



Building a More Caring World: Implications for the Community

Background Note

In order to stimulate reflection and dialogue on the vital importance of building a more caring society, the Bahá'í Chair for Studies in Development at Devi Ahilya Vishwavidyalaya, Indore is organizing a series of webinars on the theme 'Building a More Caring World: Implications for the Family, the Community and the Market' (A discussion paper on this overall theme can be accessed [here](#)). The second webinar in this series explores the implications of this theme for the community, a vital space where caring relationships based on everyday collaboration and mutual support are forged and strengthened.

After the family, it is the community consisting of people living in geographic proximity to each other that provides the most natural setting for building relationships and networks of care. A sense of connection with other human beings is a precondition for relationships of care. In the case of the family, it is kinship that establishes this connection. What connects people in a community is a communal bond formed out of collectively owning and managing common resources, supporting and helping each other in ways that neighbours do, and participating in various forms of collective action.

The community can provide an invaluable support structure to the individual or family, especially in times of crisis. A common saying in India is that in times of need, the neighbour is more important than the family. The fabric of neighbourly friendship is woven by myriad everyday expressions of sharing and mutual support, whether in helping each other, sharing food, watching out for each other, checking on those who are ill, celebrating festivals together, or participating together in the happy and sad moments of life. The solidarity formed through such close ties becomes a powerful source of resilience for the members of the community. Further, the atmosphere of goodwill and trust that such expressions of generosity, friendship, kindness, and hospitality generate provides a strong foundation for collaborating on more complex civic endeavours that require collective deliberation, decision-making, and action. Even where ties between the community's members are not close, commonly-shared conditions and circumstances bind the members together in a shared experience that is real.

In the context of care, the importance of strong communities with established practices of reciprocity and mutual support cannot be overstated. For example, during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in India, this was evident in how community members helped each other find medicines, oxygen tanks, and hospital beds when the State's resources were overwhelmed by the magnitude of the crisis. In addition, they helped each other meet basic necessities such as buying groceries or cooking food and provided each other with much-needed emotional support.

The crucial role of the community in ensuring individual and family well-being is not restricted to times of crisis. Families come together in villages and urban neighbourhoods to help each other with everything

from informal arrangements for child care to financial security, especially in cases of socially and economically underprivileged communities. In the long-term development of human capabilities, the community's contribution is vital even when it takes an indirect form. This wisdom is captured in the African proverb which states that 'it takes a village to raise a child.' The healthy growth and development of a child is as much dependent on the care and attention that the child receives from parents, extended family, teachers, neighbours, and friends as from the social atmosphere of the community in which he or she grows.

In various ways, the policies shaped by the dominant economic order which prioritizes profits over people, discourages and disincentivizes the development of vibrant, inclusive, and diverse communities based on shared civic commitment. Increasing privatization of the commons threatens to reduce the public spaces where members of a community can socialize, deliberate and collaborate. Due to the economic insecurities and the competitive pressures created by the existing economic structures, people feel compelled to focus on themselves and pursue their own self-interests, leading to isolation and loneliness and making it harder for them to form communal ties. Without a proper appreciation of the value of communal bonds, relationships, and indeed the community itself, can be instrumentalized as a means to some form of individual (and often economic) gain. In addition, the existing structures of employment often necessitate or encourage the movement of people in response to job insecurity, the movement of capital or in pursuit of better prospects which dilutes an individual's sense of connection to geographic communities. These conditions, which breed individualism and apathy, cause a decline in participation in civic action and a weakening of community bonds. At the same time, due to growing polarization in society and insecurities and anxieties created by current economic policies, there is a growing tendency to form insular communities around the identity or interests of particular ethnic, religious, racial, caste-based, or class-based groups. A sign of the crisis facing the inclusive and egalitarian community is the growing segregation of peoples along ethnic, religious, and class lines, the increasing popularity of gated communities, the ghettoization of those belonging to communities considered part of the 'Other' and the shrinking of spaces where people can interact and collaborate across social, religious and economic lines.

Thus, most communities today are in a state of crisis, with growing individualism and apathy on the one hand and the increasing trend towards insularity and parochialism in social relationships on the other. The challenge then is to develop purposeful, cohesive and inclusive communities where all are valued and cared for equally irrespective of their social, economic or religious backgrounds. It calls for the cultivation of a consciousness of oneness that elevates one's attachment to a particular group or community above any form of chauvinism and that imbues one's motivations to serve one's fellowmen in local settings with the noblest of sentiments. It is a kind of consciousness most expansively described in moral counsels such as these found in the world's sacred scriptures:

Be generous in prosperity, and thankful in adversity. Be worthy of the trust of thy neighbour, and look upon him with a bright and friendly face. Be a treasure to the poor, an admonisher to the rich, an answerer to the cry of the needy, a preserver of the sanctity of thy pledge. ...Be as a lamp unto them that walk in darkness, a joy to the sorrowful, a sea for the thirsty, a haven for the distressed, an upholder and defender of the victim of oppression. ...Be a home for the stranger, a balm to the suffering, a tower of strength for the fugitive. (Bahá'í Holy Writings, n.d., para. 3)

At the same time, consciousness is intimately connected to action. One of the most powerful ways of strengthening the bond between the individual and the community is through creating avenues for meaningful and effective civic participation that address the caring needs of community members. During the pandemic, for example, one area where the need for community support in the provision of care became clear was in supporting the education and development of children who, for extended periods, could not attend in-person classes in schools. This need was particularly acute in cases of children of economically underprivileged families.

These considerations raise a number of questions. How can supporting the care and development of vulnerable segments of the population in a community, such as children, the sick, and the elderly, become a long-term avenue for civic engagement (and not just a reaction to a crisis) through which the identification and commitment of individuals to the community are strengthened? How can caring, egalitarian and inclusive communities be developed by people in urban neighbourhoods and villages that build solidarities across social, economic, and religious divisions, avoiding segregation and fostering intermixing of peoples of all backgrounds in collective endeavours? How can such communities consisting of people of diverse backgrounds champion the cause of justice without sacrificing the unity between them?