

AGA KHAN DEVELOPMENT NETWORK

Press Release

For Immediate Release

Aga Khan says: Africa's moment has come



Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, 21 February 2016 - His Highness the Aga Khan today extolled Africa's resilience, economic progress and new willingness to accept diversity.

“What I see emerging today is a refreshingly balanced confidence in Africa - a spirit that takes encouragement from past progress, while also seeking new answers to new challenges,” he said.

The Imam (Spiritual Leader) of the Shia Ismaili Muslims made the remarks in a keynote address to the “Africa 2016: Business for Africa, Egypt and the World” conference in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, hosted by Egypt’s president, His Excellency Abdel Fattah el Sisi.

The Aga Khan noted the decidedly upbeat spirit about Africa's economic future that emanated from the speeches of African leaders taking part in the conference. “My enthusiasm today is especially strong because of the message which is at the heart of this Forum. And that message is, quite simply, that Africa’s Moment has come,” he declared.

While cautioning that Africa still faced formidable challenges, including high unemployment levels among the continent's young people, he said that the continent had made significant progress in a number of key areas.

“The story of Africa's progress and potential is also impressive - whether we talk about growing GDP and foreign direct investment, whether we look at economic diversification and national resiliency, whether we chart the rise of a vital middle class - and the expansion of consumer spending - now breaking through the one trillion dollar mark,” he said.

He noted that the experience of the Aga Khan Development Network, which is active in 13 African countries and works in an array of sectors ranging from health to education to culture to economic development, supports the positive picture.

He observed that fragmentation has long been one of the continent's main weaknesses. “The problem of fragmentation has often afflicted Africa, separating tribe from tribe, country from country, the private sector from the public sector - those who hold political power from those who are in the opposition,” he explained.

And yet the Aga Khan noted that Africa has shown new willingness to embrace diversity and emphasised the importance of civil society in creating an enabling environment for progress.

“In sum I believe that social progress will require quality inputs from all three sectors - public, private and Civil Society. Sustainable progress will build on a three-legged stool,” he said, arguing that “cooperating across traditional lines of division does not mean erasing

our proud, independent identities. But it does mean finding additional, enriching identities as members of larger communities - and ultimately, as people who share a common humanity. It means committing ourselves to an Ethic of Pluralism.”

Building on this idea, the Aga Khan emphasised the need for strong Civil Society institutions in Africa’s quest for development, noting that Civil Society has often been underappreciated, marginalised or even dismissed.

“I focus on Civil Society because I think its potential is often under-appreciated as we become absorbed in debates about the most effective programmes of governments and others, or the most successful business strategies. But, in fact, it is often the quality of the third sector, Civil Society, that is the “difference-maker”. It not only complements the work of the private and public sectors, it can often help complete that work,” he said.

He lauded the positive role Civil Society played at key junctions in Africa’s recent history. “The influence of Civil Society has also been felt at seminal moments in the continent’s recent history, for example: in shaping the Arusha Accords which recently ended 12 years of civil war in Burundi, in the peaceful resolution of the violent clashes in Kenya following the 2007 elections, in the drafting of a new promising Tunisian Constitution, and in the courageous response to the Ebola crisis” he said.

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NOTES

His Highness the Aga Khan, the founder and chairman of the AKDN, is the 49th hereditary Imam (Spiritual Leader) of the Shia Ismaili Muslims. In Islam’s ethical tradition, religious leaders not only interpret the faith but also have a responsibility to help improve the quality of life in their community and in the societies amongst which they live. For His Highness the Aga Khan, this has meant a deep engagement with development for almost 60 years through the agencies of the Aga Khan Development Network.

Founded by His Highness the Aga Khan, the *Aga Khan Development Network* (AKDN) is a group of private, international, non-denominational agencies working to improve living conditions and opportunities for people in specific regions of the developing world. The Network’s organisations have individual mandates that range from healthcare (through over 200 health facilities including 13 hospitals) and education (with over 200 schools) to architecture, rural development, the built environment and the promotion of private-sector enterprise. Together, they work towards a common goal – to build institutions and programmes that can respond to the challenges of social, economic and cultural change on an on-going basis. AKDN works in 30 countries around the world, employing approximately 80,000 people, the majority of whom are based in developing countries. The AKDN’s annual budget for non-profit development is approximately US\$ 625 million. AKDN agencies conduct their programmes without regard to faith, origin or gender.

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