

REMARKS BY HIS HIGHNESS THE AGA KHAN
AT THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
AFGHANISTAN
BONN, 5 DECEMBER 2011

Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim

Your Excellency President Hamid Karzai,
Madame Chancellor Merkel,
Secretary General Ban-Ki-Moon,
Foreign Minister Rassoul,
Foreign Minister Westerwelle,

Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am pleased and honoured to be a part of this important event. I know that all of you share a sense of gratitude to the Governments of Afghanistan and the Federal Republic of Germany for bringing us together at such a critical moment in history. We are all here to stand by Afghanistan during and after the military transition. This long-term commitment illustrates our shared goal to ensure a peaceful, stable, pluralistic country that is able to harness its immense diversity as a source of opportunity and strength.

The Aga Khan Development Network, or AKDN, has been deeply committed to the development of Afghanistan and the region for more than 25 years. The AKDN has channelled over 800 million dollars into the social, economic and cultural sectors in line with Government priorities. Many of you, not least the Government of Afghanistan, have been our partners in these activities – for which we thank you.

The challenges of moving through the transition to a post-2014 environment are many, including security, local participation and regional cooperation, the stabilisation of frontier and cross-border populations, political credibility and infrastructure reliability, private sector development and fiscal transition. Of all of these challenges, AKDN's priority is to improve the quality of life of all Afghans, especially of the most vulnerable in society.

Afghanistan's stability can only be underwritten by a population that perceives a process of positive change in the quality of their lives: a process which they should lead, and which is supported by a reliable government framework, national and local, that they can count on.

This governing framework will be most effective where it engages with and draws upon the strengths of a vibrant civil society.

Civil society has proven to be a dependable driver for positive change in Afghanistan as it has been in many other parts of the developing world. Professional associations, media, Community Service Organizations, women's organisations, and informal voluntary groups in education, healthcare, habitat improvement and micro-credit, are reflecting the needs of the people and responding by delivering critical services. These efforts unite the many communities of Afghanistan behind a common pursuit of improved well-being – a pursuit that is dependent upon the continued support of civil society institutions at all levels.

AKDN's experience has demonstrated that a combined multi-sector approach to socio-economic development is at the heart of achieving progress in improving people's quality of life. Therefore, the important National Priority Programmes that have been developed by the Government of Afghanistan will find success if they are implemented within the context of province-specific plans that take into account local conditions. We are still witnessing an uneven development process between the country's rural and urban areas.

The Government of Afghanistan's vision, outlined in the paper "Towards a self-sustaining Afghanistan," calls for broader economic investments to harness the benefits of regional cooperation, including new opportunities for investment in the extraction industry. Such opportunities must be harnessed to give rise to investments that both demonstrate economic best practice and yield significant and early social dividends to the population. AKDN, together with Germany and other partners, has already begun this process through a regional initiative that could be enlarged.

Transition demands an acceleration of socio-economic development. This will require an invigorated enabling environment to provide the conditions for civil society to expand, as well as the development of an effective police force that can underwrite the rule of law. Our experience suggests a strong civil society, is often the best guarantor for the success of government initiatives.

Islam is the predominant faith in Afghanistan and it requires of its leaders that they should ensure security and the best quality of life to all those, Muslim and non-Muslim who live within them. Building strong civil society is a goal that everyone can share.

We believe that real progress has been achieved in the quality of life of Afghans – as seen by themselves as well as others – in recent years. It is essential that this progress be consolidated and accelerated further in the next two years. Reduction in military presence should be accompanied by a stronger government and civil society, both of which are powerful enough to carry the country further ahead with the continued support of the international community. The AKDN agencies and programmes commit themselves to this goal.

Thank you.