
Bahá'í

Social And Economic Development: Prospects for the Future

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*A statement approved by the Universal House of Justice
for use in orienting and guiding the work of
Bahá'í social and economic development throughout the world*

The Direction Of Bahá'í Social And Economic Development

In its message of 20 October 1983 to the Bahá'í world, the Universal House of Justice called for the incorporation of social and economic development processes into the regular pursuits of the community of the Greatest Name. During the past ten years, many communities have responded to this call and a considerable number of projects - mostly in education but also several in health, agriculture and community development- are now being actively pursued. A few of these projects have achieved the stature of development organizations with reasonably complex programmatic structures and significant spheres of influence. Beyond the successes of this collection of projects and organizations, however, the most valuable outcome of the devoted efforts of the believers in this field has been the accumulated knowledge on how to operationalize a distinctively Bahá'í approach to social and economic development. The October 1983 message set out some of the most noteworthy elements of this approach, among which are the following:

- The oneness of mankind, which is at once the operating principle and ultimate goal of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, implies the achievement of a dynamic coherence between the spiritual and practical requirements of life on earth.
- The challenge of engaging in social and economic development evokes the resourcefulness, flexibility and cohesiveness of the many communities composing the Bahá'í world.
- The first steps to be taken must necessarily begin in the Bahá'í community itself, with the friends endeavoring, through their application of spiritual principles, their rectitude of conduct, and the practice of the art of consultation, to uplift themselves and thus become self-sufficient and self-reliant.
- Progress in the development field will depend largely on natural stirrings at the grass roots, and should receive its driving force from those sources rather than from an imposition of plans and programs from the top.
- All, irrespective of circumstances or resources, are endowed with the capacity to respond in some measure to this challenge, for all can participate in the joint enterprise of applying more systematically the principles of the Faith to raising the quality of human life.
- Activities in the development field should be viewed as a reinforcement of the teaching work, as a greater manifestation of faith in action.
- The wholehearted involvement of the friends in these activities will ensure a deeper consolidation of the community at all levels.
- The key to success is unity in spirit and in action.

The experience gained during the past ten years is now sufficiently broad to allow the Bahá'í community to systematically expand the number and range of its social and economic development activities in the years to come. In this respect, a number of ideas merit careful consideration.

Degrees of complexity

In general, social and economic development projects at the grass roots best begin with a relatively simple set of actions. The friends should be allowed to gain experience from, and increase the range of, their activities naturally, without undue pressure from opinions that are often based solely on theoretical considerations. A tutorial school, for example, can in principle become a center for activities such as health education, family counseling and reforestation, but in most cases, it is advisable for it to start simply as a school focusing all its resources on the children it proposes to serve. Insistence on initial simplicity of action at the local level does not, of course, contradict the inherent complexity of the development process itself. In fact, to raise local action to a reasonable level of effectiveness it is necessary to gradually develop corresponding structures in the micro-region, the region, and the nation itself capable of dealing with increasing degrees of theoretical and administrative complexity. Otherwise social and economic development runs the danger of being reduced to a set of laudable activities lacking the coherence and integration which are indispensable for consistent progress.

Capacity building

It has often been said that development is not a product to be delivered by the "developed" to the "underdeveloped". Rather, it is a process the main protagonists of which have to be the people themselves. The greatest concern of Bahá'í projects has to be the development of the friends' capacity to make decisions about their spiritual and material progress and then to implement them. In an ideal project, while concrete action is directed towards visible improvement of some aspect of life, success is measured by the impact these actions have on the capacity of the community and its institutions to address development issues at increasingly higher levels of complexity and effectiveness.

In this context, the relationship between development and delivery of services needs to be examined. For Bahá'ís, of course, service is a basic principle of human existence; every act, every personal or community project, is to be carried out in the spirit of service. It is impossible to imagine a Bahá'í social and economic development project that does not operate on the principle of service. Nonetheless, the delivery of services should not be viewed as the main purpose of Bahá'í development undertakings. Approaches to development centered on the donation of goods and services, so characteristic of traditional religious charity and the programs of the welfare state, are known to have debilitating effects and often lead to paralysis. In the villages of the world, the Bahá'í community should become the spearhead of spiritual, social and economic transformation. A village does not develop merely because it receives simple services in primary health and sanitation, in primary education or in agricultural extension structured around credit and technological packages.

Learning

Central to the capacity of a Bahá'í community to lead a process of transformation is the ability of its members and institutions to apply the Revelation of Baha'u'llah to various aspects of life and thereby establish consistent patterns of change. In fact, learning to apply the Teachings to achieve progress could be taken as the very definition of Bahá'í social and economic development. Such learning has to occur locally, regionally, nationally and internationally and become the axis around which our development efforts are organized at all levels.

Learning in this sense is not limited to study and evaluation. It comes about in combination with action. The believers must regularly engage in consultation, action, reflection- all in the light of the guidance inherent in the Teachings of the Faith. Such a learning process can occur in a very simple manner at the village and local level, but with greater sophistication by national agencies and institutions. At the international level, it calls for a higher degree of conceptualization, one that takes account of the broader processes of global transformation as described in the Writings and serves to adjust the overall direction of development activities in each country accordingly.

Development of human resources

Learning and the building of capacity are closely linked to the development of human resources. That development ideas and projects are not imposed from above, and that institutions are to respond to aspirations and initiatives at the grass roots, are established characteristics of Bahá'í development. However, the vigilant application of these principles does not imply that no initiative can be taken from the top. Proven and well-conceived programs and approaches to development can be promoted nationally or internationally, primarily through training. Training methods would, of course, have to foster participation and be carried out with a humble attitude towards learning. Otherwise, training tends to produce a cadre of individuals who are slaves to a given way of doing things.

Moreover, the need for development of human resources is not limited to the direct participants in the actual projects. Thousands of Bahá'í youth in colleges and universities throughout the world, as well as an increasing number of professionals working in fields related to social and economic development, should be encouraged to participate in a worldwide learning process designed to grow in size and range. Indeed, Bahá'í development projects may be seen as sites where training is provided for an increasing number of individuals from both materially poor and wealthy nations and from various sectors of society.

Influencing society

Irrespective of whether or not an individual who has benefited from a period of collaboration with a development project finally becomes directly involved in such projects, the ability to apply the Teachings of Baha'u'llah to the affairs of society- learned in action- constitutes a valuable asset for his or her future efforts to serve and influence society. Development projects in themselves offer great opportunities to the friends to become involved in the life of society in ways that far transcend efforts to improve the lot of a few people. Openness to collaboration with people of capacity and leaders of thought concerned with issues of progress, and willingness and ability to invite them to participate in applying the Teachings to specific problems, have to be created at all levels, if we are to fully exploit this dimension of our development endeavors.

Integration

Certain lessons that have been learned in the larger society need to be incorporated into Bahá'í thinking about social and economic development. Paramount among these is the inescapable need for integration. Experience has shown that fragmented activities in various fields such as health, education, agriculture, or industrial development do not lead to sustainable development. The knowledge that should be brought to bear on development problems of the communities of the world does not fit in a single discipline. Effective development unequivocally calls for coordinated interdisciplinary and multi-sectorial action.

The idea of integral development may seem to contradict the principle enunciated above that grass roots action must begin simply and in a way that can be managed by the community itself. However, this apparent contradiction disappears if local action is seen as a means for building capacity. In this case it does not matter with which activity the development of a community actually begins; complexity will arise naturally in an organic way. What is to be avoided is the artificial fragmentation created by separate programs set in motion in a given population by professionals in specific disciplines, each ignoring the knowledge and experience of other groups, each competing for resources and for the constant attention of the people they are to serve.

For Bahá'í programs integration poses an additional challenge. Within the Bahá'í framework, material progress cannot be separated from spiritual development. Social and economic development endeavors have to be carried out in the more general context of the expansion and consolidation of the Faith. When this does not occur, when the various institutions that serve the local community are not well aware of each others' efforts and do not consult on the nature and the range of their activities, development projects become difficult to manage. Divorced from the basic processes of the expansion and consolidation of the Faith, Bahá'í social and economic development cannot prosper and is prone to failure.

In our zeal to pursue social and economic development in the context of expansion and consolidation we should avoid a pitfall that leads to the dissipation of energy and confusion: impressed by the interconnectedness of all the factors that lead to community development, one may be tempted to define social and economic development as a synonym for the development of the Bahá'í community. According to such a definition, all efforts to develop the community, including the establishment of the Nineteen Day Feast, the holding of classes for the spiritual education of children, and the strengthening of Local and National Assemblies and their agencies, would have to be regarded as social and economic development projects. Such a broad definition overlooks the fact that the growth of the Bahá'í community is the result of a number of interacting processes, each directed by various institutions of the Administrative Order and their agencies in collaboration with one another. Social and economic development is only one component and must play a particular role in the growth process.

The Office Of Social And Economic Development

The observations made in the previous section suggest the gradual establishment in each national community of channels through which institutions, agencies and organizations can serve the needs of the friends in their efforts to apply the Revelation of Baha'u'llah to achieve material progress for themselves and their people. What flows through these channels is primarily learning, although the extending of financial support and the offering of guidance to solve problems that arise naturally through community action are also important.

The Office of Social and Economic Development (OSED) in Haifa assists the Universal House of Justice in the promotion and coordination of Bahá'í social and economic development worldwide. The primary purpose of OSED is to facilitate learning about development by fostering and supporting action, reflection on action, study, consultation, the gathering and systematization of experience, conceptualization, and training- all carried out in the light of the Teachings of the Faith. Ensuring that material resources become increasingly available to Bahá'í development efforts, coordinating the international flow of such resources and administering some of the funds intended for projects are also important functions of OSED.

Individuals and institutions frequently seek advice from OSED on how to design, implement and promote social and economic development projects. Based on the knowledge generated through the analysis of substantive reports and the documentation of systematic advances in the Bahá'í experience of development, OSED is able to offer these individuals and institutions guidance and share with them the results of the learning occurring in the Bahá'í community.

As projects grow in size and complexity, whether they are under the direct aegis of National Spiritual Assemblies or administered by Bahá'í-inspired organizations enjoying the guidance and support of the institutions of the Faith, OSED's relationship with them often becomes more involved and demanding. In order to interact effectively with major Bahá'í programs and organizations, OSED invites individuals, experienced in the field of development, to collaborate with it, each in promoting the progress of one particular organization. In his or her role as a collaborator, such an individual assumes a number of responsibilities on behalf of OSED. Chief among these is to help the organization establish a clear vision of itself, its role and its purpose, a vision which will be periodically reexamined, modified and restated in keeping with the progress of the Faith in the region. According to this evolving vision, well-defined strategies are to be devised and regularly adjusted. On the basis of these strategies, projects are created along diverse lines of action and appropriate proposals are developed and properly presented to various agencies, both within and outside the country, for financing or other assistance. The designated collaborator also assists in developing a flexible organizational structure, one free of contradictions, with clear channels for decision-making, appropriate instruments for implementation, and adequate methods for evaluation. All of these tasks are, of course, to be carried out under the guidance of the National Spiritual Assembly and in consultation with the Counsellors, whose vital roles in this respect have been set forth in the 20 October 1983 message from the Universal House of Justice.

It is hoped that by facilitating direct contact among its collaborators, OSED will be able to develop an informal network through which experiences can be shared and learning can occur in a natural way. The existence of such a network of individuals, a number of whom will have their own contacts with funding sources, will significantly broaden the basis for the interaction of the Bahá'í community with donor agencies. These individuals will also help put university students and professionals interested in social and economic development in contact with Bahá'í programs so that, over time, an increasing number of these programs and organizations offer training through internships of various durations.

In addition to offering collaborative support to major programs and organizations, it is expected that OSED will itself promote, on an international scale, certain approaches and methodologies to development that have proven to be effective. For example, during the past few years a highly effective approach to literacy has emerged. A worldwide campaign is envisioned in which, in country after country, a group of selected individuals are familiarized with the underlying concepts of the approach and are asked to adapt its methods and prepare materials for use in their own country. Subsequently, these same individuals can train others to act as facilitators of literacy classes, so that classes can be established in hundreds of localities throughout the country. Likewise, in primary health care, excellent experience has been gained in recent years. This experience can now be analyzed, the appropriate methods and materials can be defined, and again, in country after country, the training of health workers can be vigorously pursued.

Major Areas Of Action

The major areas of action OSED is to pursue in the coming years include education, literacy, primary health care, and sustainable rural development. As mentioned above, literacy and primary health care are to be addressed by focusing on regional training campaigns. As for integral rural development, this is a field in which systematic Bahá'í experience is scarce. However, there is a great deal of valuable experience outside the Faith, and with the help of certain Bahá'í individuals who are known and accepted in the field, it is possible to gather the necessary knowledge, analyze it and make a beginning in this essential area of development. What is called for is not a complex development scheme but a path of action of increasing complexity that can lead to the establishment of programs of integral, sustainable development at the level of the micro-region.

There can be no doubt that education will continue to be the greatest concern of Bahá'í social and economic development endeavors throughout the world in the foreseeable future. Three interrelated areas- Bahá'í schools, special programs for junior youth and moral education- merit special attention.

Experience has shown that there are at least three challenges Bahá'í schools must face in various stages of their development. The first has to do with the functioning of the school- the organization of its physical space, the selection of an acceptable program, and the erection of a working academic and administrative structure. This has proven to be a formidable task for most schools and has required an inordinate amount of time and energy. With the experience gained over the past decade, however, it is now possible to develop a set of guidelines to help Bahá'í schools, whether privately owned or belonging to the institutions, to meet this challenge with greater ease.

A second challenge is related to the process by which the Bahá'í character of the school becomes manifest. This is usually addressed in terms of the atmosphere of the school, relationships among people and extra-curricular activities. An hour or two of courses, vaguely described as moral education, are also offered at this stage. It is interesting to note that even with small changes in a few components of the educational process, Bahá'í schools become known for their standards of excellence and enjoy considerable esteem in the communities within which they operate.

A third challenge, scarcely addressed until now, concerns the development of Bahá'í-inspired curricula. The approach to such a development has to be uniquely suited to the conditions and opportunities of the worldwide Bahá'í community. It is unreasonable to expect that Bahá'í education will be invented by a group of individuals immersed in academia, no matter how profound their knowledge of the Faith and of education. The gradual development of contents and methods of Bahá'í education will most probably occur as the result of the diverse activities of an increasing number of educators working in varied cultural and ecological settings throughout the world. Systematic research and high quality academic study are called for, not as isolated activities, but as components, albeit important ones, of a process in which the design of curricula is closely connected with educational practice and systematization of educational experience. The role of OSED in fostering such a process is crucial. Any effort to ignore it by introducing, for example, the concept of a universal core curriculum at too early a stage would be counterproductive.

Significant as Bahá'í schools are, to concentrate all our energies on their development does not constitute a sound strategy. As the educational systems of the world collapse, the demands of educational establishments- beginning with villages, towns, and municipalities and soon reaching entire countries- for new content and for teacher training will rise dramatically. With the same effort that is spent to build and maintain one Bahá'í school, hundreds of teachers belonging to official systems can be trained how to include in their daily activities several educational elements inspired by the Faith. In two areas- namely, moral education and the preparation of youth and junior youth for future life- the opportunities for Bahá'í influence are almost unlimited.

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