

A Conversation with Sweta Shah, Global Lead for ECD at Aga Khan Foundation [Transcript]

Joining us today to discuss the very formative years that His Highness the Aga Khan was just talking about is Dr. Sweta Shah, AKF Global Lead for Early Childhood Development. Sweta, thanks so much for taking the time to join us and for talking to our supporters today.

Yeah, thanks so much Khalil! I'm thrilled to be here.

Can you start by telling us a little bit about your role at AKF?

Sure. So, I provide technical and strategic leadership to the organization that goes everything from technical support to country programs, all the way to coordinating with other AKDN agencies and building partnerships with external partners including donors.

And Sweta, you don't come to this role as rookie, you've got a lot of experience both as a practitioner, and as a scholar of this area. Tell us a little bit about your background in early childhood.

Great. So, I started off really in education, working in developing countries and a lot of humanitarian contexts. I was really doing implementation work, and slowly, I started working with young children, but then it just became a real passion that I didn't want to work with all children, but maybe focus on young children. So that's what's led me to this place. And then I also did a PhD, to really deepen my knowledge as well in this area. So, practitioner and also have dabbled in academia.

Sweta, we've been talking a lot about COVID, and we've been saying that COVID looks like a health crisis but actually went to penetrate beyond the first impressions. You realize that it's actually a crisis along so many other dimensions as well. COVID has clearly had a very significant impact on children, even if they're not being infected with the virus. What are some of the big challenges that you're seeing faced by children as a result of COVID? What are some of the barriers? One of our donors, Nuhad Pirani, was asking specifically about some of the barriers that our young children are facing as they think about their educations.

This is something we're very concerned about. You're absolutely right, this is not just a health crisis but we're really concerned because many schools around the world are closed. Many are virtual. When you think about young children, virtual is not really the best in terms of best practice for learning for young children. Our approach at the Aga Khan Foundation and within the Aga Khan Development Network is very much interactive play-based learning. And so, the fact that schools are closed or they're virtual in some places is really concerning to us. We are seeing, though, that we are able to, through this crisis, see real innovations. We know that a number of countries are probably going to have a full year where children won't have access to any sort of education, whether it's virtual or not. And this is extremely concerning to us.

So, we've taken a number of steps to really address this and to support government, and in particularly to support our communities. One of the things that we've done in innovations and I'll just share an experience from a program in Kenya, is that we've partnered with Nation Media, and we've actually started a nationwide television program for children, targeting children and their parents. So, this is, of course, looking at small children but it's relevant for older children as well. And these short little shows are storytelling. So, it's fun for families, they can sit around a TV and watch someone model what storytelling is about. And so, it could be reading a book or telling a story. And what we're hoping to do from that is help parents, who are really now in the driver's seat in terms of children's education in

many of our countries, to really see what is good storytelling, what is a good conversation, how can you promote literacy, vocabulary development, analysis, critical thinking, some of the really important 21st century skills that are in our programs. So that's one example.

Some other things that we're doing is using radio. Many of our contexts don't have television, so we try radio. We are also using SMS, WhatsApp, and a bunch of different modalities, but to give you an example of what we're doing with radio, our affiliate organization, the Madrasa Early Childhood Program in Tanzania, is working on, again, short little radio programs that focus on literacy and numeracy skills. And again, you know, these are like, usually 10 to 15 minutes spots, so it keeps people's attention. But it allows for children and families to get some input. We've done some surveys in Tanzania to look at the impact of this, and we've been really excited to hear that parents are actually engaging with their children more, they're having more conversations, and some of the activities that they hear about on radio, they're actually continuing to practice with their kids at home. So, these are all very encouraging types of innovations I feel that we've made to support this crisis.

Wow, that's very, very exciting to hear, Sweta. It kind of strikes me as I hear you talk that the educational barriers are one part of this, but the crisis has been disorienting in all kinds of ways for all of us. Presumably the psychosocial impacts of all these for children must also be pretty severe. Is that something you're seeing and are there things that we can do to support that part of the childhood experience?

Absolutely. And that's been actually one of the things that we see most. In my experience, in work in humanitarian contexts, the stress and psychosocial aspects are really, really difficult, and sometimes even more difficult to manage than access to learning opportunities. So that is an area that we've really, really targeted in our COVID-19 response as the whole Aga Khan Development Network. And I'm pleased to say that you know, we're forming new partnerships. So, in northern Pakistan, we have a new partnership with UNICEF specifically tackling issues of mental health and psychosocial support. We produce guides and practical tips and tools to help families, really, families and children, to use really fun play activities to promote psychosocial support, help families and children relieve stress and when they do that, that's going to really change their whole approach and they're actually going to be able to learn better as well. So psychosocial and stress management has been a big area. and I would say Khalil, not only for our communities, or for ourselves as staff as well. So, it's been a big emphasis with AKF also overall, for our staff as well, because we're kind of going through the same thing that many of our communities are going through.

Well, it's one thing that in certain sense binds the whole world along during COVID. I mean, in a sense, it's been such a disruption for all of us. It's one of those areas where we can somehow feel our interdependence maybe more viscerally than we have in a long, long time because it's such a global and universal crisis. And of course, that's going to be the same for children around the world. All of us are confronting our children at home, also maybe dislocated, not being able to go to school, not being able to see peers and friends and relations that they used to before. So, are you worried about the longer-term consequences of all of this? I mean what does this all suggest for our longer-term programming in early childhood, which we know His Highness has emphasized as strategic priority for us? How do you think is going to change our long-term posture?

So, I think actually COVID has changed a lot, and is going to change a lot and I would say obviously there are a lot of negative impacts, which is you know children losing all this time in school, losing

opportunities, but I think there are some silver linings to this as well, that I've been really reflecting on. One is all these innovations that we're now making use of, use of TV, use of radio, use of WhatsApp, use of SMS. Those are things that we're going to continue utilizing as we move forward because in some of our most remote geographies, the issue of access is still going to be there. The issue of having teachers who are, who don't have sufficient training and background is still going to be there. So, we need to think about innovative approaches to reaching our most rural communities. So, some of those actions that we started, you know that we came about because of COVID, we had to be creative. But those are things that we're going to want to keep to some degree as well, even when schools open.

So, I think that there's a lot. And then the other thing that we've seen is as ECD, as an ECD community, we know and we promote parents as really the first and most important teachers for their children and for so long we've been trying to promote more active engagement of parents. And now parents are thrown into it and they're realizing that, actually you know what, the education system does a lot, but we need to step up as well. And we're seeing all over in all of our contexts, and probably in Canada and in the US where I am, including you and me, we have to step up, there's no choice. And so, I think another silver lining actually is the amount of that parents are learning through this process about their own role, and just empowering them to really be in the driver's seat with their children's education.

That's a really thoughtful and insightful point, because, in a sense, I think all a lot of parents I mean, I know we felt this, have all felt inadequate in relation to the new responsibilities we've had for our for our children when schools have been disrupted and sometimes closed. Do you think we're doing enough to support parents to be really caring, but effective caregivers for their children especially in a time like this?

Well, I think the first and most important thing, and this is our approach, you know even before COVID, but I think it's kind of deepened and strengthened, is that we need to start with where parents are. So, parents, you know, they don't know nothing. They know a lot actually, right? They come with a lot of assets, they have the best intentions for their children. So what we are here to do is to support them, to empower them, to help them see actually that a lot of the things they do in their daily lives are really critical for children. For example, when I mentioned storytelling, I mean, that's something that any parent can do and probably many do. You can even talk about your life, and that is learning as well for children because they're learning content, they're learning vocabulary, or when you do storytelling, they're learning about how stories are written. So, I think we need to start with where parents are.

I think parents do though need more peer-to-peer support because parents are also struggling with the stress and the psychosocial challenges. And so, we are trying to have more peer-to-peer conversations. Sometimes parents just need to express the challenges that they're facing with their kids or the stress they're feeling. Sometimes parents want to talk about something else, and get their minds off of coronavirus. And so, we are doing a lot to bring parents together to facilitate discussions around children's learning, but also sometimes just for them to talk to other people. Because of coronavirus, we are all isolated. Many of us, in many contexts, we all have to social distance, we are not able to socialize with other people in the same way. And as humans, we are social beings and we need that. So, parents, and supporting parents has been critical to our work. And I would say with this virus, it's even deepened within AKF.

Sweta, you've been at this for a long time. Any surprises for you as you've gone through and watched the way in which either children or the communities where we're working have responded to the crisis in relation to caring for and helping the development of their children?

Yeah, so it's been amazing actually I worked in so many humanitarian contexts as well, and it's interesting.

And with humanitarian contexts, you mean real crisis situations.

Yes, absolutely, so, war, refugee contexts. And you know what's interesting is that we have in some of our geographies such as Syria, and Afghanistan and northern Uganda, they're in chronic crises, as well. And what's been interesting is, as we've been working with all of our country programs on interchanging their modalities for teaching and learning and thinking about different approaches, we found our teams, and our communities in these areas to be extremely resilient and flexible. And actually, they've been able to adjust to these changes faster than some of our other country teams who are not used to, or not, you know, they have more stability. So that's been really, I guess when I heard about it, I wasn't shocked by it, but I realized it until I heard it really from the teams. So just remembering that resilience, and what you bring with you, you know, helps you build that resilience. I've also been really happily surprised, you know I go back to parents and been thrilled and really happily surprised by how we're seeing families really rise up and really, really take the lead in their children's education and working with school systems to make sure they're providing the best support to teachers, and to education staff. Now we're not expecting parents to be teachers, they are not. Teachers are specialized, they are professionals, but there's a lot that parents can do to support teachers to enable better learning, and I've been really happily surprised to see how we're seeing families and parents really rise up during this time.

Sweta, earlier we talked about how COVID has got these universal characteristics, in a sense, we've all been confronted in some way or another by needing to think about children at home. You've seen a lot of crisis situations – what's your advice to all the parents out there as they, as they try to contend with what might continue to be months of disruption in their children's regular routines and schooling?

Yeah, so I think I go back to some of the basics, which is routine and stress management. I think when families are able to have a routine, which it would surprise you, but it can be hard to do when, especially if children are home all the time and you're trying to work. We have very different contexts, whether you're in Canada or whether you're in Afghanistan of course, but we know that there's a huge burden on parents and families right now. And so I would say, create a routine and whatever that routine is, and try your best to keep to that routine. I myself have created multiple routines for my family, and have not always kept to them. So, it's always a work in progress and don't beat yourself up if you can't perfectly fit your routine, but routines do help in making, not only families but children, feel a sense of stability and calm.

And then the other is really critical for parents themselves, is take time out for yourself and for your own mental health and for your own physical health. You know, many parents and adults are juggling so much right now, maybe they lost their job and they're trying to figure out how to get a new job and, you know, earn a living, or whether they're working full time, and, you know, have children at home. But looking after yourself and your physical and your mental health is critical, because if you as the parent, and as an adult in the child's life, are able to be calm and stable, that is going to help that child as well.

And children really pick up on parents' emotions and what parents are feeling, even if they don't say it. So, keeping ourselves as calm as we can be. There are times when, like, I also struggle to keep it together, and then I just have to take breath and, you know, away from my kids, take a little breather maybe take a walk if I can, read a book, and then come back and then I know I'll be a better parent. I think self-care is really critical. And I would say try your best to keep to routines.

Sweta, that's advice we could all use. Thank you for those nuggets of wisdom, thank you for all that you are doing. We know from all the research how important the first few years of life are for the entire lifespan, and so thank you for all you're contributing to help AKF serve these communities who are confronting so many difficulties and if we can continue to safeguard the life and the environment of the children, even amidst this crisis, hopefully we'll be able to prevent the lifelong consequences being too severe. And maybe even, as you say, find some silver linings and allow these children to flourish in the years ahead.

Yeah, thanks so much Khalil.