



BRAHMA KUMARIS WORLD SPIRITUAL UNIVERSITY

The Spirit of Habitat

What is a city but its people?

Statement to the

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Amidst the varied landscape of human life today, three features that clearly stand out are rapid population growth, accelerating urbanization and increasing complexity in almost all fields of activity. While the challenges humanity faces have never been greater, it is also true that we have never had at our disposal so much information, so many opportunities and such potential to improve people's living conditions and lay down the foundations for a world of stability and peace. The time is indeed right to answer this Conference's call for a greater focus on people and the conditions and circumstances in which we live and to articulate a new consensus-based approach to development, taking account of current realities.

The ways in which the planet's resources are distributed and used has resulted in the physical and social needs of many people remaining unfulfilled in number of different ways. While encouraging progress has been made in dispelling some spectres, our common future still remains overcast by Damoclean swords such as social insecurity, the forces of fragmentation and massive environmental abuse. Thus while Habitat II's immediate focus is securing broad-based commitments to creating sustainable human settlements and providing adequate shelter for all, the broader issues at stake have been rephrased by its Secretary-General, Dr. Wally N'Dow, as *"how we live, where we live, and, above all, if we live at all"*.

ONE WORLD, ONE HOME

In practically every society in the world, tremendous changes have taken place over the past few decades. Along with technological development, the theme of many such changes has been a convergence and inter-linking of interests and activities that were previously seen as separate. While the initial surge of globalization may have been primarily economic and technological in nature, it is a phenomenon that is laying low barriers and divisions of all kinds, making it more apparent than ever that no one is an island. We all live on one planet, a planet that seems increasingly small and is crisscrossed by a web of interconnecting relationships, a constant and self-perpetuating interplay of cause and effect.

As the world's peoples have begun to see themselves as global citizens, a change has also

come about with regard to development thinking. An approach that often seemed to equate an increase in financial resources with greater well-being has given way to an understanding of progress known as sustainable human development. This concept acknowledges that people require or aspire to the fulfilment of a variety of needs, rights and hopes that are not just economic in nature but also include social, gender-based, environmental, health, mental, moral and spiritual concerns. A continuum of major international conferences held during the first half of this decade has addressed many specific such concerns and, although the focus has mainly been on individual themes, it has also become apparent that each sector is deeply connected with the other sectors and that together they form a greater inter-connected whole.

GOING BEYOND CITY LIMITS

Recognizing that all human activity and aspirations are inter-linked, development is now seen as a comprehensive process that aims to further the overall well-being and standard of living of the individual. The engine of economic growth can help power this process but it should not be forgotten that it remains only a means -- a means towards an end objective of improving the quality of life as a whole and enabling individuals to reach their full potential. Indicators of progress in developmental activities have therefore now begun to take account of improvement not just in physical living conditions or material circumstances but also in the overall quality of life of families and individuals, including their mental and spiritual well-being. People have finally reclaimed their rightful place as the focal point of development concerns and it is now understood that development is only really development when it is holistic development of humanity in its entirety. Given this historical background, Habitat II is not only concerned with cities and settlements; it is also about human beings and the rights that flow from the fact of our humanity. The culminating point of past decades of development work, and indeed the apex of the broad-based pyramid of all human endeavour, is therefore the emphasis that must be placed on the inherent worth and dignity of the individual.

VISION AND VALUES FOR DEVELOPMENT WITH DIGNITY

Notwithstanding humanity's richly diverse heritage, there is broad agreement as to the nature of the higher ground to which development should lead us, and most of us hold within our hearts a clear vision of a better world of greater security, peace, justice, understanding and respect for all people. There is also widespread recognition and awareness that this vision of a better world can only be built and stand on the foundation of certain values, attitudes and ways of living consistent with this vision. As well as being a major part of the means to the desired end, these values and attitudes are also a prerequisite to the sustenance and continued existence of the vision once it has become reality, for the world will only be more understanding, just, peaceful, compassionate and respectful for so long as we are like that. The consequence of this is that we must not only do certain things but also be certain things.

ONE HOME, ONE FAMILY

Society is a community of individuals and as its condition therefore depends on that of the individuals of which it is comprised there is something that all of us can do, something that all of us can change. Just as the Habitat II process has embraced local authorities, private

sector players, community-based organizations and individuals in their own right, the need of the hour is for all people of this planet to rally under the flag of unity and take responsibility to help make the world a home of harmony, peace and fulfilment for all the human family.

HIGH LIVING AND SIMPLE THINKING OR SIMPLE LIVING AND HIGH THINKING

The issue in reality is therefore not a technical one nor one of insufficient financial or other resources as we have all the technical know-how that is required for a life of dignity, purpose and value, and the bounty of mother Earth's resources is more than enough to provide for our needs. Furthermore, the goals we are striving for are clear and agreed upon as are many steps that will lead to them. On a deeper level, the problem is a political and social one -- of defining the policies by which we manage and organize our collective affairs and resources in order to reach an agreed outcome. It is relatively easy to state that governance should be transparent, accountable and participatory and to devise constructive action plans on the basis of this, but these plans will be inadequate unless each of us chooses and commits ourselves to apply them. Good policies will only make a real difference if they are supported by personally-held moral principles, values and ideals. We must learn to manage ourselves before effectively managing anything or anyone else.

At its deepest, the issue is therefore not just a political or social one but a very personal one. In essence, the change that is sought is a fundamental and deep-rooted transformation in individual behavior, and therefore also in the attitudes, thinking and values that guide this and constitute the bedrock that underlies our political and social choices and priority decisions. Only once we have changed ourselves can there be the civil engagement, sustainability and equity that Habitat II seeks. Any change in the physical state of affairs will be, at best, short-lived unless it is firmly rooted in a greatly improved state of the human mind and spirit.

Efficient and equitable economic growth is a part of the solution and can help provide physical security but equally important is emotional and spiritual security. Bricks build houses but hearts are needed to build homes. Just as the continued existence of many urban sprawls depends on giving new life to the inner city, the future welfare of humankind hinges upon the need for a vigorous revival of the inner human being and greater self-awareness and understanding.

MOBILIZING OUR INNER RESOURCES

It is time therefore for our inner resources to be fully mobilized and engaged. Inspiring and comprehensive development plans have been articulated and are often both logical and visionary but in order for them to be realized, moral considerations and the spiritual dimension must be integrated into the development methodology. Achieving a vision requires that ethical and spiritual values be brought into action and concrete expression. Expressing and implementing higher values on a sustainable basis requires spiritual understanding and practice. These higher values -- and spirituality itself -- constitute the ultimate cross-sectoral issue and by developing them we are breathing life into all development programmes. The crisis we face is global and touches all of us and so the essence of the solution must also be all embracing and at once global as well as local and

personal. To try to implement development plans without taking account of the inner, spiritual, dimension may amount to little more than trying to erect a beautiful building on loose sand.

Our mental and spiritual energies are probably the most under-developed resource in the world today and many have attested to the tremendous potential and unfathomed depths that lie within. Through a process of appropriate learning, or re-learning, that which threatened to be humanity's darkest hours may therefore yet yield its finest days. The recognition increasingly dawning on people worldwide is that they have a choice as to the stars they steer by and the direction they take in the journey of life. Through dedicating themselves to living out their personal commitment to some fundamental principles and ways of living, these personal-best-practice pioneers are laying down firm foundations for a better world for all.

*"For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come."
(Hebrews 13.14)*

The values and principles that we live by, and express in our attitudes and behaviour, are a direct consequence of how we define, see and understand ourselves. The extent to which history reveals a decline in moral standards is a direct reflection of the extent to which we have lost touch with our spiritual identity. We have come to define ourselves more and more by reference to the temporary physical body rather than the eternal spirit which gives it life. Our attention and activity has accordingly been focused on our physical needs and in the process we have forgotten our heritage of moral and spiritual values. By developing anew an understanding of ourselves as essentially moral and spiritual beings we will revitalize the fading embers of those values and virtues. As they then again shine brightly within us we may in turn give new life and light to our settlements and habitats wherever they may be.

"To change the mindset of a community is a process, not an event." (Nelson Mandela)

While the overall edifice of the better world we are striving for involves a complex superstructure of many details, its foundation stone is therefore a deep-seated inner change in the individual. So how do we change ourselves? To have the desire or even make a commitment to change is one thing but to fulfil it is another and the process of change can be facilitated by using the right methodology. The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University believes that the foundation of personal change is a change in the understanding that we have of ourselves, in our perception of our inner nature and being, and its impact on our surroundings.

For the past sixty years the University has been teaching an understanding of the self that affirms our spiritual identity and the inherent goodness and worth of the self. This spiritual education and understanding, combined with periods of silent reflection, meditation and the strengthening of our eternal relationship with God, can lead to an effective change of awareness, attitude and values, and then behaviour and way of life. It is spiritual practice that can generate the will-power to translate vision into action, principle into practice and rhetoric into reality.

The Brahma Kumaris have recently opened "The Academy for a Better World" in

Rajasthan, India as a spiritual home or place of retreat in which to journey within and find again the calm inner depths of the spirit, that cool, clear stream of higher self-consciousness from which we have meandered into a whirlpool of inverted priorities. The University offers to all people a range of educational programmes on spirituality, meditation, personal development and the inculcation of virtues that can inspire and empower the individual to change and reform the self.

Education in spiritual knowledge, and spiritual and moral values, may seem nothing new but it has long been relegated to the backwaters of the curriculum or marooned on a barren shore of the development process. Spiritual education must now be mainstreamed as it is the cleansing water that can lead to a renaissance of the ethical values and principles on which the implementation of all our development plans depends. through such education, greed can be superseded by sharing, segregation by solidarity, exclusion by inclusion and despair by hope and courage. As breath is indispensable to the existence of the human body so is spirituality and awareness of the deeper self indispensable to the well-being of the human soul.

THE HISTORY OF TOMORROW INCLUDES TODAY

The next paradigm of development must therefore be not just sustainable human development but spiritual development as the spirit is the core of our being and nothing will change for long unless that changes. The highest values, such as love, justice, compassion and peace, are the most universal ones for they are spiritual values and spirituality is a universal phenomenon. They constitute the common heart of humanity and humanity is one family to the extent that it recognizes and lives by the heartbeat of those values. To live by such values is also to live in harmony with the self, the human family and the world at large.

The truest mirror of the state of humanity is the state of the human spirit and the deepest indicator of development progress is development of the human soul. This means a deepening of ethical and spiritual wisdom and heightened awareness of spirituality -- that divine awareness without which life soon begins to lose purpose, meaning and value. Our focus must be on fundamental core issues, not superficial or peripheral ones, and people-centred development must start at the centre of people. Our most valuable resource is not so much right in front of our eyes as right behind them and it is this resource -- the soul - that we must now develop.

As Shakespeare asked many years ago: *"What is a city but its people?"*, to which might now be added: *"And what is its people without their soul?"*

Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University

The BKWSU is a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and in consultative status with UNICEF.

The University was founded in India in 1937 and has branches in over 100 countries worldwide.

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www.bkun.org

OFFICE FOR THE UNITED NATIONS

Suite 436
866, UN Plaza
New York, NY 10017

U.S.A.

Tel.: +1-212-688-1335
Fax.: +1-212-504-2798

bkun@bkwsu.org

HEADQUARTERS

Pandav Bhawan
Mount Abu 307501
Rajasthan

India

Tel.: +91-2974-238261
Fax.: +91-2974-238952

abu@bkivv.org

INTL. COORDINATING OFFICE

Global Cooperation House
65-69 Pound Lane
London NW10 2HH

U.K.

Tel.: +44-20-8727-3350
Fax.: +44-20-8727-3351

london@bkwsu.org

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