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THEIR CHOICE OR YOURS
GLOBAL FORCES OR
LOCAL VOICES?

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and
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Preface

As one of their contributions to preparations for the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, March 1995), UNRISD and the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) undertook a project on **Volunteer Contributions to Social Integration at the Grassroots: The Urban or “Pavement” Dimension**. Its purpose was to survey and highlight the current and potential contributions of volunteer effort towards social integration at the local level. The project emphasized two elements: to hear from the volunteers, as far as possible, in their own words; and to provide an urban “pavement” perspective from marginalized communities in large cities around the world.

The project was implemented quickly, with much of the survey work completed between July 1994 and March 1995. In this short span, field visits were made to 16 cities on four continents; in each city local researchers prepared several case studies of innovative or especially instructive efforts by community organizations and volunteer groups to combat grave urban social problems. With some 40 case studies under way, the project’s researcher-activists and supporters met in Cyprus in late November 1994 to discuss the main themes raised by their studies, as well as to plan a series of short-term exchanges between community groups participating in the project and to formulate recommendations for strengthening community and volunteer action for inclusion in the Social Summit’s Plan of Action. At the Summit itself, UNV and UNRISD organized a series of roundtable discussions to present the early findings of the project. Some of these findings are contained in the present document, **Their Choice or Yours: Global Forces or Local Voices?**, an early version of which was distributed at the Social Summit. A revised and expanded version was distributed at Habitat II, and now with a few additional changes, it is appearing as the second UNRISD Discussion Paper on the theme of Community Perspectives on Urban Governance.

One of the findings to emerge most forcefully from the UNV-UNRISD project was that community responses to urban social problems could achieve much greater impact if they occurred in a context of genuine support from a stronger, more open local government. Taking the latter theme as a point of departure, UNRISD and UNV have embarked on a new project, **Volunteer Action and Local Democracy: A Partnership for a Better Urban Future**, to understand better the successes of and constraints on collaboration between community organizations (including volunteer groups) and local authorities. Preliminary findings from eight cities were presented at the Habitat II Conference in Istanbul in June 1996. A number of the reports from this project will be published in 1997, also as UNRISD Discussion Papers on the theme of Community Perspectives on Urban Governance.

This paper brings together the findings of the Cyprus meeting, extracts from the case studies and some of the most pressing concerns expressed by the groups and individuals that participated in the project. The introduction highlights the findings of the meeting, focusing on the internal and external forces tending to limit the success of community action in the project cities. It also outlines some broad strategies for overcoming these. Part I sets the

context of the project, describes the process of case study selection, and attempts to clarify the concepts of “community” and “volunteer action” that undergird the project. Part II consists of extracts from the case studies. Together they demonstrate an extraordinary range of community action in the face of deep and complex crises that disproportionately affect residents of low-income urban neighbourhoods. In their diversity and innovativeness — often predicated on the absence of external assistance or resources — these responses to crisis cast volunteers of the 1990s in a very non-traditional light. Fortunately, it is one that provides hopeful glimpses of solutions to modern-day sources of marginalization and social exclusion.

A list of acknowledgements is appended at the end of the text to recognize the many persons whose judgement and knowledge were tapped in formulating the project.

Krishno Dey was the Principal Officer of UNV until late 1994. He now operates independently from his home in Shantiniketan, West Bengal, India. David Westendorff co-ordinates research on **Community Perspectives on Urban Governance** at UNRISD.

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Executive Co-ordinator, UNV

October 1996

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KEWWO: The Kenya Women Workers Organisation, Nairobi
JANAM: Jana Natya Manch (People's Theatre Forum), Delhi
SAHMAT: The Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust, Delhi
Mothers of Acari, Rio de Janeiro
WHE Act: West Harlem Environmental Action, New York City

Confidence Building through Self-Help Enterprise

Self-Managed Community Kitchens, Lima
SMS: Sramajivi Mahila Sangha (Working Women's Group), Calcutta
WIPNO: Winstanley/Industry Park Neighborhood Organization, East St. Louis, Illinois
WEP: Women's Empowerment Project, Chicago, Illinois

Social Organization for Negotiation and Power Sharing

SPARC: Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres, Mumbai

YUVA: Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action, Mumbai
PDO: Footpathvashi Nagrik Sanghatana, Mumbai
Unnayan: Social Action Group, Calcutta
AIDWA: All India Democratic Women's Association, Delhi
The Bengal Social Service League (Mass Literacy Campaign), Calcutta
MKSS: Workers and Peasants Movement, Rajasthan
Volunteer Artisan Trainers, Nepal, India, Bhutan and Sri Lanka

Alternative, Volunteer Models of Social Organization

FDAH: Front for the Development of Human Settlements, Lima
Central de Comedores de Tahuantinsuyo: Tahuantinsuyo, Lima
WBTMU: The West Bengal Tannery Mazdoor Union, Calcutta
MFCS: Mudiali Fishermen's Co-operative Society, Calcutta

Conflict Resolution through Attitudinal Change

Peace Committees/Peace Secretariat, Johannesburg
Rah-e Haqq: "The way to our rights", Mumbai
WLA: Women Litigants' Association, Mumbai

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CDCJD: Centro de Desarrollo Comunitario Juan Diego, Mexico City
AMAI: Residents' Association of Arco Iris, São Paulo
BREM Social Ministries, North St. Louis, Illinois
The Centre for Peace Action, Eldorado Park Township, Johannesburg

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Brazil
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Acknowledgements

Despite being able to rely on operational and research contacts in the project countries, the task of identifying community (grassroots) organizations whose activities and capacities fit the criteria of the project was far from straightforward. Grassroots or neighbourhood organizations, and even many NGOs working closely with them, often operate below the visibility of our local contacts. Such organizations rarely attend national or international conferences, almost never receive grants from international agencies, and even more rarely leave a written trail of their efforts and achievements. Many have no permanent address or staff members. Our task was thus to uncover the persons who could lead us to organizations that knew of groups that should be of interest to the project. These are the persons listed below. We are grateful to these colleagues for advising us about what to look for, who to contact and how to approach our work in the project cities. We sincerely regret any inadvertent omissions.

Additional thanks must also be extended to Mr. Glafkos Constantinides, who helped co-ordinate the project in its initial stages and organize the workshop in Cyprus; to intern Mike Nicoson for assistance in organizing and staffing the Cyprus workshop; to Miguel Peirano for his telecommunications expertise and contacts throughout the project and long hours as the Spanish/Portuguese/English interpreter during the Cyprus workshop; and to Patricia Ramirez, for her persistence and good cheer in handling so many of the internal administrative tasks of the project. Thanks also go to Sylvie Brenninkmeyer-Liu, Erika Drucker and George Reid for their assistance with production of earlier versions of this paper.

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