

**Remarks by Michael Kocher, General Manager of the Aga Khan Foundation,
at the 2020 Geneva Ministerial Conference on Afghanistan
Geneva, Switzerland, 23 November 2020
(online)**

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

As the General Manager of the Aga Khan Foundation, it is an honour to speak today on behalf of the Aga Khan Development Network, or AKDN, as we have invested in Afghanistan's people and prospects for 25 years. We are committed to continued partnership with Afghanistan's Government and the priorities it leads with great thought and resilience.

We are one of the country's earliest investors, operating both not-for-profit and for-profit institutions, engaging a broad range of partners in the process, but always with a singular goal: Afghanistan's development. We see great added value in unifying regional partnerships with Afghanistan's neighbours, not only for better physical connectivity but also for strong social bonds that underpin not only economic progress but peace and stability.

That is why we established Roshan Telecommunications, restored and run the Serena Hotel, founded the First Microfinance Bank of Afghanistan, and also the new public-private partnership – Badakhshon Energy (like Pamir Energy in Tajikistan) – all examples of flagship economic projects that feature innovative partnerships – in addition to AKDN's numerous education, healthcare, livelihoods, civil society and cultural programmes and institutions.

I make today four points concerning partnership, economic development and aid effectiveness:

First, experience shows aid can and must address physical constraints – roads and bridges, telecommunications, energy and other infrastructure assets – for cities but also for remote and under-served areas. This comprehensive internal connectivity is as necessary as better links to external markets. Here we must not neglect rural Afghanistan, so critical to stability and growth. The partnership approach here is simple yet at times done too rarely – meaningful engagement with communities on what they need – be it a bridge, micro-hydel, access road or irrigation channel – at the village, district, provincial and even the cross-border level.

Second, progress demands broader multi-sector programmes. Partnering often with smallholder farmers, for example, AKDN's agribusiness investments are further catalysts for economic objectives – so too the planned extension to Afghanistan of AKDN's regional enterprise initiative, Accelerate Prosperity, supporting micro, small and medium enterprise.

Further, there are projects that might be defined as “social” or “cultural”, but central to economic progress. Examples include: the French Medical Institute for Mothers and Children, where we engage the Ministry of Health and the French Government; our work with a broad range of community groups and local government bodies through the Afghan Citizen's Charter to underpin civil society; the development of the Bagh-e-Babur and Chihilstoon gardens, and the Riverfront project in Kabul, where we partner with local artisans, urban planners and businesses toward enhancing quality of life and the local economy.

The third key ingredient is consistency. Investors make decisions based upon predictability, the reliability of rules and regulations. Afghanistan and its international partners should continue creating clearer, consistent regulatory frameworks, guided by the rule of law and transparency. This applies as well to the governance and management of Afghanistan's many natural

resources. Protecting its extraordinary natural environment – and combating climate change – are without question of utmost importance for sustainable, inclusive economic development. Community groups – civil society - must be at the table throughout.

The fourth and final key dimension is of course people, the country's greatest resource. Major strides have been made in education across the past two decades, especially for women and girls, and this must continue. But the country needs more qualified professionals – teachers and administrators, engineers and accountants, nurses and doctors, entrepreneurs and managers.

This is why we invest in skills development, executive and vocational training, and education. Greater investment in education – including education technology – at all levels is critical, from early childhood development to university post-graduate. As but one example during the pandemic, the Aga Khan Foundation has partnered with the Afghanistan Ministry of Education and Afghan radio and television stations to support public education in remote areas. We also partner with a range of private foundations in support of education in Afghanistan.

Across these points, smart community-driven aid, linked to local needs, enables the private sector. Given the importance of public-private partnerships, bilateral and multilateral partners must also remember that grants and blended financing encourage investments.

In conclusion, these four building blocks – investments in connectivity and infrastructure, multi-sector development, regulatory consistency and human capital – will spur growth and help the country look forward with confidence, and all the more so when a full range of viable partnerships is viewed strategically and expansively, in-country and regionally.

Linked to all these themes, fully including women – individually and through private associations, cooperatives and collectives – is essential.

Similarly, enabling a vibrant civil society – alongside embracing purposefully the country's remarkable pluralism – is key for economic development, aid effectiveness and self-reliance. Afghanistan requires an inclusive approach to civil society to reach its extraordinary potential.

Again, AKDN expresses its sincere thanks and appreciation for the Government of Afghanistan's clear vision, rightfully bold ambitions, determined leadership and continued partnership.

Thank you.

Read online: <https://www.akdn.org/speech/michael-kocher/2020-afghanistan-conference>