

Statement to the Canadian Parliamentary Special Committee on Afghanistan on behalf of Aga Khan Foundation Canada

Thank you for inviting me to share some perspectives on the Committee's work based on the Aga Khan Development Network's extensive and longstanding presence in Afghanistan. Our work to improve the quality of life of Afghans stretches back 30 years, and our commitment to and presence in the country today remains firm and permanent.

Let me begin with some brief background. Aga Khan Foundation Canada is a Canadian global development agency that has partnered with the Government of Canada and Canadians to fight poverty and improve the quality of life of communities in Africa and Asia for four decades. The Foundation is part of a global family of agencies known as the Aga Khan Development Network, founded by His Highness the Aga Khan. The Network operates in over 30 countries, and reaches millions of people annually.

Our partnership with Canada in Afghanistan began in 1996, at another urgent time in the country's history. The support of the Government of Canada was critical to our early humanitarian efforts then, and Canada has remained one of our core partners since that time, including through the far-sighted support of Global Affairs Canada, the International Development Research Centre, and notably thousands of individual Canadians who have contributed as donors, fundraisers, and volunteers providing essential support over these years.

During this time, we have reached millions of Afghans by enabling strong local organizations, improving the quality of and access to essential services such as health care and education, advancing the empowerment and equality of women and girls, investing in infrastructure, and increasing economic opportunity. In all these activities, we have built on the principle of pluralism that values Afghanistan's rich diversity and supports the inclusion of all segments of Afghan society. Canada's work to support the equality of women and girls has been a particularly important part of our partnership.

Today, the AKDN's work in Afghanistan ranges from humanitarian response and the provision of essential services to cultural restoration, telecommunications, hospitality, and financial services. The AKDN employs some 10,000 staff, almost all of whom are Afghan, giving it a distinctive reach and scale. In the face of the current humanitarian emergency, our response plan alone aspires to reach some three million Afghans. We operate with a network of international partners and ongoing collaboration with the UN system and its agencies.

This presence and experience has taught us that determined, transparent, and inclusive engagement, led and driven by Afghans in their communities can and does succeed. At this time of change and uncertainty, our approach is to listen to and support people at the community level to help them realise their aspirations for a better life, coming together to find solutions that are sustainable, acceptable, and deliverable.

The priority for us today most certainly must be to meet urgent lifesaving needs, as you have heard from others already. In addition to the distribution of food, cash, and other necessities, we must also urgently invest in agriculture, livelihoods, and small enterprise to stop the downward economic spiral and reduce the need for humanitarian assistance over time. Support to essential

services, such as health care and education, especially for women, girls, and other marginalized groups is likewise critical.

But even as we meet these urgent needs, we must at the same time build for the future and invest in a wide-range of local development efforts, especially by supporting community organizations and the institutions that enable them. By ensuring that the voices of Afghan citizens continue to be heard at the community level, these local organizations can continue to be a positive and constructive force for development, stability, and peace throughout the country.

We are ready to work with Canada, as we are today working with other international and local partners, to advance this work. But we face significant barriers. One is the general banking crisis that is restricting funding flows and economic activity in the country. But another is the barrier that is specifically preventing Canada – both the Government and other Canadian actors – from mounting the kind of response that our values and our track record in Afghanistan demand. Most importantly, Canadian actors need a clear, predictable, and enduring framework to ensure that those activities we all agree are paramount are not inadvertently caught by provisions of the Criminal Code regarding anti-terrorist financing or by applicable sanctions. Therefore, we would encourage the Committee to prioritize swift changes in policy and legislation that would facilitate this critical work, just as the UN Security Council and other like-minded partners have now already done.

Neither the aspirations of ordinary Afghans nor the solidarity of ordinary Canadians have been disrupted by the changes of the last several months. We are certain that with the right focus and will, Canada will continue to be a positive force, a beacon of hope and confidence, and a significant contributor to an improved quality of life for all Afghans at this difficult time.