

Meaningful Participation in the Development Process

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Bahá'u'lláh's exhortation - "*Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements*" - bears on the matter of participation in development. It suggests that each individual has a sacred duty to contribute to the progress and well-being of the community. In today's rapidly changing world, as humanity is becoming conscious of both its organic unity and its collective responsibilities, a profound debate is taking place as to what constitutes real participation in the development process. In light of this discourse, the following thoughts are offered.

Development strategy must increasingly provide for the meaningful participation of individuals in the conceptualization, design, implementation and evaluation of programs and policies that effect them. It should enhance the capability of people to participate in the generation and application of knowledge, should seek to strengthen their ability to manage change, and should offer opportunities to increase their capacities and sense of worth. At the heart of the development process must be a deep commitment to the establishment of full equality between women and men, in all departments of life and at every level of society.

Service to humanity, according to Bahá'í Scriptures, must become central to both individual life and all social arrangements. Service is the expression of man's highest nature, the means through which noble aspirations and spiritual inclinations are given concrete expression. Indeed, the principle way in which the individual fulfills his or her purpose on earth, which is to acquire the perfections of the soul, is through service to others. Therefore, development must be conceptualized and structured so as to give all the opportunity to serve the community and to participate fully in its advancement.

Only development programs that are perceived as just and equitable can hope to engage the commitment of the people upon whom successful implementation ultimately depends. When people trust that all are protected by standards and assured of benefits, such virtues as honesty, the willingness to work and sacrifice, moderation, and a spirit of cooperation can flourish and combine to make possible the attainment of enormously demanding collective goals.

Successful and enduring development will depend to a great extent on the existence of a broad consensus for change. Such a consensus can best be generated through a process of consultation. Consultation results in greater understanding on the part of the population of the measures necessary for the advancement of society; it ensures that development goals are consistent with the needs of the population served; and it secures the investment of the people on whose commitment and efforts success depends. "*The maturity of the gift of understanding,*" Bahá'u'lláh states, "*is made manifest through consultation.*" As the primary means for meaningful participation in development, consultation facilitates transparency and accountability; it can make possible a more equitable distribution of the costs of adjustment; and it tends to render reforms more sustainable. Indeed, so vital is consultation to the success of any collective endeavor that it must become an organizing principle of development.

Beyond those on the local and the national levels, it will be necessary for truly participatory institutions and processes to be established on the global level, to facilitate the emergence of world peace, justice and unity.

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