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BUILDING SAFE COMMUNITIES

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I will start by saying that some of the reflections I will share with you today have been inspired by the interesting book "21 Lessons for the 21st Century" by historian Yuval Noah Harari, currently professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

In today's polarised society, full of anger and resentment, where it can happen that neighbours stab each other over a parking lot, neighbourhood micro-communities can represent a hope for solidarity and social cohesion. Micro-neighbourhood communities, such as Neighbourhood Watch in Italy, Neighbourhood Watch in the UK, or Voisins Vigilantes in France (but also micro-communities animated by other purposes), are driven not only by the common need for security, but also by the awareness that in a community one depends on others for many aspects of one's life. This awareness can foster the integration of residents around common needs such as security, but also facilitate the peaceful and creative coexistence of different sensitivities and cultures to promote a stronger, freer, and more cohesive community.

The prerequisite for building free and cohesive communities is trust between neighbours and, no less important, mutual trust between citizens and institutions. Otherwise, communities risk falling apart, degenerating into chaos. One part of the community could collide against the other (and it usually happens with the newcomers, mainly if foreigners. Obviously, I do not want to dismiss the complex problem of immigration with an easy joke here, but these are often the effects).

A community that collide, distrust, if not being hostile too towards institutions. A community that collide and have no trust inthe role played by the Law Enforcement Agencies. This is a perfect mix for what can be called closed and hostile communities. The issue of cohesive and participative communities is an extremely interesting and complex one that will be addressed tomorrow, in this same hall, in the course of the annual conference of the Italian National Neighbourhood Watch Association.

Going on, it is also true that communities can be battlegrounds, difficult neighbourhoods where social unrest can prevent cohesion. But the members of a micro-community have an advantage and a strength of their own: they both know well their places and people, and based on this knowledge, prevention and participation strategies can be formulated and implemented.

The CEOs of social networks, who build this networks on the Net only for financial purposes, are highly sensitive to social anxieties, so much so that it led Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Facebook - now Meta - to say in a brave manifesto on February 2017 that he wanted to, and I quote ho, "help a

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billion people join meaningful communities" ... so as to "strengthen our social fabric by bringing different parts of the world closer together."

But we should seriously question whether online social networks can really help in building a 'global human community'. I do not have enough data on the effects that social networks have on world's population. Therefore I am not able to make a conscious judgement on the subject now. Personally, however, I remain convinced that in order to flourish, a community still needs to find its fundamental references in the context of small communities.

Today, most of us find it impossible to really know more than a hundred and fifty individuals, no matter how numerous our Facebook friends are. Without this real knowledge, we run the risk of feeling lonely and alienated, because one of man's basic needs is a sense of belonging, his being a social animal.

Historians, anthropologists, and sociologists tell us that small communities have been disappearing over the past two centuries, and the attempt to replace small groups whose members know each other intimately with imaginary communities such as nations and political parties may not have been entirely successful. Our millions of brothers belonging to the national family and our hundreds of thousands of friends belonging to our party may not provide us with the sense of warm intimacy that a single, true brother or friend can give us. And so people find themselves living increasingly lonely lives on an increasingly interconnected world. In the end, the dream of a connected world teared us apart.

Many of the social and political upheavals of our time (such as increasing drug addiction, baby gangs, widespread anger), are the likely consequences of this malaise and are linked to the disintegration of human communities. Which means that there are many people who now need to find sense and support elsewhere. They , therefore, seek this support in virtual worlds. A community may start with an online meeting, but it will also have to take roots in the real world to really thrive

Sometimes virtual communities can foster the vitality of real ones, but in many cases the virtual world takes time and resources away from thereal one. Real communities possess a depth that cannot be compared to virtual communities. If I am sick at home in Italy, my online friends in France can talk to me, but they cannot bring me hot soup or a cup of tea.

In the last century, technology has made us more interested in what happens in cyberspace than in what happens at home. It is very easy to talk to my cousin in London, but it is difficult to talk to my wife at breakfast, who is constantly looking at her smartphone. In the past, such a lack of attention within a group of human beings would have been intolerable.

Today, if something exciting or unusual happens to us, our instinctive reaction is to take out our smartphone, take a picture, post it online and wait for the 'likes' to come. In this process we are barely aware of what we ourselves are feeling. What we really need is a tool to connect our experiences to those of others.

Would it be desirable to adopt a new model that encourages people to only connect online when it is really necessary, and to pay more attention to their physical environment, their bodies and their feelings? Reducing relationships solely to online ones leads to social polarisation, the experts tell us so. It is true that people can have loyal bonds with various groups at the same time, but intimate relationships are extremely likely to be a zero-sum game. The time and energy we can devote to getting to know our online friends in Sweden or Morocco will be subtracted from the time and energy we have available to get to know our neighbours.

And finally, the Metaverse, which in the next decade will transform almost every aspect of our lives and business and erase the distinction between real and virtual worlds, merging them into a single augmented reality. It is a mature technology but not yet widely deployed. I would not like that one day, when this technology will be invasively present in our society, we will begin to feel nostalgic of a time when the real world was distinct from the virtual one.

On the basis of what has been said so far, EUNWA is therefore particularly interested in the organisational model and web platform of Voisins Vigilantes et Solidaires which, among other things, limits its virtual communities to small entities where people are more likely to know and meet in the real world.