

DIALOGUE 5: Historically Harmonious Cities

Abstract: The historical dimension of cities presents itself differently in diverse parts of the world. Whereas to a large extent cities have historically played an important role as engines of growth and incubators of civilization, there are also other parts whereby cities, as capitals of ancient kingdoms were often military garrisons. Others have merely been centres of powers, spaces designated for the elites while maintaining an extractive relationship with their hinterland. Cities in the latter category have demonstrated a distinct morphology and social characteristic which have become part of their history.

Included in the character of many of these cities that were mainly colonial, settler and apartheid constructs is also a socio-cultural element in the form of values, institutions and relationship which have now constituted a component of their present-day historical asset. In this respect, reference to a harmony of the cities' history transcends a mere consideration of physical and mainly architectural heritage, to include also the traditional institutions, values and norms that have evolved as part of neighbourhood and urban development as a whole.

The notion of historical harmony underscores the linkage between the past, present and future evolution of cities in relation to the overall wellbeing of the population, functionality of urban spaces, and the general sustainability of urban development. As stated above, the dynamics of such a linkage needs to take into account and valorize not only such aspects as architectural heritage, but also to rectify the distortions and inequities of the past. Furthermore, such an undertaking needs also to counter the globalization's tendency of obliterating indigenous cultures and traditions. In some cases it has also to obviate the tendency of relegating a city's history to be part of urban poverty and marginality. Invariably, historical neighbourhoods and institutions and have lately become the locus of poverty and survival instruments respectively for the poor. A historically harmonious city is thus one that finds relevance for its scars of trauma and relics of past glamour in its present and future forms, structures and functions as part of innovations for new frontiers of living.

The dialogue will attempt to examine the above issues of urban history with respect to cities of industrial societies as well as those of Africa, Asia and Latin America. It will devote more attention to fostering historical harmony within the framework of urban sustainability at the level of the environment, society and the economy. The overall intention will be to ensure that urban development is promoted by meeting the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Development needs also to ensure that the contribution of past generations to the cultural and architectural heritage is respected, harnessed and valorized.