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BIC statement explores a new concept of empowerment

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NEW YORK — Concepts of empowerment that pit one group against another should be discarded in favor of a new vision where social transformation is approached as a collective enterprise in which all people are able to participate.

That was among the main themes of a statement issued by the Baha'i International Community (BIC) to the recently concluded UN Commission on Social Development.

Rose Kornfeld Matte, right, of Chile's National Service for Older People, speaks during a panel discussion at the offices of the Baha'i International Community on 7 February 2013 during the UN Commission on Social Development. At the left is Sewa Lamsal Adhikari of Nepal, Chairperson of the Commission. In the center is Ming Hwee Chong of the Baha'i International Community.

"The impulse to rectify social inequalities is unquestionably noble, but us/them dichotomies only perpetuate and reinforce existing divisions," said the statement, which was titled "Empowerment as a Mechanism for Social Transformation."

"Careful thought needs to be given to ways in which empowerment can be approached as a universal and shared enterprise and not something the 'haves' bestow on the 'have nots.'" One way to avoid such extremes is to understand humanity as a single social organism, suggested the statement.

"Implicit in such a conception are characteristics such as the interdependence of the parts and the whole, the indispensability of collaboration, reciprocity and mutual aid, the need to differentiate but also harmonize roles, the need for institutional arrangements that enable rather than oppress, and the existence of a collective purpose above that of any constituent element."

The statement was among the BIC's contributions to this year's Commission, which was held 6-15 February, and took as its priority theme the "empowerment of people" in addressing poverty, social integration, and full and decent employment.

On 7 February, the BIC sponsored a panel discussion on the topic. Among the panelists was the Commission's Chairperson, Sewa Lamsal Adhikari, who said empowerment is increasingly seen by the UN as a vital issue in addressing social transformation.

"Empowerment of people is at the root of social development," said Mrs. Adhikari. "It is becoming one of the core elements that underpin efforts towards the achievement of the three core goals of the

World Summit for Social Development: poverty eradication, full and productive employment and decent work for all, and social integration."

"As such, empowerment is a means towards the ends of social development." Mrs. Adhikari is Charge d'Affaires of the Permanent Mission of Nepal to the United Nations.

Ming Hwee Chong, a representative of the Baha'i International Community to the United Nations, suggested that it was no accident that the theme had reached center stage in discussions about social development.

"It is a natural evolution of the development discourse," said Mr. Chong, who moderated the panel. "It is reflective of what is happening around the world, part of an expanding consciousness of who we are, what our potential is, both individually and collectively, as the human race."

Other speakers at the 7 February side event – formally titled "Empowerment: Of Whom? By what means? Towards what ends?" – included Rosa Kornfeld Matte, director of the National Service for the Elderly in Chile; Corinne Woods, director of the Millennium Campaign; and Yao Ngoran from the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

A second panel discussion sponsored by the BIC on 8 February, titled "Empowerment in Action," offered reflections by grassroots development practitioners.

Hou Sopheap, executive director of the Cambodian Organization for Research, Development and Education (CORDE), said his organization takes a "learning by doing" approach that aims to build capacity in youth so that they can better serve their communities.

A Baha'i-inspired organization offering supplementary educational programs to more than 3,000 young people in northwest Cambodia, CORDE requires its students engage in acts of service to their home communities in addition to textbook work. "So everything has a component of study and of action," he said.

Judith Therese Eligio-Martinez, program coordinator for the Baha'i-inspired agency, Bayan Association in Honduras, likewise said service is at the core of their program, which currently reaches some 6,000 high school age students in 12 of Honduras's 18 departments.

"It is built upon the belief in the capacity of the individual to make decisions for him or herself, and to help develop the capacities of three major actors (in community development): the individual, the community, and institutions," said Ms. Eligio-Martinez.

Developed in Colombia by a Baha'i-inspired organization, FUNDAEC, and known by the acronym SAT, for "Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial" in Spanish, the program trains and coordinates community-based tutors who then offer a high school education appropriate for rural areas.

"We consider SAT to be a creative way of becoming educated, but with its center being the idea of service to humanity and making the world a better place to live, on a local level as much as possible," said Ms. Eligio-Martinez. "And in this way, we feel we are contributing to empowerment."

Empowerment as a Mechanism for Social Transformation

Baha'i International Community's contribution to the 51st Session of the Commission for Social Development
15 November 2012
New York

The concept of 'empowerment' has become integral to development thought. Though it has often been associated primarily with gender equality, advances in global development will require a re-examination of the concept and its application to many aspects of human life. The following reflections on the goals, protagonists, and prerequisites for empowerment seek to assist the Commission for Social Development in its consideration of this important issue.

A Conception of Empowerment

The term empowerment means many things to many people. Concepts of choice, freedom, agency, capacity, participation, autonomy, and increased resources, however, are common to virtually all definitions. Consensus can therefore be found around the idea of empowerment as a means of improving quality of life and expanding the basis of human well-being. In short, empowerment can serve as a mechanism for effecting deep and broad-based social transformation.

The process of social transformation can be explored at both the personal and structural levels. At one end of the spectrum, social change is seen as an outcome of the development of individuals, achieved through education, training, access to material resources, and the like. According to this view, structural change is assumed to be an automatic result of personal change. Unfortunately, this rarely bears out in practice, as even those who benefit from such resources find themselves participating in oppressive social structures. At the other end of the spectrum, the human being is viewed entirely as a product of society, and change is considered impossible unless social structures—mainly those related to political power—are changed first. Yet, too often, this approach has supported the idea that ends justify the means and has resulted in conditions of injustice and oppression.

Increasing the capacity of individuals and communities to build more just and equitable social structures requires a conception of social development that avoids these extremes. Individual and structural transformation are intimately related: the individual's inner life shapes his or her social environment, and that environment, in turn, exerts a profound influence on one's spiritual and psychological well-being.

The metaphor of the body politic, likening all of humanity to a single social organism, provides a useful framework for exploring empowerment as means to pursue the transformation of individuals and society. Implicit in such a conception are characteristics such as the interdependence of the parts and the whole, the indispensability of collaboration, reciprocity and mutual aid, the need to differentiate but also harmonize roles, the need for institutional arrangements that enable rather than oppress, and the existence of a collective purpose above that of any constituent element. Viewed in this way, empowerment both depends on and contributes to a system in which diverse actors are provided the resources needed for each to make a unique contribution to the whole.

Drawing on the above ideas, individual and collective empowerment can be conceived as the expansion of vision, capacity, and volition necessary for people to act as effective agents of human well-being and prosperity.

The Protagonists of Social Transformation

Who are the primary actors in the processes of social transformation? Experience suggests that three are critically important: the individual, the institutions of society, and the community. In this light, empowerment can be said to involve assisting individuals to manifest constructive capacities in creative and disciplined ways, institutions to exercise authority in a manner that leads to the progress and upliftment of all, and communities to provide an environment in which culture is enriched and individual wills and capacities combine in collective action.

Raising capacity among these protagonists will require a thorough reexamination of assumptions about human nature. Notions of "us" and "them" deserve particular attention. Discourse in development circles, for example, is often rooted in notions of the "empowered" members of society assisting the "disadvantaged" or "marginalized." The impulse to rectify social inequalities is unquestionably noble, but us/them dichotomies only perpetuate and reinforce existing divisions. Careful thought needs to be given to ways in which empowerment can be approached as a universal and shared enterprise and not something the "haves" bestow on the "have nots."

Closely related is the question of who is empowered and who is not. Historical processes have created inequalities that must be addressed. But the development framework should be one in which every individual and group is presumed to have room for advancement. In this light, the marginalized are not without capacity, and the privileged are not all-powerful. All have capacity to develop and all have a responsibility to advance the welfare of the whole.

Finally, though empowerment denotes someone or something being invested with power, the social dynamics of power seem to have been largely ignored in discussions on development at the United Nations. That an examination of the dynamics of power has proven difficult to integrate into these discussions suggests the need for new and alternative approaches. How can power be conceptualized as something other than a zero-sum commodity? How can its associations with control and domination be replaced by ones of capacity and ability? How can it be approached as an integral part of all social relationships and institutions, rather than a resource to be acquired or lost? Exploration along these lines, we believe, will provide much insight into the means and ends of empowerment.

Prerequisites for Social Transformation

Because those without a seat at the table have little voice in decisions affecting their lives, participation in the systems and structures of society is an essential prerequisite for social transformation. To be anything more than window-dressing though, participation must be substantive and creative. It is not enough for people to be mere beneficiaries of projects, even if they have a voice in certain decisions. They must be far more involved in decision-making processes: identifying problems, devising solutions and approaches, enjoying benefits, and determining criteria for evaluation.

Participation, however, cannot be equated with empowerment—taking part in flawed systems merely perpetuates existing patterns of injustice. In order to advance the common good, individuals must possess both the capacity to assess the strengths and weaknesses of existing social structures and the freedom to choose between participating in those structures, working to reform them, or endeavoring to build new ones.

Building the capacity of the world's peoples and social institutions to create a prosperous and just society will require a vast increase in access to knowledge. This will entail approaches that facilitate the generation, application, and diffusion of knowledge at the local level. Rather than unquestioningly adopting "solutions" developed elsewhere, an emphasis on strengthening local capacity to generate, apply, and diffuse knowledge can help to put into place an ongoing process of action and reflection, one which encourages respect of the existing knowledge base of a community, raises the community's confidence in its ability to devise, implement and assess solutions, and helps to systematize and expand local knowledge. The result is a systematic and coherent process of learning that can gradually encompass a wider range of community endeavors.

Finally, the ability to identify the root causes of injustice will be crucial to the empowerment of populations to become agents of social transformation. Regardless of the advantages a population might enjoy, if it is unable to discern the drivers of social injustice and inequity, it will remain unable to rectify them. If empowerment is to lead to social transformation, it must involve the ability to recognize the forces shaping one's social reality, to identify the possibilities and challenges presented by that reality, and to devise initiatives for the betterment of society.

Further Considerations

Many questions remain to be answered. How can we measure empowerment? How do we conceive of empowerment at the level of the individual, the community, and social institutions? How can we ensure that efforts to assist people and communities to become protagonists of their own development do not reinforce the notions of "us" and "them" or the "developed" and the "developing"? How can such efforts serve to strengthen vision, capabilities, and volition rather than creating dependencies? How can social transformation be approached as a universal and shared enterprise and not something driven by the "haves" for the benefit of the "have nots"? How can we give expression to the power that comes from love, knowledge, solidarity, truthfulness, and wisdom? How can we strive for mutual empowerment in human relations at all levels of society?