

# ***Uplifting Words***

## ***Economic Life of Communities***

*Among the basic tenets of the Bahá'í Faith is the elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty by promoting just economic systems and the voluntary striving of everyone, rich and poor. Bahá'ís everywhere are called on to learn about how to advance collective prosperity through the implementation of methods and approaches that promote unity and justice, as well as the application to economic affairs of such spiritual principles and concepts as generosity, trustworthiness, and integrity. A handful of examples of activities that have contributed in one or another way to enhancing the economic life of families and communities, albeit modestly, are provided below.*

In many communities around the world, a growing spirit of mutual support and assistance naturally finds expression in economic activities. In a village in **Togo**, a group of 18 friends formed a cooperative with the aim of sharing resources and helping improve the material well-being of their families. A farm was created on which all of its members would work. Over many years, with the money that had been raised from the produce, the members were able to cover the cost of several of their families' health and educational needs. For instance, the children of these individuals were the first in the village to go through tertiary education. At the same time, the group's concern with the advancement of the entire community prompted it to consider how opportunities could be created for all children to have access to better education. The group also obtained a mill which, in addition to being used for its own activities, was intended to benefit two neighboring villages that did not have access to similar technology.

Many Bahá'í educational projects, while not directly focused on strengthening local economies, help build the capacity of individuals to earn a livelihood as they strive to contribute to the advancement of their communities. In **Colombia**, the Supporting Community Leaders (SCL) program of FUNDAEC assists young people living in rural regions of the country to select and pursue a path related to one or another trade or profession. The youth take part in apprenticeships and technical or undergraduate degree programs, and some are assisted to pursue a path of entrepreneurship by starting a production project or a small business.

Specific programs focused on one or another aspect of local economic activity are also under way in some places. Almost two decades ago, the Bahá'í-inspired organization Education, Curriculum, and Training Associates (ECTA) in **Nepal** developed a community banking program. The program involves offering training to groups of 10 to 30 individuals, who then begin to save small sums and make modest loans available to bank members at a reasonable rate of interest. The banks are managed entirely by the members themselves, and interest earned is divided proportionally according to the amount each holds in savings. Further, a portion of the profits is put into a social and economic development fund for the benefit of the community at large. The banks provide their members with the opportunity to learn skills of sound financial management and encourage them to establish or expand their own businesses.

A number of organizations in other parts of the world, primarily in Africa and Latin America, have implemented this program in different settings. Among these is Asociación Bayan in **Honduras**, which in 2017 was supporting some 70 banks. Through saving, young people have

been able to continue their education or pursue a means of livelihood within their own communities, alleviating to a certain degree pressures that lead youth in the rural regions of Honduras to move away. Banking groups have also been able to carry out a variety of community development initiatives of fixed duration, including digging a well, constructing a bridge, building and painting classrooms, installing a culvert beneath a road, and engaging in agricultural experiments.

## *Arts and Media*

*The Bahá'í Writings give particular significance to the arts, asserting their capacity to “uplift the world of being” and to “awaken noble sentiments” among the masses of people. Bahá'í development efforts that utilize arts and media, then, use various means of communication to help inspire high aims and raise consciousness about principles pertinent to the material and spiritual progress of a population. They attempt to give concepts and themes drawn from the principles of the Faith expression in new forms in order to assist in effecting constructive social change. A small selection of such efforts is described below.*

Early instances of initiatives in the field of arts and communications media include the establishment of Bahá'í radio stations in Latin America and Asia. These agencies have provided a notable example of the role that media can play in contributing to the material and spiritual progress of society. Radio Bahá'í in Soloy, **Panama**, was established in the 1980s to give voice to and serve as an educational and cultural channel for indigenous peoples. The station broadcasts in both Spanish and Ngäbere, the language of the local population, and has at least 7,000 listeners. It produces and airs content especially for children, youth, and women on themes of spiritual import including service, truthfulness, love, and generosity in the form of original songs, skits, announcements, and interviews.

A number of dance workshops and theater companies were also created over the years in an effort to raise awareness about certain social issues through the arts. One such example is the Children's Theater Company in the **United States**, which works with children and youth between the ages of five and nineteen to produce musicals and perform them for the general public in communities of New York City. Cast members meet weekly to reflect on the social and moral implications of the musicals, which address such themes as racial unity, the advancement of women, the elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty, and preservation of the environment. The Company also hosts a weekly discussion group with parents during which subjects related to early childhood development and parenting are explored.

More recently, a few Bahá'í communities have engaged in a process of learning aimed at creating and sharing meaningful content at the grassroots through several means of communication, such as film, music, and theater, in a way that raises collective understanding and contributes to the transformation of their social environment. Illumine Media Project in Toronto, **Canada**, for instance, offers workshops for youth on different aspects of filmmaking and invites them to participate in producing short films on themes reflecting the capacity of youth to transform their own lives and their environment. The films are then shared with the community through screenings at locations such as schools, community centers, and film festivals, during which the audience is posed a number of questions that are intended to stimulate meaningful conversation. Since the Project's start in 2012, some 2,000 young people have participated in such screenings.

A similar project in Chongón, **Ecuador**, helped give rise to a series of songwriting workshops that brought together musicians from several countries in Latin America to produce music for young people that addresses their unique aspirations and enhances their understanding of moral issues. The songs produced are shared with local populations through concerts, visits with families, and meetings of young people participating in the junior youth spiritual empowerment program