Honourable Co-Chairs,
Excellences,

On behalf of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), allow me to extend my sincere appreciation to the Government of Pakistan for hosting the Ministerial Conference of the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process (HoA-IP) and for the gracious hospitality extended to us. AKDN is honoured to participate in this important regional initiative.

AKDN is a long-standing partner to the peoples and Government of Afghanistan, to the peoples and Government of Pakistan, and indeed to the peoples and governments of the region. We are honoured to be a supporting organisation of the HoA-IP since its inception in 2011. To this end, we have engaged in activities of the Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) for Education; Trade, Commerce and Investment; and Disaster Management led by the Islamic Republic of Iran, Republic of India and Islamic Republic of Pakistan respectively.

We commend the lead countries on the progress of the activities undertaken within the CBMs as reported at the Senior Officials Meeting, and encourage them to extend their reach further to the supporting countries and organisations to build upon the outcomes achieved thus far. We urge Afghanistan as the ‘Heart of Asia’ to develop mechanisms for enhancing greater synergy and coordination between the CBMs so as to hasten the impact on the quality of life of the peoples of Afghanistan and the region. The CBMs, when applied synergistically have the potential to contribute significantly to the objective of the HoA-IP, namely to “galvanise regional cooperation and development in Afghanistan and its near and extended neighbourhoods”.

With programmes and investments in partnership with governments across the Heart of Asia region, AKDN seeks to improve the quality of human life, in health, education, cultural and economic development, with a “core conviction that human progress depends on human cooperation, even across difficult lines of division”.

Mr. Chairman, the Heart of Asia region is a flourishing economic hub with a global reach and vibrant entrepreneurial spirit. Recognising the important role of the private sector in supporting regional economic development, the Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development and the Aga Khan Foundation are both helping to strengthen regional cooperation through investments in critical infrastructure, linking communities across borders through bridges, cross-border markets, energy, telecommunications, financial services, health and education initiatives, cultural exchanges and tourism.

Today we have discussed major infrastructure projects - roads, rails and ports. With your permission Mr. Chairman, I would like to highlight yet another example of infrastructure, which can be implemented quickly and can have an immediate impact on the quality of life.

The example is bridges - building bridges across frontiers helps open up the region to new development and improved prosperity. The six bridges constructed by AKDN over the Pyanj river linking Tajikistan and Afghanistan, the latest two with support from the German Government through the PATRIP Foundation, demonstrates concrete expressions of regional cooperation and partnership. In addition to inspiring a sense of confidence and progress, these
projects also have tangible economic value in enabling expansion of productive exchange and innovation, granting access to markets beyond their immediate border and reducing the cost of essential commodities. Through the use of the bridges, each year over one million dollars of goods are exchanged at cross-border markets.

These bridges have transformed the lives of some of the most isolated and fragile communities in the region through increasing food security and providing access to essential services such as healthcare and education. AKDN recognises the many partners, who are here at the table today, for working with us in this shared endeavour.

Mr. Chairman, the bridges do more than simply facilitate commerce. They play another important role – in enabling the exchange of ideas and experiences among communities across borders, supporting them to get to know one another better, finding solutions to common challenges and building trust through this process. In this way these bridges contribute to regional confidence building and are worthy of replication.

The second example, which I would like to share with the conference today relates to a regional initiative, which supports the development of critical human capital to multiply the socio-economic impact of other investments in the region. This is the University of Central Asia (UCA), which was established through an international treaty between Tajikistan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Kazakhstan, and His Highness the Aga Khan. UCA which has an increasing presence in Afghanistan, is providing critical demand-driven and market responsive training and education to build human resource capacity to catalyse economic growth in remote communities. To date, over 80,000 learners from Tajikistan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Kazakhstan, and Afghanistan have benefited from UCA’s programmes. Of note is the alumni survey showing that over 70% of UCA learners have found employment, been promoted, or have started their own businesses.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, allow me to touch on another example of an important AKDN intervention, which promotes confidence building within the region through support to Afghanistan, Tajikistan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Pakistan in strengthening health human resources through the exchange of knowledge and best practices. In partnership with Canada and France and in close collaboration with relevant ministries, AKDN is providing e-Learning and offering Post Graduate Medical Education through its various partner health agencies and institutions. The Aga Khan University (AKU) based in Karachi with campuses in several countries plays an important role in providing learning opportunities to doctors and other health professionals in Afghanistan and the region, enabling the transfer of knowledge and building of specialised skills. Close to 2,000 Afghan health professionals, 1,400 community nurses and midwives and 70 doctors have received specialised training in their respective medical fields, through the combined efforts of AKU, Aga Khan Health Services, and the French Medical Institute for Children.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, I would like to express AKDN’s deep appreciation for the opportunity to contribute to this Heart of Asia conference and to promote Afghanistan’s development within its regional context. We remain committed to the Istanbul Process to support a peaceful, stable and prosperous Afghanistan.

Thank you.