

Building a Just World Order

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The Bahá'í International Community, with affiliates in over 140 countries and members in 100,000 localities, of which 40,000 are in the ESCAP region, is a Non-Governmental Organization with consultative status at the United Nations. Its role is to support, in principle and in practice, the activities of the United Nations, which are consistent with Bahá'í principles, namely the building of a just world order, the unity of mankind and the universal attainment of human rights.

While development activity is not new to the Bahá'í International Community, it has only been within the last few years or so that there has been an upsurge in the level of participation by the rank and file members and a broadening of the scope of the activities in which Bahá'í communities are now involved. The source of the motivation of this involvement in development, including both social and economic development, can be expressed as follows.

In the Bahá'í view the potential of human beings, and therefore also of human society, is limitless. Each and every person, regardless of sex, race, creed or nation is considered to be endowed with rich qualities, virtues and powers. To fulfill the possibilities of this divine endowment is seen as the purpose of human existence. Development and self-realization is therefore both a right and a duty springing from the very essence of human life...Man is also inevitably a social being, and it is a basic Bahá'í belief that this self-realization can only be accomplished through serving his fellow human beings. The honor and distinction of the individual thus consist in his becoming a source of social good.

Community Participation at the Local Level

The Bahá'í community is service oriented and provides other elements to enable the individual members to become a source for social good. It has become widely accepted that an environment of cooperation in which the needs and interests of the various groups [that is, the poor, women, youth, the aging and disabled] are reflected in the activities, affords a greater chance for mutual benefit and economic growth. Development at the local level, if it is to have a lasting and permanent effect, must arise out of a unity of purpose, the foundation of which must be firmly based on the "organic oneness of mankind." Participatory planning and implementation of projects at the grass-root level creates the necessity of community training, effecting coordination among institutions at the national, district and local levels and developing or selecting existing institutional frameworks to formulate the plans and carry out the programs.

However, these elements are not always sufficient to guarantee success. The paper "Critical Issues in Social Development in the Asia-Pacific Region" ¹ points out that there are at times "inadequate organizational and participatory skills among the people themselves." Opportunities to develop the necessary skills may never present themselves or potentially capable individuals may be eliminated from the planning and decision-making process because of age, status in the community or sex. Steps to reverse these tendencies may also not be successful as "social structures -- in terms of the distribution of power and resources, of social relationships and authority, gender and religion, and of cultural preoccupations -- have proved resistant to change." ² It is this background to which the Bahá'í International Community's approach to development may be compared. It is in contrast to these limitations that the very structure of the Bahá'í community allows for voluntary participation of its members.

It is our experience that where the Bahá'í principles of service, participation and cooperation are practiced among all those involved in a project or other development action, a high degree of social cohesion based on common values has resulted. Development experience has further shown that such social cohesiveness -- creating a sufficient level of unity in diversity -- is often a necessary component of sustainable and equitable action.

In addition, the Bahá'í communities are organized in a fully participatory and democratic structure with locally elected bodies representing the communities which they serve. Within the structure of these elected bodies are the means whereby an individual can develop adequate organizational and participatory skills. Through the process of consultation, each member has "*not only the right but the sacred obligation...to express freely and openly his views, without being afraid of displeasing or alienating any of his fellow members.*" In an atmosphere where spiritual principles take precedence over sectarian and individual interests, each project arises from the local needs as perceived by the community. Such projects are then formulated and executed.

It is within this context and against this setting, fortified with a spiritual foundation for action that the Bahá'í administrative structure has proven itself to be an instrument for undertaking projects for the benefit of all, Bahá'ís and non-Bahá'ís alike. A 1984 statistical report on Bahá'í development projects noted that in the area of education the non-Bahá'í attendance varies from country to country. For instance, Fiji, Pakistan and Thailand report that 90% of their enrolled students are non-Bahá'ís whereas Papua New Guinea reports 27% non-Bahá'í participation.

Social Development

A survey of the development projects in which Bahá'í communities are currently engaged shows that emphasis has been placed on those areas that relate to the quality of life and the values that make life worth living. Education, health care and agriculture at the community and village level have received the most attention as they are concerned with the very basic needs of humanity, a large segment of which is deprived of the necessary requirements for an acceptable standard of living.

Of those areas mentioned above, education is at the forefront with the largest number of projects. At present, literacy programmes and primary schools are functioning or are in an advanced planning stage in some fifty developing countries, primarily in the rural areas where no schooling was previously available. Currently there are thousands of children's classes in which the curriculum focuses on moral and spiritual education, as well as basic literacy skills. The large number of classes reflects the Bahá'í view that the youth of the world are our

brightest hope for a world at peace. Their idealism demands protection from the larger community in order to prevent the growth of mistrust and cynicism. Concrete steps have been taken towards understanding youth and fostering its participation in finding and implementing solutions to the world's problems. Within the Bahá'í International Community there has been an increased emphasis in providing the youth with the tools to organize themselves to work with children, the aged and each other. In conjunction with the observance of the International Year of the Youth, the Bahá'í youth have been urged to organize activities for the formation of rural youth projects, youth clubs, to hold youth conferences thus inspiring new concepts of employment, self-employment, volunteerism and community service.

Examples to illustrate this increasing momentum of youth participation and service can be found in such places as the Wailaselase Bahá'í Youth Rural Development Project in Lomaivuna, Fiji in which the youth are involved in cash crop production, a fish farm, a goat farm and a chicken farm. Hundreds of banana trees were planted and the members recently completed six courses on business organization and management. Except for an initial \$500 grant from the Ministry of Youth, the project has been self-supporting. Or one might look at the youth agricultural projects in Falealupo, Samoa in which the youth have become actively involved in projects specializing in piggery and poultry development. Other examples exist in India, Tonga, Australia, Malaysia and the Philippines.

When one is looking after the many needs of youth and children one must also focus on women and family relationships. Bahá'ís uphold the principle of the equality of men and women. They view humanity as a bird with two wings, one male and the other female. For the bird to fly, both wings need to be equally strong. The role of the woman as mother and nurturer within the family is a weighty one indeed for the Bahá'ís recognize that the education of the women means the education of the children. In fact, it is enjoined upon each Bahá'í family that the education of the girls is more important than and has preference over the education of boys. The family relationship is sacred in that unity and peace at this level will be the cause of unity and peace at all other levels.

Towards the accomplishment of these aims, the Bahá'í International Community has devoted its efforts to raising the status of women. Increased focus on non-formal education in order to equip women with useful and economically oriented skills has seen the formation of many diverse activities from sewing and weaving to business management skills. Within the Bahá'í International Community the women are given an equal voice so that their needs and interests are increasingly reflected in the projects which are chosen.

Some fine examples from the Asia-Pacific region can be seen in Thailand at the Santitham Vithavaknom School in Yasothorn where, in cooperation with the Non-Formal Education Department, sewing classes are conducted in the surrounding villages, and in Fiji where courses in sewing, accounting, and in making "smokeless" ovens have attracted both Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í women. Also, in Port Vila of Vanuatu, a 10 week social development course for young women age 16-20 who have only primary education was held in May, 1984 at the Nīzīr Institute in conjunction with the Social Development Department of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. The examples are numerous and one can locate projects in Tuvalu, New Zealand, New Caledonia and the Loyalty Islands, Sri Lanka, Sikkim, the Philippines, Nepal, Laos, Indonesia, Bangladesh and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

There have been many successful projects to raise the consciousness of women as well. Efforts have been made to educate women in understanding marriage and its responsibilities and avoiding child marriage, to improve their knowledge and understanding of child-rearing and hygiene, to enhance their family life and to complement government programmes in their attempts to eliminate caste.

Operational Mechanism

The accomplishment of these programmes and projects has been carried out through the auspices of the previously mentioned locally elected bodies. The decentralized structure of the Bahá'í administrative system, although unified on a global level, allows for initiative and to a large degree authority to be vested at the local level. Most governments welcome Bahá'í institutions in their countries because of their recognition of its non-political nature. Bahá'ís believe that the administrative machinery should be regarded as a means to further the community's interests, to coordinate the activities, and to apply the principles of participation, cooperation and service. This principle of service to mankind is equated with worship and each member of the community is enjoined to be productive and to provide a useful contribution to his fellow human beings without discrimination.

By its vigorous involvement within the development of rural communities and in its effort to uplift the status of women the Bahá'í International Community has attempted to demonstrate its serious interest in pursuing social and economic development. Through its association as a Non-Governmental Organization it invites the agencies and commissions of the United Nations to call upon the Bahá'í communities. Viewing its role as supportive of UN agencies it stands ready to offer its experiences and services for social and economic development activities.

Notes

1. Document E/ESCAP/437 p. 15.
2. Document E/ESCAP/437 p. 4.
3. From the Bahá'í Writings.

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