

Right to Development

Statement to the 46th session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights

Agenda Item 8: Question of the realization of the right to development

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The right to development is an essential recognition of an age-old attempt to fulfill the uniqueness in man. It is a formal realization of the fact that if mankind is to abide by the conventions that guarantee a safe existence it must be given the opportunity to develop within itself the characteristics that will ensure the upholding of these commitments. Man must be allowed to foster the part of him that transcends race, religion, language and gender, and so to focus on his essence. It is, thus, a call to the spiritual.

In this sense, the Convention on the Right to Development represents a much-needed attempt to restore to large sections of the world's population the dignity that is their birthright. We should recall to mind the sentiments espoused by the Convention on the Rights of the Child that the right-to development should not be granted at a price, that a child must have the right to grow and develop "in conditions of freedom and dignity." In light of this, the Baha'i International Community fully concurs with the conclusions presented in the Report of the "Global Consultation on the Realization of the Right to Development" (E/CN.4/1990/9) and commends the excellent work it has done.

For those in a position to effect such a recognition of the freedoms and rights of oppressed minorities and maltreated citizens, the challenge is largely to raise the consciousness of the equality of all mankind to the level of principle. It is to ensure that the standard of human rights, including as an essential prerequisite the right to development, will not suffer at the hands of compromise and self-interest. It is not sufficient merely to accept the contraction of the world into an interdependent entity; it should be our foremost consideration, when dealing with the issues raised by the right to development, to commit ourselves to the fundamental belief that humanity must be united in its consciousness of a global society and to remain steadfast in this belief.

If this belief is to be the lodestone of our thinking, then we must, of course, consider the right to development as a freedom that is as much a gift to future generations as it is a cause in ours. If this eternal sense of human rights is to remain free from the manipulation of expediency and parochial attitudes, it must assume an origin beyond and above political or economic ideologies. For Baha'is, the right to development is a spiritual bounty and, in this sense, is not a man-made convention that has arisen from circumstance.

With this backbone of belief, we may call to mind a few of the problems that beset human progress and, thus, the cause of development. Let us consider one such shameful state of affairs: the role of women. It is

something of an axiom to say that the emancipation of women is vital to the full realization of the universal right to development. As one Baha'i text puts it:

"The denial of such equality perpetrates an injustice against one half of the world's population and promotes in men harmful attitudes and habits that are carried from the family to the workplace, to political life, and ultimately to international relations."

In developing countries, but, of course, not in these countries alone, women remain the beasts of burden. It is they who must bear the children, grow the food, care for the home, travel to the market, obtain the fuel, carry the water, and then serve their men. This hugely unjust expectation of the female population also denies them the right of participating at the decision-making level and so in promoting actively the cause of human rights in their locality, for they have neither the time nor the energy. What we must attempt is a conversion of this source of inequality into a spring of positive energy. One way of approaching this is to recognize the rootedness of women in the basic survival processes of society and to channel such experience into the development of rural, and urban, societies. This implies female participation at all levels of development, whether it be in the home, at work, in administration, or in leisure. Moreover, if the benefits of such knowledge are to be most effectively diffused throughout society, then the appropriate authorities would do well to consider giving first priority to the education of women and girls, not just as a priority over the education of men, but as a priority among the general concerns of their domestic policy.

The field of education itself should give reason to pause for thought. The ideal to which we must aspire is surely a level of universal education -- as advocated in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights -- for, as one Baha'i text puts it:

"... ignorance is indisputably the principal reason for the decline and fall of peoples and the perpetuation of prejudice."

Indeed, childhood represents a period of man's greatest malleability, a time when values can be discovered and instilled. And it is thus towards education that resources must be directed. It is often in education that the diseases of racism, of unbridled nationalism, of unjustifiable sexual inequality find their parent and their legitimacy. Thus, we must urge any country that will be the recipient of international aid derived from arms reductions to channel this resource into a proper elementary and secondary system of education.

Its working curriculum must surely involve at every level the consciousness of a global civilization. Only then is a child enlightened on the duty that is his as part of the world's population. As the Convention on the Rights of the Child concludes: "... his energy and talents should be devoted to the service of his fellow men." Knowledge is not enough. Deeds must articulate our belief in development, otherwise this culture of human rights, so often referred to, will remain a mere symbol of our age and not present itself as a process of change. But knowledge has its place. Indeed, it is equally important that children be made aware that they possess a right to development. Only through such self-knowledge may a child be guided to the path of self-development and aspire to the nobility that is the distinction of his race.

It is a good thing that many schools do provide the study of the contemporary world, including the various cultures, religions, and racial backgrounds that populate the earth. However, this may only feed the mind, when it is the human spirit that must be fulfilled. Our attachment to the world beyond our country's borders should not be an academic one, but should reveal to us the common bounty we share as the inheritors of a global civilization. Geography must no longer be the study of division but of diversity. History should be witnessed as the heritage of humanity and not the legacy of heroes. It is, very simply, a question of attitude. With this in mind can we offer our children the freedom to investigate the world and, more importantly perhaps, encourage the will to do so. Let us hope that this will to investigate might forge the will to action in service to humanity.

An integral part of the development process, as recognized by the Convention on the Right to Development, is for the human being to be at the center of this process. This being our standard, we should make efforts to emphasize the attributes of the human being rather than the attributes of the office held within the decision-making agencies. This is vital to the creation of a culture of compassion and consultation, of developing the immanent human capacities needed for the respectful exchange of ideas. This is what Baha'is regard as the new culture of human rights. Indeed, that what is meant by man being the center of development is the development of the center of what makes man: that is, his virtues. In this process, full and impartial consultation is a system of discussion that engenders feelings of the unity of human association through the very act of participation and so is vital at all levels of decision-making.

Thus, development means developing together. In fact it implies that development cannot be anything other than a reciprocal responsibility: that to allow development in the world around us we must first develop the world within us, but by the same token, development implies harnessing the best in the self by harnessing the best in others. This is not the simple call of ethics, but the lasting proof of the essential oneness of humankind.

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