

## Princess Zahra Aga Khan Statement

for the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction

5<sup>th</sup> of June 2007-06-04

Excellencies, delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

For several decades now the Aga Khan Development Network has been working to improve the living conditions of populations in disaster-prone regions in South and Central Asian, the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa. The Network currently has activities in seismically-active high-mountain areas, fast-growing cities, fragile coastal ecosystems, and flood- or drought-prone rural environments.

The AKDN's "area development" approach brings together many of the key elements of Disaster Risk Reduction that will be discussed in this forum in the coming days: building viable and disaster-resistant health systems, providing education about and assessment of risk, initiating natural resource management systems and improving planning and building technologies to mitigate these risks, in both urban and rural habitats. Furthermore, the Network has responded, through its subsidiary institutions, to many post-disaster situations, from the collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent food insecurity in the Central Asia to the flooding in Mozambique, and post-earthquake relief and reconstruction in Kashmir.

In these many and varied crises the institutions of the AKDN have faced the recognised barriers to disaster mitigation and crisis response: the absence or low quality of physical and communication infrastructure, the lack of knowledge and training afflicting high-risk populations, the dire lack of "safe havens", stockpiles, and safe water-sources. Long-term disaster situations such as famine and desertification, the erosion of habitats and agricultural subsistence,

prompted by inevitable increasing and rapid urbanisation, the stress caused by growing populations on natural resources, and poor farming techniques.

Disaster risk reduction efforts also face man-made barriers: administrative, political, legal and cultural constraints that hamper evolution and change in the social and structural systems of high-risk communities.

The earthquake in Kashmir in October 2005 was a case in point. It killed 75,000 people and left 3.5 million homeless, damaged or destroyed 66% of the schools, 74% of the health facilities and 84% of the rural houses in the region.

The huge death toll amongst school children, who had just started their classes for the day, illustrates the dire importance of adequate and disaster-resistant public buildings. Not only should these have been constructed with seismic-resistant materials and techniques, but they (like other public buildings) should have been located in those areas least prone to earthquakes, landslides, floods, or other disasters. Public buildings should be safe-havens for the population, harbouring stockpiles of food and water, communications equipment, medical supplies, and disaster-response tools.

Since that terrible earthquake, the AKDN has implemented a multi-input reconstruction programme in the Chakhama Valley, rebuilding homes, water and sanitation systems, health systems, infrastructure, providing micro-credit and micro-enterprise, and training masons, carpenters and the population at large about disaster-risk management and techniques in hazard risk assessment.

It is possibly this last intervention that should be retained in the long run. In areas where title deeds do not exist and subsistence depends on historical, physical possession, it is vital to the future of disaster risk management that communities living in risk be given the tools and technologies to evaluate the safety of their own environment. They must be given the education and training

necessary to alter that environment for the better by improving public and private building standards, infrastructure, and services, by creating civil society institutions and a legal framework for ownership, and by developing local response mechanisms to respond to disasters.

It is now widely recognised that climate change will have a tremendous effect on the environment, agriculture, economies and populations of the developing world, as well as increasing the frequency and severity of the natural disasters that tend to strike those very regions. While development agencies have usually promoted or delivered traditional academic education in developing nations, is it not time to ALSO promote access for these populations to the most robust and appropriate scientific and technological information in those areas that affect their actual survival, such as an meteorology, climatology, seismology and the earth sciences in general, as well as the knowledge necessary to compete and survive in a globalized market.