Having fifty years of first hand and successful experience in development of the poorest peoples, and as founder of one of the world's largest private development institutions, the Aga Khan Development Network, the Aga Khan is in a unique position to reflect not only upon the notion of Civil Society institutions but also their role and impact in world progress:

"By civil society, I mean a realm of activity which is neither governmental nor commercial institutions designed to advance the public good, but powered by private energies. They include institutions dedicated to education, to culture, to science and research. They include commercial, labour, professional and ethnic associations, as well as entities devoted to maintaining health, protecting the environment, and curing disease. Religious institutions are central to civil society — and so are institutions of the media."

"Of course, the civil sector includes international non-governmental organizations.... But they also grow, increasingly, out of local communities and indigenous populations. This is particularly true for Afghanistan, where a broad sense of local commitment, tied to rural villages and urban neighbourhoods, will be an indispensable development force.

"Long active in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, South and Central Asia, the AKDN agencies and programmes help advance human development — cultural, economic and social. Experience convinces us that human progress can only be achieved and sustained when it is anchored in grassroots institutions of civil society, able to harness merit and build on pluralism, as bedrocks of democracy."

"[However], because most civil society institutions are non-commercial, these institutions are faced with the fundamental problem of identifying financial resources that will keep them alive and enable them to grow. At the heart of the issue is the question: 'Is civil society bankable?' If so, what criteria should apply? The long history of the AKDN agencies has shown that non-commercial civil society institutions face the permanent threat of being systematically under-funded."
"Sometimes, in our preoccupation with government, we discount the impact of civil society, including the potential of constructive NGO’s. ... Meeting the realities of a complex world will require a strengthened array of civic institutions. They spur social progress — even when governments falter. (17) One of the reasons that governments often fail is that we depend too much on them. We invest too many hopes in political promises and we entrust too many tasks to political regimes. (17)

"Throughout the developing world, we see a new emphasis on the capacities of indigenous organizations to meet development challenges — on a bottom up rather than a top down approach. Voluntary village associations, for example, are undertaking projects which once lay in the political domain — ranging from the installation of water and sanitation systems and the building of irrigation canals, to the provision of educational services and the support of health and safety standards. (14)

"A vast decentralization of decision-making is already occurring in many countries; it has the advantage of placing new responsibilities in the hands of local communities. (18)

"We believe that the principal issue is the need to build a vibrant civil society to help develop economic, social and cultural institutions to serve people in rural and urban settings. We have thus been co-operating with the Government in expanding a community development programme through the creation of village-based Community Development Councils, enabling us to direct attention to priorities that people themselves identify. A thousand of these institutions are expected to be functioning by next year. (19)

"It is heartening that a recent external evaluation, commissioned by the World Bank, found this AKDN approach innovative and effective in forming credible, legitimate and self-reliant institutions. The report commended the outcome as a significant contribution to democratic governance and civil society development in the country. This observation corresponds to our experience in many countries, similar to that of the United Nations, that a healthy civil society is indispensable to fostering and legitimizing pluralism which itself is the foundation of democratic government. This remains a paramount challenge. (19)

"The key to future progress will lie less in traditional top-down systems of command and control — and more in a broad, bottom-up spirit of co-ordination and co-operation. (18) But such developments cannot be coerced. They require an encouraging, enabling environment, supported by a broad public enthusiasm for social goals. (17)
"In saying all of this, I do not mean to ignore the importance of government. The role of civil society is to complement government efforts, not compete with them. And the same thing is true of a third important partner in a great alliance for development — the private, business sector. (14)"

-- His Highness the Aga Khan

Extracted from NanoWisdoms' summary document, *Key themes of His Highness the Aga Khan's speeches between 2000 and July 2007*. Click here to read the full summary ...¹

Click here to view the Aga Khan Foundation's civil society video, *The Spirit of Humanity* ...²

**Speeches referenced:**

5) The Enabling Environment Conference (Kabul, Afghanistan), 4 June 2007³

9) Gulf News Interview (Dubai), 18 April 2008⁴

11) Foundation Stone Laying Ceremony of the Bujagali Hydropower Project (Kampala, Uganda), 21 August 2007⁵

14) Evora University Symposium: “Cosmopolitan Society, Human Safety and Rights in Plural and Peaceful Societies” (Evora, Spain), 12 February 2006⁶

17) “The Peterson Lecture” to the Annual Meeting of the International Baccalaureate, marking its 40th Anniversary (Atlanta, Georgia, USA), 18 April 2008⁷

18) An Address to Aga Khan University 2006 Convocation (Karachi, Pakistan), 2 December 2006⁸

19) Foundation Stone-Laying Ceremony of The Aga Khan Academy (Hyderabad, India), 22 September 2006⁹

[NOTE: For some reason NanoWisdoms' Facebook posts do not always appear in many Facebook newsfeeds due to a problem in Facebook and/or individual newsfeed settings. Please visit our wall¹⁰ to review all our posts if you do not always see our daily post. Click here¹¹ to subscribe and receive our Facebook posts by e-mail. Click here¹² for NanoWisdom's Facebook posts in PDF format. Thank you.]
References


^ 5) The Enabling Environment Conference (Kabul, Afghanistan), 4 June 2007 (http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/8072/)

^ 9) Gulf News Interview (Dubai), 18 April 2008 (http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/8454/)

^ 11) Foundation Stone Laying Ceremony of the Bujagali Hydropower Project (Kampala, Uganda), 21 August 2007 (http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/8257/)


^ 17) “The Peterson Lecture” to the Annual Meeting of the International Baccalaureate, marking its 40th Anniversary (Atlanta, Georgia, USA), 18 April 2008 (http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/8435/)

^ 18) An Address to Aga Khan University 2006 Convocation (Karachi, Pakistan), 2 December 2006 (http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7997/)


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