

*Conference on Preparing for Afghanistan's Reconstruction  
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*Opening Remarks*

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Imagine Afghanistan in peace, and free of poverty. Afghanistan, where quality of life guarantees human dignity for every citizen. Afghanistan, where every woman, every man, exercises basic human rights. Afghanistan, where all children live to play today and learn tomorrow.

That is a dream we share -- you and I. It is a dream we share with the sovereign people of Afghanistan. And that dream is why we are here today.

Mahatma Gandhi said once, at a gathering of scientists: *"Unless all the discoveries that you make have the welfare of the poor as the end in view, all your workshops will be really no better than Satan's."*

So, Gandhi's like-minded friends, welcome! And a special welcome to all who come and hail from every corner of Afghanistan. Without you, this conference has little meaning.

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I have worked on this part of the world a little over 10 years, on and off since 1987. Every time I travel this way, I ask about the flight plan. Do we fly over Afghanistan tonight? Whenever we did, you would have found me glued to the window -- following the lights of Iran's highways, cities and villages till they disappear abruptly; watching a vast darkness unfold beneath; and straining my eyes for some sign of hamlets or human enterprise...

Inevitably, an old woman's voice would rise out of the darkness: "Beneath my feet is this hard earth. Above my head is the sky." In a harsh place where we met, on Pakistan side of the border, she needed not complete her sentence: "There is no comfort in between." Flying over Afghanistan I could not see, my heart would always sense the presence of her sisters and brothers -- between the hard earth and cold sky -- and ache to *listen* to their voices. The time has come.

And I do mean *listen*. I did not come to this conference to tell you how the World Bank and other donors are going to rebuild Afghanistan. Anyone who thinks this is our purpose will be disappointed. How dare we think about rebuilding Afghanistan without listening to the sovereign people. How dare we continue the very exclusion that has blighted the lives of the Afghan people so long.

Following Gandhi's footsteps with all humility, "*I know no diplomacy save that of the truth.*" The truth, then, is this: If the assistance community were to drive the rebuilding of Afghanistan, we would merely become part of the problem, instead of part of the solution that we could be.

The reconstruction of Afghanistan will be inseparable from her long-term development. And, I think of development as a process of economic, social and political transformation, of a society, by the society, for the society.

- I think of the *development process* as one of learning and change -- a process in which people choose: to gain more control over their destinies; to widen their horizons; to reduce the afflictions of poverty; and to improve the very vitality of life.
- I think of a *development strategy* as a society's own living, dynamic, strategy -- a strategic framework that is driven by a shared vision; identifies structural barriers to its transformation; selects those who can serve as catalysts for change; and is rooted in a participatory process where people create, revise and strive to realise their vision.
- And I think of an *outsiders' role*, be they governments, NGOs or international agencies like the World Bank, as a facilitator for the process, invited by the people to serve as a catalyst for change as "honest brokers."

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As I speak, steps toward a political resolution of Afghanistan are taking place in Germany. The World Bank is, by definition of its charter, not part of that process. We have a deep respect for this process, however, in which Afghanistan finds its leadership to steer the nation's reconstruction and development.

There are many factors we know about -- and many we do not -- that reduce poverty. I view *quality of leadership*, in governments and throughout civil society, as one such factor that is of enormous import.

Reducing poverty is about sharing tangible and intangible fruits of economic growth equitably. Strategy, policies and actions to achieve it are about changes with winners and losers. This fact challenges people with vested interests in the status quo. It also challenges those with radically different political views about the course or process of change.

Visionary leaders inspire and raise the sights of the people above their lowest common denominator. They help their people see beyond the immediate personal losses to greater opportunities for all. Rapid growth can be achieved without such leaders. Economic history of the world is full of such cases. But, quality growth with equity, redistributing income and wealth as nations grow, cannot be achieved without such leaders' good governance.

Sharing the fruits of growth is also about helping poor or socially marginalised people help themselves. Citizens need to feel that they are truly consulted and that they have participated actively in the process of change. They need to feel convinced that they can honour a consensus, and share deeply in a common vision, strategy and actions. Such a participatory process of change is the only way to secure a sustainable development path.

And so I return to my message of *listening*. In consulting deeply -- especially with those women, as well as men, who are marginalised from the mainstream of their society -- it is important to listen to their silence. As Rumi, the 13th century poet-saint known to his people of Afghanistan as Jelaluddin Balkhi, reminds us:

*There is a way between voice and presence  
where information flows.*

*In disciplined silence it opens.  
With wandering talk it closes.*

It means knowing their fears, and making a secure space for their empowerment and voice. It means valuing differences as society's wealth, and finding unity in diversity whatever the roots - be they culture, language, race, religion, gender, or simply age. It means listening to and learning from the wisdom of these people, with genuine respect.

Such listening demands ***humility and tolerance*** in every citizen of the land. It is especially so, in leaders and the elite who are in the position to shepherd the change process. In the cultural context of many with power and privilege, these qualities do not visit naturally nor do they always stay for good. Yet, no development process will ever be truly participatory and sustainable without the humble and tolerant leadership.

I dare say, Afghanistan free of poverty will remain a mere dream without humble and tolerant leadership of vision throughout the nation -- leaders of courage, who draw strength from humility, find peace in tolerance, and gain true power by giving it away.

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The agenda of this conference is critical for the future of Nation Afghanistan, indeed. But, the agenda is not of Afghanistan alone. Events of September 11 taught us, in profoundly personal ways, a powerfully simple fact: Without peace and security, prosperity anywhere is a mere house of cards; and without quality growth with equity everywhere, that peace and security will also be just a house of cards.

I end my remarks with a favourite passage of mine from the Koran: "*Verily never will Allah change the condition of a people until they change it themselves, with their own souls ...*"

I wish the people of Afghanistan well -- and *mash'Allah* all the good leaders of today, and of tomorrow, among them. *Allah Hafiz*, from the bottom of my heart.