

THE SPIRIT OF VOLUNTEERISM

Volunteerism is a force that encourages collective responsibility while acting as a social glue that brings and holds together a community. Voluntary service is a hallmark of the Islamic tradition, and is continually emphasized by Mawlana Hazar Imam as a cornerstone of Jamati and Imamat institutions.

This notion is central to the Time and Knowledge *Nazrana* (TKN), established by Mawlana Hazar Imam on the occasion of his Golden Jubilee. The purpose of TKN is to strengthen and advance the mandate of the Imamat and Jamati institutions globally, with contributions made on individual and collective basis.

Focus Humanitarian Assistance (FOCUS) is an international crisis response and disaster management agency which emphasizes a community-based approach, particularly in its Disaster Risk Reduction efforts. FOCUS depends heavily on its international network of volunteers, who are integral to the success of the organization. We have had TKN volunteers from around the world join in our efforts to limit the magnitude of disaster, taking the work of our organization to the next level. We had the opportunity to interview six such TKN volunteers who worked at FOCUS, to learn more about their experiences: Hadi Husani (HH) - Strategic Plan Consultant; Natasha Manji (NM) - Program Support Officer from the FOCUS International Coordinating Committee; Alamin Halari (AH) - Donor Services Assistant; Riaz Charania (RC) - Finance Support Officer; Safeena Keshavjee (SK) and Sajjad Jindani (SJ) - Program Assistants for Disaster Management from FOCUS Canada.

Q: What does volunteerism mean to you, why do you feel it is important?

SK: Volunteerism enables me to utilize my skills to benefit the lives of individuals and the environment around me – basically to make a difference in my community. As

an Ismaili Muslim, volunteerism is entrenched within our core values and culture, which has become a part of my personal values.

NM: Volunteerism means giving it your all. It is important to me because I am grateful for all that I have been blessed with, including my family and friends. This is the way I like to give back to the community and ultimately the Almighty!

SJ: As part of our traditions, we are encouraged to engage in voluntary activities from an early age. To me, volunteerism allows institutions and individuals to share their knowledge and expertise in a global context. We often find that there is a gap between available and required resources at our institutions due to various constraints, making it difficult for us to implement our agenda. Volunteers assist in narrowing this gap in resources and overall, help the institutions achieve its goals.

Q: What was the nature of your TKN assignment? What motivated you to accept this role?

HH: I worked with FOCUS on their strategic plan for the coming years, and it was great to see the tremendous rigor and detailed thought that went into the exercise by the units. I hope to do my best to effectively serve the institutions in whatever capacity I can. The act of selflessness is one of the purest expressions of our faith, something that loosens the bonds of the ego and opens the soul to growth and fulfillment. This idea inspires me every day, and compels me to volunteer.



FOCUS volunteers in Gilgit transporting non-food items during a crisis event
Photos: FOCUS

SK: I worked at FOCUS Canada as Program Assistant. During my assignment on significant projects, I was able to contribute ideas and provide feedback. Throughout my term, I really felt that my skills were being utilized effectively, which made me feel good too.

RC: My TKN assignment is to design and implement procedures to improve the efficiency of the finance department. Additionally, I conduct the day-to-day accounting functions as well as provide support on management accounts. Part of my motivation was to play an active role in serving the institutions. I have always wanted to contribute my skills in a meaningful way. I perceive TKN has a unique opportunity to give Hazar Imam something he has specifically asked for. There is so much talent within the Jamat, and I hope

that it can be harnessed to realize the full potential of this beautiful notion.

AH: My TKN assignment was within the donor services department. It consisted of providing information to donors about the nature of FOCUS' work, processing donations, reconciling and reporting. Mawlana Hazar Imam has mentioned time and time again that his institutions are there to assist the less fortunate, and I think that FOCUS does exactly that. In times of disaster, FOCUS aids the afflicted and helps communities rebuild. My main motivation in accepting the TKN assignment was that I would have been able to contribute to FOCUS' overall work.



FOCUS volunteers gather data from displaced women from Kashmir

NM: I was the Programme Support Officer at the International Secretariat. My motivation came from my faith, a feeling that came from deep within, and so I pledged my time and gave an unconditional commitment to this program.

SJ: I am currently supporting the disaster management component of FOCUS Canada. My primary motivation in accepting this assignment was being able to contribute my field knowledge in this area (from my education and from working at FOCUS Pakistan) to the incredible work that FOCUS does already.

Q: What did you aim to gain from this assignment and how would you describe your experience?

SJ: FOCUS not only responds to crises, but also ensures that vulnerable communities are able to respond to, and recover from future disasters. Using various innovative approaches such as the inclusion of indigenous knowledge in its strategies, alongside using the latest available technologies, FOCUS has taught me a lot about how Disaster Risk Reduction works.

SK: I went into this experience intending to provide my time and knowledge to a Jamati institution. Part of what I gained in return was practical experience that developed my skills and taught me new ones too, that can now be employed for future TKN assignments, or even my career. I was able to

work very closely with projects that were within my field, in an organization that I truly believe in.

RC: I hoped to gain a better understanding of FOCUS and its role within the AKDN. I have gained insight into the projects and workings of FOCUS, met some very inspiring people, and have greatly enjoyed the thought-provoking environment.

NM: I wanted to gain exposure to the Institutional side of AKDN, having been involved on the Jamati side of things. My experience was fantastic and I thoroughly enjoyed the assignment. Having left home (Nairobi) and going to Toronto for the TKN assignment, I truly feel that I had an opportunity to make a

family away from home. FOCUS was that family for me and I am proud to be a part of the FOCUS family.

HH: FOCUS is one of those truly remarkable institutions of the Jamat, respected around the world in some of the most important policy circles and viewed as a leader in its field, given the strength of its network in the countries within which it operates. I have seen FOCUS' work in North America, Europe and South and Central Asia, and what it has been able to do with the support of the Jamat in each of those countries. FOCUS brings together all the best practices of an international organization with the tremendous volunteer support of the worldwide Jamat. Together, we have been able to move mountains. ♦

Focus Humanitarian Assistance (FOCUS) is an international group of agencies established in Europe, North America, South and Central Asia to complement the provision of emergency relief, principally in the developing world. It helps people in need reduce their dependence on humanitarian aid and facilitates their transition to sustainable self-reliant, long-term development. Focus Humanitarian Assistance is an affiliate of the Aga Khan Development Network.

For more information on FOCUS, please visit:
www.akdn.org/focus