

Sustainable Communities in an Integrating World

by Bahá'í International Community

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As the rapidly approaching 21st century approaches, governments, organizations and peoples are spending enormous energies to develop communities that are socially vibrant, united and prosperous. The Conference on Human Domiciles (Shelter II) of the United Nations, which joins the great global conferences of this decade, is a milestone in these efforts and portends major advances in community development.

However, in the long term, efforts to build communities will succeed only to the extent that they intertwine material progress with fundamental spiritual aspirations, respond to the increasing interdependence among the peoples and nations of the planet, and establish a framework within which all peoples can be active participants in the governance of their societies.

To these three fundamental elements of sustainable communities is that the following comments are addressed.

Material progress must reflect spiritual principles and priorities

Human nature is fundamentally spiritual. It is therefore unlikely that communities will become prosperous and sustainable unless they take into account the spiritual dimension of human reality and seek to foster a culture in which the moral, ethical, emotional and intellectual development of the individual is primary concern. It is in such an environment where the individual will be likely to become a citizen performing constructively and directed to service, working for the material and spiritual well-being of the community, and where a common vision and a sense of shared purpose can be effectively developed.

Therefore, the material aspects of community development - environmental, economic and social policies; production, distribution, communication and transportation systems; and political, legal and scientific processes - they have to be guided by spiritual principles and priorities. Currently, however, the substance and direction of community development are largely determined by material considerations.

Therefore, our challenge is to redesign and develop our communities around these universal principles - including love, honesty, moderation, humility, hospitality, justice and unity - that promote social cohesion, and without which no community can last a long time, no matter how prosperous it is economically, how intellectually endowed or how technologically advanced.

Among the considerations and principles that should guide this company are the following:

The protection of the family and the promotion of their well-being must be at the center of community

processes. The family is the primary institution for society and the main incubator of values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. When she is spiritually healthy she contributes significantly to the development of happy and responsible citizens.

The physical, social, economic, legal and political designs of our communities must serve all members of society, not just the privileged. A truly just and equitable society will require a citizenship that understands that the interests of the individual and the community are inseparably intertwined; that the advancement of human rights requires full commitment to the corresponding responsibilities; and that when women are accepted as equal plenums to men in every area of human endeavor then families, communities, and nations will prosper and progress.

Work is both a means of earning a living for the individual and a way of contributing to the prosperity of the entire community. As such, it helps to give meaning to one's life. Therefore, community design has to ensure that the creative energies of the individual have a productive employment step in which they can express themselves. For its part, the individual has to assume the responsibility of carrying out his trust. Progress in this area will give great impetus to the elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty in the world.

"Religion," the Bahá'í Writings assert, "is the greatest means for the establishment of order in the world and for the peaceful contentment of all who live there." ¹ Therefore, freedom of religion must be ensured in every community, including the right to establish centers of worship.² Places of worship provide a place for prayer and meditation, acts of devotion through which the individual He can approach the Creator, thus strengthening his spiritual abilities for sacrifice and service. As physical monuments these buildings also often serve to express the cultural genius of society.

The promotion of beauty, whether natural or man-made, must become a guiding principle in community planning, since beauty can touch the heart and inspire the soul with noble feelings and actions.

Community development will have to incorporate principles of environmental preservation and rehabilitation, not only to bring our current civilization to a sustainable pattern of action, but also to respond to the great need of the human spirit through close contact with the natural world. The primary role of the farmer in food and economic security also has to be carefully considered in the design of every human domicile.

The vast forces of science and technology must be harnessed to serve the material, intellectual, emotional and spiritual needs of the entire human family. This will require all peoples to be involved in generating scientific knowledge and in determining its applications. While participation increases the technologies that have tended to desensitize and alienate, to make satisfaction work and trades redundant, to destroy the environment, and to cause illness or death, will undoubtedly be reconsidered, redesigned or abandoned.

The interdependence between the peoples and nations of the world will only increase in the years to come

The peoples and nations of the planet are attracting each other as they become more and more dependent on each other. Homes around the world - from villages and towns to cities and megalopolis - are becoming home to more and more diverse populations. This augmentative interdependence and the intensifying interaction among diverse peoples create fundamental challenges to old ways of thinking and acting. How we respond, as individuals and as communities, to these challenges will determine to a large extent whether our communities have to become caregivers, cohesive and progressive, or inhospitable, divided and unsustainable.

Unity in diversity is both a vision for the future and a guiding principle for the world community in its

response to these challenges. This principle not only has to animate the relations between the nations of the planet, but it also has to be applied within both local and national communities if they are to prosper and endure. The unifying and healthy effects of applying this principle to the redesign and development of communities around the world would be incalculable, while the consequences of failing to respond appropriately to the challenges of a shrinking world would surely be disastrous.

Obviously humanity has to be prepared for the opportunities and responsibilities that are emerging as a result of this augmentative interdependence. People have to develop the knowledge, values, attitudes and skills necessary to participate constructively and with confidence in shaping the global community at all levels, so that it can reflect the principles of justice, equity and unity. Education will play an indispensable role in this aspect. The individual will have to help develop a sense of place and community: a meaning that is not limited to the local or national level, but extends to include the whole world.³ It should cultivate virtue as the basis for personal wellbeing and collective,

Humanity has to move towards more participatory, knowledge-driven and value-driven government processes.

Models of community development that are from top to bottom can no longer adequately respond to the needs and aspirations of modern times. The world community has to move towards more participatory, knowledge-based and governance-driven processes in which people can take responsibility for the processes and institutions that affect their lives. These systems have to be democratic in spirit and in method, and must emerge at all levels of world society, including the global level.⁵ Consultation - the working expression of justice in human affairs - must become its way primary decision-making

Naturally, the old ways of exercising power and authority have to give rise to new forms of leadership. Our concept of leadership will have to be reformulated to include the ability to foster collective decision-making and collective action. You will find your greatest expression in the service to the entire community.

Towards a community in common, n common destiny

In conclusion, the communities that grow and prosper in the new millennium will do so because they recognize the spiritual dimension of human nature and ensure that the moral, emotional and intellectual development of the individual is a central priority. They will guarantee the freedom of religion and encourage the establishment of places of worship. Their learning centers will seek to cultivate the unlimited potentialities in human consciousness and will pursue as their main goal the participation of all the people in the generation and application of knowledge. Always bearing in mind that the interests of the individual and of society are inseparable, these communities will promote respect for both rights and responsibilities, promote equality and the association of women and men, and will protect and take care of families. They will promote beauty, natural and man-made, and incorporate principles of preservation and environmental rehabilitation into their design. Guided by the concept of unity in diversity, they will support broad participation in the affairs of society, and more and more will be directed to leaders who are motivated by the desire to serve. In these communities the fruits of science and technology will benefit the whole society, and there will be work available for all. and more and more will be directed to leaders who are motivated by the desire to serve. In these communities the fruits of science and technology will benefit the whole society, and there will be work available for all. and more and more will be directed to leaders who are motivated by the desire to serve. In these communities the fruits of science and technology will benefit the whole society, and there will be work available for all.

Communities such as these will prove to be the pillars of a world civilization: a civilization that will be the logical summit of humanity's efforts towards community creation through long stretches of geography

time. The declaration of Bahá'u'lláh that every person "is born to carry out a civilization in continuous progress", implies that every person has both the right and the responsibility to contribute to this historic, comprehensive and collective enterprise whose goal is nothing less than that peace, prosperity and the unity of the entire human family.⁶

Although enormous injustices have been perpetrated throughout history, in the name of religion, it is impossible to deny the primordial role that faith has played in social progress, motivating individuals to develop spiritual qualities, empowering them to sacrifice themselves for their fellow men and to contribute to the improvement of their communities.

The centers of worship, and the institutions and activities to which they give rise, must become a fundamental part of every village, village, town and city - in fact, of all types of human habitation in every nation - but they have to contribute to the harmony, peace, well-being, understanding, and the full tolerance of the community. Otherwise, they will only serve to delay the development of sustainable and prosperous communities, and the people will eventually abandon them when they realize the divisive and parochial role they play in society. In fact, almost any place can serve as a center of worship. One of the prayers revealed by Bahá'u'lláh emphasizes this point: "Blessed is the place, and the house, and the place, and the city, and the heart, and the mountain, and the refuge, and the cave, and the valley, and the earth, and the sea,

The Mashriqu'l-Adhkár Bahá'í (the Sunrise Point of the Praise of God) is such a center that by its own design integrates worship with service, that is, expresses the spiritual in practical ways. At the center of this complex lies the House of Worship which is open to every person, no matter what faith it is. Around the House of Worship, and animated by it, there must be a number of dependencies - or institutions - dedicated to social, administrative, humanitarian, educational and scientific matters. As each Mashriqu'l-Adhkár complex develops, these units will include "a hospital, a dispensary, a lodging for travelers, a school for orphans, and a university for advanced studies." This practical model to harmonize the moral and ethical aspects, physical and environmental,

In this aspect, the community can be conceived as a set of concentric circles, with the local community being the smallest, and the global community the largest.

The concept of global citizenship helps integrate all levels of the community: being a responsible citizen at local and national levels does not deny love for all humanity; rather, these multi-level loyalties and obligations form a strongly woven network, an inseparable whole.

In the consultation individual participants strive to transcend their respective points of view in order to function as members of a body with their own interests and goals. In an atmosphere characterized by both honesty and courtesy, the ideas belong not only to the individual who presents them, but to the entire group, to accept, discard, or revise as it seems best to serve the goal pursued. The consultation is successful to the extent that all participants support the decisions made, regardless of the individual opinions with which they entered the discussion. Under such circumstances an earlier decision can easily be reconsidered if the experience teaches any faults.

It is interesting to note that several of the concepts that appear in this statement were also presented in the statement delivered by the Bahá'í International Community to the first Conference on Human Domiciles of the United Nations in 1976. Among the most recent Bahá'í statements that clarify the theme of sustainable communities include The Prosperity of Humanity; World Citizenship: A Global Ethics for Sustainable Development; and The Decisive Point for Every Nation.

