



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

INTERNATIONAL CHARITY LAW COMPARATIVE SEMINAR

BEIJING, CHINA

OCTOBER 12 - 14, 2004

Address during the Welcome and Conference opening ceremony at

The Great Hall of the People

by

Shams Vellani, Aga Khan Development Network

Bismillahir rahmanir rahim

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

The event being inaugurated now is significant as symbolic of constructive human encounters. For we live at a time of increasing dissension. No continent is free of conflicts which are largely a consequence of the failure of people of different cultures, ethnic origins or religions to find common ground for a productive life together. At the same time, a vast expanse of humanity remains trapped in poverty. The two-fold challenge of our new century, therefore, is the ability and willingness of institutions of civilisation - be they of democratic governance, citizen affairs or faith traditions – to preserve and enhance the world's pluralist heritage and, simultaneously, address the scourge of poverty. Poverty erodes hope, creates despair and makes the afflicted susceptible to the forces of ethnic and religious violence. This two-fold challenge drives the mandate of the Aga Khan Development Network, established by His Highness the Aga Khan, the 49th hereditary spiritual leader – Imam – of the Shia Ismaili Muslims. He has expanded on an institutional structure created by the preceding Imam, his grandfather, extending considerably its geographic and thematic scope, and adapting it to the complexity of modern development processes.

The Aga Khan Development Network – or the AKDN – is the instrumentality through which the Ismaili Imam engages in development, guided by the duty, as defined by the ethics of

The use of materials published on the Institute of Ismaili Studies website indicates an acceptance of the Institute of Ismaili Studies' Conditions of Use. Each copy of the article must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed by each transmission. For all published work, it is best to assume you should ask both the original authors and the publishers for permission to (re)use information and always credit the authors and source of the information.



Islam, to contribute to improving the quality of human life of the weakest in society. The AKDN comprises a group of international, non-denominational philanthropic and development agencies which have been active in many of the poorest areas of Africa and Asia for over one hundred years.

The AKDN philosophy is the empowerment of beneficiaries so that they gradually take charge of the processes of their own development. The emphasis from the outset is local capacity building and to encourage the needy that not only can they help themselves, they can also help others. This requires a long-term, multi-dimensional strategy of health and education support, cultural awareness and enhancement, and income generation opportunities, from micro finance for rural enterprises, tourism, revitalisation of cultural assets and related artisan skills, to modern banking, insurance, communications and power generation.

At the heart of capacity building is the moral imperative of respect for human dignity and, hence, for the values of pluralism. A part of the AKDN mandate is, thus, building and enhancing the social institutions of civil society, among rural as well as urban populations.

Through village organisations, for example, which bring beneficiaries together for the self-management of their development activities, the AKDN actively seeks to inculcate the message of the benefits of mutual respect for each other's heritage, and the dire consequences of undermining it. A central aim of the AKDN's extensive, international network of schools and tertiary education programmes and institutions is to make a case for a pluralist worldview – one that builds on differences of culture, ethnicity, religion and outlook, regarding them as a source of strength rather than weakness. The evidence, including World Bank and other evaluations, shows that this patient, participatory philosophy yields fruits whether in the fragile, mountain, desert ecosystem of Northern Pakistan or Tajikistan where efforts continue to rehabilitate and develop the country's economy and its physical and social infrastructure. Lessons learnt are being applied to neighbouring countries, including Afghanistan which illustrates dramatically an extreme case of deprivation aggravated by strong, antagonistic social and religious forces.



The Aga Khan Development Network compliments China Charity Federation for hosting this International Charity Law Comparative Seminar. The conference resonates the current consensus globally on the role that the law and government can play to help unleash and harness the energy and creativity of the citizen sector to the task of nation building. More than two decades ago, His Highness the Aga Khan first coined the term “enabling environment”. It is heartening to witness that development philosophies and strategies are increasingly focusing on the importance of private initiatives complementing the public sector to help build capacity that restores to the vulnerable the dignity of self-reliance, enabling them, in turn, to help others less fortunate than themselves.

Thank you.