

TRIBUNA

We, the Cities

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More than 70 years ago, with the intention to rebuild a new world on top of the ruins of World War II, the governments came together in San Francisco to sign the United Nations Charter. All of them – “we, the peoples of the united nations” – showed themselves determined, among others, to save the world from the scourge of war, to reaffirm faith in fundamental rights, dignity and the worth of the human person, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom. In the wake of these foundational commitments followed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and a set of international treaties and conventions to which States have been subscribing progressively, thereby accepting to be bound to human rights obligations.

If, admittedly, this regulatory framework has not always been respected, until today, there was at least an attempt to conceal the human rights violations from the public opinion and the international community. Lately, though, there are increasingly more voices from political representatives – also from supposedly democratic countries – who justify, or even promote them, undermining a whole system of rights and guarantees after it took centuries to build it. It is no coincidence that, in just a few months’ time, up to three countries – Ukraine, France and Turkey – have (temporarily) derogated from the European Convention on Human Rights.

The agreements between the European Union and third countries on the matter of refugees and migration, the xenophobe rhetoric in the media and in the programs of political parties which, at each election, receive more votes, the contempt for the human lives at the gates of our fortresses, the attacks on the environment, the *laissez-faire* in front of serious abuses committed by transnational organisations, uncontrolled

arms trade or the dismantling of our freedoms in the name of a militarised security are worrying signs of the decadence that alienates us from the ideals that should mark the path that was taken in 1945.

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Amidst all this chaos, the city of Madrid offered, for some weeks, a small oasis of exchange, dialogue, creativity and hope. Invited by the mayors of Madrid, Manuela Carmena, and Paris, Anne Hidalgo, representatives of many municipalities, big and small, from around the world, and a well-nourished representation of organisations from the social fabric participated in the World Forum on Urban Violence and Education for Coexistence and Peace, held in Madrid from 19 to 21 April 2017. Close to 3,500 persons from around 70 countries did not want to miss out on this event.

This gathering has given the opportunity, on one hand, to listen to speeches and reflections that are very remote to the miserable trends mentioned earlier. Speeches and reflections where people were talking about solidarity, sustainability, democracy, social justice, gender equality and which remind us that, at the centre of all priorities, we need to place the dignity of the all human beings, without any kind of discrimination. In the present situation, organising international meetings with the participation of institutional representatives of the highest level and the media coverage we saw during the Forum in Madrid is fundamental. Without any doubt, initiatives of this kind help to highlight these principles, give them visibility and put them on the political agenda.

On the other hand, the Forum has been a magnificent occasion for the mayors of many cities to send the world this message: against the culture of violence, we, the cities, call upon the culture of peace. If governments cannot come to an agreement to solve international conflicts in a pacific way, if they lack commitment to improve the people's

living conditions, fight against corruption, protect the environment and educate in the spirit of peace, we, from our mayor's offices, will keep moving forward.

“ It gives hope to see that the highest municipal authorities call upon the culture of peace to solve conflicts ”

And it is very encouraging to see that mayors commit themselves in this sense, because it is precisely at the urban level that expressions of violence are most visible. By violence, we don't just mean the crime level. Beside physical attacks against persons and acts of interpersonal violence, we also refer to more structural forms of violence, as inequalities, poverty, shortage in access to housing, education or healthcare, lack of job opportunities, corruption, discrimination, etc. We also need to keep in mind the most symbolic (or cultural) forms of violence that perpetuate structural and/or direct violence: those messages - more or less subliminal - that are still very present in our daily language, customs, media, entertainment, public opinion, creating and aggravating prejudices, exclusions and marginalisation.

Before these multiple situations of violence, it gives hope to see that the highest municipal authorities take time to reflect with the intention of finding an integral response, not exclusively based on “securing” measures, but calling upon the culture of peace to resolve conflicts and promote the education in coexistence.

The debates, held during the Forum, have been very useful to address, with direct testimonies, conflicts arising in the cities in all their diversity: from the challenges found in Montreal (Canada), a city of 4 million inhabitants, to the way refugees are hosted in a relatively small town like Ventimiglia (Italy), as well as the outbursts of violence the mayoress of Banganté (Cameroon) tries to manage despite limited local powers.

They have also helped to raise awareness on several initiatives led by public institutions or civil society organisations, which have had positive results. And even if

there is no universal formula for the promotion of proper coexistence and peacebuilding in urban surroundings, the Forum – with its formal and informal scenes – was helpful in giving publicity to projects in progress and getting to know them more in detail, showing their capacity of adaptation to and implementation in other locations. Because, if the cities are spaces for conflicts which can derive in violence, they are also spaces for encounters, for shelter, for creativity, for knowledge, for personal and collective growth, for leisure, for culture, that can help us to move forward towards a more fair and sustainable world. You only need to know how to identify and promote them.

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In this connection, the Forum did not find itself short of theatre, dance, music,... because art as well, especially urban art, has claimed its place as a tool for social transformation. This has been brilliantly exposed by the philosopher and dancer Miguel Ballarín, and illustrated by our friend Jeihhco from Casa Kolacho, Medellín, who managed to move an entire auditorium with his rap.

The opponents of initiatives like this one can detect naivety or even demagoguery in every project aiming at peacebuilding. Even so, putting serious problems that affect the well-being and life of millions of people on the table and looking for a way to solve them is exactly what political leaders ought to be doing, whether on the national, regional or local level. Creating platforms for dialogue, for exchanging experiences, for building alliances to confront those problems, according to principles which unite the entire humanity, is no eccentricity. On the other hand, what we do have to demand from our leaders is coherence and exemplarity in rhetoric and practice. Despite the lucidity,

solidarity and sensitivity, expressed during the Forum by their respective mayors, Madrid, Paris and many other cities are not exempt from evictions, exclusions, gender-based violence, police abuse or racism. The final statement of the Forum could be considered a road map to stand firm on the commitments, while waiting for a political agenda for peace in municipalities: "Madrid's commitment to peaceful cities".

A three-day lasting forum is definitely not enough to change the wrong course events are taking, but it can give wings to all those people who are working for peace and human rights, often in very hostile situations. It opens the door so that more municipalities may feel themselves challenged to tackle urban conflicts from a culture of peace. The announcement of the organisation of another worldwide gathering in two years from now is very positive news. Hopefully, more local governments join in and more organisations from civil society can attend. Peace capitals are needed all around the planet.

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