding money, threatening any sense of security and asserting their power in dangerous ways. The sight of men toting Kalashnikovs is common. Missteps can have deadly consequences.

Imagine living in such a world.

Yet, as my wise friend said, powerful people can take away your home, your land, your rights and even the people you love – “But they can’t take away your hope.”

And education is the foundation of hope. Greg often quotes the Persian proverb, “When it is dark, you can see the stars.” I’ve held fast to that image in the months since allegations surfaced that Greg mismanaged the organization and fabricated or manipulated details about CAI’s accomplishments overseas to benefit himself. That they coincided with Greg’s serious health issues – he wound up undergoing open-heart surgery in June to repair an aneurism and a hole in his heart – have made things all that much harder. The repercussions of all this have been staggering and are still being sorted out.

But I’ve been lucky. I “can see the stars.” In my travels I hear the stories and see the projects. I know that CAI is inspiring, cultivating and delivering hope. I know CAI is making a difference.

That’s true for our overseas managers, too. “I am very lucky that I find [Greg] and to be working for CAI,” Saidullah Baig, CAI’s Gilgit project manager, said in May. “Not just because of his working for the poor, but because he brought us humanity, he taught us to serve the human being, to love the human being, to help the people who are poorer than you … [and] to educate the females in the remote areas.

“You don’t have to do what Greg Mortenson is doing. You don’t have to make a school. Just come and help one orphan girl. Or come and make a toilet. Or give a single dollar to a vocational center so we can improve their lives. You come to this valley, you see and observe. You come here and listen to the kids.”

He speaks for all of us.

Peace,

Karin Ronnow
CAI communications director
Nov. 17, 2011
Generations of Hope

Korphe is home to CAI’s first school, second generation

KORPHE, Pakistan – Time stood still in this village high in the Karakoram Mountains for centuries. The local Balti people led simple lives, in sync with the seasons, focused on survival. Most had no idea of the year they were born; due to illiteracy, they kept no written record of such things. Nor did it particularly matter. People rose with the sun in the morning, worked as subsistence farmers all day and went to sleep when it was dark.

For perhaps six centuries, that was all they knew.

Then an American named Greg Mortenson accidentally stumbled into Korphe after an unsuccessful attempt to summit K2, the world’s second-highest mountain. The year was 1993. Three years and countless financial and logistical peaks and valleys later, he and the villagers completed work on Korphe’s first school – ever.

In the 15 years since, a generation of Korphe’s children has learned to read and write. Some graduates have gone on to pursue higher education. Others have married and are raising their own children, the next generation of Korphe School students.

“Now, slowly, people are changing,” said “Master” Hussain, who became Korphe’s first educated person after his father sent him to school in Lahore, and who has been a teacher in the school since its inception. “They are going to school and doing good things for their children, their families, their villages.

“Because of Greg, we have girls and boys who went on to earn their degrees and now have good jobs, including a nurse, teacher, engineer, Islamic scholar – many, many different jobs.”

Even the school has entered a second generation of sorts. Last year, the same heavy rains that triggered Pakistan’s epic floods destroyed the original Korphe School. The roof caved in. And Central Asia Institute, the nonprofit organization Mortenson co-founded in 1996, quickly rebuilt the school.

“The Korphe community is tremendously proud of their school and Twaha, the village leader now, said that without a school there was no light in the community, so we made it a priority to help them,” Mortenson said.

Resourceful, determined people

Just getting to Korphe from “downside” in Skardu, the capital of Baltistan, entails an all-day jeep ride over rough dirt roads. It takes eight hours to traverse the roughly 60 miles. The trip is only possible during the warmer seasons. And even then, it can be dangerous and iffy.

The road follows the Shigar and Braldu rivers as it climbs into the mountains, over boulder fields, gravel, mud, sand and hard-packed dirt. Every year or two, jeeps careen off the road and plunge into the river canyon below.
In May, about two-thirds of the way to Korphe, red flags and cairns – stacks of rocks – indicated problems ahead. At a nerve-wrackingly narrow spot where a cliff rises on the right and the Braldu gushes through a rocky canyon 100 feet below on the left, the road was covered with rocks and silty glacial sand. Landslide.

“This happens when it is hot and the glaciers are melting or when there’s too much rain, or when the wind sweeps away the sand holding up rocks on mountainside,” said Mohammad Nazir, CAI’s Baltistan program manager.

Which means it happens a lot.

In 2010, “because of much rain and landslides, the road was blocked for many months at two, three points,” said Twaha Ali, Korphe’s village chief.

Fortunately, by that time most of the materials to rebuild the school had been delivered, Nazir said. But the distance from the “cityside” is one reason Korphe remains so timeless.

Twaha’s ancestors migrated from Tibet and settled in the treeless, rocky landscape at an altitude of about 10,000 feet hundreds of years ago. On a bench high above the Braldu River, they built simple homes of mud and straw, sometimes trimmed with precious pieces of carved wood brought by Himalayan traders. The houses were built close together so that all arable land was reserved for crops.

Then as now, families used dried animal dung fires to heat their homes and cook their food. The dung burns slowly and generates a dense smoke that permeates everything – including eyes and lungs. To generate a little more heat, winter stables for the animals – yak, goats, sheep – are attached to the homes, sometimes above living quarters, sometimes below.

“Korphe is indeed a tough place to carve out a living, raise a family and fight for health and happiness, Twaha conceded.

“Life is hard here,” Twaha said. “We live in the mountains. It’s hard to live in the mountains. More than 500 people live in Korphe, but only four people are government servants and the rest of the people are farmers. Most people only grow enough to eat, not to sell.”

But, Twaha said, smiling and pushing his pakol (woolen hat) back on his head, it is home.

“It is a hard life for us. But even if we would starve, we would get food and we’re not going to die,” he said. “And we’re happy to be here. We born and raised here. I don’t want to go to city and have a city life.”

He would, however, like a few more modern amenities. “Electricity to Korphe would be good. We can get heaters, lightness and television. Now only sleeping when it is dark.”

But he’s not holding his breath.

“Since partition (in 1947), the Pakistan government has not paid attention to us,” he said.

He’s more optimistic about his latest request to CAI for a public bathroom for the village, and maybe a small health center.

In the years since Mortenson’s work in Korphe launched CAI and Mortenson’s own humanitarian career, CAI’s work has expanded to include dozens of projects in Baltistan. [For more information, see the Master Project List online at www.ikat.org]

The work started with primary schools, based on the basic philosophy that, as Mohammad Ajaz, teacher and principal at CAI’s Hemasil School downriver from Korphe, put it: “Without education, we cannot progress.”

Yet as people become educated and more aware of the need for higher education, basic sanitation and health care, their requests for help reflect that. Sometimes resourcefulness and determination are not enough. They need outside help.

CAI’s ongoing relationships with the schools and communities, its willingness to continue to expand schools and consider other critical needs along the way have made Mortenson a hero not just in Korphe, but across the region.

“Greg is a very great and honest man,” Hussain said. “He has worked hard, especially in the backward areas of Baltistan. Many
climbers, trekkers and NGOs (non-governmental organizations) come here, but most only take photos and do nothing.”

The new school
The new Korphe School, set in a green field and framed by vaulting snow-capped mountains, is visible from a short distance downriver. Soon after the school comes into view, the original signboard pops up on the left side of the road just outside Askole, the village across the Braldu River from Korphe.

In green letters on a white background, the sign credits the individuals and organizations that helped bring that first project to fruition, including the American Himalaya Foundation and West Side Elementary School in River Falls, Wisc.

“Korphe School and Braldo [8899sic] Bridge Project. Dedicated to the Balti children living here on the roof of the world.”

That the original sign still exists is a point of pride for the Skardu signmaker Olam Mehdi. “I did the first signboard in 1995 for the Korphe School and that board is still there,” he said. And he bought into CAI’s philosophy right away. Since then, he’s made signs and banners for more than 200 CAI schools, water projects, celebrations and dedications. His work is everywhere CAI has a school in Baltistan.

“This area is very poor and CAI has made more than 45 schools in Baltistan, and a lot of water projects, too, so families can have fresh and clean drinking water. All of that gives people hope for a better future,” said Mehdi, the father of two, who in his spare time preserves old poems in beautiful, handwritten Persian and Tibetan script. “We are very thankful for Greg. He has given so many good things for Baltistan communities and everyone loves him very much.”

After passing the sign, it is just a short distance over the jola or zamba (bridge in Urdu or Balti) – a new one built by the government to replace the foot bridge Mortenson built before constructing the first Korphe School – and into Korphe. However, to visit the school and village requires hiking up a nearly vertical rocky hill to a bench. But then there it is – the place where it all began.

When the 15-year-old Korphe School’s roof collapsed last year, Nazir knew there would be no question about CAI’s commitment to reconstruction. The logistics, however, were daunting. And Nazir is rightfully proud of his ability to get the work done in a single construction season.

“First with the villagers we put the students in a temporary location and demolished the old school,” he said. “That part was easy.”

Getting building materials to the site was the next step. “Korphe is not easy access and the school is even more difficult to reach, so building was very difficult,” Nazir said.

“The only building materials we could get nearby in Korphe were sand and crash (gravel). All other material had to come from Skardu – wooden frames, cement, iron bars – everything. So we had lots of transport costs.”

But the materials were delivered before the spring rains triggered the landslides that closed the road, Nazir said. “That was most lucky.” It also meant the local laborers, supervised by Twaha (the son of Haji Ali, the man who oversaw construction of the first school), were able to work throughout the summer.

Nazir said the villagers laid a 4-foot-deep foundation underground, topped by layers of cement and stone until the base was one foot above ground. “Then we could start.”

Fiza Bano, 10, the only girl in her fourth-grade class, studies outside in the courtyard of the Haji Ali Memorial School in Korphe.
The result is a tidy five-classroom school with double doors on each room and “best-quality” hardware and locks, Nazir said. The windows and doors are made of good wood. The playground equipment has been delivered. There are a boys’ and a girls’ toilet. And the gate in the boundary wall surrounding the school is bright blue.

“CAI gives everything here, most importantly – the teachers,” he said. “There are no school fees for students and we bring stationary – notebooks, pencils, sharpeners, chalk, rulers, all things the students need.”

Storytelling

Balti hospitality does not allow guests to stand around for long without serving them paiyu chaab, (green tea with salt and goat or yak milk). So it was that, after a quick look at the school, Twaha and Nazir steered the visitors to the village guesthouse – a small house with a rudimentary kitchen and a living/eating/sleeping room.

The guests kicked off their shoes at the door and settled around the edges of the rug-covered floor, leaning against pillows and piles of blankets and padded quilts.

As the late afternoon sun shone through a dusty window, a plastic “table” cloth was spread on the floor and tea was served – tea, biscuits brought from Skardu, dried apricots and hardboiled eggs.

Twaha poured tea and told stories. A steady stream of men stopped by to say hello, get a good look at the visitors and inquire about Greg’s health. A 5x7 color photo of Greg and his family was tacked to the wall like a family photo.

In between prayers and after some banter about the recent death of Osama bin Laden and complaints about the rising cost of everything, Twaha jumped up and headed for the door of the guesthouse.

“Here, come, I’ll show you something,” he said with a big grin.

Twaha’s guests took one last swallow of their tea, grabbed cameras and notebooks, jackets and shoes and followed Twaha through his village. Before long, a group of boys had latched onto parade of visitors who were, Twaha said, the most exciting thing to come along in a while.

Some of the women looked up from their chores, washing dishes and clothes in the stream or laying grass out to dry on the roofs, but many hid their faces or turned away from the unfamiliar visitors. The girls, too, squealed, giggled and turned away, although curiosity won out for a few, who kept turning back, determined to get a look.

“The women here are shy, frightened of strangers,” Twaha said. “But when Greg came here, he went house to house to visit everyone, shake hands. One time he brought a friend and the women would shake Greg’s hand, but not his friend’s. The friend asked, ‘Why won’t you shake my hand?’ The women said, ‘Greg, he is member of our village.’”

Twaha led the visitors through the narrow maze of paths between the houses. He pointed out his own home and then his father’s home, where he said, “Inside there is where Greg slept. We could make museum someday. What do you think?”

He proudly pointed out the engraved wood posts his father had installed, but then hurried the group back onto the path.

At the center of the village, the male elders were sitting together, talking in the late afternoon sunlight. They stood, however, to shake hands with the guests and ask about Greg and his health.

But the time before sunset was getting short, Twaha said, and kept the crew moving out of the village. The path wound north alongside irrigated fields, across a rock-strewn stream and onto an arid plateau littered with boulders.

From the village, it’s a 30-minute walk to the remains of the old bridge over the Braldu River that Twaha was so eager to point out.

“Here,” he said, pointing down a nearly vertical hill. “The bridge is right there. Bridge is no good now, but when Greg came, it was
School days

The sun was setting by the time the group arrived back at the guesthouse. A group of young men from the village were cooking a freshly butchered sheep in a pot over an open fire. Meals for guests, whenever possible, include meat, although most families are too poor to eat meat with any regularity. And while women and girls do the daily cooking, the men step in on special occasions.

After sundown, the men served a feast, laying out heaping plates of boiled mutton stew, potatoes, rice and bread. For dessert, Nazir produced a bushel of mangoes he had brought along from "cityside."

And then, after a stretch outside and a look at the stars, the stories resumed. Baltis love to tell stories.

"Baltis have a careworn, depressed look at first sight," Sir Francis Younghusband, a 19th century British army officer and explorer, wrote in "Wonders of the Himalaya." “But they are a gentle, likeable people, and whenever the care of feeding themselves is off their minds, they brighten up and unloose their tongues."

The stories continued long after most of the village had gone to sleep.

Roosters announced sunrise the next day and soon after, the village was awake, smoke rising from cooking fires and children already shooing chickens out of the wheat and barley fields that abut the village.

School starts at 8.30 a.m., when one of the three teachers bangs on a circular piece of metal. The first order of business is the morning assembly.

As the students lined up in the schoolyard, Master Hussain explained that the enrollment had reached 80 students, including 30 girls, from Korphe and neighboring Manjong.

He has been trying to increase the number of female students, he said, nodding toward the girls standing outside the gate and watching the school day get under way. “But still we have not so many girls because some families they are not allowing for different reasons,” he said.

Change takes time, he added. “But everybody is very happy” with the new school, he said, walking up the stairs and opening doors to show off the five new classrooms, office and storage room. The students’ parents are also happy with the clean new latrines and the playground equipment.

However, the school needs another teacher, he said. “From here there are no good, qualified people and nobody from downside wants to come and stay in Korphe.” His hope is one or two of the students who have finished class eight in Korphe and gone on to study in Skardu will return and join the teaching staff.

One of the girls in class eight, 15-year-old Mehra, said she’d like to continue her studies and become a teacher. Asked if she would return to Korphe, she said she wouldn’t know that until she marries, since women typically move to their husband’s village.

“Where I teach would depend on where I am going to live,” she said.

Mehra and two other girls then handed the visitors a letter they had written in Urdu, requesting scholarships to help them finish high school (class 10) in Skardu.

One of them, 18-year-old Abida, is Hussain’s daughter. She said shyly that she wasn’t sure what she wanted to do for work once she finished her schooling, only that she didn’t really want to become a teacher like her father.

At this point in her life, she said, her passion is reading.

“So if you could help, I would like fiction stories, preferably in Urdu, but English would be OK,” she said. “I just like to read.”

Student at Haji Ali Memorial School.
WAKHAN CORRIDOR, Afghanistan – A two-day horseback ride – if you’re a good rider and there’s no snow – from the last village in the Wakhan Corridor east into the Little Pamir lands a person in the most remote place Central Asia Institute has ever built a school – Bozoi Gumbad.

In late May, three Afghan teachers and their Kyrgyz students, descendants of the nomads who have wandered these mountains for centuries with their goats, sheep and yaks.

About the same time, from another direction, CAI Program Director Sarfraz Khan was hauling a stack of eight yurts – the portable, traditional Kyrgyz housing – to Bozoi via a rugged old tank road from Tajikistan built decades ago by the former Soviet Union. Khan’s yurts were to serve as a hostel for the teachers and students during the school season.

A few weeks later, a team of donkeys loaded down with new school desks, notebooks and pencils, and giant bags of flour and rice set off from the Wakhan. Carpenters and porters led the beasts of burden up and over the mountains, along the river, through the valleys and into Bozoi.

Logistics for delivering even the most basic resources to this school are daunting – which is probably why few people even try.

But it is paying off, Khan said as the school season at Bam-i-Dunya, or the “Roof of the World,” wound down.

“Usually school will probably end in September, but this year there was no snow there yet and the teachers said they wanted 10 to 15 days more,” Sarfraz said in late September.

“The students were doing very nice, speaking good Persian. Before they didn’t speak this language. And now they are learning some basic English.

“This is very nice news for the world. Many NGOs [non-governmental organizations] for many years try to help the Kyrgyz, but you have to go up and down through many mountain passes on horse or foot for days. So the other NGOs say, ‘Say hello to the Kyrgyz, I’m going back to Kabul.’”

But not CAI.

The three-room Bozoi Gumbad
School is the only one in Afghanistan’s Little Pamir, and stands as a sort of exclamation point at the eastern end of a long string of CAI projects through the remote and neglected Wakhan Corridor.

John Pilkington, a British travel writer, photographer and radio journalist, traveled through the Wakhan to Bozoi this summer and said he was “astonished” by the number of CAI schools he saw in the Wakhan. They are “a real tribute to the energy and enthusiasm of the CAI staff and their local partners. I also noticed how well located each school was within its village. They’re a focus for the whole community.”

Of Bozoi Gumbad School, he said, “The building in the vastness of the Little Pamir is a tiny gem in the middle of nowhere. My first reaction was disbelief. Then, after I’d met the students [and teachers], I thought, ‘This is just fantastic.’

Sarfraz takes enormous pride in the Bozoi project, which took many years – and many cups of tea – to negotiate, construct, and fill with students.

“Most people say education is a good thing, but the Kyrgyz, they don’t really know about education,” Sarfraz said. “Today the only money Kyrgyz have comes from the animals. So they want children to go with the yak and sheep, collect them at night and keep a lookout for wolves. If the kids all go to school, the house is just two people, the wife and husband, and this is too difficult. So they say, ‘We much want education, but we also need children to help with work.’

‘I encourage them. I tell them, ‘After 10 years, you will see the profit from education. Look at Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. We need 10 to 15 years for kids to grow up to be a teacher or a nurse or something else and start making money.’ And slowly, slowly, they say yes,” he said.

**White stars in the Wakhan**

CAI has worked in the remote Wakhan Corridor for eight years. When it started, the handful of government-run, understaffed and crumbling earthen schools meant that most Wakhi families never even considered education an option.

But now, from Iskhashim to Bozoi Gumbad, CAI is changing the way people think about education and about their future.

“We get life from education more than from anything else,” said Daulat Baig, head teacher at CAI’s Pigish School. “We want to bring education to the whole area, but our government has many problems and so is doing nothing in this area. Our only help is from CAI. You help all of the Wakhan.

“We know it is much difficult to travel to Afghanistan, to work here. But you came here. All the students and teachers, all the people are happy because CAI gives every village a school building. If we wanted government help, we would wait 20 years.”

His point is borne out in Sust, about halfway through the Wakhan, where the government started to build a middle school – nine years ago. While the village waited, classes were held in tents, an almost ridiculous notion in a place where winters are harsh and the wind blows constantly.

Sarfraz saw the situation, held several meetings with villagers and this spring broke ground for a high school adjacent to the government construction site. Shortly afterwards, the government came along and finished its building.

Headmaster Abdul Karim said he is delighted with the new school that bears CAI’s signature white *sitara* (star) on the side. With the two buildings, the villagers can finally fold up the remaining tents and shift all 312 students into classrooms.

“Before we were like shepherds, with classes in tents, waiting for years while the government was building, building, building,” he said. “But CAI starts and, in six months, finished. We are very thankful.”

Even the government officials are grateful, although a little chagrined, at CAI’s efficiency and efficacy.

“You yourself have seen all the Wakhan, and all schools are CAI,” Wakhan Education Director Razar Ghazal Sahi said at the end of a tour of CAI’s projects in September.

“Government is not really working here and we only get promises, but no money from Kabul. There are no other NGOs. CAI is starting all these schools.”

Workers wave from the roof of a nine-room school CAI is building in Sust, in the Wakhan, next to a government-built school. The two buildings will accommodate 312 students.

In Afghanistan, enrollment has increased from 800,000 to more than 7 million students, including 2.5 million females, in the past decade. Although Afghanistan’s education prospects are looking better these days, the vast majority of support still goes to urban areas and provincial hubs while the rural areas including the Wakhan are ignored.

**Relic of Great Game**

The Wakhan Corridor is a narrow, 140-mile-long, finger-shaped piece of Afghanistan tucked between Tajikistan and Pakistan, “where the Hindu Kush, Karakoram, Kunlun and Tian Shan mountain ranges come together in a tangle of glaciated peaks,” Pilkington wrote on his blog (www.pilk.net) after his trip.

The no-man’s-land is a “relic of the 19th century ‘Great Game’ between Britain and Russia,” created after Russians arrested British Army Capt. Francis Younghusband at Bozoi Gumbad – not far from CAI’s school – in the late 1800s. When the Russians ordered Younghusband to leave Russian territory, the Brits saw this as a threat of war and “immediately mobilized troops to defend the frontier,” Pilkington wrote.

Students line up at the end of the school day waiting to be dismissed at Pigish Higher Secondary School. CAI recently added four classrooms to the original CAI-built 12-room school, making it a high school.
“Thankfully in the end the Russians backed down and war was averted. But this so-called ‘Pamir Incident’ led directly to the creation of today’s curious boundaries, with the Wakhan Corridor incorporated into Afghanistan to prevent British and Russian forces ever again having to meet.”

The sad result of that is more than a century of isolation. The Afghan government has been content to let the Wakhis carry on their quiet, impoverished existence.

Yet the isolation has also resulted in a relative peace. The Taliban never took root in Wakhan, even during its five-year reign that ended just after Sept. 11, 2001.

“The Wakhan is a beautiful area – beautiful people, beautiful mountains, beautiful valleys – and no fighting,” said Hussain Ali Khan, a ranger training consultant for the Wildlife Conservation Service in Afghanistan. “The security situation in Afghanistan is difficult. Other areas are bad. But in Wakhan, it is very good, the best.”

Tawalkhali Shah, village leader in Yuzuk, said, “I am an Ismaili Muslim and I am happy when guests come to my house and see my family, see which kind of position we are in. Some Muslims don’t let foreigners come in their homes. But here in the Wakhan, this is OK. You are my guest, my daughter. You are visiting all of the Wakhan, looking at many kinds of people, seeing much suffering. This is our life. We are very poor people. But we are strong and we don’t allow Talib and Al Qaeda fighting in our area. You should tell American people that Wakhis want peace. We need you.”

But Islamic militancy is creeping closer. The Wakhan is in Badakhshan Province, where extremists increasingly target security forces. And the situation in neighboring Nuristan, Fakhar, and Konduz provinces has deteriorated to the point where it is too dangerous to travel by road from Kabul to the Wakhan.

Tension in the region escalated in September, after former Afghan president Burhanuddin Rabbani – head of President Karzai’s High Peace Council – was killed in Kabul. Rabbani was from Badakhshan, and people here took his death especially hard. In the days immediately following the assassination, official business came to a halt, schools were closed and the region mourned.

“Rabbani was a mujahidin who fought for peace and he has been killed,” said Muzhda, 18, a student at CAI’s Ishkashim Girls’ Higher Secondary School. “Most of the people of Afghanistan are living in sorrow right now for him.”

As a mujahidin (freedom fighter) Rabbani fought the Soviets in the 1980s and later led the mainly Tajik Jamiat-e-Islami group against the Taliban. He was a hero, albeit a complicated one.

“Now we are much angry because Rabbani was a very nice person, he tried to bring peace but Taliban killed him,” Tawalkhali Shah said, “We had hope that Rabbani would bring peace to Afghanistan, but we lost him and now we are suffering.”

His death also served as a dark reminder that although the Wakhan lives in relative peace, war rages just out of sight – a war that only extends the misery of poverty in the Wakhan given that the development money pouring into Afghanistan doesn’t reach this remote corridor. And that makes CAI’s heavy investment in the corridor even more important. It’s a good fit, especially given the locals commitment to educating women and girls.

“Educating boys and girls, both is important, there is no difference,” said Haji Baig Khan, leader of Pigish village. “Other places, people are afraid of Taliban because if they send their daughters to school, they beat or kill them. But here, no problem. We want our daughters in school and CAI is already helping us with that. We hope you will stay with us and we are not doing this alone.”

Endless need

In Ishkashim, at the western end of the Wakhan, families have responded to CAI’s construction of girls’ schools with amazing enthusiasm. CAI has built five schools, including three girls’ high schools, in
Ishkashim since 2008 and enrollment just keeps increasing.

“These Ishkashim people understand the idea of education for their daughters,” Sarfraz said.


“For five years the government has been building a library right there,” behind the school, Sarfraz said. “But the workers must be very lazy. We built both of these schools and the government library still isn’t finished.”

Enrollment at the school has reached 1,074 students – all girls, said headmaster Akha Baig.

“This is the best maktab (school) in the Wakhan,” he boasted. “These girls are the first generation educated in Ishkashim and they are getting a good education here.”

Families are motivated to educate their daughters as a way to build bridges to a better future, said Muzhda, the 12th grader.

“Afghanistan is full of problems,” she said. “People are not living in good conditions. People are not living in peace and security. Afghanistan has been at war for generations and before women did not have permission to go out of the home. So now, when they have the opportunity to go to school, especially females, they have a strong interest.”

The overwhelming community response to the 32-room higher-secondary school has also served as a valuable lesson for CAI – girls’ high schools will fill up, and fill up fast.

“In Wakhan, all people – teachers, village, families, government – say CAI should please come here to build high schools for girls,” Sahi, the education director, said. “In many areas there are no high schools for girls and that’s why our daughters don’t have good education, why there are no women teachers or nurses or doctors. So that’s why CAI schools are nice.”

So nice, in fact, that every village wants one, or they want a bigger one. The requests for help never seem to abate.

CAI built a 12-room school in Kali-Panj in 2004, for example. “Now we request, please, four classrooms more,” Headmaster Saeed Qudi said in September. “If you are making these additional classrooms, all of our problems will be solved.”

Down the road in Kipkut, CAI is building a nine-room high school. “It’s not even finished and people want more classrooms,” Sarfraz said. “I say wait and see.”

Village leaders ask for more classrooms, more teachers, teacher training, better books – the list goes on and on. And it is no wonder. Nobody else is working here.

In Sust, after village leaders toured the new school with Sarfraz, they asked for a pipeline from a mountain spring to the village.

In Ishkashim, a group of Sunni men came to the CAI house/office to ask for help with a mosque. “It is impossible for CAI to help with religious projects,” Sarfraz told them. “Like the governor told the people of Khandud last year, ’A masjid (mosque) is not an NGO job or government job. This should be paid by people from their own pocket.’ If you need a school, a vocational center or water project, I can help you. But we can’t do this kind of project.”

In Pigish, where CAI just built a four-room addition to turn the 12-room school into a high school, headmaster Daulat Baig said the villagers want more.

“If possible, we need help for drinking water,” he said. “We have a spring-water pipe, but the number of people is increasing and it is not enough. Also, we have some very poor students; if possible, can you give them scholarships for study in Kabul and Faisabad? And we need teacher training, if possible, from your organization. Especially English training. Also, our women would like a vocational center.”
CAI health worker Lal Bono, left, checks on a neighbor’s sick baby boy, named Muladad, who was having stomach problems. His mother Laila is holding him.

**Planting a seed**

Women’s vocational centers are a common request. In Shkhwar, where CAI built a school in 2010, the elders asked Sarfraz about the status of the center he promised when CAI laid the first stone for the new school.

Sarfraz saw a chance to bargain a little. “In your school there are only 122 students,” he said. “This is a two-village school, there should be 300 or 400 students.”

Headmaster Jaffar Kuhl said, “Tashakur (Thank you), Sarfraz Khan, for the school. Before we asked government so many times, but they are no help to us. Now I am trying for more students, I am trying.”

Sarfraz replied, “OK. First we get more students in the school, then we check village and see whether women want to work together. If they do, we can start the project. For next year, we will check.”

One of CAI’s first Wakhan centers is in Karat, in the shadow of the mountain locals call Baba Tangi. But while the 45 “regulars” at the center are making beautiful, traditional handicrafts, there is no place to sell them.

“No tourists come this way because the main road is on the other side of the (Panj River) and people here on village side have no money,” said Nigar, a spokeswoman for the group.

In 2009, CAI and the village also built a small airstrip here to accommodate small planes flown by PacTech, a charity that transports staff members of NGOs around Afghanistan. For a decade, large NGOs and aid agencies had touted the benefit of establishing a runway in the Wakhan to help promote tourism and conservation efforts and provide medical relief. But it never materialized – until PacTech approached CAI co-founder Greg Mortenson to help mobilize local support. Within a few weeks, a dirt runway was in place.

Sarfraz had an idea for the women. “You need to set up a shop next to the airstrip. You could sell handicrafts, tea and some food. Maybe CAI could build one small shop. What do you think?”

He had planted a seed. But before the women were ready to think ahead, they wanted some help with something else. A few weeks earlier, a trader had come to the center and offered to buy some fabric for the women on his next trip to the city. The women agreed. Good fabric is hard to come by in the Wakhan. But when the trader returned several weeks later, he presented a paltry amount of fabric and said, “Here you go,” according to Momo, the center’s secretary.

“The man was a thief,” explained Khayal Baig, a village leader who helps the center. “He finished the money and we only got this,” he said, gesturing to a couple bolts of cloth on the floor of the center.

The incident had left the women broke and demoralized and the center’s work had slowed to a virtual standstill. Sarfraz said that was unacceptable.

“You must divide this material among all the women’s houses and then don’t make the same mistake again,” he told them. “Then you get back to work, you make money and become good people. If it is still like that next time I come here, with arguing and nobody working, I will be much angry and lock the door.”

Audible sighs of relief filled the room. “These things only get resolved when Sarfraz Khan comes to the village,” Nigar said. “Tashakur (Thank you), sir.”

**Other kinds of projects**

Education remains CAI’s predominant mission in the Wakhan. But since its inception, CAI has stepped in to help in other ways, too. The dearth of basic human services in the remote areas where CAI works has led to creative solutions. After all, clean drinking water, health workers and even community meeting halls bolster education efforts.

“Students can’t focus on school lessons if their stomach is empty, they are sick or there’s a bad situation at home,” Sarfraz said. “When people have jobs and food and no disease, when they have good health and don’t worry about other things, they focus on education.”

The women’s vocational centers, for example, give women a chance to earn some money to spend as they wish – and most spend it on their kids. Plus, having money can be empowering in other, sometimes unexpected, ways.

“We are much happy and much success,” Bakh Begum, a member of the Khandud women’s center, said as she spun wool into yarn. “We can buy soap to wash our clothes, and money for tea and other things we need. Before we had nothing like this, women were always looking to men. Now men come to us asking for loans.”

In the Wakhan, villagers have also come to rely on CAI’s health workers.

One day in late September, health worker Lal Bono, 25, walked from her home in Sarhad to a neighbor’s to check on a sick 9-month-old boy named Muladad. The infant was having stomach problems.

“He is sick for six or seven days,” said his grandfather, Rhamad Ali. “He cries all the time. We come here, with arguing and nobody working. He is a thief,” explained Khayal Baig, a village leader who helps the center. “He finished the money and we only got this,” he said, gesturing to a couple bolts of cloth on the floor of the center.

The incident had left the women broke and demoralized and the center’s work had slowed to a virtual standstill. Sarfraz said that was unacceptable.

“You must divide this material among all the women’s houses and then don’t make the same mistake again,” he told them. “Then you get back to work, you make money and become good people. If it is still like that next time I come here, with arguing and nobody working, I will be much angry and lock the door.”

Audible sighs of relief filled the room. “These things only get resolved when Sarfraz Khan comes to the village,” Nigar said. “Tashakur (Thank you), sir.”

Audible sighs of relief filled the room. “These things only get resolved when Sarfraz Khan comes to the village,” Nigar said. “Tashakur (Thank you), sir.”

On his next trip to the city. The women agreed.

Good fabric is hard to come by in the Wakhan. But when the trader returned several weeks later, he presented a paltry amount of fabric and said, “Here you go,” according to Momo, the center’s secretary.

“The man was a thief,” explained Khayal Baig, a village leader who helps the center. “He finished the money and we only got this,” he said, gesturing to a couple bolts of cloth on the floor of the center.

The incident had left the women broke and demoralized and the center’s work had slowed to a virtual standstill. Sarfraz said that was unacceptable.

“You must divide this material among all the women’s houses and then don’t make the same mistake again,” he told them. “Then you get back to work, you make money and become good people. If it is still like that next time I come here, with arguing and nobody working, I will be much angry and lock the door.”

Audible sighs of relief filled the room. “These things only get resolved when Sarfraz Khan comes to the village,” Nigar said. “Tashakur (Thank you), sir.”

**Other kinds of projects**

Education remains CAI’s predominant mission in the Wakhan. But since its inception, CAI has stepped in to help in other ways, too. The dearth of basic human services in the remote areas where CAI works has led to creative solutions. After all, clean drinking water, health workers and even community meeting halls bolster education efforts.

“Students can’t focus on school lessons if their stomach is empty, they are sick or there’s a bad situation at home,” Sarfraz said. “When people have jobs and food and no disease, when they have good health and don’t worry about other things, they focus on education.”

The women’s vocational centers, for example, give women a chance to earn some money to spend as they wish – and most spend it on their kids. Plus, having money can be empowering in other, sometimes unexpected, ways.

“We are much happy and much success,” Bakh Begum, a member of the Khandud women’s center, said as she spun wool into yarn. “We can buy soap to wash our clothes, and money for tea and other things we need. Before we had nothing like this, women were always looking to men. Now men come to us asking for loans.”

In the Wakhan, villagers have also come to rely on CAI’s health workers.

One day in late September, health worker Lal Bono, 25, walked from her home in Sarhad to a neighbor’s to check on a sick 9-month-old boy named Muladad. The infant was having stomach problems.

“He is sick for six or seven days,” said his grandfather, Rhamad Ali. “He cries all the time. We are poor people. We have no money to take him to Ishkashim or Kabul to see a doctor.”

Ali presides over a clan of 23 people, three generations who live communally in a smoky, mud-brick house. Traditional living arrangements, lack of sanitation and basic hygiene, plus malnutrition, ignorance and poverty contribute to the preponderance of disease. People work with the animals then go into the kitchen and eat without washing their hands. A mother wipes her child’s runny nose with her scarf, then later dries her hands with the same cloth. Pots and pans, bowls and plates are washed with unboiled water and no soap.
The result is that nearly everyone in the Wakhan seems to be fighting some kind of ailment – a runny nose, rotten teeth, high blood pressure, arthritis, diarrhea or eye infections.

“There is so much sickness,” Bono said.

In the case of the little boy, she said, “I already gave him some medicine, some syrup, and that helped a little. But I need to watch him.”

A graduate of CAI’s girls’ high school in Zuudkuhn, Pakistan, who also participated in CAI’s 2009 midwife training, Bono and her family moved to Sarhad two years ago when Sarfraz asked for her help. She is of Wakhi descent and speaks the language.

“She and her husband came here with nothing, no house, nothing,” Sarfraz said as he heaved a 50-pound bag of rice out of his truck. “We built this house and we give her medicine for helping the people here. We bring some food, too.”

He has made similar arrangements for Parveen Varghand, 29, and her family in Wargeant. “Here, too, people have no money to travel for medical attention,” Sarfraz said. “They have Parveen. She can help with blood pressure check, stomach problems, headaches – all kinds” of maladies.

CAI’s health workers were first installed in hopes of helping to curb maternal and infant mortality. The average life expectancy for women is 45 years, and many of those years are spent bearing and raising children. Afghan women bear an average of six children, and one in every 11 women dies giving birth.

Parveen, herself a mother of four children, said she is working hard to help change that reality. In Wargeant, “I work to make sure no women die anymore giving birth. Just one week ago I took a woman who was having a difficult delivery to Khandud, to a small clinic, for help,” she said. Khandud isn’t particularly far as the crow flies, but travel in the Wakhan can be inordinately difficult.

“No one there could help,” she said. “So I took her in the other direction, to Ishkashim. Now she is alive and her baby is alive.”

New horizons in Bozoi

Despite the poverty and neglect, isolation and ill health, people in this remote area are amazingly generous and hospitable.

Pilkington called his travels in the region, “the most difficult, exciting, terrifying, thought-provoking and occasionally comical” that he’d had in a long time. But “wherever I came across Wakhi villages or Kyrgyz encampments, people came out to meet me with smiles and bowls of milk or yogurt.”

The Kyrgyz, in particular, have a history of proud independence, he said, but their isolation and harsh surroundings have left them on the edge of survival and, in some cases, “vulnerable to drug addiction.”

Yet their future is brighter now that they have access to education.

“Schooling will broaden their horizons, especially for girls, and if done properly will help them to be proud of their heritage while sharing in the best – rather than the worst – of the outside world,” he said.

Building the necessary relationships took time and the school had a slow start, but Sarfraz said the Kyrgyz are now invested.

“We worked on this for more than 10 years from when Greg met them in Charpusan [Pakistan],” he said. “For many years we gave them help and some food. We talked with them to make friendship and build trust. Now they have a school and are happy.”

This fall, before the snow began to fly – the Little Pamir is snow-covered for more than six months every year – the Kyrgyz rolled up the CAI yurts and stored them in the school building for the winter, Sarfraz said.

“Then next June – or maybe May, if there’s not much snow this winter – we’ll take them out and start again,” Sarfraz said. “Maybe next year the other children will see and tell their parents, ‘I want to go there.’ And then in 2012 we can collect many more students in Bozoi.”

Children carry desks and chairs into some of the eight yurts delivered to Bozoi Gumbad in the summer of 2011 to be used as classrooms, and a hostel for students, whose families are nomadic.
Central Asia Institute co-founder Greg Mortenson traveled to Tajikistan and Afghanistan in November 2011 to visit projects and reconnect with the people who inspire his humanitarian work.

He filed the following field reports and photos at the end of his journey.

In the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast of eastern Tajikistan, I visited potential school sites and met key players on CAI’s Tajik team, including Mehbuba. Mehbuba has many years of experience in the NGO and development sector and is not afraid to keep corrupt government officials in line. She’s also fluent in Russian, Tajik and English and feels all children should learn three or four languages in school, as the world is becoming a global society. Her husband is pursuing graduate studies in geology in Russia and she is raising their son on her own in his absence.

In Ishkashim, at the western end of Afghanistan’s Wakhan Corridor, I stopped to see CAI’s girls’ higher secondary school. The girls aspire to be everything from doctors to teachers to engineers to pilots to president of Afghanistan.

Most of the girls’ mothers are illiterate or uneducated; a rough survey in this school found that only 10 percent of the girls had educated mothers, which makes 90 percent of them the first generation of educated females in their families.

The girls’ overwhelming request was to have more sport activities, including volleyball, judo, badminton, and running.

Forty-nine women are already using CAI’s Oin Gardhi Women’s Vocational Center in Ishkashim. The popularity of the center means it must accommodate the women in two shifts, morning and afternoon, six days a week, and many more women still aspire to attend after their husband’s approval.

The women primarily want to make clothing to sell in the local Saturday market, instead of indigenous handicrafts, which may appeal to foreigners, but are difficult to market since only a few dozen foreigners visit the Wakhan annually.

Zarmina is a new kind of scholarship student for CAI. This young married woman with four children will be the first woman from the Wakhan to attend a two-year advanced maternal-healthcare training program. CAI will move her and her family to Faizabad, the capital of Badakhshan Province, early next year for the training.

A high school graduate who worked as an apprentice midwife in her community, Zarmina ran into major obstacles taking her next step. When she declared she wanted to continue her studies and not just stay home and be a mother, her father-in-law disowned her.

After they were thrown out of the house, Zarmina ran into major obstacles taking her next step. When she declared she wanted to continue her studies and not just stay home and be a mother, her father-in-law disowned her.

At a CAI girls’ school in Zebak, I learned to count with the first-grade class. The school has over 680 girls enrolled as of this
Greg Mortenson and Mariam, a CAI scholarship student studying to be a doctor, visit in Kabul.

**WAKIL KARIMI**

Greg Mortenson visits CAI’s Kali Mira women’s center on Nov. 15, 2011, in Afghanistan.

Zarmina with Mortenson, Safran Khan (kneeling), Juma (CAI’s Wakhan supervisor), Hamid (driver) and her four children.

**SARFRAZ KHAN**

Mortenson and Mehbuba review a 15-page contract estimate for a 14-room school in Zhamag village, in the Vanj Valley of eastern Tajikistan’s Pamir Mountains.

**SARFRAZ KHAN**

Students at CAI’s Ishkashim High School gather around Mortenson, Headmaster Ata Baig and Regional Education Inspector Mudhir Khabir in November 2011.

**SARFRAZ KHAN**

Fall and they come in two shifts due to the rapid enrollment increase.

Zebak was an area of significant fighting during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979-1989) and many of the men from that area who were mujahidin (freedom fighters) were killed and the women fled to refugee camps in Pakistan.

I visited CAI’s Kali Mira Women’s Literacy Center near Kabul. These centers are predominantly in conservative areas where women have difficulties being in public or the ulama (religious leaders) put strict limits on women being outside their homes. About two-thirds of the women at Kali Mira wear burkas in public.

I met Alia, a middle-aged woman who said she was thrilled to be enrolled, even though she is the last person in her family to learn to read and write.

The emphasis with the literacy centers is not on buildings, but on finding highly qualified instructors, who take exams and are observed teaching before being hired. As per government policy, the teachers make 5,000 afghani (about $100) a month. CAI has over 20 such centers in the Kabul area.

Also in Kabul, I had tea with Mariam, an outstanding second-year medical student at Spin Ghar University. She is on a CAI scholarship to fulfill her dream to become an ob-gyn doctor.

Mariam is from Naray District in Kunar Province, where she graduated from high school despite great adversity. During her early years, the Taliban were in control and she had to study in secret, as the Taliban did not allow girls to go to school.

She is the first female educated in Naray to attend medical school.

**WAKIL KARIMI**

Greg Mortenson and Mariam, a CAI scholarship student studying to be a doctor, visit in Kabul.
Residents of Halter-Yasim village in the far northwest corner of Pakistan were thrilled when the national government announced it would build a primary school for their children. That was 12 years ago. The government never built the school.

“We know without education there is no life, so imagine how we are feeling about ourselves without education,” says Maqsud Aman, chairman of Halter’s education committee.

Then Halter’s elders heard about Central Asia Institute. They wrote a letter. And this spring CAI and the villagers started construction of a co-ed primary school in Halter to serve three neighboring villages in the Yasim Valley, Ghizer District. “This will be the first primary school in any of these villages,” Aman said.

Word spread quickly. A group of women who had organized in Gich (Punyal Valley) a few years ago to make some money for themselves and their families was kicked out of the house it was renting in 2009. The women spent more than a year trying to regroup.

“Then we heard about CAI from somebody who saw you driving up and down the road and so we asked for your help,” said Parita Wos, chairman of the women’s organization.

CAI and Gich then joined forces to build the Gich Women’s Vocational Center. Work began in April.

In Phander village in the Gupis Valley, 600 students are crammed into six classrooms, an unsustainable situation that makes teaching and learning difficult, said CAI’s Gilgit Project Manager Saidullah Baig.

The community requested CAI’s help expanding the school, but hasn’t been able to get the land on which to build, Saidullah said.

“If they can get land, we can help. We are ready,” he said.

Despite unreliable electric and telephone service and the absence of a postal service and Internet here in the valleys of the Hindu Kush Mountains near the Afghan border, people seize on news that a humanitarian organization is offering help.
here. He warned that without education, the local population risked exploitation by radical Islamist groups moving north toward Ghizer.

“This is a soft corner for extremists,” Saidullah said. “And if the world, the Western people, even Pakistan do not focus on this area, it is not far off that there will be terrorists in this area. That’s why when Faisal and I observe that this is going on, we decided to start our education projects.”

At a glance, the villages in Ghizer look like any others in Gilgit-Baltistan: mud-brick homes surrounded by stone walls, terraced fields latticed with irrigation channels, rows of small shops selling everything from penny candy to motor oil. At almost any time of day, cars and trucks struggle to maintain forward motion on the narrow roads, dodging herds of skittish goats and sheep, donkeys loaded down with winter wheat or wood for cooking fires, and children darting to and fro.

The region is neglected and run down. The people are mostly illiterate and poor. In many places, the ubiquitous wild rose bushes provide the only bursts of colors in an otherwise gray-brown landscape.

Look closer, though, and the influence of conservative Islamic groups becomes apparent. You can see it in people’s dress, the men’s long beards, the political graffiti and the preponderance of mullahs promoting virulent rhetoric under the false auspices of Islam.

Violent insurgents, forced out of the largely ungoverned tribal areas by the government and U.S. and allied forces, are shifting northward in Pakistan along the Afghan border, bringing their training camps and strict ideology with them.

“The influence of the extremists is coming to these areas because these areas are very poor,” Saidullah said. “If a person is poor and not getting food, if somebody is dying without food, he tries to get food at any cost,” including signing up as a militant.

“Education, especially for women, is a key tool in fighting that equation,” he said.

High in the mountains

In mid-May, snow remains on the ground in Barswat, the last village on the road before Shandur Pass, high in the Hindu Kush mountains.

“Winters here are very hard,” Saidullah said. “If you stay on the road past Barswat and go over Shandur Pass, it is a relatively short distance north or west to Afghanistan. It’s a road less traveled.

CAI’s approach in two villages here in the Gupis River Valley – Barswat and Teru – has been to improve the small, overcrowded primary schools built a decade earlier by the Aga Khan Foundation. CAI has added classrooms, constructed bathrooms and boundary walls and pays the salaries of at least two teachers at each school.

“Regular classes are overburdened but have enough space,” he said. “We are very happy to be at this school and really happy it is not so far to walk.”

Head teacher Mohammad Rahim Shah led a room-by-room tour of the school in May. He said that having 10 classrooms instead of five has made a huge difference for the 300-plus students and 11 teachers. “Now we finally have enough space,” he said. “We are very comfortable and very happy.”

CAI pays two teachers here. Yet despite the majority female student body, all the teachers are men. Shah explained: “In this village before, no women were educated to a high-school level. After finishing class eight, girls got married and started having babies.”

But times are changing. Shakeela said she hopes to be a nurse or an engineer. “There is lots of poverty in this area so it would be helpful if girls could work and help their families,” she said.

Yasmin, 16, is a science student in ninth class at Teru School and also wants to be a nurse. Her father died 16 years ago and she wants to work to help her family and her country. “But only if I get an education will I be able to do something.”

CAI’s commitment to a village, however, doesn’t end with construction. Saidullah told Shah and the teachers: “Our aim is to strengthen the education. If you need something, notify me.”

So the headmaster asked about a science lab. Saidullah said there are only a handful of science students, not enough to merit such an investment given all the other requests in

Local men provide free and subsidized labor for Damal Gam Elementary School in Yasin Valley.
the valley. “If the number of science students increases to 15 or 20, then you can apply for a laboratory. Let’s wait and see.”

‘Terrorism situation’
Over in Barkolti in the Yasim River Valley, CAI is using the same formula it applied in the Gupis Valley schools – adding classrooms to a primary/middle school and paying additional teachers to allow the village to offer co-ed education through high school.

And just as in Teru, the teachers begged for a science lab. “It is a burning issue,” “a critical demand,” “a dire need,” for students who want to go into medicine and engineering, they told Saidullah.

But Saidullah is pragmatic. The first order of business in Barkolti is to get the classrooms built, he said. The head teacher, Kareem Madad Shah, said he understood that first-things-first approach.

“We are very excited about your help,” Shah tells Saidullah. “It has been very hard for us, classes are too crowded. But when this is done, we will have nine classrooms. In anticipation, we have already started class nine.”

Gulbaz Khan, the village education committee chairman, said CAI’s emphasis on girls’ education will make a world of difference. Parents had been reluctant to allow daughters to walk the 7 kilometers to the nearest girls’ high school. “Now we are able to give our daughters education,” he said.

An older gentleman who donated the land for the project, Hazir Shah, was the first to greet Saidullah and his guests from the United States upon their arrival and the last to say goodbye. Saidullah thanked him for his contribution, but Hazir Shah demurred.

“I was born here, so contributing to education is my thing to do for my village,” he said. “But you, I am very thankful for you. You have come so far, and are not worried about your life in this terrorism situation. You risked your lives to come here.”

His sentiments reflect a growing sense of urgency in Ghizer about creeping militancy. Ghizer borders the North West Frontier Province, where militants have run roughshod over local people and government as their influence has spread. The Pakistan government’s efforts to intervene have proved insufficient.

In Swat Valley, for example, President Asif Ali Zardari attempted to end the violent conflict by allowing the Taliban leaders there to impose Sharia (Islamic law) in 2009. “This effectively empowered the Taliban to impose its authority in the areas, which it did through summary executions, including beheadings of state officials and political opponents, public whippings and large-scale intimidation of the population,” the nonprofit Human Rights Watch reported.

The horror continued until public outrage led to government reversal of the deal. A military operation ensued. An estimated 2 million people were displaced before the military finally declared Swat clear of Taliban insurgents.

But “the absence of virtually any government follow-through” has turned hope for a better future “into despair” for Swat residents, the New York Times reported in November 2010. Pakistan says it has repeatedly driven out violent militants, but they keep returning. And local leaders predict the government inaction is creating a generation of young people susceptible to Taliban recruitment.

Economic realities
Yet the Taliban are just part of Pakistan’s almost overwhelming litany of woes. Feudal social structures, government corruption, rolling electricity blackouts, soaring food prices, motor fuel and natural gas shortages, overpopulation – Pakistan just can’t seem to catch a break.

Then add natural disaster to the mix. A deadly 2005 earthquake in Kashmir and the epic flood of 2010 took enormous tolls on the country’s poorest people and a government unable to respond or rebuild.

The floods, the worst in Pakistan’s history, killed thousands of people and millions of farm animals and exposed the government’s weaknesses through scattered, unreliable and insufficient relief efforts.

“Events of recent months have shown how very deep-seated Pakistan’s problems are,” James Traub wrote in the October 2010 issue of Foreign Policy magazine. “The floods, though an act of God, were enormously exacerbated by state failure.”

In its defense, the government claimed...
it was broke, that the costs of flood relief reconstruction plus the war on terrorism were too much. Pakistan’s finance minister said the economy had been “teetering on the brink” before the floods, but was headed for the “abyss.”

The flooding actually began in the mountains of northern Pakistan. Months of heavy rain triggered flash floods and massive landslides. Some families lost everything — houses, land, animals. CAI stepped in with direct assistance to flood victims in villages where it works across Gilgit-Baltistan.

But the country’s economic woes have not abated. In the past year, unemployment rose, real wages dropped, food prices soared and the number of people living in poverty grew. “Families are taking children out of school because they cannot afford both fees and food,” the New York Times reported in February 2011. “Others choose between education and food,” the New York Times reported.

CAI’s roots go deep in Gilgit region

During the past dozen years, Central Asia Institute has established nearly 50 projects in northern Pakistan’s remote and mountainous Gilgit region. The projects include building schools, women’s vocational centers and a museum, helping existing government- and community-run schools, training and paying health-care workers and a scholarship program for girls seeking higher education.

“We live in such a remote area where the government was not doing anything,” said Saidullah Baig, who has worked with CAI since 1999 when Mortenson first visited the then closed-off Charpusan Valley, where Saidullah was born and raised. “When Greg came to our area, it was a difficult time because foreigners were not allowed.”

“CAI started with a potable-water project. This is the first seed for Charpusan. Now CAI has completed seven buildings for schools in Charpusan and we are working with some government schools also, giving them teachers and supplies. We have also built 13 vocational centers [north of Gilgit]. We have seven health workers in the villages of Charpusan; we are paying for them and supplying medicine.

“We have a scholarship program, which is on a need basis; we are not collecting the ‘cream of the crop.’ We have 45 girls in Gilgit and some in Rawalpindi. … We also have a good museum in Charpusan to preserve the heritage of the area.”

The organization has also diversified its humanitarian efforts in response to natural disasters. In 2010, “we started work in the Attabad landslide area” in the Hunza District, Saidullah said. “We have set up tent schools, given the IDPs [internally displaced persons] supplies, food and even cash.”

And in the past three years, it has expanded into the Ghizer District.

“We built 11 schools in Ghizer and five vocational centers,” he said. “And we have, as you know, the unconditional disaster, the flood. During that time there were more than 250 households affected in Ghizer Valley, people who saved their lives with just the clothes on their backs. CAI was the first charity that helped the people with cash, because if a person has money, he can buy his choice. We have given assistance to those households.”

Saidullah said the formula is simple: “Education is the light and life of everybody.”

Beyond that, the focus needs to be on women’s empowerment, he said.

“Greg is always saying all the time, ‘If you educate a boy, you educate an individual. If you educate a girl, you educate a family.’”

He ticked off a list of ways CAI has changed the region in that regard.

Filling the gaps

But life goes on. In Ghizer, people too poor to evacuate picked up hand-tools and began clearing or rerouting roads, rebuilding bridges and homes.

CAI also held its course on projects, convinced education remains the fundamental ingredient for a better future.

This philosophy is exemplified by CAI’s support for women’s vocational centers like the one in Gich (Punyal), along the main road from Gilgit to Barswat. The women in Gich had formed a cooperative a few years earlier, said Parita Wos, president of the women’s center.

“Because of poverty, this valley suffers,” Wos said. “That’s why the females try to share a source of income. The profit is always divided. Some women are saving their share. Most are spending it to help with their children’s education. We are mothers.”

Fathers, too, see the merits of investing in their sons and daughters. Mushtaq Hussain, a Gilgit-Baltistan police constable based in Skardu and a father of six, accompanied the CAI team in Gilgit-Baltistan in May.

“I was really surprised when I saw so many CAI schools and the way kids talk and their confidence in reading and writing and speaking,” he said.

In many parts of Gilgit-Baltistan, the government is not helping at all. In some places there are government schools, but “education is not really good,” he said.

“But education makes you a good human being, allows you to see the difference between good and evil and make good choices,” he said. “I am really happy about the education of kids through CAI. [You are] giving opportunities to children they otherwise would not have.”

“About 10 years ago, in the beginning, we tried to hire a female teacher for our school, but we couldn’t find one there,” he said.

“Now we have girls who have graduated from our own school, plus the students whom we have given scholarships, and they are coming back and getting employment in our schools and helping the community. And they are changing the community.”

“As mothers, we are seeing students get married and have babies, now they are taking better care. They have learned something about the babies. And we are helping through our health-care workers to help control the birth rate, teach the necessity of population control. A male worker or doctor cannot educate the female,” he said.

“And for the vocational training, when that time for basic education is past, how can you empower a woman who is illiterate? That is why we are focusing on the vocational centers for the woman.”

“So if the people get education, they can serve other people and get job opportunities. Parents are getting some good idea that maybe their kids’ lives will be different than theirs. This is the effect of the work of CAI, not only in Charpusan, but in Ghizer, Baltistan, Kashmir, Afghanistan.

“We are making change in these unfortunate areas, these remote and neglected areas.”

— BY KARIN RONNOW
SKARDU, Pakistan – Al Abid Public School is a single-story, eight-room middle school with 280 students. Central Asia Institute helped build the school in 2004, pays two teachers’ salaries and provides school supplies and building maintenance.

“Education increases awareness about things and we are seeing that [with education] students are more punctual, clean, aware of their lessons,” Mohammad Hassan, the 23-year-old vice principal, said in June. “That’s why we are thinking this school is better than the government schools. We are really satisfied with the overall education here. The parents, too, are satisfied with their children’s test scores. We, our whole community, are thankful to Central Asia Institute.”

But that is not what Al Abid’s principal told a cameraperson who claimed to be with an audit team last spring. In a videotaped interview that later appeared on CBS News’ “60 Minutes,” he said that CAI had built the school, then abandoned the project.

CAI has not abandoned Al Abid in any way, said CAI’s Baltistan project manager, Mohammad Nazir, whose meticulous bookkeeping records and signed receipts back up his story.

The school was turned over to the government a few years ago, but CAI is still helping and keeping tabs on the school. In fact, a few months before the principal made his on-camera comments, CAI staff had visited the school, delivered supplies and handed out teacher bonuses. A photo from that visit of Al Abid students was on the cover of the 2010 Journey of Hope.

“CAI pays two teachers’ salaries, and gave a bathroom, fresh whitewash (paint), furniture and built another classroom in the stairwell this year” because the school needed more space, Nazir said. “We are also giving stationary (notebooks, pencils, erasers and pencil sharpeners) for all students, and teacher bonuses.”

On June 1, Nazir went to Al Abid School to ask why the principal – Mr. Mahmood – would say such things.
Mahmood wasn’t there. So Nazir sat down with Hassan and a teacher. Outside in the schoolyard, students were taking their first-term exams.
“Only the principal can answer your questions,” said Hassan, who has worked at the school for a year and confirmed that CAI has continued to support the school. “I have no information about that.” Later he added that the principal had been feuding with the community education committee, but declined to elaborate.

**Overseas projects**

After CAI projects are established, oversight is the responsibility of CAI’s in-country managers, who maintain contact with schools and make regular visits. But the situation with Al Abid underscored the need to verify the status of every project on CAI’s master project list. So in 2011, CAI amped up its efforts to document all its projects in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The project managers were thrilled to show off their work.
“You need to see the schools,” said Sarfraz Khan, who manages projects in Pakistan, Afghanistan and is breaking trail for new CAI projects in Tajikistan. “This is not my money, all is CAI donor money.”

The managers were confused and angry about the conflicting foreign media reports on CAI’s projects.

“International journalists visit our schools and see that they are good, and CBS sends a secret cameraman who says he is an auditor and says CAI schools are bogus,” Sarfraz said. “That brings much shame to our communities.
“Maybe other people get jealous and say, ‘They are lying, there is no school there.’ I will give you a list and I will show you all our schools and also vocational centers. You can check. Then next year if I die or can’t come, then you know I did my job, the schools are complete, no tricks. We can show that these schools are real.”

The overseas project survey involved visiting schools and construction sites; meeting with teachers and village leaders; and reviewing managers’ accounting records, documents, community contracts and government reports. The school visits and recordkeeping were videotaped and photographed.

CAI staff and advisors verified student and teacher numbers and checked the condition of existing buildings, playground equipment and bathrooms. Lists were made of needs and wants. And many, many cups of tea, later, CAI has an updated master list plus a more streamlined system to document all CAI projects and a means to account for future changes.

In conjunction with the survey, CAI’s managers crafted a plan to put greater emphasis on its human resources – teacher pay and training – and less on “bricks and mortar” in coming years. That initiative was launched with across-the-board teacher pay increases in Pakistan this fall – with the new range being from 8,000 to 15,000 rupees per month (about $92 to $173), depending on experience and education.
Checking it twice

In the course of checking existing projects, Nazir explained his system for keeping projects on track from the beginning.

“Once we agree to work with the community, we look at the land the community is donating and see if it is feasible or not,” he said. “If feasible, at that time we can have architect visit the site to see the land and check the position of how the building shape should be on this location.

“After we get the map (blueprints), we can check all government-required things – the cement ratio and iron bar size and such like that. Then we release some advance money to the village heads with which we have been dealing and deliver materials.”

As the building starts to go up, “the engineer and me, with the community, we check in at different stages – at the foundation stage, the beam-pillar stage and then the final stage – to keep the pressure on,” he said. “And I always pay after they finish the work. If they cannot finish, they have no pay. So they work hard and are careful so we don’t reject their work.”

A streamlined version of that is used for ongoing maintenance, too, he said.

The system works. Requests for new projects, expanded projects and partnerships with mountain communities land in Nazir’s lap every week, he said.

“Eighty percent of Baltistan know Dr. Greg, what he has built and the help he give in this region,” Nazir said. “The people have much respect for Greg and pray for his health and his family.”

Next chapter

After talking with Hassan, the CAI survey team went out to the Al Abid schoolyard, where all the children were sitting in neat rows. Nazir had hung a Pennies for Peace banner behind a table stacked high with new notebooks, erasers, pencils, pencil sharpeners and pencil cases. All the supplies had been bought with P4P funds. And every student received one of each.

Although Al Abid is now a government school, it is largely supported by student fees, which range from 250 rupees for girls to 500 rupees for the older boys. That money, combined with CAI’s support has enabled the community to hire additional teachers. But the fee money doesn’t go far.

“We need more teachers,” Hassan said. “I also request CAI help us build more classrooms, bring electricity to the school and supply computers and more desks.”

Nazir replied, “Inshallah, we can build two more rooms upstairs as soon as possible. Also we will pay two more teachers starting now.”

Hassan was happy. “I want this school to be one of the best in Baltistan. We are working really hard for that and we are thankful to CAI for helping.”

For more information, see CAI’s Master Project List at www.ikat.org
KABUL, Afghanistan – Mullah Taukal fought hard to get a primary school built in Batyash village in eastern Kunar Province, right in the thick of Taliban territory.

“When we started to work, three or four times the Taliban came and stopped the work – because we allow girls,” said Taukal, 36, Batyash’s leader and now headmaster of the school his village built with help from Central Asia Institute. “One Taliban gave me small sheet of paper that is stronger than 10 papers signed by [Afghan President Hamid] Karzai,” he said, pulling a slip of paper from his pocket. “I keep this with me.”

The handwritten note was in Pashto and signed by the “Islamic government,” or Afghan Taliban. “Salaam Alickum. Kindly we tell you (that) you shouldn’t work on this school. You should stop. Before we told you (that) you shouldn’t work and you again started. If anything happens, all responsibility will be with you.”

But the village was determined, he said. “We made a jirga (meeting of community elders) and decided to fight the Taliban to allow us to make a school,” he said. “I and another villager went to the Taliban base and talked to the leaders. We told them, ‘If you reject school, you cannot come to our village.’ Then they allowed the school, the first school ever in this village.

“Now sometimes the Taliban come to check the curriculum to see if anything is wrong. ‘What do you teach here?’ they ask. But if they try to stop the school, the elders stop them. Now our daughters are in school because of the force of the local people; in our area, the Taliban cannot object,” he said.

Batyash and CAI built the 10-classroom, two-story, co-ed primary school in 2010, said Wakil Karimi, CAI’s Central, Southern and Eastern Afghanistan program manager. “They got it done by the power of the people.”

It wasn’t easy. Kunar is a “very remote, dangerous area” near the rugged 1,500-mile-long border with Pakistan, Karimi explained. It is a mountainous, forested area with few roads, plenty of places to hide and no central authority. Delivering building materials for the school was difficult. But extremists presented the larger obstacle.

“My village is a two-hour walk from the Pakistan border,” Taukal said in a September interview in Kabul. “When you go to the top of the mountain, you can see all Pakistan. There is no check post there – no nothing – so it is easy to cross. That’s the problem. And security is not good because government doesn’t have control in that area, so local people have to try to control.”
He said Kunar hasn’t had an effective government since Afghan King Mohammed Zahir Shah was ousted in 1973. These days, three militant Islamic groups operate in the region: the Pakistan Taliban, Afghanistan Taliban and Hekmatyar.

Given the heavy extremist presence in the region, Karimi said it helps that Taulkai is also a mullah in the local mosque.

“People have much respect for him,” Karimi said. “And he is educated. He knows school is better for our children. So when the Taliban come and say, ‘This school comes from United States money; you should not work with US, with NGOs or with Afghan government,’ he can do work on both sides. He can say education is important for our children.”

Taulkai said he is not afraid to argue with the Islamic extremists.

“As headmaster, I can stand against them. When any Taliban come, I ask them, ‘Where is it written that girls are not allowed education?’ The Holy Koran says educated and uneducated people are not equal and it is important to come out from ignorance and have an open mind.’

But he refused to have his photo taken. “If Taliban see my picture they will kill me,” he said, drawing his index finger across his throat.

Education is light

Although the fighting gets most of the attention, extremism is just one piece of the puzzle in Afghanistan. Poverty looms just as large – and just as deadly.

In the overcrowded capital of Kabul, families often resort to sending their children to the streets to scrounge what they can.

“When I see small children begging on the street, or working dirty jobs no one else will do, it makes me so sad,” Karimi said.

“Childhood is not for working, it is not for begging, it is a time for getting education. Sometimes the terrorists use these children, paying families for their boys. And the families are poor. They have no choices. They need food.

“It is a difficult job to convince their parents the children are better in school. It is a long time from when a person starts school to when they become a doctor. I look forward to the day when I don’t see children begging on the street,” he said.

But some kids, particularly boys, have to put economic needs before their education. Finding a balance isn’t easy.

Waisudeen, 16, is a fifth-grader who started school later than his classmates. These days he attends school at the CAI Center in Kabul. In the morning he is in class. In the afternoon he dashes off to his job working for a tailor in the central city.

After paying for transportation from school to work, he takes home about 82 cents a day.

“My father is sick for a long time. Nobody works in my family and my family has no money,” he said. “The sewing, making girls whose families belong to the nomadic Kuchi tribe fetch water for their tent-homes in a valley just south of Kabul in September. The Kuchis head east to warmer climes for winter. CAI has erected tent schools in the Kuchis’ summer and winter camps for the children.
“I have two wives, 11 sons and 12 daughters,” said Akhtar Mohammad, a teacher at CAI’s Musakhil School in Parwan Province. “All my children are married now and we have 80 people in our household. I cannot even remember all my grandchildren’s names.”

Education is key to combating all these problems, Karimi said. He painted the words “Education is Light” on the side of the CAI center.

“By education we can improve our own country, like foreign countries where most of the people are educated,” said Uden, the principal at the CAI center. “We should do everything by ourselves, not count on other foreigners to build our roads, design our apartments, teach our students. Most important is we need peace. If we have peace, we can do everything. For 10 years people were much afraid to come out of homes. Now students come to school and get knowledge.”

The results of education are not instantaneous, Karimi noted. It will be generations before the results of today’s investments can be measured. But the situation is improving. School enrollment has risen from 1 million during the Taliban years to more than 8 million.

Conservative mullahs and religious scholars still object to secular education and education for girls. But that’s changing.

“Of course it makes much difference if girls are educated,” said Izmari Mamozy, a math teacher at CAI’s Familia Girls’ High School in Maiden Shahr who lost his right arm in “the fighting” of the early 1990s. “Educated women can make a good mother and have good care and control in all areas of her family – health, water, food. She knows what is better for her body and for her children. Women who are uneducated in all parts of life, they cannot do as well.”

As a result, Taukal said, it has even increased the “value” of girls as potential brides.

“For marriage, people now give much value to girls who have education,” Taukal said. “They will help their families and villages, and they will work hard. People love to get married to them!”

‘People will talk’

Unfortunately, that value is not universal. Nooria, an 18-year-old student in class 10 at Mir Afghan Girls’ School in the foothills north of Kabul, is engaged to be married. But she has had to fight to stay in school.

“My father and my brothers don’t let me come to school and I missed one year,” she said, shyly pulling her pink dupatta (headscarf). “They say I have to stay at home to help, that’s it not fair for me to go to school, that people will talk because girls are not supposed to go to school when they are older. Only my one brother has helped me come here.”

Headmaster Mohammad Azim said he hired that brother as a teacher in the school in order to help Nooria. The two walk to school together every day.

“This is the courage of the headmaster,” Karimi said.

Most of the villagers in this quiet village make a living from agriculture. In September, families were busy harvesting wheat, shaking walnuts from the trees and picking ripe fruit.

Nooria said her fiancé wants her in school, not in the fields.

“I am very shy to talk about this, but when I get married and have children, I can help with children and my husband’s family,” she said. “Already when I go home I teach my two brothers’ wives for a half-hour every day. I also help my sister in class six. So he knows and I know education is important.”

Nooria and her classmates study in a dusty room in a rented house that serves as their school.

“The government pays for one house rent and teachers, but never built us a school,” headmaster Azim said. As he spoke, a cow wandered into the yard outside and he summoned a couple younger children to shoo it away.

For all these reasons and more, CAI has partnered with the village to build a new 12-
room girls’ high school. Work is already under way; Karimi estimates it will open after the winter break.

Another 10th-grader, 17-year-old Sakina, was effusive in her thanks for the school and shared a story about how she, too, is using her education to help others.

“Yesterday I went to the clinic and there were many women and all had pieces of paper for their turn, but none of them could read,” she said. “So I told everybody, ‘This is your turn, you are next, then you.’ I was then much proud of my education.”

Sakina has the support of her family, and is the second highest-ranking student in her class, the headmaster said.

“I try to come to school everyday,” Sakina said. “Sometimes I become lazy and I don’t want to come to school. But my father, he is uneducated and he says, ‘You must not miss school.’”

Working together

Family support is key to education, especially for girls. But the role of teachers and headmasters who advocate for their schools and their students is just as important.

The principal at Kamiri Girls’ High School east of Kabul in Bagrami district works hard for the 1,265 girls at her school.

“When I started here four years ago, we had 600 students and when they finished class eight they were done,” said Parwin Waffa. “We also had five classes in tents. This school is a little far from Kabul and government so they don’t pay attention to what we need. No materials, nothing comes from government side. They have school here in name only.

“So I try to get help for school. I know if we have good situation, all students will come to study because they know education is important for girls. So when heard about CAI, I asked Wakil. Then together we make school to 12 class. We appreciate CAI’s hard work here.”

CAI helped build a five-classroom addition to the school, a boundary wall and a gate. CAI also pays the school fees and buys uniforms and supplies for 120 girls, pays the English teachers, and provides notebooks and pencils. The community, with Wakil’s help, also intends to start a new program here in 2012 – an afterschool prep class for girls who want to take the university entrance exams.

The school office is in a large room on the second floor of an old house in the center of the schoolyard. As Waffa poured tea and served dates and caramel candies, she explained that former Afghan president Babrak Karmel, who served from 1979 to 1986, built the house. “He brought the Russians to Afghanistan,” she said, adding that he wasn’t all bad, “He was from this village and donated this house and the land for a school.”

After tea, she led a tour of the school, ending in the library she has assembled in one of the classrooms built by CAI. A large table holds a 3-foot-tall plastic human skeleton and a microscope. The walls are covered with maps and charts explaining human anatomy, chemical elements and the speed of sound. One locked bookcase holds the supplies for the “science lab.” Two other bookshelves have a variety of books for students and teachers.

“This is our job,” Waffa said. “We have to do this. We want to do it better, but unfortunately our hand is empty. I hope the level of education gets higher in Afghanistan, because then we can solve our problems by ourselves and the fighting will finish. We thank Allah and ask him to give you a long life. You are hardworking for us all.”

Karimi smiled and gestured to the library.

“No,” he said. “It is not us. This is all your hard work.”

Need trained teachers

One of the most common requests these days is help with teacher training to boost the quality of education in Afghanistan.

“For more than 30 years there is fighting in Afghanistan and there is no city, no town, no village not destroyed or damage, no road undamaged, no schools undamaged,” said Abdul Moqim Halimi, education director in Panjshir Province. “Teachers moved to other places, other countries. Now all of us are trying to make a little better quality of education for the people. Quantity is not enough. We need professional teachers, a training center or institute or university. If we can solve this problem, it will be much easier to move ahead with quality education.”

The education director in Parwan Province, Zalma Shaheed, echoed that sentiment.

“I need 180 schools. But more than anything, I need teacher training. We have many teachers for them, but some have no more than 10 class education. They aren’t teachers.”

Asked why the Afghan government doesn’t invest in education, Shaheed sighed, smiled and leaned back in his chair.

“It is not as easy as your question. The education of a human takes a long time and many resources. After more than 30 years of war all over Afghanistan all things, even schools, all are gone. And like all countries, Afghanistan spends too much money on the army. The result of fighting is not good and makes many problems, it kills people and destroys the country. There is no development.

“So now we start from zero and need to slowly build. Education makes human beings change. After 20 years we will have teachers to introduce to the community. But without professional teachers, education cannot go ahead,” he said.

Tangling with Taliban

Parwan “has long been thought of as one of Afghanistan’s more peaceful provinces,” McClatchy Newspapers reported Aug. 14. “It is home to the largest U.S. military base in Afghanistan, and its major highway is a key supply route for U.S.-led NATO forces from the Central Asian republics of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.”

But in August, the Taliban attacked the offices of Gov. Abdul Basir Salangi; Shaheed’s office is on the second floor of the same building.

One bomber detonated an explosives-packed vehicle at the gate, according to news reports, and five other militants armed with automatic weapons, grenade launchers and rockets stormed the building. A three-hour firefight resulted in 22 killed and 34 injured.
The common perception was that the attack was intended to undermine ISAF and President Karzai’s plan to shift responsibility for security in Parwan to the Afghan National Army and Police. Despite the attacks, the plan went ahead in September.

The villagers in Parwan, too, are not deterred by the violence when it comes to educating their children.

Sayed Mohammad donated the land for CAI’s Musakhil School, a 2011 project. “These are our children. We must not let anyone interfere with our children’s education,” he said. “We tell (the Taliban) that we, the local people, teach the children, no one else comes here to teach them. And we have to protect them. We appreciate this building and your help with girls’ education and, if the Taliban comes, we will stand against them.”

Some places in Afghanistan are easier to work in than others, Karimi said. And that changes. Places where there were no security problems a year ago are now too dangerous for foreigners to visit. In other places, it is the reverse.

This year brought “a surge of Taliban activity in historically more stable regions of Afghanistan, with an increasing number of insurgent attacks taking place in the provinces surrounding Kabul,” Erin Fitzgerald wrote on the Huffington Post Aug. 23. Incidents in Parwan, Kapisa and Wardak provinces underscore “the impression that the government’s writ does not extend outside Kabul.”

In Logar Province, south of Kabul, not far from CAI’s Gumran Girls’ Middle School, extremists attacked trucks carrying supplies to ISAF headquarters in Kabul. The headmaster’s daughter was killed in another firefight, Karimi said.

But he is proud of the new building, set to open this winter. “This is a high-quality school. You can see it is blue, the CAI color, and there are 12 big classrooms. Everything is high-quality material – marble floors, 44 pillars and big strong beams so nothing will shake if there is an earthquake.”

He paused for a moment while someone whispered in his ear and then turned abruptly toward the main door. “Someone called to warn us [of militant activity]. We should go.”

Just west of Logar is Wardak Province. Some of CAI’s projects there are in areas “too dangerous” to visit, Karimi said. He said CAI’s Familia Girls’ High School in Maiden Shahr was pretty safe, but he was nervous. A few weeks earlier Taliban abducted police and intelligence officers in Maiden Shahr and beheaded them.

He suggested that his female guests completely cover their heads on the way through one market at southern edge of Kabul. “Only eyes showing,” he instructed.

Once at the school, though, he relaxed. As he watched masons laying bricks for the second story, he said, “Taliban comes and tells workers to stop sometimes, but headmaster says it is OK.”

The headmaster, Aziz Ullah, confirmed Karimi’s summary. “Now it is OK. It is clear to all people that education is important for girls, so everyone tries to send their daughters and sisters to school,” he said.

It was a quick visit. Driving back out to the main road, past women wearing burkas in the city’s Peace Park, Karimi said, “Those people working here now are from a danger area of Maiden Shahr. They don’t work with Taliban, but they know them, they are relatives or from their neighborhoods. So Taliban won’t interrupt them.

“You see, every place we work, we clear security with the inside of the village. On Kunar side, it is a dangerous area. One time Taliban attacked two guys who went there with building materials and tried to kidnap them. But no success; the villagers protected the two guys. I have good people to work with me. The education minister says other NGOs are not able to do that. Most of them are afraid and refuse to go to these places.”

This past winter, amid growing public outrage at vicious attacks on girls, teachers, and their schools all over the country, Taliban commanders eased restrictions regarding girls’ schools. They announced girls’ education was permissible as long as it was in a separate building, teachers and students were fully covered and the curriculum reflected cultural values.

Dozens of reported attacks took place during the September 2010 parliamentary elections, including one at Rahman Mena Girls’ High School, where CAI provides assistance to the more than 4,000 students.

“It was the last period of the day and the principal noticed a bad smell,” said Manighza, the assistant principal. “When students came out of the room, many of them were sick, they could not walk or speak, they were confused and fell down. Eighty-four girls and some teachers got sick. Gas was leaked in from windows.

“Nobody saw it happen, but everybody knows it is insurgent people. It was near to parliament elections and they want to scare people. All the girls were fine and all are still in school.”

But the attack got Karimi’s attention. He visited the school just at the edge of the city to see how CAI could help. After numerous meetings with Manighza and other administrators, he agreed to set up university-exam prep classes and install a computer center with a teacher to run it.

The computer classes have become enormously popular.

“I am just starting on the computer, but I know it will be helpful for getting knowledge to help us protect our society from poverty.
and develop our country,” said 18-year-old Rozia Rahmati. “And maybe someday, by this computer we can connect to the world, to all information, to the Internet.”

**Education trumps fighting**

Computer labs and lessons are probably still a few years off in Kunar Province. “Most schools don’t even have buildings,” said Haji Sakhi Moshwani, who represents Kunar in the Afghan Parliament.

The good news from Kunar is that “now everyone wants to send their daughters to school,” he said. “They got information from people who went to other countries (as war refugees) and came back and said, ‘Girls and boys who have education can do something for themselves and do it well. Even if girls don’t get a husband, they can run their life without other people if they have education.’”

The bad news is “we still have three important problems,” he said. First is that many areas don’t have educational opportunities – especially for girls – above the primary-school level. The second is that there are no women teachers. The third is a lack of higher-education opportunities for girls.

“I ask people, ‘If our daughters don’t get higher education, who will teach your daughters in school? Who will become doctors to help your wives?’ Too many people say their daughters marry at 14 or 15. That time is for education. One of my daughters is 22 years old and not married. She wants to be a lawyer. Another wants to be a teacher. Another wants to work for women. I have 21 children, including 11 daughters, so I want to divide them into different parts – except police and army. I send my sons to police and army.” That’s important, too. Educated police and soldiers will be important players in Afghanistan’s future; illiteracy in the ranks is a huge problem.

NATO forces that helped with security in the region have now been withdrawn, following failed efforts to work with local populations. NATO officials say the strategy henceforth will be to focus troops on more heavily populated areas and coach Afghan security forces to eventually take over the task of providing security.

The only real way forward is education, Taulk said. “When people get education they know that fighting doesn’t have good result.”

The Batyash Primary School now has 450 students in 10 classrooms. “For eight years we had classes in tent and mosque,” Taulk said. “Now we have a nice building.”

Karimi said the mountainside property for the school made building a little tricky. “We had to blast stone and make two levels. Sometimes we have to adapt.”

But he is pleased with the outcome. “They do good work there, very nice stonework, with blue trim. This is the No. 1 building in the area.”

Taulk, too, is pleased. “Now I want to make a little garden in front with a retaining wall and maybe a wood fence. There is also a water channel and a big tree that makes shade and a good area for sitting. I am very proud of the school. Many times people come to see the school and thank me and Wakil for all our hard work and everything we have done for the children of our village.”

Batyash is one of four CAI schools in Kunar now open for students, he said. Seven others are under construction.

“We have no government to help and we cannot wait,” Taulk said. “We have students sitting on the ground and in the rain. Nobody is invested. Nothing is there from government side. The first NGO is CAI.”

“You can come to Kunar and I will show you all the CAI schools,” he said. “I have relationships with all those people, so when you reach the village, there is no problem. I will introduce you. But you need a burqa.”
ZHAMAG, Tajikistan – The two earthquakes that rocked this remote village in the Pamir Mountains in recent years have reduced the village’s old one-story Soviet-built school from aging but functioning to crumbling and dangerous.

“You can see, the school is cracked and finished,” Vanj District Education Director Mardov Odinasho said in September after a quick tour of the building.

Since the quake in January 2010, Zhamag School’s 332 students have attended classes in tents during the warm-weather months. When the temperature drops and the snow flies, the entire operation shifts into the cracked and crumbling old school building.

“This area is very poor and I want a school for these people,” Odinasho said. “The children study in tents, but those are cold in winter, so they have to take risks to study in the damaged building.”

Central Asia Institute’s overseas program managers have an amazing capacity to zero in on the neediest villages in the most remote places. Zhamag lies at the end of a twisting, narrow dirt road that crosses three rickety bridges and gets increasingly rough and narrow as it climbs the mountain. The villagers lack the resources to rebuild their school – over half have no regular income source – and live in a sparsely populated region of one of the world’s poorest countries.

That region, the Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO), is right across the Panj River from Afghanistan’s Badakhshan Province, where CAI has been working for nearly a decade. Tajik community leaders took note of CAI’s Afghan projects and in 2009 asked CAI project manager Sarfraz Khan for help.

“For CAI it is no problem if there is war, mountains, rivers, or no phones or electricity – we go,” Sarfraz said. “I start by making friendships with the Tajik people and now we can work together for schools.”

Education officials in the GBAO estimate that at least 10 percent of the region’s schools are in such poor condition as to be dangerous for students.

“The problem is money,” said Boymamad Alibakhshov, chairman of Milal-Inter, a GBAO-based business development group. “Our people want education, but we need much help in poor areas like Zhamag.”

Post-Soviet Tajikistan

Tajikistan is a mountainous country of 7.6 million people just north of Afghanistan and west of China. The Soviet Union took over the Islamic country in the 1920s and remained here for 70 years.
Under Soviet rule, the government invested in the country’s infrastructure and people, building roads, schools and health clinics, stringing power lines into the GBAO and introducing concepts of gender equity and even Western-style dress.

As a result, the country is better off than neighboring Afghanistan. Tajiks live, on average, 20 years longer than Afghans. The electricity works – most of the time. There are no roadblocks, no military helicopters overhead and no Taliban.

“For 70 years, Soviet Union was here and at that time everyone was working very hard,” said Alibakhshov, who worked as director of the propaganda department for the Communist Party in Khorog, GBAO’s capital city. “Now almost all people are at least educated. We have other problems. But our neighbors in Afghanistan, 70 percent of the people are not even educated. I think Afghanistan is 50 or 60 years behind us.”

But Tajikistan’s social and economic structure began to crumble almost immediately after independence in 1991. A civil war ensued between the Moscow-backed government and the pro-democracy and Islamist opposition. An estimated 50,000 to 80,000 people were killed and 1.2 million people displaced. One-tenth of the population fled the country.

Plus, the Soviet safety net – state farms, price controls, government investment in infrastructure, guaranteed jobs and income – was gone.

“When the Russians left, things got very bad,” said Shahlo, Alibakhshov’s 34-year-old daughter. “Everyone suffered.”

Her father said, “After the collapse of the Soviet Union, people were starving. During the civil war there were so many barriers – roads were closed, there was no money, people were working, but weren’t getting paid.”

In an effort to help, he formed Milal-Inter and went to Russia for a management course offered by the U.S. government. “That was when I realized that the USSR was over, gone, and we were truly going to have to do this for ourselves,” he said.

The civil war ended in 1997 with a United Nations-brokered peace agreement and the country stabilized, but economic health and prosperity have remained elusive.

These days, more than 50 percent of Tajiks live in poverty, according to the World Bank. The average income is about $700 per year. Tajikistan remains the poorest country in the former Soviet bloc and one of the poorest on the planet.

“Here there are no jobs. There is no money,” said Salima Rakhmatbecova, 28, an unemployed nurse in Khorog, the capital of GBAO.

Some women make a meager living selling goods in the market. But almost half the working-age men, and an increasing number of women, leave the country to find work.

“Most people go to Russia because Tajiks don’t need a visa, it is cheaper to get there than to Europe, England, or the United States, and we speak the language,” Shahlo said. “They just register there and can look for work. But they only get service jobs, because they are not citizens.”

Life in Russia is not easy, Rakhmatbecova said. “My brother was killed in Moscow by Russian people. It is a dangerous place and they are racist to Tajiks.”

Tajiks know education is key to bolstering their economy and keeping its productive workers at home.

The country has a good start; education is free and compulsory between the ages of 7 and 17. Yet in the post-independence decline, functional literacy may be slipping, the U.S. State Department reports. And the country is now dealing with the fact that a disproportionate percentage of the population – nearly half – is under age 15.

“Education is the most important sphere that needs to be improved,” said Shahlo, who works with her father at Milal-Inter. “Everything depends on education. If our children will be well educated, it will help improve our republic’s economy, and allow Tajikistan to be more progressive.”

Into the mountains

Getting to the areas of the GBAO where CAI has started working isn’t simple. People traveling from Dushanbe have two options – a one-hour, good-weather-only flight through the mountains in an aging Russian Antonov 28 prop plane, or a 15- to 20-hour road trip along the M41 “highway.” On rainy days, the road is the only option.

Calling it a highway is rather misleading. After leaving the capital, pavement quickly gives way to broken asphalt and stretches of gravelly dirt.

The road weaves through the canyons, ascending gradually through small villages; three-quarters of Tajiks live in rural areas. Along the way, children run out to
greet travelers, selling apples, dried figs, pomegranates, and pears. Girls sell old plastic pop bottles filled with honey. Men and boys move huge herds of goats and sheep along the road.

The road winds along a vast construction site – the massive Roghun hydroelectric dam and power plant on the Vakhsh River. The project taps Tajikistan’s largest natural resource: water.

“The region is so lofty and cold that you can not even see any birds flying,” Marco Polo wrote in the 13th century. “And I must notice also that because of this great cold, fire does not burn so bright, nor give out so much heat as usual.”

The Pamir is home to last nomadic Kyrgyz people on the planet. But few others are willing to put down roots in the area – while the GBAO makes up 45 percent of Tajikistan’s territory, it is home to only 3 percent of the population, about 230,000 people.

And much of that population is isolated from the outside world – only two major roads connect it to outside world, the M41 to Dushanbe and another to Kyrgyzstan. Foreigners must get special permission to travel in the GBAO.

Isolation and neglect

Although most people in the GBAO – Ismaili Shiite Pamiris – have more in common culturally and ethnically with the people in Afghanistan’s Badakhshan Province than they do with the Tajiks, the Soviets attached the autonomous region to Tajikistan in 1929.

The union has always been a little strained. The GBAO government declared independence again during the civil war of the 1990s, and the region became an opposition hub. Leaders later acquiesced to continuing as an autonomous province within Tajikistan, but locals argue the region may be paying a price for its rebellious streak. “The problem everywhere is money,” Sarfraz told the elders he still needed to get the school in Zhamag started, and negotiations were under way for two others. But he promised to return to Kala-i-Khumb next spring.

Building bridges

Continuing east into the GBAO, the road follows the Panj River, which divides Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Afghan-Badakhshan is right there, 100 meters away. On the Tajik side, there are schools, health clinics, electricity and paved roads. On the Afghan side, dire poverty and no infrastructure.

It’s impossible to talk of Tajikistan’s future without considering the impact of war in neighboring Afghanistan, with which it shares an 870-mile border.

“It is a porous and in some places intangible boundary that adheres closely to the Panj River, with a smattering of poorly trained, uneducated and easily corruptible guards deployed to protect it,” the New York Times reported in August.

Those guards patrol the boundary day and night, deployed to protect it,” the New York Times reported in August.

Students – dressed in freshly washed and pressed white shirts and black pants or skirts – stopped their lessons to recite patriotic verses and sing songs for their visitors. In one classroom, the teacher opted to continue with her math lesson and show off her students’ skills.

But the condition of the building – wood with plaster walls – has meant that the village pours more resources into maintenance than into education.

“Every year in winter the walls fall and crack and we need new plaster,” the headmaster said.

Sarfraz told the elders he still needed to get the school in Zhamag started, and negotiations were under way for two others. But he promised to return to Kala-i-Khumb next spring.

“The problem everywhere is money,” Sarfraz said afterwards, echoing Alibakhshov. “No one has any money – not even the government.”

Sarfraz Khan discusses educational needs in the GBAO with Education Director Gharibsho Gharibshoev in the director’s office in Khorog.

Although most people in the GBAO – Ismaili Shiite Pamiris – have more in common culturally and ethnically with the people in Afghanistan’s Badakhshan Province than they do with the Tajiks, the Soviets attached the autonomous region to Tajikistan in 1929.

The union has always been a little strained. The GBAO government declared independence again during the civil war of the 1990s, and the region became an opposition hub. Leaders later acquiesced to continuing as an autonomous province within Tajikistan, but locals argue the region may be paying a price for its rebellious streak.

“We ask [the education ministry] in Dushanbe for help with our school, but no success,” said the headmaster of the high school in Kala-i-Khumb, a village on the Panj River along the M41 from Dushanbe.

And that’s where CAI comes in. When Kala-i-Khumb’s elders heard that a CAI representative, Sarfraz, was coming through town, they lined up a tour of their 1960s-era high school.

The single-story school is overcrowded, they told Sarfraz, and administrators have resorted to running two shifts for the 260 boys and girls: upper classes in the morning, lower classes in the afternoon.

As Sarfraz went from room to room, the students – dressed in freshly washed and pressed white shirts and black pants or skirts – stopped their lessons to recite patriotic verses and sing songs for their visitors. In one classroom, the teacher opted to continue with her math lesson and show off her students’ skills.

But the condition of the building – wood with plaster walls – has meant that the village pours more resources into maintenance than into education.

“Every year in winter the walls fall and crack and we need new plaster,” the headmaster said.

Sarfraz told the elders he still needed to get the school in Zhamag started, and negotiations were under way for two others. But he promised to return to Kala-i-Khumb next spring.

“The problem everywhere is money,” Sarfraz said afterwards, echoing Alibakhshov. “No one has any money – not even the government.”

Building bridges

Continuing east into the GBAO, the road follows the Panj River, which divides Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Afghan-Badakhshan is right there, 100 meters away. On the Tajik side, there are schools, health clinics, electricity and paved roads. On the Afghan side, dire poverty and no infrastructure.

It’s impossible to talk of Tajikistan’s future without considering the impact of war in neighboring Afghanistan, with which it shares an 870-mile border.

“It is a porous and in some places intangible boundary that adheres closely to the Panj River, with a smattering of poorly trained, uneducated and easily corruptible guards deployed to protect it,” the New York Times reported in August.

Those guards patrol the boundary day and night, deployed to protect it,” the New York Times reported in August.
night, trying to stop the Afghan opium bound for Russia and Europe. Drug-related violence, corruption and crime are among the reasons the Tajik government worries about U.S. plans to leave Afghanistan in 2014.

Russia, too, is worried. Its soldiers helped guard the border until 2005, when Tajik leaders asked them to leave. Now Russia is reconsidering its role. “[Tajik President Emomali] Rakhmon’s government has resisted those overtures, however, amid concerns that it could undermine the country’s sovereignty,” the AP reported.

And locals seeking to expand trade between Afghanistan and Tajikistan aren’t too fond of the idea, either. “Here the territory is big and the people are few. In order to develop this region we have to find markets outside, including Afghanistan,” Alibakhshov said.

Among its other business-development efforts, Milal-Inter – Milal means nation – has set up a handful of cross-border markets, facilitated in part by recent construction of several bridges over the Panj.

There have been hurdles, he admitted. “For a while, the Afghan commandants and mullahs wouldn’t let women come to our market. They have such power, such influence,” he said. “And Tajik government had to make some rules, including no burkas in the market. They worried burkas could hide suicide bomber’s vest.”

But as the months go by, the markets are more and more popular. And he is optimistic. “The main thing is trade. Due to civil war in the 1990s, the manufacturing sector got very weak. Now everything we have here is from China,” he said. “But we have a concept of export promotion. We have honey, herbal plants, and handicrafts. We have so many fruits that are wasted because we have no production process.”

The Pamir is rich in mineral resources, too, he said. “We have gold, platinum, silver – 35 elements are available here. When the first atomic bomb was produced by the Soviet Union, the uranium was brought from here. And we have water.

“So this is our duty – to help make business more alive and create possibilities for other businesses. When Russia left, we lost everything. Now we understand we have to establish a business environment here and then when the situation is more stable we find a way to start some production. We are in the center of Pakistan, Afghanistan, China, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. If we work together, we all benefit,” he said.

**Learn, learn, learn**

At the core of economic development, however, is education, Shahlo said.

“Our people try hard in Badakhshan,” Shahlo said. “Other places don’t force their children go to school, but in our region everyone has to finish secondary school, 11 class, and people pay much attention to this.”

The Aga Khan, spiritual leader of the Ismailis and founder and chairman of the private, nondenominational Aga Khan Development Network, inspires GBAO’s Ismailis to educate themselves and their children, she said.

“Our Aga Khan says all the time, ‘You have to learn, to learn, to learn.’ Our people listen to him. Aga Khan also is saying ‘Focus on girls and women.’ They have to be educated. They will be mothers and children depend on them,” Shahlo said.

But the education infrastructure is crumbling, Gharibsho Gharibshoev, the GBAO education director, said in a September interview in his office in Khorog.

Some of the main problems that exist here are that the school buildings are very old and in bad condition,” he said. “In GBAO, 315 schools were built from 1960 to 1975. Now 32 of those are in emergency condition.

“Also, in Badakhshan there are some places where there is a school in one village and children in another village have to get up early and walk 9 kilometers (more than 5 miles) one way. That’s OK in the summer, but difficult in the winter. So we need more schools. We are also in need of tent schools in GBAO.”

As of this fall, Sarfraz was considering three locations for CAI projects: Zhamag; Kono Kurgan in the high plains of eastern Pamir’s Murghob District; and Langar, in Ishkashim District, which includes the Tajik portion of the Wakhan Corridor, just across the river from Afghanistan. Negotiations with the government have proved more difficult than expected.

Thus far, his emphasis has been on Zhamag. “It is damaged by earthquake and local people want CAI’s help,” Sarfraz said. “CAI works in poor areas, difficult areas in mountains where no NGO or government is working.”

There are logistical problems to working here, he acknowledged. One of the three rickety old bridges between the main road and the village won’t support the heavy trucks typically used to deliver building materials. The road is also narrow.

But the villagers in Zhamag are fully on board with CAI. They have offered to fell trees to provide wood for the new school and provide subsidized and free manual labor.

And they are eager to get started. There are growing concerns that any gaps in Tajikistan’s investment in education only make the country more vulnerable to the extremist influences rocking neighboring Afghanistan and Pakistan. As one BBC report put it: “Economic hardship is seen as contributing to a renewed interest in Islam – including more radical forms – among young Tajiks.”

In Vanj District, which is largely Sunni, the sect of Taliban, “the local people are also working hard to stop the radicals,” Alibakhshov said. “Even though people are educated here, we still have a long border with Afghanistan. If we provide education, though, then we will have no problem like Taliban.”

Everyone has a lot riding on the Zhamag School project. But once the community breaks ground, then it’s full speed ahead.
KABUL, Afghanistan – When Marina was young, her father refused to let her go to school. She was frustrated, disappointed and angry, but filled her days with household chores, working in the fields and with the animals.

But when her two younger sisters reached school age and her father again refused, she fought back. “All three of us went on a hunger strike,” she recalled, sitting on the floor of one of Central Asia Institute’s women’s vocational centers. “For three days we didn’t eat. The whole time we were crying, we had headaches – until finally my father agreed. Now my sisters have graduated from class 12.”

“I didn’t get to go to school. But I made sure they did,” she said.

Marina, 27, grew up in eastern Afghanistan’s Laghman Province. She married a man from Kabul five years ago and moved to the city. Her husband is a bicycle mechanic. They have two children, 2 and 4 years old, and are expecting a third child in early 2012.

“My economic situation is not well and I am uneducated,” she said, swishing the flies off the chai and cookies in front of her. “Next year we will have a new baby and I’m afraid we can’t afford it.”

Determined to change her circumstances, she started with the basics. “I decided I had to learn to read and write,” she said. She found and enrolled in one of CAI’s literacy programs here in the city.

And when she was done with that, she kept going. She enrolled in CAI’s vocational training. “I want to help my husband or work for people and get money to help for my children’s education.”

She said her 45-year-old husband doesn’t object to her education, “He is an open man.” But he doesn’t help her, either. “He doesn’t give me one afghani. That’s the problem,” she said. “I get the doctor’s prescription for medicine, but I don’t have money to get it filled – such things like that.

“All Afghan women are under such stress, under much pressure. Most women are also under the control of men. The women don’t have education, so their husbands don’t allow them to go outside. Since they can’t work outside the home, they have no income and men don’t respect them. It is like a circle.”

From Kabul to Kashmir, CAI is trying to break that cycle. In every region where CAI works, it has established women’s centers to teach basic skills – reading, writing, basic math, sewing and handicrafts, and basic hygiene and nutrition – and empower women to build a better future.

Sabiera (left) and Safiya supervise and manage CAI’s women’s centers in Kabul. 

Women in a CAI women’s vocational center in Kabul learn to sew clothing for themselves, their families and, eventually, to sell.

Hope and Last Illiterate Generation
CAI’s vocational and literacy centers

STORY BY KARIN RONNOW | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELLEN JASKOL
Pakistan and got no farther than the city. Still others moved to the capital in search of economic opportunities. But those opportunities are limited and most of the population winds up eking out a living.

For women, however, the post-Taliban years have brought new freedoms.

“Education was not possible for us before,” said Bibi Maria, 50, a student at a CAI literacy centers in Kabul’s Doghabad District. “This is the first time we have these kinds of classes in houses, the first time our families will let us come. Now we must make advantage of what you made this for us. I even brought my two daughters-in-law here, too.”

Literacy classes meet for two hours, six days a week, for nine months, usually in the teachers’ homes.

“So many women in Kabul are uneducated,” said Lamia, who runs a CAI center in her home. “Any woman who was a child or a teenager during Taliban, now she is in her 20s and she was married and had children before she could learn. Even now there are parents who are conservative and don’t trust society and won’t let their daughters go to school. But they will let them come here.”

Behind her, the girls and women in her class entered the house, leaving their shoes by the front door and their blue chadors (burkas) on a sturdy wooden table in the hallway.

“The Taliban period for Afghanistan was very dark,” said Safiya, 30, CAI’s women’s programs manager in Kabul. “I was in Khost Province then and my mother-in-law was very bad. She made me wear a burka. A lot of women still wear burkas because their husbands or their husbands’ families insist.”

Safiya is a widowed mother of two girls who lives with her parents in Kabul. “My husband was killed by the Taliban because he worked for the Afghan government in Khost,” she said. She earned an accounting degree with the help of a CAI scholarship and was hired to run the literacy and vocational programs.

By the time the women finish the literacy program, they have roughly the equivalent of a primary school education, Safiya said.

Graduation

After women complete the literacy program in Kabul, they are welcome to enroll in the vocational training. All the programs are free to participants.

“After they learn to read and write, then they want to know vocational skills so they can get some money and get their own income,” said Wakil Karimi, CAI’s program manager for central, southern and eastern Afghanistan and the creator of the programs. “That is much important. Most Afghan people don’t take care of women and wives. So we help them learn sewing, making clothes.”

The three-month course starts with the basics of drawing a paper pattern, said Vida, 29, one of the vocational teachers.

“I teach that on a white board for 10 to 15 days,” she said. “Then they learn to make lines on the fabric and cut. Then we move to the sewing.”

As she spoke, 20 women were seated on the floor, sewing machines set up on boxes in front of them. A few of the women had brought their small children with them. A few days later, in a different Kabul
neighborhood, a vocational center held a graduation ceremony for 47 women who had completed the course this past summer.

The graduation kicked off with lots of pomp in an assembly room of the local high school (CAI also operates a computer center for girls at the school and pays for additional teachers). Students sang the national song. Eight girls and two boys wearing national costumes and the colors of the Afghan flag sang a traditional song. The principal of the high school then addressed the graduates.

“Education is important for females; some say it is not, but I have proof it is,” said Principal Abdul Malik Khan. “They do much good for society. Thanks to CAI for help educating girls and for paying attention to this area that is so poor.”

Then he spoke directly to the vocational center grads: “And you, especially, should send your girls to school. They should not be uneducated like you.”

After his speech, graduates and “alumni” came to the front of the room to talk about the merits of the training. Most of them were very nervous – public speaking is not common for Afghan women – and two of them opted to keep their burkas on since there were men in the room.

“In future we hope to solve our problems by ourselves,” one graduate said.

“Now we don’t have to put our hand out to others,” said another woman.

“Clothing is a fundamental need, like housing and transportation,” a woman said. “Thanks to this program, I am able to make clothing for my children, for myself, for my neighborhood. It solves many problems.”

Every graduate received a certificate of completion and a hand-crank sewing machine, scissors, a metal T-ruler and an iron. Outside the hall the women were met by their children, who loaded the machines into wheelbarrows or hefted them onto their backs for the walk home.

“Some of them will continue with CAI’s advanced tailoring training,” Karimi said. “From all centers we collect the three or four top students. We are already running two such classes. They are making student uniforms for our schools.”

Giving back
CAI has invested in literacy and vocational training for women throughout its project areas. But the needs, and thus the approach, vary by region.

In Pakistan and in Afghanistan’s Wakhan Corridor, for example, the programs are often combined, with a heavier emphasis on handicrafts. CAI provides small buildings, training and materials.

“Women want to make their share for the family, to generate income for kids’ education and for their own basic needs. Mostly they use it for their kids,” said Saidullah Baig, CAI’s Gilgit (Pakistan) project manager. “Now in Charpusan [Valley], some of the vocational centers have become self sustaining and the women are making bank accounts with the profits. They sell their work for 20 to 50 rupees per piece, so they are making 600 to 2,000 rupees per month. Some women are actually saving money.”

Late last May, Saidullah checked on the progress of three women’s centers under construction in the Ghizer Valley. The typical blueprint calls for four rooms – a workshop, display room, kitchen and raw material storage room – and a bathroom. The community supplies the land and free or subsidized labor.

“After we finish the building, we will offer basic training for them with a trainer, material and sewing machines,” he said.
In Singul village, CAI is working with the Hillbush Local Support Organization, which will look after and supervise the center once it is done, Baig said.

“More than 100 women could benefit from this center,” he said, as workers measured and installed roof beams for the building. “A villager gifted the land to the women.”

Hillbush LSO is an umbrella organization run by Bulbul Haja and her husband Alimadad Shah. When they heard Saidullah was in the area, they insisted he stop at their home for tea.

Over a spread of fresh fruit, sweet fried bread, boiled eggs and chicken, they inquired about the estimated date of completion for the project and CAI’s other work in Ghizer. Then Alimadad insisted on giving a tour of his orchard.

“I have so many trees: cherry, apricot, apple, mulberry. We also have grapes,” he said. “Some of this was planted by my grandfather, some by my father. But now, my kids are not interested in land and plants. They are all studying. We are all literate in this family, and it is bringing some changes.”

The changes are good, he said, but he is determined that his children will give back to their community, too. That’s why the family started Hillbush.

For the children

Up the Yasin Valley, in Hunder village, CAI is building another vocational center that Baig said will serve 60 women. In anticipation, a local woman approached Saidullah about a job during a May visit to check on the project.

Lal Begum, 38, an educated local woman, mother of two and a widow, also happens to be a master trainer looking for work. “I have some machines at home and already trained some village women for sewing, embroidery and different skills,” she said.

Her husband had just completed his law degree when he died 15 years ago of a heart attack. She moved to Gilgit to live with her parents and after a few years, “they started pushing me to remarry. But I loved my husband and don’t want to remarry. I came back to our home here, my husband is buried here and started doing everything myself. But it is very difficult. I am working in the fields, I have two young children – I faced so many problems.

“I don’t know what my children will become, but I am trying to give them education so they will spend life in a better way,” she added.

Saidullah promised to consult with her about the possibility of a job once the building was complete.

But Lal Begum’s passionate attempts to build a better future for her children are echoed everywhere CAI works.

Back in Kabul, Fozia, a 26-year-old literacy center student, said in a patriarchal society like Afghanistan’s it is the women who “guide their children’s education.” And an educated mother leads to better-educated children.

“It is much better if mother is educated,” Fozia said. “If she is uneducated, she will not know whether they learn or don’t learn. The father can’t do this thing because he is busy with the income of the family.

“‘My husband has education to class six and is a construction laborer. But when he comes from his job and I say, ‘You should check with the children and see if they can read and write,’ he says, ‘I am too tired.’ It is much better if the mother has education because most of the time she is with her children. If I am educated, I can help.’

Or, as Marina, the woman who went on a hunger strike with her sisters, put it: “Even though my daughters are young, already I try to catch them, give them pencil for writing and try to set a good example for them. We need to create a new generation of educated children.”

Local laborers begin work on the ceiling in CAI’s new women’s vocational center in Hunder, in Pakistan’s Yasin Valley.

A group of women gather to wash clothes in an irrigation ditch just outside the Hunder center.
“I will never forget how many schools there aren’t in the world.”
“I learned that pennies can make a difference. Every time I look at a penny I think of Pakistan.”
“I was like, ‘Holy cow, there are poor kids without school.’ It was sad but touching.”

These are just a few of the comments from children who participated in Pennies for Peace. The quotes were collected by Jerene Mortenson, a retired educator, P4P’s ambassador and the mother of Greg Mortenson, CAI’s co-founder (not necessarily in that order). Jerene was there when a boy at West Side Elementary School in River Falls, Wisc. – where she was the principal – heard Greg’s stories about the children in Baltistan, Pakistan who had no schools. That boy came up with the idea for what was originally called Pennies for Pakistan. He shared his idea with his classmates and teachers and together they helped Greg raise money to fulfill his promise to build the children in Korphe, Pakistan, a school.

She has traveled to the Karakoram Mountains to see the school in Korphe that her students helped build.

And now, in her retirement, she has taken on the mantle of spokesperson and advocate for the messages that she believes are inherent in P4P’s service-learning construct – messages that we all need to be thinking about.

It boils down to two words, “empathy and efficacy,” she said in a speech at CAI’s “Building Bridges of Peace” conference in October. “Empathy requires understanding, efficacy requires doing. Learning about children in societies different from their own can create understanding. Not having the opportunity to learn to read and write resonates with children and Pennies for Peace gives them an opportunity to do something concrete about it. A sense of efficacy comes about through a ‘can-do’ attitude, which results from providing the funds to help make school a possibility.”

Restricted funds

In the past decade, Pennies for Peace has blossomed into an important teaching tool for children and adults. The idea is that a penny buys a pencil in the places where CAI works. All money raised by P4P drives goes into a restricted fund and is only...
used to help establish schools, buy school supplies (pencils, notebooks, erasers) and furniture, provide scholarships and pay teacher salaries at CAI schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Roughly 60,000 pennies, or $600, will pay a teacher’s salary for a whole year.

Pennies for Peace is about kids helping kids. As Jerene said, it is about teaching kids why it is important to help those who don’t have the same advantages we have, and helping them see that they can actually do something about it, they can make a difference in the world.

One parent wrote to Jerene that there were two lessons she wanted her children to learn from P4P.

“As parents, it is so important to teach our children that doing something to help another is one of the most important things we can do in life. Another lesson that I would like my children to learn is that the feeling of self-satisfaction you get from helping someone who truly needs help is the very best reward. I don’t want my children to always think they should be paid, or given something in return for being helpful. For both of these reasons, Pennies for Peace has been a wonderful teaching tool for my family. My son was so excited about the fact that 100 pennies could truly change the life of a child.”

Twenty-nine countries

As of mid-November, CAI had 1,969 active or open campaigns in 29 countries, according to Michelle Laxson, CAI database manager.

In addition to the United States and Canada, the other countries represented were: Australia, Belgium, Brazil, China, France, India, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Latvia, Liberia, Mexico, Norway, Pakistan, Panama, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Saudi Arabia, Sierra Leone, Singapore, Slovakia, Spain, Switzerland, Thailand, United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom.

Since the program was started, 9,644 drives have registered with CAI, including a few more than 200 since April, Laxson said.

Following the controversy involving CAI last spring, some schools and other organizations running P4P campaigns opted to choose a different charity for their donation.

Students at Kiroli Elementary School in West Monroe, La., for example, raised $379 and donated it to the Family Justice Center of Ouachita Parish, according to news reports. Students at Wolcott Street School in Le Roy, N.Y., raised $1,600, which they donated to a local program that provides children with backpacks filled with snacks and food to take home over the weekends.

Greg Mortenson has always said that CAI doesn’t have to be the beneficiary of a P4P campaign. The point is to get kids involved and engaged.

Still, Greg’s stories continue to inspire communities to launch P4P campaigns to benefit CAI’s community partners in remote areas of Central Asia.

One current campaign has been organized by Joanne Broder, a teacher at Smallwood Academy in Gambo, Newfoundland, Canada. She decided P4P would be a great way to introduce her students to the idea of global citizenship.

“When most middle-school kids get up in the morning and head off to school for the day, it’s unlikely they’re preoccupied with what it costs to educate each of them for a month,” the Gander Beacon newspaper reported on the Oct. 18.

But the kids in Broder’s class know how much it costs to educate a child in Pakistan, the newspaper said.

“One-hundred pennies,” Chanel Hobbs, 13, told the Beacon. “For that little bit of money, a student can go to school for a month. That’s not much.”

Broder said she wants her students to know that they are part of an effort that is bigger than them and working for peaceful solutions.

“Our students will join tens of thousands of students around the world who are participating in the Pennies for Peace program and who are working together to become members of the global family dedicated to peace,” Broder told the Beacon.

And Pennies for Peace drives do seem to generate a sense of belonging and helping, of being part of something bigger than oneself.

Jerene said she recently spoke at a school where students had raised enough money to pay for school supplies for 70 children for a year. She told them that there are more than 100 million children in the world who are unable to go to school.

One of the children told her afterwards: “The message was heartbreaking and I almost cried. But at least we made 70 kids worth of a difference. Thank you for letting me make a difference.” 

Hope in new places:
CAI begins first project in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Central Asia Institute has teamed up with the community and education officials in the Dera Ismail Khan District for its first project in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, formerly known as the Northwest Frontier Province of Pakistan.

At the behest of Lt. Col. (Ret.) Ilyas Mizra, CAI’s chief operations manager in Pakistan, who grew up in the province, CAI this past spring began engagement of the Paharpur Girls’ Primary School, a government school that was severely damaged in the 2010 floods.

The people of Muhammad Hussain village had shifted their children into an old shelter after the floods, but the situation was unsustainable, Mizra said in June.

“This school’s condition was covered by three leading TV channels to draw attention, but to no avail – there was no response from any quarter,” Mizra said. “I got into it because being a CAI worker I thought we should do something about it.”

He contacted the village elders and education department officials and sent a man to check the situation.

“They want a school for their children and the government is not interested,” Mizra said.

“The villagers agreed to donate 2 kanals of land, or 10,000 square feet, to the education department. This is the first CAI school in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and is very deserving.”

Dera Ismail Khan is the southernmost district of the province, with a population of about 900,000, mostly farming communities and nomadic herding tribes.

Because of its proximity to Afghanistan and the presence of militant Islamists, the region is considered unsettled and dangerous for foreigners.

Ten militants attacked the police station in the city of Dera Ismail Khan, district headquarters, in July and 16 people were killed in the resulting battle with police. And in mid-October, Pakistani police recovered arms and ammunition in an operation against suspected militants in Dera Ismail Khan city.

— KARIN RONNOW
Since 1996, Central Asia Institute’s mission has been to empower communities of Central Asia through literacy and education, especially for girls, promote peace through education, and convey the importance of these activities globally.

CAI has established or significantly supported more than 250 community-initiated education and service projects. CAI is a registered 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, federal IRS EIN # 51-0376237.

- Sign up for CAI’s email newsletter, Alima
  www.ikat.org/alima
- CAI’s blog: CAI Communiqué
  www.ikat.org/cai-communique

About the journalists:

KARIN RONNOW, 49, joined Central Asia Institute as communications director in May 2011, after nearly 25 years as a newspaper journalist. Prior to joining CAI, she was a reporter for daily newspapers in Maine and Georgia, a U.S.-based reporter for Lafferty Publications in Dublin, Ireland, managing editor at the Livingston (Mont.) Enterprise, and assistant managing editor of the Bozeman (Mont.) Daily Chronicle. Her 2007 stories on CAI’s work in Afghanistan and Pakistan were nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and she has received numerous awards for her reporting, writing, and editing. She earned her bachelor’s degree in urban studies and journalism from Macalester College in Minnesota and master’s degree in journalism from Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism in Illinois. She lives in Montana with her husband, Kimball Leighton, and their two dogs, Darwin and Beattle. Their daughter, Carmine, lives in Missoula. Karin can be reached at kcronnow@gmail.com.

ELLEN JASKOL, 48, a photojournalist for 27 years, owns Ellen Jaskol Photography in Denver, where her clients include businesses, nonprofits, magazines, families, and Central Asia Institute. Prior to starting her own business, she spent 17 years at the Rocky Mountain News in Denver and nine years at the Los Angeles Times, where she began her career as an intern. She has won numerous local and national awards for her photography, including two Pulitzer Prizes while at the Rocky Mountain News, where she was also Photographer of the Year in 2008. Her work over the years took her to Italy, Jamaica, Mexico, and Cambodia, and now, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan. She earned a bachelor’s degree in English literature from University of California Los Angeles. She lives in Denver with her husband, Steve Katich, and their two dogs, Manny and Jane. Steve has two grown daughters: Helen is a student at CU Boulder and Alexandra lives and works in New York City. Ellen can be reached at ejaskol@hotmail.com.
Central Asia Institute’s mission:
To empower communities of Central Asia through literacy and education, especially for girls, promote peace through education, and convey the importance of these activities globally.