

Uplifting Words

The Worldwide Bahá'í Community's Approach to Social and Economic Development

Prepared by the Office of Social and Economic Development

Concept

Bahá'ís view development as a global enterprise whose purpose is to bring prosperity to all peoples, an enterprise that must pursue its aim in the context of an emerging world civilization. Humanity, the Bahá'í writings explain, is experiencing an age of transition best described as a passage from collective childhood to collective maturity. The revolutionary changes that are occurring with bewildering swiftness in every department of life assume their real meaning in this light. During this period, the barriers raised by the thoughts, attitudes, and habits of the childhood of humankind are gradually being uprooted, and the structures of a new civilization that can reflect the powers of adulthood are taking shape.

The hallmark of the age of maturity will be the unification of the human race, which, in turn, requires the establishment of the principles of justice. The current disparity between rich and poor cannot be permitted to persist. All of the earth's inhabitants should be able to enjoy the fruits of a materially and spiritually prosperous global society. To create such a society, it is essential that people everywhere be empowered to participate in the constructive processes that will give rise to it. Building the capacity in individuals, communities, and institutions to contribute effectively to these processes is the primary task of development.

For the individual, this implies developing a number of interrelated capabilities—scientific, artistic, technical, social, moral, and spiritual. Individuals must be endowed with an understanding of concepts, knowledge of facts, and mastery of methods, as well as the skills, attitudes, and qualities required to lead a productive life. In Concept terms of the community, capacity building entails fostering its development so that it can act as an environment conducive to the enrichment of culture. On the community rests the challenge of providing the milieu in which individual wills blend, in which powers are multiplied and manifest themselves in collective action, in which higher expressions of the human spirit can appear.

Beyond the training of individuals and the cultivation of community life, development strategies have to pay attention to the strengthening of organizational structures. Institutions are needed at every level of society that can act as channels through which the talents and energies of individuals and groups can be expressed in service to humanity. One of the accomplishments in which the Bahá'í community takes particular pride is the erection over its 170 years of existence—sometimes under the most adverse circumstances—of a structure of elected bodies that operate at the local, regional, national, and international levels. This collective hierarchy devolves decision-making to the lowest level practicable—

providing thereby a unique vehicle for grassroots action—while at the same time conferring a level of coordination and authority that makes possible cooperation on a global scale. Bahá'í development efforts throughout the world benefit from the guidance and support supplied by this administrative order.

Building the capacity of the world's peoples and their institutions to participate effectively in weaving the fabric of a prosperous and ever-advancing civilization requires a vast increase in their access to relevant knowledge. It also involves the ongoing generation, application, and dissemination of new knowledge at all levels of society and within every field of human endeavor. Given that such a civilization will have to be cognizant of both the material and spiritual dimensions of existence, development theory and practice must draw on the two basic knowledge systems that have propelled humanity's progress over the centuries: science and religion. Through these two agencies, the race's experience has been organized, its environment interpreted, its latent powers explored, and its moral and intellectual life disciplined. Together, they have acted as the real progenitors of civilization. Bahá'ís reject the notion that there is an inherent conflict between science and religion, a notion that became prevalent in intellectual discourse at a time when the very conception of each system was far from adequate. The harmony of science and religion is one of the fundamental principles of the Bahá'í Faith, which teaches that religion, without science, soon degenerates into superstition and fanaticism, while science without religion becomes merely the instrument of crude materialism. "Religion," according to the Faith's writings, "is the outer expression of the divine reality. Therefore, it must be living, vitalized, moving and progressive." "Science is the first emanation from God toward man. All created beings embody the potentiality of material perfection, but the power of intellectual investigation and scientific acquisition is a higher virtue specialized to man alone." An imaginary duality between reason and faith—a duality that would confine reason to the realm of empirical evidence and logical argumentation and which would associate faith with superstition and irrational thought—must be avoided. The process of development has to be rational and systematic—incorporating, for example, scientific capabilities of observing, of measuring, of rigorously testing ideas—and at the same time has to be deeply aware of faith and spiritual convictions—contributing, for instance, to virtue, good character, high resolve, cooperation, and sacrificial endeavor.

A cursory survey of the historical forces that are shaping the structure of society should convince even the most avid defenders of today's global policies that unchecked material progress will never lead to true prosperity. From the heart of the great masses of humanity a dual cry can be heard. While it calls for the extension of the fruits of material progress to all peoples, its appeal for the values of spiritual civilization is no less urgent. For material civilization is "like a lamp-glass. Divine civilization is the lamp itself and the glass without the light is dark. Material civilization is like the body. No matter how infinitely graceful, elegant and beautiful it may be, it is dead. Divine civilization is like the spirit, and the body gets its life from the spirit . . ."

Approach

Bahá'í development activities are governed by certain underlying principles. In the Bahá'í Faith, proselytizing is prohibited, and development projects are not conducted for the purpose of public relations or as a means of converting people. In the appropriate context, funding for projects of a humanitarian nature can be accepted from government and donor agencies, but Bahá'ís do not accept or use funds from outside sources for the progress of their internal community affairs. There

are, of course, opportunities for people to learn about the precepts of the Faith and to join it; so, too, there are a range of community activities, including those for worship and for education, in which all are welcome to take part. Development activities are, however, intended to involve Bahá'í communities in disinterested service to humanity.

Endeavors of social and economic development play a distinct function in the life of the Bahá'í community. They represent the efforts of individuals, groups, and Bahá'í governing councils to apply the spiritual principles of their Faith to the achievement of material and social progress. They are intended not to serve Bahá'ís alone but people of all beliefs, and they strive to elicit the widest possible participation. Often projects are undertaken in collaboration with government agencies and organizations of civil society that share similar aims.

Because the Bahá'í community is global in scope, it transcends divisions prevalent in society today such as urban and rural, "North" and "South," "developed" and "underdeveloped." The process of capacity building that defines development has to be carried forward in every part of the world. In whatever country Bahá'ís reside, whether in their native lands or elsewhere, they are morally bound to participate in this process and contribute their talents to its advancement as members of that national community. Bonds of collaboration, however, extend across national boundaries, and resources flow from the more materially prosperous countries to those with less. Bahá'ís believe that it is the right of every people to trace its own path of development and direct its own affairs. The Bahá'í global administrative structure safeguards this right. Thus, while outside support and resources may be readily available to a project, it is left to those directing it to determine whether the capacity exists to utilize such support constructively.

Progress in the development field, from a Bahá'í perspective, depends largely on natural stirrings at the grassroots of the community, and it is from such stirrings that it should derive its motivating force. In general, then, Bahá'í efforts in social and economic development emerge in localities where a pronounced sense of community exists and a growing collective consciousness and will is becoming manifest. These efforts often begin with a relatively simple set of actions that can be managed by the local community itself. Complexity emerges naturally and in an organic fashion, as the participants achieve success, gain experience, and increase their capacity to make decisions about their spiritual and material progress and implement them. Local action gives rise to projects of a more sustained nature with more ambitious goals. Invariably, organizational structures are created to support such projects, and some of these nascent agencies possess the potential to evolve into fully fledged development organizations with the ability to undertake programs in a wide field of action.

The existence of such organizations in a region is imperative if significant progress is to be achieved. For while an isolated project can yield tangible results, experience worldwide amply demonstrates that fragmented activities in health, education, agriculture, and so on do not lead to sustainable development. No one discipline can offer solutions to all the problems besetting humanity. Effective development calls unequivocally for coordinated, interdisciplinary, and multisectoral action. Organizational structures capable of dealing with increasing degrees of theoretical and administrative complexity are needed to integrate efforts across various fields and to provide the coherence required for consistent advance. The growing network of such organizations in the Bahá'í world community allows, too, for well-conceived methods and approaches that have emerged in one country or region to be shared with others, providing a natural channel for the flow of knowledge.

At whatever level they operate, the central theme of all Bahá'í development efforts is learning. As members of a religious community, Bahá'ís hold to a common set of beliefs

and fundamental principles. Yet the wise application of these principles to social transformation, which lies at the heart of all collective action, is something that must be learned through experience. Not only do such principles point the way to practical solutions, but they also induce the attitudes, the will, and the dynamics that facilitate implementation. Equally important to the learning process are the content and methods of science, for by religious truth is not meant mere assertions about the esoteric, but statements that lead to experimentation, application, and the creation of systems and processes, whose results can be validated through observation and the use of reason. Further, the advancement of civilization requires the multiplication of material means, and these have to be generated by scientific endeavor in areas such as economics, agriculture, and environmental protection. Development as a learning process, then, can best be described as one of study, consultation, action, and reflection on action—all carried out in the light of the guidance inherent in religious teachings and knowledge drawn from science.

When efforts are carried out in a learning mode, visions and strategies are re-examined time and again. As tasks are accomplished, obstacles removed, resources multiplied, and lessons learned, modifications are made in goals and methods. The learning process, which is given direction through appropriate institutional arrangements, unfolds in a way that resembles the growth and differentiation of a living organism. Haphazard change is avoided, and continuity of action maintained. Over the decades, the insights gained by Bahá'ís in various parts of the world have helped give rise to a common framework for learning about development that gives shape to activities and evolves as experience accumulates.

To facilitate learning about development theory and practice within the Bahá'í community, the Office of Social and Economic Development (OSED) has been established at the Faith's world headquarters in Haifa, Israel. It helps to strengthen institutional capacity in every country to promote Bahá'í development efforts, ensures that material resources become increasingly available to such efforts, and offers general advice, based on insights gained around the world, in response to questions that arise. OSED sees itself as a learning entity dedicated to the systematization of a growing worldwide experience made possible by the participation of increasing numbers of individuals, agencies, and communities in the development of their societies. The approach to development that comes into focus, then, defies categorization into either "top-down" or "bottom-up"; it is one, rather, of reciprocity and interconnectedness.

The following pages offer an overview of Bahá'í efforts in the area of development. Not discussed here, but no less significant, are the contributions to the development field made by thousands of Bahá'ís who, in their professional lives, are working within a host of agencies—in the public sector and in civil society—to bring about the betterment of humanity.