His Highness the Aga Khan on the essential goal of global development and why progress has been difficult

by NANOWISDOMS ARCHIVE

"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 categorised 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 centres on one principal observation: I believe the industrialised 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 moulded the Western democracies. Forgotten, for one thing, is the fact that economic development in Western nations was accompanied by massive urbanisation. 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 unrecognised, 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 marginalised by any centralised authority. But did today's developed countries not face similar challenges as they progressed toward nationhood?"

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2009 address to the Global Philanthropy Forum (Washington D.C., USA)

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