Excerpts: His Highness the Aga Khan on the role of culture in development

"With so many social and economic needs still unmet around the world, why is culture so important? Conventional thinking suggests that there is a sequence that must be followed in every instance -- first addressing humanitarian and social needs, then economic challenges and finally, perhaps, culture. We have found, however, that the equation is not so simple. Culture itself can be the catalyst for social and economic development....

"When I created the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, I discovered that the cultural dimension of the Islamic world was an extraordinarily powerful trampoline for development. It became apparent that by developing patrimonial sites one could improve the quality of life of the people who live in and near them. The populations of these historic areas are often the poorest in the countries concerned. Here, by acting in the realm of culture, it was actually possible to improve the quality of life for the poorest of the poor. By giving its true value back to culture, new forms of productivity, a new form of socio-economic development, come into being.

"My effort to defend the value of culture, through the Aga Khan Development Network, and specifically through its dedicated agency, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, focuses its activities in four main areas: the Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme; the Aga Khan Award for Architecture; the Aga Khan Music Initiative; and Museum Projects. These activities, which are themselves subdivided into a number of subsidiary programmes in many countries, obey four key principles. Firstly, they seek to increase the beneficiaries'
independence, to involve local communities, and to secure the support of public and private partners. Second, they are carried out in poor environments where there are considerable centrifugal, sometimes even conflicting, forces at play. Third, they are designed to have maximum beneficial impact on the economies of the populations involved and their quality of life in the broadest sense of the term. Finally, they are planned in the long term, over a period of up to twenty-five years, enabling them to become self-sufficient both financially as well as in terms of human resources.


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"By rehabilitating these environments you create an indigenous economic process. It’s not driven by tourism. It’s simply driven by improvements in quality of life. People actually trade -- they do their own thing in a sense. You find new enterprises coming up. If you can add in micro-credit, then you add in economic support to that process. It’s true that tourism was one of the factors, but I think our experience up to now is that it’s more important to create that economic dynamic of that community....

"We’re looking at how to develop economic results in restoration of historic buildings. So what we’re doing is trying to bring out new knowledge, or create new knowledge, which then can be used by communities to change and to change positively....

"What I’m hoping to achieve is the notion that these historic sites are potential economic and social dynamos. They are not frozen, paralysed, historic assets. They are assets that can actually contribute to the quality of life of people who live in those contexts.”

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2007 remarks in the documentary: Let the Beauty we Love Be What We Do: A Profile of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture

http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9734/
"Finally, I should like to put into different words something I have already said indirectly: I am very concerned about the gulf between cultures. However, this gulf is not what has mistakenly been called the clash of civilisations. This gulf is potentially just as dangerous as a clash, because ignorance about other people and a lack of understanding of the valuable benefits of plurality can lead to contempt, hatred and war. A gulf however can be filled in, whereas a clash is irreparable.

"We are all profoundly aware of this gulf and this is fundamentally why we take action. I have given you several examples, but there are many others, like the Aga Khan Museum which is to be built in Toronto to become the specialist centre for Islamic art in North America and initiate exchanges with all the leading museums in the West....

"I hope I have demonstrated the hugely beneficial effects of serious initiatives in the field of culture, whether they can be measured in economic terms or can be perceived in terms of the progress made by pluralism and, as a result, the improvement in quality of life. Culture is not just an added extra or a luxury. QED."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2008 Address to the Avignon Forum ‘The value and importance of cultural diversity and its role in promoting peace and development’ (Avignon, France)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9065/

"[The Aga Khan Trust for Culture] has shown how culture can be a catalyst for development even in the poorest and most remote areas of the globe. From Afghanistan to Zanzibar, from India to Mali, the Trust’s support to historic communities demonstrates how conservation and revitalisation of the cultural heritage -- in many cases the only asset at the disposal of the community -- can provide a springboard for social development. We have also seen how such projects can have a positive impact well beyond conservation,
promoting good governance, the growth of civil society, a rise in incomes and economic opportunities, greater respect for human rights and better stewardship of the environment. Indeed, we have seen architectural models recognised by the Aga Khan Award for Architecture have a profound impact when they are replicated.

"For all these reasons, the Trust works to preserve the cultural heritage of the Muslim world -- not as a bulwark against the contemporary world, but rather to ensure that the rich heritage of these cultures endures. At the same time, the Trust’s education programmes promote pluralism and tolerance as an antidote to what I call the 'clash of ignorance.' It is my hope that one day pluralism will become accepted as the norm within communities and among the nations of the earth. I know of no better road to lasting peace than tolerance for the differences of faith, culture and origin."

Aga Khan Trust for Culture Brochure (Aiglemont), 2007
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9411/

"For all of these journeys [of cultural projects], the development process has been long and complex, but filled with stimulating lessons. Let me briefly summarise five of them.

"First, these cultural projects depend upon an ethic of partnership. This means that traditional separations between public and private domains must be set aside. The concept of public-private partnership is an essential keystone for effective cultural development. The role of governments, including municipalities, is fundamental in providing what we often term 'an enabling environment' for development. But the public sector cannot do this work alone.... I have one more comment to make about partnerships. It is absolutely essential that effective partnerships are maintained throughout the life of a project, including the post-completion period....

"This discussion leads me to a second conclusion: while cultural development often begins with physical legacies, planning must focus well beyond the cultural goals. We cannot somehow assume that a
favourable social and economic impact will flow naturally as a by-
product of cultural commitments. Issues relating to the quality of life
must be considered from the beginning and monitored throughout
the project’s life.

"A third point in this list of lessons learned is that the engagement of
the local community from the earliest stages is imperative for
success. Cultural endeavours, in particular, involve risks that go
beyond external, economic factors. Their progress can depend
heavily on variable qualities of human nature, including the pride
and confidence of the peoples involved....

"There is a fourth point that is also special to historic restoration
projects. That is the fact that we can never be sure just what we will
encounter as the work of rediscovery moves along. There are many
unknowns going in, and we must be ready for surprises....

"Let me finally highlight a fifth lesson. Planning for such projects
must anticipate how they will operate on a continuing basis after
they are completed.... Up-front investment will be on everyone’s
mind at the start. But our financial strategies should include
eventual income streams that will sustain the project over the long
run. One of the least happy outcomes for any cultural initiative is
that it becomes a net drain on the local population.”

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2013 UNESCO Conference on Culture and
Development Keynote Address (Hangzhou, China)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10503/

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