

1999 BAHÁ'Í DEVELOPMENT SEMINAR FOR THE AMERICAS

**COMMON ELEMENTS AMONG BAHÁ'Í SOCIAL
AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS**

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BAHÁ'Í SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

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PART 1

Introduction

The concept of social and economic development is enshrined in the sacred Teachings of our Faith.¹ As Bahá'ís gain in individual and institutional capacity and understanding, their efforts become increasingly more systematic and meaningful. The challenge to Bahá'ís is to go beyond the work of other well-intentioned organizations in development that focus on charity or the delivery of basic services, and to discover how to use the Teachings and principles of the Faith to uplift the human condition by tapping into and releasing the spiritual forces created to ensure human prosperity and progress. This mystical process is one of discovery, and represents a global learning initiative of the Bahá'ís, as we learn to put the Teachings into action in service to humanity. It is in this sense, that the Universal House of Justice has stated in its document entitled "Prospects for the Future", 16 September, 1993, that "learning to apply the Teachings to achieve progress could be taken as the very definition of Bahá'í social and economic development."

To stimulate our reflection on our action in the field of development, the following summary of recent guidance helps to highlight some of the key elements that should be common among all Bahá'í development activities:

Reliance on Spiritual Guidance

What the Bahá'ís around the world have in common as they approach their service in the area of development, is access to the Creative Word of the Central Figures of our Faith, and the writings of Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice. In recent years, the Universal House of Justice has been sharing core concepts gained from the experience of the worldwide Bahá'í community as it steadily increases its social and economic development activities.

Covenant – Centered Development

Common among all Bahá'í social and economic development activities is the understanding that development begins with the Covenant. Having accepted Bahá'u'lláh, we have accepted at least two types of duties.² The first refers to our personal commitment to apply the teachings to ourselves so we grow spiritually and develop capacities. The second refers to our collective commitment to contribute towards the achievement of a New World Order. This dual process of personal and collective transformation is at the very heart of our commitment to the Covenant, and is what motivates us to serve humanity. The Faith provides for us a clear vision of an ever-advancing civilization, and outlines methods and approaches to fulfill that vision. It is this vision that guides all our efforts. With this understanding, we can see how the many diverse efforts of the Bahá'ís around the globe united with a common vision actually constitute a worldwide campaign to systematically apply the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh to the life of humanity.

¹ Universal House of Justice, 20 October 1983

² The following information is taken from "The Covenant and the Development Process" by Dr. Farzam Arbab, originally presented in Spanish at the I Latin American Bahá'í Social and Economic Development Seminar, Bolivia, 1993.

Bahá'í social and economic development is an individual response to the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. It begins in the spiritual life of every believer, in our attachment to Him. Out of love for Bahá'u'lláh and His teachings, we strive to change ourselves so that we become the people He wants us to be, and we strive to change our societies so that they also confirm to the laws and principles He has revealed. The Universal House of Justice explained this in a letter about social and economic development: 'First comes the illumination of hearts and minds by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, and then the grassroots stirring of the believers wishing to apply these teachings to the daily life of their community.'³

The Principle of Oneness

*O ye beloved of God! Know ye, verily, that the happiness of mankind lieth in the unity and the harmony of the human race and that spiritual and material developments are conditioned upon love and amity towards all men.'*⁴

In the Prosperity of Humankind document, the Bahá'í International Community is calling into question certain basic assumptions about development as it is currently understood. The document explores the "prevailing beliefs about the nature and purpose of the development process" and the roles assigned to the various protagonists in a strategy for global development. Among the conceptual challenges presented in the document is the Bahá'í belief that "the bedrock of a strategy that can engage the world's population in assuming responsibility for its collective destiny must be the consciousness of the oneness of humanity." In using the analogy of comparing planetary organization to the human body, the document explains the principle of unity and diversity:

What is true of the life of the individual has its parallels in human society. The human species is an organic whole, the leading edge of the evolutionary process. That human consciousness necessarily operates through an infinite diversity of individual minds and motivations detracts in no way from its essential unity. Indeed, it is precisely an inhering diversity that distinguishes unity from homogeneity or uniformity. What the peoples of the world are experiencing, Bahá'u'lláh said, is their collective coming of age, and it is through this emerging maturity of the race that the principle of unity in diversity will find full expression.

Guided by this basic principle and understanding, Bahá'í development activities embrace this teaching and strive to develop activities in accord with this principle of oneness.

Universal Participation

Bahá'í projects seek universal participation. Bahá'ís believe that every individual has the potential, the right, and the responsibility to contribute to the advancement of human civilization. For this reason, creating a space and opportunities for people to participate in the identification of needs and programs to address those needs, is of paramount importance. Bahá'í projects aspire to ensure that the members of a group or community have equal access to the consultative and decision-making process. Development initiatives will build upon the talents and capacity of individuals and the existing conditions and resources of the community as a key to guaranteeing successful and sustainable development.

³ Vick, Holly Hanson. *Social and Economic Development: A Bahá'í Approach*, p. 21.

⁴ Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selection from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 88

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.

Universal House of Justice, 20 October 1983

At present, however, the clear majority of the planet's inhabitants come from a long history of having been denied access to resources, education, positions of influence, and employment. The forces of oppression and domination over the centuries have effectively prevented people from active participation in the development process and from fulfilling their spiritual destiny. In essence, most of the world's people have no experience with the concept of participation. For this reason, Bahá'í projects must aspire to identify and break down the mental models that have traditionally prevented people from participating in development decisions, and should contemplate strategies within their projects to develop the latent capacities of the population it desires to serve.

Spiritual Principles, Moral Rectitude and Consultation

In its October 1983 letter, the Universal House of Justice wrote of a wider horizon opening before the Bahá'í Community, and invited the believers to become involved in the development of the social and economic life of peoples, and to contribute to the ordering of human affairs and the progress of the world. To engage in this process, the Universal House of Justice explains how "the steps to be taken must necessarily begin in the Bahá'í community itself, with the friends endeavouring, 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."

Responding to the Grassroots

The Universal House of Justice emphasizes in its 20 October 1983 letter that our progress will depend on our capacity to respond to the "natural stirrings at the grassroots" rather than impose programs from outside the community, and that our service will require "resourcefulness, flexibility and cohesiveness." It furthermore clarifies that the key to success would be "unity in spirit and in action" and that the result would be a "deeper consolidation of the community".

Ten years later, in a document approved by the Universal House of Justice dated 16 September 1993 entitled "Prospects for the Future", ten years of the Bahá'í Community's experience is reflected upon, and the following six elements were identified as key lessons from our collective learning in the social and economic development field.

1. Degrees of complexity

Bahá'í development initiatives normally begin with a relatively simple set of actions, and through experience, a diversity of actions within an overall coherent strategy emerge organically. The capacity to manage increasing complexity emerges over time with the creation of the necessary structures and resources to sustain the development initiatives. The success of Bahá'í social and economic development is measured by the "degree to which they enhance the ability to address issues of development at increasingly higher levels of complexity and effectiveness".⁵

⁵ Bahá'í Office of Social and Economic Development, "The Evolution of Institutional Capacity for Social and Economic Development" 28 August 1994

2. Capacity building

Bahá'í development initiatives require the active participation of the community in the consultative and decision-making processes. For this reason, development initiatives must take into consideration actions to systematically develop the capacity of the friends to make decisions about their spiritual and material progress and then to implement them.⁶

3. Learning (Praxis)

“Learning to apply the Teachings to achieve progress could be taken as the very definition of Bahá'í social and economic development.... 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.”⁷

4. Development of Human Resources

Successful Bahá'í initiatives will incorporate actions to systematically develop human resources. Training approaches to develop individual capacity would foster participation and be carried out with a humble attitude towards learning.

5. Influencing Society

Development projects offer opportunities to the friends to become involved in the life of society and to associate and collaborate with like-minded individuals and organizations, people of capacity and leaders of thought concerned with human progress.

6. Integration

Lessons learned from the experience of the non-Bahá'í world in the field of development demonstrates the need to think systemically and avoid the temptation to fragment knowledge by creating projects that respond to only one area of need. Development problems are complex in nature, and over time the Bahá'ís will gain the necessary experience and capacity to ensure sustainable development practices. “Effective development unequivocally calls for coordinated interdisciplinary and multisectoral action.”⁸

Institutional Capacity

The Office of Social and Economic Development (OSED) in its letter dated 28 August 1993 on the “Evolution of Institutional Capacity” presents a framework for understanding how organizational structures evolve to undertake or support the work of social and economic development. OSED identifies two broad categories: 1) Bahá'í Institutes or agencies for the development of human resources under the auspices of the National Spiritual Assembly or an appointed agency, and 2) Bahá'í-inspired agencies created by individuals or groups that share a common vision of service (e.g. non-profit or non-governmental agency, private business venture). In the cases of Bahá'í inspired private or non-profit agencies, the letter states that the elaboration of by laws (related to a legal status) and a statement of purpose, philosophy, principles and mission are advisable.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Universal House of Justice, “Prospects for the Future”, 16 September 1993

⁸ Ibid.

PART 2

THE NATURE AND EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

Having identified some of the common elements among Bahá'í social and economic development projects, it may be useful to understand the nature and evolution of social and economic development projects and the process of organically increasing institutional capacity to expand the influence of Bahá'í programs.

The Nature of Projects

Most social and economic development projects can be categorized into three broad categories: Human Needs Assistance, Transformation / Human Resource Training, and Research and Knowledge Generation.

Activities aimed at meeting basic human needs like housing, education, health care, income generation, etc., are often the focus of government programs/projects. However, during the past three decades, non-governmental development organizations within the civil society have generated new approaches and strategies for addressing these important needs. While primarily concerned with the delivery of services and / or products, many projects have found it necessary to develop strategies for promoting community participation and collective decision-making.

In this light, some actors within the civil society are engaged in transformational training programs, aimed at community consciousness raising. Through capacity building approaches, replacing dysfunctional mental models of community participation and organization, new approaches to changing social structures are embraced and promoted. Such approaches originate from the grassroots community upwards, and strive to influence authoritative decision makers through popular participation in the decision making process.

Lastly, research and knowledge generation projects have to do with the creation of a new discourse and emergence of new development frameworks through which community development approaches can be redefined. Such activities while at first sight may appear overly intellectual, frequently serve as the impetus for radical changes in content and approaches to development thinking and application.

The Evolution of Projects: Scaling Up

Simple strategies of social action often begin with experimental projects in which actors strive to discover or create something new, and to test it out. Examples of experimental projects would include a theory of social organization or community participation, a new family literacy approach, a new methodology, a new conceptual framework. Building upon research and experience of other practitioners, experimental projects allow for the expression of new ideas based on a body of theoretical and practical knowledge.

Taking a successful experimental project to its next level, would call for a demonstration project. Such an activity would allow for demonstrating the effectiveness of a new methodology or idea. It is usually carried out on a small scale with available resources for promotional purposes. Once proven successful or viable under a certain set of conditions and circumstances, an

experimental project can be launched as a pilot project in different regions and under different conditions. By making cultural and other adaptations as necessary, the original concept can be replicated in different communities. If successful, consideration may then be given to replicate the pilot project on a massive scale. By replicating a pilot project, economies of scale can be achieved that make it feasible to massify the impact on much larger scale.

Examples

RUHI Methodology

By embracing a learning mode, the Baha'is of Colombia began to develop the RUHI content and learning methodology using an action-research approach. Based on certain theoretical underpinnings and systematic reflection on the Creative Word, the RUHI methodology was born. The effectiveness of the content and methodology for providing basic deepening at the grass roots community level was demonstrated. New pilot projects were launched in different cultural settings throughout Colombia, and even in neighboring Latin American countries. As part of a human resource training strategy, the replication of both the learning methodology and content of the Ruhi Institute has served to strengthen the Institute process in many countries.

Nur University: Training Rural School Teachers as Community Change Agents

Nur University's Educational Leadership Program began as a teacher-training program in 1993. As the moral leadership framework and concept of the development of moral capabilities was beginning to take shape, an extension project for training rural schoolteachers as community change agents was developed. As a demonstration project in Tarija, Bolivia, the initial program was modified for different settings and piloted in different regions within Bolivia, and subsequently Argentina. Based on several pilot experiences in different regions, the project was converted into a permanent program for the Training of Rural School teachers as Community Change Agents. This program was then implemented on a much larger scale to 1,000 facilitators of the educational reform in Ecuador in 10 regions of the country, simultaneously. The program is currently under consideration for replication with another 1,000 participants, and based on that experience could potentially be adapted to reach the remaining 90,000 teachers through a mix of distance education methodologies using remote classrooms linked by satellite and on-site workshops.

Conclusion

Our ability to improve the spiritual, social and material conditions of society will unfold as the Bahá'í community grows and matures. Development activities are just one part of the evolution of the Faith in the world. The individuals, the institutions and the whole structure are getting stronger and more capable all the time. Social and economic development is not a departure into something new and different for Bahá'í communities: it is an extension of our other efforts to promote the laws and principles of Bahá'u'lláh.⁹

The scope of this paper does not allow for a thorough examination of all of the common elements among Bahá'í social and economic development projects. It is the hope of the authors that the ideas expressed in this presentation accurately reflect some of the many ideas and lessons learned being articulated by the Universal House of Justice and its agencies on this theme. However, thoughtful Bahá'is desiring to serve in this field will undoubtedly wish to refer

⁹ Vick, Holly Hanson, *Bahá'í Social and Economic Development: A Bahá'í Approach*, p. 99

to the source documents for more accurate and complete information. For this reason we attach a list of suggested readings that helped us prepare this presentation.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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