'Mumbai is a civilization based on democracy, peace, understanding and tolerance'

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The welcome session of the launch will be held on March 15 at KC College Auditorium.

The Shahani Group India and Global Dialogue Foundation Australia, in collaboration with UN Alliance of Civilizations and NGO DPI, will launch Unity in Diversity-World Civil Society, India on March 15-16.

Representatives from NGO's, private business, government, religious and spiritual organizations will come together to align efforts towards building inclusive societies in

Mumbai. Unity in Diversity - World Civil Society is the nucleus of a planetary citizen's assembly, which aims to establish collaboration by citizens with governments and religions, at local, regional and global (UN) levels.

The Mumbai event will focus on projects that strengthen communities and support people from all cultural background to better integrate with society while maintaining their cultural identity and heritage.

Iamin spoke to Hanifa D. Mezoui, who is in Mumbai for the launch. Mezoui is a native of Algeria who has worked with the United Nations for the past 25 years and is currently serving as Senior Advisor to United Nations Alliance of Civilizations.

How do you look at Mumbai in terms of civilization?
Mumbai is defined by its cultural and ethnic diversity. Almost every religion and every region of the world is represented here. While half the population is Hindu, there are significant religious minorities including Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, Zoroastrians and Jews here. Almost every Indian language and many foreign languages are spoken in Mumbai. The cultural life of the city very much reflects this ethnically diverse population.
When we look at the history, cultural, social and economic development of Mumbai, we understand the power it holds as a civilization. Mumbai is recognized as the commercial capital of India and one of the most populous and densely populated cities in the world with over 21 million people, nearly half of whom live in slums and shanty towns under social and economically stressful conditions.
We can learn much from Mumbai in terms of how such co-existence prevails in relative peace. You cannot achieve this type of harmony without building a civilization based on the shared values of democracy, peace, understanding and tolerance. We strongly believe that Mumbai's power as a civilization lies in its search for understanding among all its citizens.

When we talk about societies, there is always some kind of objection to change. How do you look at that?
Change is inevitable and is happening all around us, every day. The most important question that concerns people is the direction of change, particularly in the areas of economic and social policy. Who benefits and who loses often determines the acceptance or rejection of change. Much depends on how the consequences of change are presented to the public. If there is no dialogue and no understanding of the consequences for different groups, then conflict often arises. Therefore, change has to be presented in a context of collaboration and dialogue among citizens, governments, religious groups and the private sector, which constitute basic pillars of unity in diversity.

Your objective is to build communication in civil society. So, what do you think is affecting Mumbai in terms of economic growth and a society with understanding?
Civil society organizations working in the field of cultural diversity at the grassroots to address these challenges are facing difficulties due to lack of resources and capacity to influence policy at national and international levels. Often, they are operated by representatives of minority groups and individuals under pressure due to ethnic or religious diversity. Many of their leaders often experience difficulties connected to language,

prejudices and have limited connections to governments and other institutions. Therefore, their potential for solving problems, particularly of an ethnic and religious nature, is underutilized.

Since India is diverse in nature, what can be done to build societies in equal diverse ways?

Collaboration is a key. As Unity in Diversity - World Civil Society is the nucleus of a planetary citizens assembly, which aims to represent every culture, ethnicity and civilization at the local, regional and global (UN) levels, it is committed to increasing capacity in communities so citizens are better equipped to contribute to mainstream society.

It cannot be done by citizens alone but together and in collaboration with local, state, federal governments and international institutions. We see these as relevant for building a good society and in this way the vision of Unity in Diversity will be successful.

What will be Unity in Diversity - World Civil Society's first job after launching?

After launching, we aim at forming a "National Steering Committee" in India; which will coordinate continuously among civil society, private business sector, governments, religions, spiritual organizations and work towards building inclusive societies. We will also establish a grassroots "Community Leadership Team" which will work with local communities in creating and implementing projects to strengthen civil society via dialogue and understanding. It will also be crucial to lay the foundation of the Policy of the Indian Unity in Diversity - World Civil Society Assembly and to create the first action plan based on this policy. We will focus on establishing a strong collaboration between the UN Alliance of Civilizations India Focal Point, UN associated organizations and the Indian civil society in order to contribute to reaching the UN's Sustainable Development Goals

What is the role of government in this foundation? Do you think politics could be a major factor while working with society?

Politics is a key factor in working with society. Like civilizations, politics in its philosophical definition, is an entire component of human life and development. In its essence, politics hold the values of liberty, justice, rights, law and everything that is needed to make and protect society's freedom.

With that in mind, at UNAOC, we believe that governments are vital actors in promoting and in protecting the idea of 'unity in diversity' within their societies. This political initiative is stronger and even more necessary today, as the world becomes increasingly globalized and interconnected. However, we have learned an important lesson in 70 years. We have understood that governments and politics cannot work for peace and inclusivity alone. They need the partnership of all factors, ranging from civil society organizations, youth, public and private foundations businesses.

What suggestions do you have for students willing to work with UN?

I am proud to mention the increased involvement in our programs of youth located in the four corners of the world, including India. It demonstrates that youth want to be trusted and empowered. At the Alliance, we trust them, and we do our utmost to empower them through immediate and action-oriented programs.

The welcome session of the launch will be held on March 15, starting at 5:00pm, at KC College Auditorium and on March 16, from 9:30am to 3:30pm at Thadomal Shahani Centre