

Harvard Club, New York Speech on Habitat II Istanbul Conference

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This paper was presented on a panel at the Harvard Club in New York City on February 28, 1996, that was held to report on the UN Habitat II Conference. Other speakers included: John McConnell, founder of Equinox Earth Day and co-founder of the Earth Society Foundation; Elaine Wolfson, founding president of the Global Alliance for Women's Health; and Carol Smolensky, U.N. NGO representative for the Defense of Children International.

The U.N. is a very important institution but under attack and underfunded. It costs only \$2 per person on earth. Compare this to \$134 per person for military expenditures. The total operating expenses for the entire U.N. system (including World Bank, IMF, and all the U.N. funds, programs and specialized agencies) comes to \$18.2 billion a year. This is less than the annual revenue of a major corporation like Dow Chemical, which took in more than \$20 billion in 1994. The budget for the U.N.'s core functions in New York, Geneva, Nairobi, Vienna and five Regional Commissions is only \$1.3 billion a year. This is about 4% of NYC's annual budget.

The Turkish hospitality to foreign guests contrasted with the repression of freedoms of speech and expression in Istanbul. Contrapuntal to the Official U.N. Habitat meetings, an Alternative Habitat Conference had been organized by individuals and human rights organizations who perceived a profound hypocrisy in having a major global conference on adequate human shelter and sustainable settlements in a nation state waging a war within its own territory, a conflict, which thus far had destroyed more than 2,000 Kurdish villages and created thousands of refugees, many of whom, now landless and uprooted, were living in extremely substandard and insecure conditions in Istanbul.

The official U.N. conference, with delegates from 183 nation states, had convened at three previous preparatory conferences. The task before them was to finalize a 65-page document that would be the Global Action Agenda for Adequate

Shelter and Sustainable Human Settlements. It was inspiring to watch this assembly working laboriously word by word to a consensus.

The issue of Housing as a Human Right was a major, perhaps the primary, point of contention at Habitat II. The official position of the U.S.A. delegation opposed issuing a clear statement of housing as a human right. The concern was that homeless people might use this as a basis for lawsuits against the government for not providing shelter. That, in my perspective, is perhaps understandable in a time when the proper role of government is currently being rethought and redefined.

But it brings us up against a perplexing reality. If people do not have the purchasing capacity to procure safe, secure shelter for their families, what choices do they have? When the mechanisms of the market economy disallow supply to meet demand to secure basic human needs, then a compassionate society has turned towards government to play a role in the provision of these basic necessities, either through various forms of transfer payments or through centralized control and planning.

Elsewhere there is the realization that the huge bureaucracies of the welfare state, which confiscate the wages of the middle classes through the income tax in the attempt to provide housing and other necessities for the poor, are unwieldy, unworkable and a bandaid at best.

Above and beyond any particular ideology or world view is the raw reality of the horrendous and maldistribution of wealth on planet earth:

- The richest fifth receives 82.7% of total income, while the poorest fifth received 1.4% of world income.
- The incomes of the richest 20% of the world's people are approximately 140 times those of the poorest 20%.
- The world now has more than 350 billionaires whose combined net worth equals the annual income of the poorest 45% of the world's population (The Nation, July 15-22, 1996, "The Limits of the Earth")
- The richest 1% of Americans possesses greater wealth than the bottom 90% (New York Times, 10-19-86, "How Many Billionaires are Enough.")

There is a grave problem with the way the democratic governance is currently constituted. This year at universities throughout our country students have been organizing Forums on The Crisis of Democracy, asking how can democratic institutions remain intact while there is an ongoing concentration of economic and subsequently political power in the hands of so few.

I've come to see the world increasingly as a hologram, as if all of the world is somehow reflected and can be seen in each part of the world. I see similar forces at work in my own small town in rural southcentral Pennsylvania, both for good and for bad, as I saw in the city of Istanbul and see in New York City.

There were 2,000 Kurdish villages destroyed in Turkey, and similar crises elsewhere, but here in our land, witness the decaying and rotting conditions of homes, schools, and infrastructure. Many of us are appalled by the ongoing expropriation of land and mineral resources and the poisoning of the water, earth, and thus the peoples on what remains of the land bases allocated to Native Americans. Perhaps the forces militating against the renewal of human habitat in our own country bear some resemblance to the forces that lead to the blatant destruction of villages and communities throughout the world.

The one reality that is quite obviously contributing to intense human suffering and conflict, that threatens the survival of people and their democratic institutions, is the maldistribution of wealth problem. With a fair distribution of wealth throughout the world, there would be no need for a global conference concerned about securing adequate shelter for all.

My perception is that this problem is clearly acknowledged with the U.N. system and has been acknowledged in all the documents to come out of the five great global conferences of this decade. The question remains, what are we going to do about it?

It is not government's role to provide decent shelter for all, then how can we establish a market economy that functions not only freely and efficiently but also fairly?

The NGO that I represent, the International Union for Land Value Taxation, is part of a world-wide movement that is working to implement a market system that fairly distributes wealth, one that would result in sufficient purchasing capacity for all in order to procure life's basic necessities and even something to spare to make life worth living. Our movement stems from a perspective that has been struggling to emerge for the past 100 years, some would even say for the past 2000 years.

Of primary concern to our movement is how to establish a market system that functions both freely and fairly. The body of knowledge that this movement has spawned has clearly identified the root of the maldistribution of wealth problem and the fundamental flaw in current market economies.

We have not founded our democratic system of governance on what should be a fundamental human right -- the human right to the planet itself.

Here are some land ownership facts:

- A U.N. study of 83 countries showed that less than 5% of rural landowners control three-quarters of the land.
- According to a government report, 2% of landowners hold 60% of the arable land in Brazil while close to 70% of rural households have little or none.

- Just 342 farm properties in Brazil cover 183,397 square miles -- an area larger than California. (Worldwatch, October, 1988)

In order to show there was NO NEED for land reform in Central America because our land in the U.S.A. is even more concentrated in ownership than Central America, Senator Jesse Helms read these facts into the Congressional Record in 1981:

- In Florida, 1% of the population owns 77% of the private land. Other states where the top 1% owns over two-thirds of the land are Maine, Arizona, California, Nevada, New Mexico, and Oregon.

Throughout the world, we see these numbers (compiled by U.K. Quaker Land Research Committee):

- 86% of South Africa is still owned by the white minority population.
- 60% of El Salvador is owned by 2% of the population.
- 80% of Pakistan is owned by 3% of the population.
- 74% of Great Britain is owned by 2% of the population.
- 84% of Scotland is owned by 7% of the population.

Many of our modern nation states were founded on territorial conquest and domination, on the old Roman stance of "dominium" -- the legalization of land acquired by conquest and plunder. And we continue to be ruled by might rather than by what is right. "Neocolonialism" and the globalization of the economy have become code phrases for the challenges arising from earth's control by so few.

Another aspect of this land tenure is that current market mechanisms distort free trade. Buying, selling, and thus profiteering and speculating in land and resources prevents market supply from meeting demand in order to procure shelter and other life necessities for all.

All that we need for life's securities is created by labor applied to land and natural resources. I believe that it is important that the ethics and institutions of democracy are firmly grounded upon the human right to the earth and this ethic be realized in a practical matter through fundamental reforms in our systems of public finance.

In Istanbul our NGO sponsored six forums entitled "The Earth is the Birth-right of All People. We described how to implement this right in a practical manner through local to global public finance systems based on the collection of the ground rent of land and resources for the benefit of all. These policies shift the public revenue base away from taxes on labor and productive capital and onto fees for the use of land and natural resources, an approach recommended now by eight Nobel Prize winners and also by equinox Earth Day Founder John McConnell.



Refugees in transit after being forced off their common lands.