



ATSAF - CGIAR++ Junior Scientists Program Final Report

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Country: Pakistan

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Preparation

In June/July 2020 I first heard about the Apricot project in Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan and what immediately grabbed my attention was that they were looking for someone who wanted to look at the role of women. I intuitively knew that the person they were looking for me as during the same time I was searching on my own for female empowerment projects in India. A region and a topic very dear to my heart. So I applied. Briefly after that I had a talk with the leading professor and before I knew it I was in.

The months before we would finally depart to Pakistan many things had to be done. I spend a considerable amount of time on research and communication with Pakistani and German research colleagues to find my own research strategy that would not only be useful but which would also cover my own interests. That being said, I have never done my own field research, beyond a classical literature analysis my expertise did not reach. So where should I even start? My time was filled with a constant back and forth, from one idea to the other, weighting options and ways to construct the research in a proper manner. Qualitative or quantitative research or a mixture of both? Coming from a humanities background, quantitative analysis was not a subject that was covered and had always filled me with a certain apprehension. In order to expand my horizon, on what was actually possible I took various courses over the course of my master, which covered both fields. Finally, I found a way of including both methods in my research, which actually made me happy as it allowed me to expand my skills and knowledge into the quantitative field (without scaring me.. too much). Besides the organization of my research, I had to take care of many bureaucratic matters. Applying for a visa for example, luckily we had a professor who took care of the process necessary for us to receive the documents we needed for the application. Since the whole corona situation made it nearly impossible for most researchers to pursue any sort of field research. Even though, we had the right documents, we received, due to a misunderstanding on our side only a visa for one months. Fortunately, after a lot of back and forth and help from our Pakistani colleagues we managed to receive the appropriate visa for a period of 3 months. The money we paid for the first visa we did not get back though, but that was a collateral we were more than willing to take.

Moreover, around the same time I was collecting and preparing all the documents necessary for the scholarship of the ATSAF-CGIAR++ Junior Scientist Program. To be honest, I was quite happy that a research proposal was necessary for the application process as it pushed me to truly think and research about the best way to construct my research months before we actually left. This really helped me to get a clearer idea about what I was about to do. The application process went quite



smoothly and I was glad about the good communication with ATSAF that helped to solve all arising problems in a quick manner. After I handed in all my documents, I only had to wait about 2-3 weeks until I got the great news that not only my proposal was accepted but also the one of my research colleague. Undoubtedly, a night of celebration followed.. after all the work we already had put in we definitely felt like we deserved it.

The weeks before we left got really busy with us trying to construct interviews filled with the right questions to guide our research. This was really difficult. One side were our own questions, the other side was that we had to create a larger questionnaire for the three of us (we were three main researchers during our trip, with partially very different interests). The other side was, that we had to put our questionnaires into CSPro and online survey tool. A tool none of us had ever used before. Actually finishing this, took us weeks into our field research because there is only so much you can plan ahead without ever having been at the place and with the people you want to research about. But that was ok. I was quite aware that there is a certain number of things that I could prepare for and that the rest would unravel at the right time in the right place, in its typically charming manner.

Finally, after I had been fortunate enough to receive my last corona vaccination right before the day of departure, we were ready to take off. Well, not really, we were but the airplane was not. Sitting in the airplane it was approaching mid-night, when we were told that the plane had a technical error and since it was prohibited to fly at night in Frankfurt we were sent to an adjacent airport hotel, which was nice enough. Nevertheless, long story short, we would not be able to receive our connecting flight from Dubai to Multan and had to stay, on the costs of Emirates for two days in Dubai. This time in a pretty nice hotel. Honestly, it could have come worse.

Arriving in Pakistan

The first weeks were as beautiful as they were busy. We were treated with the utmost care and love by our hosts at Multan Agricultural University who did everything in their power to make us feel at home. We were shown all the important facilities and spend a few days in Choltistan, a very arid area in which we came together with Pakistani University students to do a field excursion. After a long, very hot day we were even invited to spend the night in the desert under the starry sky but only after we were blessed with a very elaborate dinner and beautiful, traditional live music. After that we took off on the long-and bumpy road through breathtaking scenery to reach our final destination Gilgit-Baltistan. A place of such stunning beauty, that words cannot do it justice. In a desert like, arid area amid 7000-8000m high mountain peaks you would find lush valleys alongside torrential rivers. Fed by millennial old, intricate water channel systems derived from the surrounding glaciers, fertile, habitable grounds were created. Often times every free square meter in the little villages were filled with crops and fruits



and agroforestry type of systems were quite common. Studying sustainable agriculture in Germany, where intensified agriculture is the common and agroforestry only a dreamy vision you can imagine how happy we were. The first few days we spent our days getting to know the area and trying out our interviews and the nights incorporating our new knowledge into our questionnaires. A bunch of things had to be changed. We quickly realized that our interviews were way too long and tiresome for the interviewees, so we feverishly worked on shorting them to a doable length. After about a week there two people of our team went back to Germany another two weeks later two more left. Then our journey only really took off. Left were Iftikhar our Pakistani research colleague, Naila our dear assistant and translator, our good friend Zulfiqar who was our driver and Mareike and me, the two German master students. Our time was not always easy, we were together 24/7 and had to work, sleep, eat and travel together. Not to mention that we had a complete different cultural background, but we made it work. It took a few weeks of getting to know each other and finding a common rhythm, but then we grew quite close together as a team and I am beyond grateful for the incredible time and hospitality we were offered by our colleagues. They gave their absolute best to make us feel at home, which made all the difference. Especially, during the many weeks in which we both (Mareike and me) were fighting with at times severe stomach flus and homesickness. The homesickness came surprising to me as I had quite extensive abroad experiences before but never one like that. For two months we were travelling from one small village to the next one and were very much immersed in the local culture. A beautiful experience that would have been impossible if we would have been mere tourists. However, the constant sickness in combination with the immense cultural difference, especially as a woman, hit us hard at one point. The happier we were that we had each other. Neither of us would have thought it possible that we would grow as close together as we did, but we did and no one can ever take that experience away from us.

The Research

We rather quickly established a rhythm that worked for all of us, getting up early but not too early, we had breakfast and would walk or take the car to the next village where we would do our interviews. Usually, we would have a key source person, a person that was sometimes a distant relative, someone who worked with our colleagues before, a person from a farmer cooperative or sometimes just one of the first farmers we met in the village. They introduced us to different farmers and their families where we could conduct our interviews. Indeed, they were decisive figures in our research, since otherwise it would have been very tiresome to find the right farmers who were fitting to our research on our own. Pakistan has a very rich cultural tradition concerning hospitality, whereas, in Germany if we would have just showed up out of nowhere without a prior appointment, people would



have most definitely told us to leave again. This was not the case in Gilgit-Baltistan, where ever we went we were greeted with such warmth's, which was luckily not only due to our foreignness. Often times, families would immediately make time and space to accommodate us and our lengthy research requests, which at times, depending on if we had to take apricot samples could easily take between 2-4 hours. This obviously included the indispensable chai-time and often times some sort of lunch as well. Another big part of our research experience was waiting, a lot of waiting. Regardless as in the car during a long drive, when had to figure out what to do next, where to sleep, to eat, who to talk to, etc., then during our interview times when we had to wait for a farmer or respondent to come home, when we had to wait for an interviewee to be done with the questionnaire so the other person could continue with their questionnaire (because the head of household always had to be asked two different surveys) and the list goes on...

We usually always had our interviews translated because it was rare that someone spoke English, when they did it was such a blissful experience, because we were able to receive the information first hand instead of getting it passed down, a process where inevitably a lot of details get lost. Often times, I even had double translation, since in the region over 8, very different languages, are spoken and our translator did not know all of them. Usually people learn Urdu in school, however, since most of the women I talked to were illiterate, a phenomenon of the generation above 35 years old, they never learned Urdu. Therefore, many times one of their daughters would translate for us into Urdu and then I would get it translated into English. During this type of interviews, I really only got the basic answers.

On average we would stay around 4-5 days in a village after we had done about 5 interviews and at least one key source interview, before moving on to the next one. We did 3 villages with a different level of remoteness to the next market, then we drove to the next valley and did the same all over again. All together we interviewed 87 households, whereas, I interviewed approximately double because I always talked to male and female head of households. Besides Apricot farmer we also conducted many interviews with key source people, such as from the agricultural department, NGOs, different farmer organizations, entrepreneurs and even with people from the former royal family. Overall, I would say the research was very successful and we were able to gain a very in-depth perception on the status quo of the Apricot system and the role of women therein. Currently we are still working on our data analysis and cannot yet share any results. However, as soon as we are done, we will incorporate them into the rough cut of our short film and will happily share the film as well as our thesis's with you.



Conclusion

I feel deeply blessed that I had the chance to do this field trip to Pakistan. Even though, it has been a constant roller coaster not only in our stomachs but also of emotions I have taken a lot of personal growth out of this experience, which otherwise would have taken many years for me to develop in a similar way. Pakistan is an incredibly beautiful and diverse country, in terms of landscape but also of local cultures and languages. From the very beginning we were taken care for in such an endearing and loving manner and were shown the beauty and the richness of our short-term home. I am beyond grateful that I have been offered this opportunity and the full support of various parties to be able to go to Gilgit-Baltistan and to receive a deep insight into not only the reality but also the weaknesses and the potential of this small niche sector and its people. I hope that in the future I will be able to return many folds this privilege and opportunity of personal growth that I have been offered through my own work and expertise. I am deeply grateful that you have supported me during this journey, thank you very much for all that you have done! I hope that in the future our paths may cross again.

Warm heartedly,

Franziska Lehr
