

A Clarification of Some Issues Concerning Social and Economic Development in Local and National Communities

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at the Bahá'í World Centre*

In September 1993, the statement “Bahá'í Social and Economic Development: Prospects for the Future” was prepared at the Bahá'í World Centre and approved by the Universal House of Justice. It contained an analysis of past experience and delineated a course for future action. It also specified that the work of the Office of Social and Economic Development should be organized around its “primary purpose” 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 light of the Teachings of the Faith”.

The following year, in 1994, our Office prepared the document “The Evolution of Institutional Capacity for Social and Economic Development”, which describes two noteworthy types of organizational structures that have emerged in the Bahá'í world for advancing the development process in a country or region. Of particular interest in that document is the guidance quoted from the Universal House of Justice which clarifies the nature of Bahá'í and Bahá'í-inspired endeavors. Since then a number of questions have arisen, and this document briefly addresses the issues raised.

DEGREES OF COMPLEXITY OF BAHÁ'Í DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

One of the principles discussed in the document “Prospects for the Future” is related to the degrees of complexity of Bahá'í endeavors in social and economic development. There it is explained that projects at the grassroots are most effective when they begin with a relatively simple set of actions and are allowed to grow in size and complexity over time. This is indeed the pattern that can be observed in most communities in the Bahá'í world today. While it is difficult to categorize the very diverse actions currently undertaken by Bahá'ís in the area of development, at least three broad levels of activity can be identified:

Activities of Fixed Duration: Most Bahá'í social and economic development efforts are fairly simple activities of fixed duration in which Bahá'ís in villages and towns around the world address the problems and challenges faced by their localities through the application of spiritual principles. These activities either originate in the Bahá'í communities themselves or represent responses to invitations from other organizations. It is estimated that in 1998–99 there were some 1,500 endeavors of this kind, including tree-planting and clean-up projects, health camps, workshops and seminars on such themes as race unity and the advancement of women, and short-term training courses.

Sustained Projects: A second category of Bahá'í social and economic development efforts consists of approximately 290 ongoing projects. The vast majority are academic schools, while others focus on areas such as literacy, basic health care, immunization, substance abuse, child care, agriculture, the environment, or microenterprise. Some of these projects are administered by nascent development organizations which have the potential to grow in complexity and in their range of influence.

Organizations with Capacity to Undertake Complex Action: Certain Bahá'í development efforts have achieved the stature of development organizations with relatively complex programmatic structures and significant spheres of influence. They systematically train human resources and manage a number of lines of action to address problems of local communities and regions in a coordinated, interdisciplinary manner. Also included in this category are several institutions—especially large schools—which, although focusing only on one field, have the potential to make a significant impact. In this category there are currently 43 such organizations, located in all continents of the globe.

Through the general encouragement of National Assemblies and their committees, on the one hand, and the Counsellors and the Auxiliary Board members, on the other, the number of grassroots activities of fixed duration increases, providing communities with valuable experience commensurate with their needs and resources. Some of the activities in this first category may be one-day events, while others may last weeks or months.

Sustained projects may either emerge from activities in the first category or be initiated as such by Assemblies, groups, or individual believers. The agencies administering these projects receive guidance from the National Spiritual Assemblies in whose jurisdiction they operate. The Counsellors frequently single out projects in this second category for special attention as part of their overall strategy to promote the organic growth of the community in a country or region.

Some of the entities that sustain projects over an extended period of time evolve in complexity as they learn from experience, develop human resources, and integrate into their work activities from various fields of endeavor. As they do so, they begin to take on the characteristics of nongovernmental development organizations, and their capacity to contribute to the advancement of the populations they serve increases. The existence of such an organization in a country fosters the growth and multiplication of efforts in the other two categories. As mentioned in the document “The Evolution of Institutional Capacity for Social and Economic Development”, these organizations usually take one of two forms: either a training institute, established by the National Spiritual Assembly, or a Bahá'í-inspired agency. Every national community, if it is to play its part in building a global civilization, needs to gradually acquire the capacity for complex action in the development field.

TRAINING INSTITUTES AND SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

In the messages delineating the provisions of the Four Year Plan, launched at Riḍván 1996, the Universal House of Justice described the role of the institute in developing the human resources needed for the expansion and consolidation of the Faith. Although these messages did not address the relationship between training institutes and social and economic development, communications to specific National Assemblies contain explicit guidance on this

matter. For example, a letter dated 19 August 1997 written on behalf of the House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Zambia regarding its national institute reads:

The House of Justice finds highly desirable the present structure in Zambia in which the various aspects of human resource development, related both to the expansion and consolidation of the Faith and to projects of social and economic development in areas such as education, health and literacy, are all under one organization, namely, the William Masetlha Foundation.

And in a letter dated 24 September 1996 written on its behalf to the National Spiritual Assembly of Zaire the following is found:

It is understood that the institute will be an agency for the development of human resources for activities of expansion and consolidation, as well as for projects of social and economic development, in both North and South Kivu. In this latter context, it could also gradually take on the administration of the development projects in both areas. The institute can establish a clear-cut organizational structure that has various departments and sections, each of which is dedicated to one of its programs—a health program, a literacy program, and so on—as well as those for training human resources for expansion and consolidation.

By broadening the scope of its operations to include development, the training institute is able to undertake complex action within a region and exert meaningful influence on its entire population. In this process it assesses the needs of the people of the region it serves and becomes well familiar with the conditions of the population in areas such as literacy, health and education. In response to the needs identified, it gradually designs courses, for example, to train literacy facilitators, primary health care workers, or primary school teachers. In time it may go further to mobilize these human resources through systematic projects to tackle specific problems, for instance, a literacy project in a cluster of villages.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEACHING THE FAITH AND SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Some of the questions that have been repeatedly asked have to do with the relationship between teaching and social and economic development: Are social and economic development efforts distracting us from the primary work of advancing the process of entry by troops? Is development simply another word for indirect teaching, carried out for the sole purpose of attracting people to the Cause? Are activities for the consolidation of local communities—such as Bahá'í children's classes—to be considered development endeavors?

In its October 1983 message, the Universal House of Justice referred to Bahá'í social and economic development as an “enlarged dimension of the consolidation process”. The 1993 document “Prospects for the Future” describes the relationship between development and certain activities related to the consolidation of Bahá'í communities:

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 inter-connectedness 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 general relationship between teaching and social and economic development has been clarified in a memorandum dated 27 April 1998 to our Office from the Universal House of Justice:

The relationship between teaching and social and economic development needs to be considered both in terms of certain fundamental principles and in the context of the processes which characterize the growth of the Bahá'í community. You are well aware of the relevant principles, which include the following: Bahá'ís should give the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh liberally and unconditionally to humanity so that people may apply them to pressing social issues and uplift themselves materially and spiritually; in their dealings with society at large, the friends should be upright and avoid any trace of deception; social and economic development projects should not be used as an inducement to conversion; and funds from non-Bahá'ís should not be utilized for strictly Bahá'í purposes. None of these diminishes the importance of the sacred obligation to teach the Cause. Teaching should remain the dominating passion of the life of every individual believer, and growth a major concern of the Bahá'í community.

As the Bahá'í community has moved from one stage to the next, the range of activities that it has been able to undertake has increased. Its growth has been organic in nature and has implied gradual differentiation in functions. When the Bahá'í community was small in size, all of its interactions with society at large easily fitted together under the designation of direct and indirect teaching. But, over time, new dimensions of work appeared—involvement in civil society, highly organized diplomatic work, social action, and so on—each with its own aims, methods and resources. In a certain sense, it is possible to refer to all of these activities as teaching, since their ultimate purpose is the diffusion of the divine fragrances, the offering of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation to humankind, and service to society. But, in practice, it seems more fruitful to treat them as distinct but complementary lines of action. For example, simply designating certain social and economic development endeavors indirect teaching may cause confusion in at least two ways: On the one hand, it may give the impression that development activities should have as their primary and immediate objective the recruitment of new believers, which is, of course, not the case. On the other, it may suggest to some friends that they are fulfilling their obligation to teach merely by participating in social action.

Social and economic development is an important area of activity in and of itself. Its justification should not be sought in its ability to produce enrollments; it complements teaching and also contributes to it. Naturally, when endeavors in the development field are successful, they increase the public's interest in the Faith and create new teaching opportunities for the Bahá'í community, opportunities which the friends should seize upon through their expansion and consolidation activities.

PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS

As the Bahá'í community becomes more involved in the affairs of society, enthusiasm is generated for Bahá'í social and economic development activities. Particularly, believers with some background in development-related fields often express their desire to assist projects as volunteers or consultants. Unfortunately, given the embryonic nature of current efforts, the capacity of projects to take advantage of such offers of service is limited. In a memorandum dated 11 March 1997 to our Office, the Universal House of Justice has written:

The worldwide Bahá'í community, as an organic whole, transcends divisions prevalent in society today, such as "North" and "South", "developed" and "underdeveloped". Social and economic development efforts are undertaken by Bahá'ís, irrespective of the degree of material prosperity achieved by their nations, as they strive to apply the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh to the gradual process of building a new civilization. Every follower of Bahá'u'lláh is a member of this worldwide community and can rightfully offer to contribute to a specific endeavor in any country. As the friends gain experience in social and economic development, and as they advance in their studies of various branches of learning or in their professional fields, individuals arise in every continent who have expertise in some aspect of development work and who wish to offer their services to projects at home or abroad. If their energies are not channelled effectively, and they are not given a realistic picture of Bahá'í development efforts, these friends will later become frustrated when they realize that the capacity of Bahá'í projects overseas to utilize their talents and services is limited.

For this reason, it is important that conferences, seminars and promotional materials not reinforce an image of "development projects" as understood by society at large. Bahá'í efforts in this field generally take the form of grassroots initiatives carried out by small groups of believers in the towns and villages where they reside. As these initiatives are nurtured, some grow into more substantial programs with permanent administrative structures. Yet very few can be compared with the kind of complex projects promoted and funded by government agencies and large nongovernmental organizations.

The effective use of the talents of individuals with particular expertise also demands vigilance in ensuring that the initiative of some, usually those with access to more resources, does not end up suffocating the initiatives of others. The Administrative Order is structured in a way that fosters initiative and safeguards the right of people to be meaningfully involved in the development of their own communities. Accordingly the activities of the friends in each country fall under the guidance of the institutions of the Faith in that country....

In general, the determining factor in matching offers of service and assistance to projects should be the capacity of the projects to receive help and not the amount of resources available. It is quite possible that the talents of the friends, especially those in North America, exceed the capacity of the development projects elsewhere to receive assistance at this stage in the growth of the Faith. In this connection, the two-pronged approach you are pursuing seems most appropriate. While striving to help increase the capacity of projects worldwide, you are at the same time encouraging individual believers from more materially prosperous countries to become involved in Bahá'í projects at home. You should also continue encouraging them to participate in worthy endeavors outside the Faith in order to influence their professional fields and infuse them with the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. They should be assured that this is, in and of itself, a tremendous service to the Cause and not feel that they are serving the Faith only if they dedicate themselves directly to Bahá'í projects.

ROLE OF THE OFFICE OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

From the above discussion, it should be clear that Bahá'í social and economic development is not centrally organized and controlled. Projects belong to the believers and their communities on national and local levels, whether organized under the aegis of Bahá'í institutions or by Bahá'í-inspired agencies. These efforts emerge from the organic evolution of communities and are subject to the opportunities and limitations imposed by their current needs, resources and capacities.

The role of the Office of Social and Economic Development is, the Universal House of Justice explains, to provide “support and guidance” to Bahá'ís engaged in development activity by “coordinating the flow of human and financial resources to projects” and to nurture them by “providing general advice, technical and otherwise, in response to the questions that naturally arise in carrying out such endeavors”. More importantly, the Office acts “as a channel for learning about development, facilitating the exchange of information and materials and the sharing of lessons learned among those working under similar conditions”.