

Business 360: Get to grips with the issues affecting world business Blog Archive - Healthy Speed of Change «



Spiritual Imam, Aga Khan, whose network encourages investment to foster employment and advance education.

It is rare in the world of BlackBerries, iPads, mobile phones and airport lounges that one can pause long enough to think differently about the shape of the world, in particular the Middle East.

Doha is a city that welcomes a slower pace - despite its breakneck pace of development - and it is where I sat down with the Aga Khan, the Imam of the largest branch of the Ismaili followers, for an exclusive interview. The window of time was limited - 10 minutes to be precise - but precious in its outcome.

The Aga Khan was in Qatar to present a handful of awards for architectural excellence - major projects touching the Islamic world that make a difference to the lives of nearly 1.5 billion people. His Highness is a man who backs his words with action. His network is focussed on what he calls "the construction of civil society" since he believes it is the "greatest guarantor of positive change."

The network facilitates economic, housing and tourism development in more than 30 countries and

encourages investment to foster employment and advance education. But here is the caveat: change must be calibrated.

"I think the issue is not only quality of life. There are many other criteria and one of the ones we are most exposed to as a network of institutions is, 'What is a healthy speed of change?' Because you can move too fast."

According to the International Monetary fund, Qatar will grow 16% this year and as much as 20% in 2011. In a world of 2% growth in Europe and the United States, the tiny Middle Eastern state could see 10 times the pace of expansion next year.

His Highness was cautious not to point fingers at any countries in particular: For example, I asked him if Saudi Arabia and Egypt can play catch up on the education and poverty reduction fronts. He chose two positive stalwarts in Southeast Asia with majority Muslim populations, Malaysia and Indonesia.

"One cannot generalise when it comes to the Islamic world. If you look at countries like Malaysia or Indonesia they have invested heavily on education and they have seen the benefits of that investment."

Malaysia is a good case study. It has methodically worked on moving from a resource based economy up the value chain to add high technology and financial services to the mix. It has aspirations of joining the ranks of industrialised nations by 2020.

But the moves Dr. Mahathir Mohamad and the prime ministers who have followed him in Malaysia have been methodical and required patience to maintain a balance within in society.

**Business 360: Get to grips with the issues affecting world business Blog
Archive - Healthy Speed of Change «**

However, in the Middle East, a lack of patience with the process of playing catch up, says the Aga Khan, could tear at the fabric of society.

“It is not only addressing a form a paralysis of development and extricating yourself from that frozen situation, it is also that societies don’t change that quickly and if you force them to change that quickly you are going to run into another set of problems.”

One of the key problems facing regional leaders is the rapid birth rate and its knock-on effect in the problem of double-digit youth unemployment. Policymakers are in agreement that 100 million jobs need to be created by the end of the decade for the jobless rate to stand still. It is a tall order, but adds the Aga Khan, educating the workforce will, over time, lead to a drop in birth rates, while development will do the same for the unemployment rate.

In the meantime, the Aga Khan wants to keep rural development on the radar of leaders throughout the Islamic world, in part to slow down the massive migration to city centers in search of work.

He said: “It has to be a priority, after all 70% of the Muslim population around the world lives from the land or on the land.”

Posted by: [CNN business anchor, John Defterios](#)

Filed under: [Business Marketplace Middle East](#)

Click here to send your **feedback**



Printed with