

Leaders in the Civic Engagement Movement: Shamsh Kassim-Lakha, Founding President of Aga Khan University and active member of the Talloires Network’s Steering Committee
by Lorlene Hoyt



January signals the seventh installment of our Leaders in the Civic Engagement Movement series. This issue features Dr. Shamsh Kassim-Lakha, Founding President of Aga Khan University, Pakistan’s former Minister of Education as well as Science and Technology, and active member of the Talloires Network’s Steering Committee.

Dr. Kassim-Lakha is the Founding President of the Aga Khan University (AKU), the first private university chartered in South Asia. Under the vision of His Highness the Aga Khan, he led the planning, building and operation of this world-class institution for 27 years in eight countries of Asia, Africa and the United Kingdom.

AKU has international renown for the quality of its academic and service programs in Medicine, Nursing and Education. When prompted to reflect on the impetus for his motivation to make community engagement an institutional priority, Dr. Kassim-Lakha pointed to his early work in spearheading the construction of AKU’s Health Sciences Centre including its teaching hospital in Karachi. “In 1979-80,” he explained, “we worked with leaders from the World Health Organization and other international and national institutions to address issues relating to curriculum development for the AKU’s College of Medicine and School of Nursing and its relationship to the teaching hospital.” He continued, “Together, we explored two key questions: What should be the role of hospitals in primary care? What kind of education should we plan and provide that is relevant to our context?” They “quickly came to the realization” that the community must be a focal point, and, in turn, they designed and implemented a “model for a Medical curriculum that devotes 20% of its five year program to Community Health Sciences, including service and research in the community.” At first, according to Dr. Kassim-Lakha, “Students didn’t understand why it was important to work with people in the squatter settlements of Karachi.” But students soon learned that infant mortality rates in the region were very high (more than 300 per 100,000 births) and “began spending time with mothers, listening to their concerns, and providing them with basic information to help them understand how to better care for infants.” Over a three-year period, infant mortality rates decreased dramatically (to less than 130+ per 100,000 births). He described this outcome as “a jolt” that required leaders like himself to “begin looking at medicine differently and education from a fresh perspective.” He added, the “community became more prominent in our thought processes, for in the end all education must result in a positive impact on people’s lives.”

Dr. Kassim-Lakha believes the community “is the most important partner a university has” and readily acknowledges the myriad of challenges associated with forging and sustaining community-university partnerships. In his view, the “biggest challenge is understanding how to practice community engagement. Universities have an obligation to share their intellectual and material resources with their immediate community and not simply to co-exist with them.”

Many, he explained, “use the community to do their research and provide little benefit to the community itself.” Relying on such concepts as “quid pro quo” and “reciprocity,” Dr. Kassim-Lakha painted for me a detailed portrait of how universities can “avoid becoming an ivory tower.” Central to this philosophy is the idea that university faculty, staff and students must “listen to people and work through dialogue” to prioritize local problems and co-create long-lasting solutions.

Dr. Kassim-Lakha knows first-hand what these ideas look like in practice. In 2009, The Urban Health Program at AKU, Pakistan was the first place winner of the MacJannet Prize, which recognizes exceptional student community engagement initiatives. Designed in response to a critical assessment of community needs, the Urban Health Program provides preventative and curative care to expectant mothers as well as their children. It also works with organizations in the community to improve literacy rates, increase the mobility and social engagement of women, and make use of micro-credit schemes. In return, AKU students gain experience outside the walls of the university and public hospitals, learning about the health problems and challenges faced by the poor. With time faculty members too have become genuinely engaged with the community as they discovered rich potential for research in this setting.

With regard to advancing the global movement of civic engagement in higher education, Dr. Kassim-Lakha was a founding member of the Talloires Network and from its inception has been an active member of the Network’s Steering Committee. Working in collaboration with Rob Hollister, Dr. Kassim-Lakha played a major role in developing the Network’s new Youth Economic Participation Initiative, a \$5.9 partnership with The MasterCard Foundation (For more information, see <http://talloiresnetwork.tufts.edu/yepi/>)

Looking to the future, Dr. Kassim-Lakha advocates that the Talloires Network work vigorously to achieve “the kind of commitment we need from universities.” He would like the TN “to ask members to contribute to the Network and the field by regularly sharing their community engagement achievements” as well as the strategies they have used to reach their goals. He noted TN’s recent expansion and increased interaction with engaged universities in Pakistan and believes we can “allow a thousand flowers to bloom” by increasing the number of such partnerships. Recognizing that “all community engagement is local,” he recommended stronger connections with regional networks as well as the establishment of new regional networks across the globe. We look forward to working with Dr. Kassim-Lakha on these and other projects for years to come.

Dr. Kassim-Lakha earned degrees from the South Bank and Westminster Universities in the U.K., and the University of Minnesota in the U.S. In recognition of his academic and social work he has received an honorary degree from McMaster University, Canada as well as national awards of Sitara-e-Imtiaz and Hilal-e-Imtiaz from the President of Pakistan and Officer of the National Order of Merit from the President of France. In 1997, he chaired the Committee that wrote Pakistan’s National Environment Protection Act and co-Chaired (with the Education Minister of Tajikistan) the Commission on the Establishment of the University of Central Asia. In 2001-2, he

led the government Task Force that recommended reforms in Pakistan's higher education and served as a member of the Higher Education Commission from 2007 to 2011. From 2007-8, he also served as Pakistan's Minister of Education as well as Science and Technology in the Caretaker Government. He is currently Senior Distinguished Fellow at the Munk School of Global Affairs, University of Toronto and consults for the World Bank, and Grameen Bank. He chairs the board of Pakistan Centre for Philanthropy and sits on the board of International Baccalaureate Organization. He is a member of the board of Benazir Income Support Programme, Pakistan's largest poverty reduction initiative.