Excerpt: His Highness the Aga Khan on the difference between the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) and traditional NGOs

by NANOWISDOMS ARCHIVE OF IMAMAT SPEECHES, INTERVIEWS AND WRITINGS,

Eric Chol / Christian Makarian: As the leader of the Ismaili community, you have always emphasised the development of social, economic and cultural activities not only for your followers, but for the benefit of all. What do you make of your development organisation?

Aga Khan: It needs to permanently adapt! The idea of development is comparable to a kaleidoscope: you twist it and see a new vision of the problems. It is up to you to draw conclusions for the short, medium or long term. That is why it is imperative that we adjust our network of agencies. These ones are the result of fifty years of analysis of the material development needs. Far from being the fruits of different development theories, they are rather conceived to be navigated based on lessons learned on the ground. Nobody in the 1950s or 1960s was thinking of micro-credit or culture. These activities are now part of our network, and I have no doubt that my successor will carry out [further] changes.

Eric Chol / Christian Makarian: Would you consider your network to be a non-governmental organisation?

Aga Khan: No, we function very differently! We [are in it for the long run], whereas it is not rare to see an NGO start-up in a country and leave five days later. Second difference, we work in the frame of a complete network, theoretically capable of bringing about appropriate responses in the majority of situations. Finally, we have placed culture at the heart of the development puzzle. Not long ago this idea might have sounded eccentric. In reality, culture is a remarkable engine for development, which we have already experimented with in Kabul, Cairo, Zanzibar and Delhi.
Eric Chol / Christian Makarian: Another difference with the NGOs: you accept the idea of making profits...

Aga Khan: Exactly, with the condition that we distinguish between non-profit projects with an objective of reaching a break-even point to become self-sustaining and therefore independent, and others which must be profitable. As for the dividends, they are systematically reinvested in the Development Network.

Eric Chol / Christian Makarian: This idea of profit-making is not normal in the world of development...

Aga Khan: It's true! Often non-profit activities are considered charity. And this is a word that we do not like. Islam has a very clear message about the different forms of generosity. There is that with regard to the poor, which takes the form of gifts. But the recipient remains poor. There exists a second form of generosity that contributes to growing the independence of the person. This concept, in which the goal is to make the person the master of their destiny, is the most beneficial in the eyes of Allah.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2007 L’Expess Interview with Eric Chol and Christian Makarian, (Paris, France) [Translation]

http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/8106/

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Aga Khan: ... And one other characteristic of the Network is that it's not a banking system in the sense that the Network commits and commits without time limit to the processes of change. Most development agencies have a different way of working -- they lend money and then they...

[Emphasis original]

Reem Haddad: That’s right and for a period of time only.

Aga Khan: Yes, exactly ... whereas we don’t work in a set time-frame. Sometimes the problems or the need to create change will take 15 or 20 years and then you have to create institutions that will do that work.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2008 Syrian TV interview with Reem Haddad (Aleppo, Syria)

http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9004/
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