New Patterns of Community Life in an Urbanizing World

QUITO, ECUADOR—14 October 2016

"Urban centres have become the dominant habitat for humankind,"[1] wrote the Secretary General in his report on the Third United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development. Yet urbanization in its current incarnation is not a process that can continue indefinitely. Large-scale migration to urban centers has, in many cases, led to social fragmentation, the depletion of limited ecological resources, and profound feelings of isolation and despair. The path forward, it becomes clear, is not to be found in simply aggregating larger and larger numbers into smaller spaces. Rather, it calls for a holistic approach to human settlements that enables individuals and communities to thrive in urban and rural settings alike, providing for the needs of both and drawing on the strengths of both.

Progress in this direction will require conceptions of life in rural and urban settings to be thoroughly reimagined, drawing on the accumulated knowledge of the past, the scientific advances of the present, and a compelling vision of the future. Insights from the field of psychology, for example, clearly demonstrate that people thrive in communities that are characterized by trust and interconnection. Human happiness – which impacts productivity, physical health, and mental acuity – is at its peak when personal relationships are strong[2]. The close friendships and sense of mutual reliance among neighbors that have traditionally been associated with rural communities is an element of life that should be strengthened, not forgotten. However, the complex realities of rural life, which continue to drive so many to urban centers, should not be romanticized. Communication technologies allow levels of integration and social cohesion that were unimaginable only a few decades earlier. Yet physical and intellectual isolation undermine economic and educational prospects in countless rural centers. What is called for, then, is a new pattern of community life in all settings.

Building healthy and prospering settlements is a formidable task that will require learning and effort for generations to come. In considering the challenges ahead, the Secretary General writes of "fearful urban societies" turning to "short-term solutions"[3] unavailable to those with fewer economic assets, such as gated communities and private security firms. He writes of the fear of crime creating "an atmosphere of urban paranoia, with some cities almost failing to function normally."[4] Challenges of this kind, it must be realized, stem not merely from a lack of wealth, information, and material resources. Rather, they arise also from basic attitudes toward others and fundamental assumptions about the world and our place and purpose within it. Cities and villages will need to provide economic opportunities and means for young people to support themselves and build livelihoods according to their skills and talents. But communities of all kinds will also need to nurture many additional aspects of human well-being, such as social inclusion and cohesion, intergenerational solidarity, equitable distribution of resources, and meaningful connections to land and the natural world.

How are such qualities to be fostered within a population? This is a question that will need to be the object of sustained investigation for the foreseeable future. But in the experience of the worldwide Bahá'í community, a number of elements seem critical to the creation of flourishing settlements, whether in urban areas or rural ones.

Prominent among these is an explicit concern with reviving the concept of community. The idea is virtually ubiquitous in its most basic form, of course; we speak of communities of countless types and varieties. The lived reality of many, however, is not that of a cohesive and interlinked whole, but rather an atomistic collection of largely unrelated parts. This will need to be replaced by communities and neighborhoods in which inhabitants are friendly, trusting of one another, unified in purpose, and attentive to moral and emotional well-being. Mutual commitment and an overarching sense of shared identity will need to expand as more and more of those living in proximity to one another work to transcend barriers that previously kept them separated.

If community is to further the progress of society in its own right – complementing the roles played by individuals and social institutions – a much more expansive conception of community life must be actively embraced. New patterns of action and interaction will have to be built, and new forms of relationship and association constructed. Experimentation, trial and error, and a robust process of learning about the nature of lasting cultural change will be vital – all of which require effort and no small amount of sacrifice. Yet as this work continues, new capacities that facilitate progress toward those very goals will come to the fore. Among these, the ability to forge consensus across a diverse population and foster collective commitment to shared priorities; to strengthen vision of a common future and devise practical steps to pursue it; to shape and assess action according to an emerging collective conscience about what is right and wrong, acceptable and intolerable, beneficial and harmful. These are outcomes of significant social change at the local level, but are also drivers of it.

Integrating populations that have traditionally – or recently – been at the margins of society is another prerequisite for flourishing human settlements. As the global community faces the large-scale displacement of peoples, as well as the proliferation of various extremist ideologies, the danger of relegating entire populations to underclass conditions needs no elaboration. Yet this integration cannot be cosmetic, nor content itself with offering certain groups a limited range of choices formulated by agencies inaccessible to them. Instead, decision-making processes must reflect and draw on the talents and views of as wide a cross-section of the population as possible. The input of those who might otherwise be excluded must be not only valued, but actively sought out and embraced. And barriers to the full and effective participation of any particular group, whether based in traditions, customs, habits, or prejudices, must be frankly addressed and resolutely overcome.

Movement in this direction will require qualitatively different approaches to decision-making than those adopted in the past. Specifically, experience suggests that more effective outcomes are achieved when decision-making is approached as a shared effort to explore the underlying reality of relevant circumstances – a collective search for truth and common understanding. Within such a framework, ideas and suggestions do not belong to any single person or entity. Nor does their success or failure rest on the status or influence of the individual or institution that put them forward. Rather, proposals belong to the decision-making group as a whole, which adopts, revises, or discards them in whatever way conduces to the greatest understanding and progress. In some situations, consultation of this kind might be undertaken among those regarded as

equals, with the aim of reaching a joint decision. In others, it may take the form of discussions to elicit thoughts and information toward the enrichment of common understanding, but with a decision being made by those invested with formal authority. In any event, effort is made to ensure that all voices are heard and participation is maximized. And, crucially, consultation such as this explicitly seeks to strengthen the bonds that unite participants. In this way, the shared commitment needed for effective implementation is built through the consultative process itself.

Understandings of self and identity are key to establishing dynamics of this kind. In instances where members of a local population are increasingly functioning as a cohesive, united whole, the Bahá'í community has consistently seen that a sense of common purpose has been critical. A united vision of the future helps harmonize diverse efforts into one coherent movement toward shared goals. As a common sense of purpose takes root among more and more individuals, and understanding of how different efforts can reinforce one another becomes sharper, increasing numbers are able to find the unique contribution they can make. A process begins to take shape, by which larger and larger segments of a population come to take active ownership over their own material, social, and spiritual development.

It should be noted that values – those held by the many individual members of a community, and those institutionalized into aspects of its collective culture – will be central to building cities and human settlements that "fulfill their social function."[5] Values shared across lines of race, nationality, language, or other characteristics, for example, foster solidarity between otherwise disparate groups, as bonds of shared commitment exert their influence. Conversely, values that assert the superiority of one group over another foster antagonism and undermine social cohesion. The process of integrating immigrants into new communities, to take one timely example, often falters not because any technical capacity is lacking in the community, but because new arrivals are seen to be "other" by those who are more established, and are treated as such. Successful integration, like many other areas, requires the ability to establish shared priorities and summon the collective will of a diverse and evolving community.

Education is also central to the construction of thriving human settlements. Experience has shown that young people – regardless of race, nationality, or degree of material means – long to translate high ideals into practical realities and aspire to make a meaningful contribution to the fortunes of humanity. But different approaches to education foster different kinds of characteristics. Thought must therefore be given to the attitudes, qualities, and skills that are to be cultivated in the coming generations. Experience suggests that, if it is to empower growing numbers to contribute to the betterment of society, education would need to assist young people to think deeply about the purpose of their lives and the aims towards which their talents should be directed. It would help them identify and understand the various forces shaping society around them. And it would empower them to take constructive action, fostering qualities such as ethical leadership, principled action, and moral courage.

Creating healthy human settlements is an endeavor that the international community will be learning about for years to come. Local communities will be exploring the practical requisites of individual and collective well-being in a great many places and settings. But learning at the local level can all too easily plateau when isolated from knowledge being generated on wider scales around the world. Structures that facilitate the horizontal and vertical flow of experience, insights, and lessons learned will therefore be of great benefit in achieving the objectives of the New Urban Agenda. Which bodies or agencies might contribute to such structures, how

arrangements at the local level might connect to national, regional, and global counterparts – these and similar questions can be addressed as unfolding circumstances require. But it seems clear that the outcome of any such system must be to ensure that those laboring at the grassroots both contribute to and benefit from a global process of learning.

It is in this way – through building and drawing on the capacity of all populations to contribute to the common good – that the Bahá'í International Community sees the greatest potential to achieve the ambitious commitments proposed in the New Urban Agenda.

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[1] Third United Nations conference on housing and sustainable urban development (Habitat III), Report of the Secretary-General, 9 August 2011, A/66/282

[2] "The Happiness Index: A Summary Report", *The Victoria Foundation,* PDF Report, April 2009.

[3] Third United Nations conference on housing and sustainable development (Habitat III), report of the Secretary-General. 9 August 2011. A/66/282

[4] Ibid.

[5] New Urban Agenda, HABITAT III, Draft outcome document for adoption in Quito, October 2016, 10 September 2016