

## Speech by His Highness the Aga Khan at the Global Philanthropy Forum

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President Jane Wales, thank you for those very generous comments.

I'd like to say how happy I am to share in this year's Global Philanthropy Forum.

Participants,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a special pleasure for me to be with you tonight, for I look upon you as particularly serious and informed partners in the work of global understanding and international development.

As you may know, I recently marked my 50th anniversary in my role as Imam of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims. This responsibility connects me intimately with the traditions of the Islamic faith and cultures, even while my education and a host of personal and professional associations have acquainted me with the non-Islamic West. The relationship of these two worlds is a subject of considerable importance for me – a relationship which some define, regrettably, as an inevitable *Clash of Civilizations*. My own observation, however – and my deep conviction – is that we can more accurately describe it as a *Clash of Ignorances*.

It is not my purpose tonight to detail the misunderstandings which have plagued this relationship. Let me only submit that educational systems on both sides have failed mightily in this regard – and so have some religious institutions. That – at this time in human history – the Judeo Christian and Muslim societies should know so little about one another never ceases to astonish – to stun – and to pain me.

As a Muslim leader speaking in Washington this evening, it seems appropriate that I cite the words of President Obama, in his recent speech in Ankara. As he put it, pledging a “broader engagement with the Muslim world, we will listen carefully, we will bridge misunderstandings, and we will seek common ground.” I know that the vast majority of the Islamic world shares these objectives.

Among the areas where we *can* find common ground is our mutual effort to address the problem of persistent global poverty, especially the endemic poverty of the developing world. Surely this is an area where we can listen and learn and grow together – establishing ever-stronger bonds of understanding. One of the great principles of Islam, in all its interpretations, is the elimination of poverty in society, and philanthropy's centrality in this duty.

When I succeeded my grandfather as Aga Khan in 1957, I was a student at Harvard – but speaking mostly French. I got extra English practice, however, from my new official routine of regular communication with Africa and Asia – and, in the bargain, was kept in great good humour by the amazing typographic errors which inevitably arose. But then computerized spell check programs came along - and all those charming idiosyncrasies disappeared!

I recently noticed, to my joy, however, that this new invention is not a fail safe protection. Consider this recent item in the publication “The Week: “Bad week for spell-check: Several Pennsylvania high school students had their last names changed in their yearbook by an automatic computer program, Alessandra Ippolito was listed as Alexandria Impolite, while Max Zupanovic was rechristened Max Supernova. And Kathy Carbaugh's photo appeared next to the name Kathy Airbag.”

After reading this, I decided that maybe I should act prudently and spell check my own name. And I found that, while there was no “Aga Khan”, there was an “Aga” Cooker. It was defined as one of England's oldest stoves and ovens – now somewhat outdated – but with a distinctive whistle every time it frizzled the food within!

But returning to a more serious topic let me submit this evening a few of my own reflections on the developing world that I know a central focus of my interests over fifty years. For, in coming to understand the life of widely dispersed Ismaili communities across the globe, I have also become immersed in their host societies.

The essential goal of global development has been to create and sustain effective nation states – coherent societies that are well governed, economically self-sustaining, equitable in treating their peoples, peaceful amongst themselves, and sensitive to their impact on planetary sustainability.

This is a complex objective, a moving target, and a humbling challenge. Sadly, the response in the places I know best has often been “one step forward and two steps back.” Today, some forty percent of UN member nations are categorized as “failed democracies” – unable to meet popular aspirations for a better quality of life. The recent global economic crisis – along with the world food crisis – has sharply accentuated these problems.

But why have our efforts to change that picture over five decades not borne greater fruit? Measured against history, where have things gone wrong? Given the progress we have made in so many fields, why have we been so relatively ineffective in sharing that progress more equitably, and in making it more permanent?

My response centers on one principal observation: I believe the industrialized world has often expected developing societies to behave as if they were similar to the established nation states of the West, forgetting the centuries, and the processes which molded the Western democracies. Forgotten, for one thing, is the fact that economic development in Western nations was accompanied by massive urbanization. Yet today, in the countries of Asia and Africa where we work, over 70 percent of the population is rural. If you compare the two situations, they are one and a half to two and half centuries apart. Similarly, the profound diversity of these impoverished societies, infinitely greater than that among nascent European nation states, is too often unrecognized, or under-estimated, or misunderstood. Ethnic, religious, social, regional, economic, linguistic and political diversities are like a kaleidoscope that history shakes every day.

One symptom of this problem has been the high failure rate of constitutional structures in many developing countries, often because minority groups – who often make up the bulk of the population – fear they will be marginalized by any centralized authority. But did today’s developed countries not face similar challenges as they progressed toward nationhood?

If there is an historic misperception here, it has had several consequences for development activities.

The first concerns what I would call the dominant player fallacy – a tendency to place too much reliance in national governments and other institutions which may have relatively superficial connections to life at the grass-roots level.

Urban-based outsiders often look at these situations from the perspective of the city center looking out to a distant countryside, searching for quick and convenient levers of influence. Those who look from the bottom-up, however, see a much much more complex picture. The lines of force in these rural societies are often profoundly centrifugal, reflecting a highly fragmented array of influences. But was this not also true during the building of Western nation states?

Age old systems of religious, tribal or inherited family authority still have enormous influence in these societies. Local identities which often cross the artificial frontiers of the colonial past are more powerful than outsiders may assume. These values and traditions must be understood, embraced, and related to modern life, so that development can build on them. We have found that these age-old forces are among the best levers we have for improving the quality of life of rural peoples, even in cross frontier situations.

Nation building may require centralized authority, but if that authority is not trusted by rural communities, then instability is inevitable. The building of successful nation states in many of the countries in which I work will depend – as it did in the West – on providing significantly greater access for rural populations, who are generally in the majority.

If these reflections are well founded, then what is urgently needed is a massive, creative new development effort towards rural populations. Informed strategic thinking at the national level must be matched by a profound, engagement at the local level. Global philanthropy, public private partnerships and the best of human knowledge must be harnessed. As the World Bank recognized in its recent Poverty Study, local concerns must be targeted, providing roads and markets, sharpening the capacities of village governments, working to smooth social inequalities, and improving access to health and education services. The very definition of poverty is the absence of such quality of life indicators in civil society among rural populations.

It is in this context that I must share with you tonight my concern that too much of the developmental effort – especially in the fields of health and education - have been focused on urban environments.

I whole-heartedly support, for example, the goal of free and universal access to primary education. But I would just as whole-heartedly challenge this objective if it comes at the expense of secondary and higher education. How can credible leadership be nurtured in rural environments when rural children have nowhere to go after primary school? The experience of the Aga Khan Development Network is that secondary education for rural youth is a condition sine qua non for sustainable progress.

Similarly despite various advances in preventive medicine, rural peoples – often 70% of the population – are badly served in the area of curative care. Comparisons show sharp rural disadvantages in fields such as trauma care and emergency medicine, curbing infant mortality, or diagnosing correctly the need for tertiary care. Building an effective nation state, today as in earlier centuries, requires that the quality of rural life must be a daily concern of government. Ideally, national progress should be as effective, as equitable, and as visible, over similar time-frames, in rural areas as in urban ones. Amongst other considerations, how else will we be able to slow, if not stop, the increasing trend of major cities of Asia and Africa to become ungovernable human slums?

From this general analysis, let me turn to our own experience. The Aga Khan Development Network, if only as a matter of scale, is incapable of massively redressing the rural-urban imbalances where we work. It is possible, however, to focus on areas of extreme isolation, extreme poverty and extreme potential risk - where human despair feeds the temptation to join criminal gangs or local militia or the drug economy. The World Bank refers to these areas as “lagging regions”. We have focused recently on three prototypical situations.

Badakhshan is a sensitive region of eastern Tajikistan and eastern Afghanistan where the same ethnic community is divided by a river which has now become a national border, and where both communities live in extreme poverty and are highly isolated from their respective capitals of Dushanbe and Kabul. There is a significant Shia Ismaili Muslim presence in both areas.

Southern Tanzania and Northern Mozambique is a region of eastern Africa where large numbers of rural Sunni Muslims live in extreme poverty. A third case, Rural Bihar, in India, involves six states where the Sachar Committee Report, commissioned by the Indian government, has courageously described how Muslim peoples have been distanced from the development story since 1947.

All three of these regions are works in progress. The first two are post conflict situations, relatively homogeneous, and sparsely populated, while the third is densely populated, and culturally diverse. All three have acute potential to become explosive, and our AKDN goal is to identify such areas as primary targets for philanthropy.

We have also developed a guiding concept in approaching these situations. We call it Multi-Input Area Development – or MIAD. An emphasis on multiple inputs is a crucial consequence of looking at the development arena from the bottom up. Singular inputs alone cannot generate, in the time available, and across the spectrum of needs, sufficient effective change to reverse trends towards famine or towards conflict.

Similarly, we want to measure outcomes in such cases by a more complex array of criteria. What we call our Quality of Life Assessments go beyond simple economic measurements – considering the broad array of conditions – quantitative and qualitative – which the poor themselves take into account when they assess their own well-being.

Secretary Clinton echoed the concern for multiple inputs and multiple assessments when she mentioned to you yesterday the need for diversified partnerships among governments, philanthropies, businesses, NGO's, universities, unions, faith communities and individuals. The Aga Khan network includes partners from most of these categories – sustaining our Multi-Input strategy. I applaud her concern – and yours – for the importance of such alliances.

Northern Pakistan provides another example, in a challenging high mountain environment, of a complex approach to rural stabilization. Innovations in water and land management have been accompanied by a new focus on local choice through village organizations. A "productive public infrastructure" has emerged, including roads, irrigation channels, and small bridges, as well as improved health and education services. Historic palaces and forts along the old Silk Route have been restored and reused as tourism sites, reviving cultural pluralism and pride, diversifying the economy and enlarging the labor market. The provision of micro credit and the development of village savings funds have also played a key role.

For nearly 25 years, we have also worked in a large, once-degraded neighborhood, sprawling among and atop the ruins of old Islamic Cairo – built 1000 years ago by my ancestors, the Fatimid Caliphs. This is an urban location – but occupied by an

essentially rural population, striving to become urbanized. The project was environmental and archaeological at the start – but it grew into a residential, recreational and cultural citiscape – which last year attracted 1.8 million visitors. The local population has new access to microcredit and has been trained and employed not only for restoring the complex, but also for maintaining it – as a new expression of civil society.

Because historic sites are often located among concentrations of destitute peoples, they can become a linchpin for development. We work now with such sites as Bagh-e-Babur in Kabul, the old Stone Town in Zanzibar, the Aleppo Citadel in Syria, the historic Moghal sites at New Delhi and Lahore, and the old mud mosques of Mopti and Djenne and Timbuktu, in northern Mali. Altogether, more than one million impoverished people will be touched by these projects. Such investments in restoring the world's cultural patrimony do not compete with investing in its social and economic development. Indeed, they go hand in hand.

In all these cases, it is the interaction of many elements that creates a dynamic momentum, bringing together people from different classes, cultures, and disciplines, and welcoming partners who live across the street – and partners who live across the planet. Each case is singular, and each requires multiple inputs. And it is here that those present tonight can have such an important impact. Working together on programme development, on sharing specialized knowledge, and on competent implementation, we can all contribute more effectively to the reduction of global poverty.

Let me say in closing, how much I admire the work you are doing, the commitment you feel, and the dreams you have embraced. I hope and trust that we will have many opportunities to renew and extend our sense of partnership as we work toward building strong and healthy nation states around our globe.

If we are to succeed we will need, first, to readjust our orientation by focusing on the immense size and diversity of rural populations whether they are in peri-urban or rural environments. For no-one can dispute, I think, that a large number of the world's recent problems have been born in the countrysides of the poorest continents.

Finally, we will need to address these problems with a much stronger sense of urgency. What we may have been content to achieve in 25 years, we must now aim to do in 10 years.

A mighty challenge, no doubt.

Thank you.