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Commentary

In Your Hands – The Realization of a Dream¹

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PDHRE, People's Movement for Human Rights Learning

We welcome you to join us in a voyage founded on a vision and a promise. It is a journey to advance Human Rights Cities as a vision of the future of humanity in which communities learn about human rights as a way of life and generate innovative and exciting social and economic transformation.

A city is a microcosm of the world, where the multiple issues and formidable concerns of humanity emerge painfully and restlessly, calling out for sustainable solutions through meaningful and positive change. Sixty years ago all nations defined a powerful vision of a holistic human rights framework as a response to the challenge of freedom from fear and freedom from want. This overarching framework offers communities a moral, political, and legal support system for women, men, youth and children, wherever they are and whatever their culture, religion, history or identities, to determine their own futures. They join in moving from humiliation to belonging in their community in dignity with other, and participating in the decision that determines their lives in equality and without discrimination – moving from charity to dignity.

Indeed what a marvelous promise that answers succinctly hopes and expectations of thousand of years – a dream that must be realized is now in your hands!

The Human Rights Cities initiative involves the formation of local communities-of-learning. These are municipal spaces where citizens learn about human rights as relevant to their daily lives and concerns. They embark on highly motivated voyages, led by local groups and organizations concerned

¹⁾ *Human Rights Cities: Civic Engagement for Societal Development*, Nanjing, China, at UN-HABITAT Global Forum, November 2008.

with economic and social justice, and plan, reconstruct, and advance their goals step-by-step, guided by the wisdom, norms and standards of the holistic human rights framework.

Eleven years ago, this audacious idea took shape in Rosario, Argentina, through the initiative of Susana Chiarotti, with whom I had shared the idea at an international conference. A few weeks later, she called me with great enthusiasm, telling me that Rosario was about to become the first Human Rights City in the world. I flew from New York to Rosario to join in a meeting in the mayor's office, where 120 representatives of local NGOs and community groups joined in signing a declaration. I will never forget the representatives of the Toba community – a local indigenous group of 100,000 in a community of one million – a woman and a man signing on to a dream in a city they had never really felt part of. With enormous contentment and after many months of hard work, Susana sent me a message saying, "Shula, you dream and I have to work very hard." Indeed, Rosario and other cities that have since made similar commitments to vigorous statements of values and to action plans for Human Rights Learning have required the dynamic energies of the most committed and active members of the community.

Their achievements clearly demonstrate that dialogue and learning about human rights have had a significant place in their lives. Our organization, PDHRE, People's Movement for Human Rights Learning, has been honored to walk the first steps of this journey with them for the last 20 years.

I am humbled to have been present as these cities, villages, or communities embarked on their own paths to collective human rights dialogue and learning. They have created a practical model for true citizenship where every inhabitant – rich or poor, powerful or oppressed – learns and recognizes the importance of respecting, protecting and promoting all human rights of all, striving to breathe and live human rights in every waking moment and in every impossible dream.

PDHRE was founded in 1989 as an international service organization with a deep belief in the power of Human Rights Learning for communities to achieve economic and social justice. We have worked directly and indirectly with networks of affiliates and partners in over 60 countries around the world to develop and advance the learning about human rights as way of life. We facilitated programs that enabled women and men to re-imagine their lives and discover their own power to define the destiny of their community. Participating in the planning of their future, the human rights about which they learn provide them with the principles with which

to pursue their hopes. As a result of internalizing the praxis of human rights communities and assuming social responsibility, communities are constantly being revitalized by actions that create wider spaces, choices and possibilities for meaningful change.

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Human Rights Cities

Imagine living in a society where all citizens have made a pledge to overcome fear and impoverishment, to build a society that provides human security, access to food, clean water, housing, education, healthcare and work at livable wages, and to share available resources with all citizens – not as a gift, but as a realization of human rights. That is what Human Rights Cities do by providing an energetic space that demonstrates that living in such a society is possible!

We live in a world where a multitude of organizations work to solve the enormous problems humanity is facing, one project at the time. In 20 years of accumulating rich experiences, we are convinced of the practical value of a holistic human rights framework for the betterment of the lives of women and men at the community level. Forming into a Steering Committee, they develop learning programs throughout the city. In the process they develop critical thinking with a gender perspective of broad issues of poverty, patriarchy, and power, as well as a systemic analysis not only of symptoms, but more importantly of causes of their lack of clean water, education, food and employment. These are issues that can be solved if the decisions made by communities are guided by a holistic human rights framework.

Fifty percent of the world's population is under twenty-five years old and many of these young people, often uneducated and unemployed, have joined the two billion people living in cities to find their future. Tragically, many young women and children are being trafficked to the cities. The world is on the move and the movement is towards urban spaces. The reasons for this vast immigration are many – wars and conflict, climate change, economic gain, the promise of education, and in general the hope for a better life. These overwhelming challenges call for an inclusive, holistic yet practical plan devised by engaging both citizens and local authorities, vertically and horizontally, to act with transparency and accountability to

make a visible difference in citizens' lives. Basing such a plan on a human rights framework builds on humanity's historic memories, narratives, aspirations and hopes; it aims at a future in which human rights will be guaranteed for all without discrimination of any kind, such as race, sex, sexual orientation, language, religion, origin, property, or birth.

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Human rights provide a powerful tool for action towards genuine societal development. We have no other option but to develop ways and means for people across the globe to learn human rights and use them to challenge impoverishment and deprivation that undermine the future of humanity. Human Rights Cities draw on the comprehensive human rights instruments by enabling all citizens to participate as equals in the decision-making processes affecting their lives.

We are inspired by the words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt that, "A necessitous man [or woman] is not a free man [or woman]," and by those of Nelson Mandela who said, "We face the urgent task of deepening the culture of human rights." He also said, "However good the policies of the government are, nothing will come of them without the active participation of each and every one of us."

But let us face it, most people around the world do not know of the existence of international human rights, even though they were proclaimed by the United Nations in 1948, "for all peoples and all nations." People know traffic regulations that enable us to move safely towards our chosen destinations as socially responsible and free human beings, but they do not know the rules of human rights that allow us to lead lives in society as socially responsible and free human beings.

Make no mistake about it: for many millions of our brothers and sisters the enormous potential of all to live a life they value is shattered by the vicious cycle of humiliation, which forces people to exchange their equality for survival. When women and men internalize human rights as their own, hidden capacities come and throw light on the path toward freedom from injustice.

The acquired knowledge informs actions to reach to what is offered to humanity in the inclusive human rights agenda. Having become aware of the structures of injustice, people find meaning and relevance in the two International Covenants (one on economic, social and cultural rights, the other on civil and political rights) and in the Conventions on race, torture,

discrimination against women, and human rights of children, migrants, persons with disabilities, and indigenous peoples to name subject areas of the main UN human rights treaties. These instruments and more have been ratified by most countries of the world, which thereby promise to modify their laws and practices in order to give effect to the obligations they have accepted. Yet, the general public in the North or South remains to a large extent ignorant of what their governments have agreed to on their behalf and the enormous improvements respect for these obligations could make to their lives. Our call is to redress the human rights violation of imposed ignorance by learning and dialogue leading to social change and dignity for all.

This rich framework enables women and men to realize their potential, identify opportunities and choices to overcome the prevailing imbalance of dignity. When people know and own human rights they start believing in their abilities; they develop new capacities and call for good governance to develop democracies to deliver human rights. They also start looking at the environment in a new way and consider the life of other species as an integral part of being in dignity in their community and the world around them.

And more: varied civil society groups in the city that focus on issues like women, labor, children, housing, food, health, education, poverty and religion, discover common ground for collaboration and solidarity guided by inclusivity and indivisibility of human rights. All gain by pulling together sparse resources in developing agreed upon city plans and creating alternative budgets to achieve their goals without competing with one another. Thus inhabitants of a Human Rights City, through their groups and neighborhoods representatives, create a vibrant new space of living in mutual recognition, dignity and freedom. They move from “shame and blame” to realize the promise of democracy. Indeed we have no other alternative but for human rights to become a universal support system for maintaining and sustaining sanity, collaboration and cooperation in difficult urban environments.

As part of the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of human rights, the United Nations General Assembly declared, at the initiative of Benin, that 2009 will be the “International Year of Human Rights Learning.” (Resolution: A/RES/62/171) The resolution states:

...every woman, man and child, in order to realize their full human potential, must be made aware of all their human rights and fundamental freedoms...[and] human

rights learning should serve to transform the holistic vision of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights into a way of life...

The General Assembly decided to devote the International year of Human Rights Learning:

to activities to broaden and deepen human rights learning... on the basis of the principles of universality... constructive international dialogue and cooperation, with a view to enhancing the promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural...

Human Rights Cities offer a structure for locally run investigation, evaluation and analysis of what is needed and essential to prevent violations and promote realization of human rights. Each member of the community becomes a mentor and monitor as they move relationships, laws, policies, and resources from the vertical to the horizontal with respect and trust. They develop a new vision of the world.

Inspired by what people have done so far, PDHRE continues to facilitate the creation of new Human Rights Cities, which now can emulate existing ones. *Human Rights Cities: Civic Engagement for Societal Development* tells their stories. We do so with much pride and expectation that these cities will multiply around the world. We nurture the hope that every country in the world will have at least one Human Rights City to serve both as a magnet and a radiating beacon, a space where communities advance learning about human rights as a way of life, celebrating the full and vibrant dimensions of their society guided by the holistic human rights framework, their legacy to humanity in the 21st Century.

We all must assume the responsibility to replicate these experiences and make these communities a living reality. We have no other option.

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To send you on the road let us look back to Rosario and the change in the lives of the Toba indigenous community:

As part of learning about the Millennium Development Goals and mapping the human rights in their community, youth living in the slums decided – even though hesitantly and believing that it was useless – to obtain a meeting with the mayor. They wanted to request the replacement of the many shuttered and broken windows in their school. The meeting

was granted and within two days all windows were replaced. These young people realized their human right to be educated in an environment that recognizes their dignity and protects their human right to good health. They received a gift of trust and respect. The students became aware that they could make a difference. They have become mentors and monitors in their now changing community.

Another short story...

In the process of learning about human rights, representatives of the Toba people, inspired by the UDHR, wrote a ten-point document to articulate their quest for dignity, trust and respect in the community. After long deliberation they came up with the first point, "It is our wish to be able to go to buy what we need in the new shopping mall in Rosario without being looked at as thieves." The pain and the hope that filtered through these few words expressed their desire to live like the other inhabitants of the city. Truly, they saw human rights as a way of life – one to be lived in dignity and non-discrimination – infusing all aspects both great and small.

We have no other option!

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