

**1999 BAHÁ'Í CONFERENCE ON SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC  
DEVELOPMENT FOR THE AMERICAS**

**HARMONIZING TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP  
IN BAHÁ'Í SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC  
DEVELOPMENT**

**FACILITATORS: JUDIE BOPP (CANADA)  
MICHAEL BOPP (CANADA)**

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**PREPARED BY:**

**JUDIE BOPP (CANADA) AND MICHAEL BOPP (CANADA)**

**Introduction**

This brief paper will highlight issues related to the synthesis of “top-down” and “bottom up” approaches in social and economic development (SED) from a Bahá'í perspective. We will first describe what the issue looks like in general development practice. We will then outline principles and models from the Bahá'í administrative order and propose how the Bahá'í model is in fact a synthesis of top down and bottom up. Principles to guide action in SED work will be articulated.

The paper will be oriented to a few basic concepts about the nature of development, and what it takes to promote it.

***Basic Concepts***

1. We want to state clearly at the outset what we think development is, and to roughly sketch out a few things about what we believe is required to promote it. The word “development” comes from the French “envelopper” (to wrap up) and develop (to unfold). Like the unfolding of a flower, development implies the gradual revealing of potential and capability from within.

“...upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His Names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self ... these energies with which the Day Star of Divine Bounty and Source of heavenly guidance hath endowed the reality of man lie, however, latent within him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of light are potentially present in the lamp ... Neither the candle nor the lamp can be lighted by its own unaided efforts ...”

- Bahá'u'lláh (BWF:103)

Latent within the reality of who we are as human beings is deposited infinite capacity for growth and for the realization of nobility and greatness. This is true both for the individual and for human societies.

“Every man of insight will, in this day, readily admit that the counsels which the Pen of this Wronged One hath revealed constitute the supreme animating power for the advancement of the world and the exaltation of the people.”  
Bahá'u'lláh (“Tablet of the World,” in WOB:246)

“This wronged one testifieth that the purpose for which mortal men have from utter nothingness, stepped into being, is that they may work for the betterment of the world and live together in concord and harmony.”  
Bahá'u'lláh (cited in “The True Foundation of all Economics,” page 34)

2. In practical terms development (as we use the term in the phrase “social and economic development”) is the process of learning, healing, growth and change that leads human beings and their societies toward greater levels of well-being and prosperity.
3. Development comes from within. Bahá'u'lláh wrote, “All that ye potentially possess can, however, only be made manifest as a result of your own volition.” (GWB:49 ) In other words, human volition (i.e. will) must be engaged for development to occur. We therefore conclude that people’s participation (i.e. the engagement of the hearts, mind and will of people) in the process of their own development is an imperative. If there is no participation, there is no development.
4. This implies (to us) that, whatever else we may be trying to do in Bahá'í social and economic development work, we must employ a participatory development methodology. If we are not, we are likely not promoting authentic development. As Marilyn Ferguson said, “Sewing wings on caterpillars does not make butterflies.”
5. Bahá'u'lláh explains that “neither the candle nor the lamp can be lighted through its own unaided efforts.” In addition to its obvious reference to the role of the Manifestation of God in human progress, we take this verse (among other things) to

be revealing a necessary dimension of the process of growth; i.e. that nothing in nature grows and develops completely of its own energy and capacity. Everything, including human beings, require energy and substance from outside themselves. (For example, trees need water, sunlight and minerals from the soil).

6. While everything in the world of creation develops *in relationship* with other aspects of creation, and *requires* input from outside itself in order to develop, the terms of that development must be dictated from within (e.g. the tree needs a certain amount of water and sunlight; too much or too little will kill it).
7. Hence we find that a necessary balance must be maintained between development from within (bottom-up) and assistance from outside (top-down) in all social and economic development processes. How to strike this balance effectively is the primary focus of this paper.

## II. A Necessary Tension

One of the primary conceptual tensions inherent in development practice around the world is the tension between expert-driven strategies and solutions promoted by most professional development agencies<sup>1</sup> and grassroots people-centered participatory strategies, which have been championed by the NGO movement and are now receiving moderate recognition within mainstream development circles.

The *top-down, expert-driven approach* is rooted in what is essentially a technocratic paradigm. Within this framework, it is believed that development challenges ranging from poverty and disease to ineffective governance and civil disorder exist largely because of ignorance, and especially because of the lack of scientific and technical know-how. Those of us who are professionals spent many years studying in colleges and universities in order to become expert in our chosen fields. Our expertise is based on the research and ingenuity of thousands of other experts, working for many years to bring the frontiers of knowledge and technology to where it is today. All that is needed is to apply this knowledge within the development context. Only trained professionals can really do this. Poor and semi-literate populations have simply not had the opportunities to learn as we have.

It is therefore our responsibility to share what we know so that others may eventually be uplifted, their economies kick-started, their health problems overcome, their governance system rationalized, their finances harmonized with the global market, and their education system capable of turning out experts of their own.<sup>2</sup>

The *bottom-up participatory development approach* is rooted in a very different set of assumptions. Within this framework, it is believed that most primary development challenges were created by the incursions of the North-Atlantic (Euro-American) nations into the societies and natural environments of indigenous populations everywhere else. These incursions, it is argued, came in many forms: colonization, slavery, missionization,

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<sup>1</sup> This includes most initiatives sponsored by USAID, CIDA, UNDP, The World Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank. While lip service is paid to participatory approaches, most projects are in reality professionally driven.

<sup>2</sup> This is a very important part (though not all) of what is known as “modernization theory.” For a detailed explanation of this approach see Rostow, W.W. (1962) “The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto,” Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. See also Bernstein, Henry (1970)

formal education, and of course, capitalism( i.e. investment, wealth extraction, protection of that wealth and its extraction mechanisms, and subsequent impoverishment of local populations and depletion of their natural environment). Within the people-centered paradigm, it is believed that development, as promoted by the international development agencies, is really an anti-development force that disempowers people, creates dependency, passivity and hopelessness, and leads inevitably to the worsening of social and economic well-being.

What is needed to move a population toward well-being and prosperity, it is believed, are processes of healing from the traumas of the past (and present), learning and discovering about the roots of their own development dilemmas (such as poverty, social breakdown, civil disorder or poor health), and the mobilization of ordinary people into groups and organizations of their own making oriented to learning and action for the common good.<sup>3</sup>

These two “camps” within the world of developmental practice each have within them a wide range of opinions and approaches, some of them extreme and dogmatic, and some very open to learning from and including contributions from the other “camp” in their own practice. We will argue that *both* of these positions have considerable validity as well as serious blind spots and weaknesses.

### ***Top Down and Bottom Up as a Metaphor***

The metaphor “top-down” usually refers to a hierarchical, pyramid model of organizations in which power and resources are concentrated in a few hands and distributed downward to the masses. Professional development organizations and their parallels within government ministries and large NGOs are organized (theoretically) to facilitate the efficient flow of expertise and resources into developing countries and regions. At this level the focus of attention is typically on macro (i.e. big picture) patterns

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“Modernization Theory and the Sociological Study of Development” in Journal of Development Studies, Vol. 7, No. 2, p.141-160.

<sup>3</sup> Some of the streams of thinking that have contributed to the people-centered approach include Freirian conscientization (Friere 1970), participatory action research (see Fals-Borda, O. and M.A. Rahman (1991), community development (see Roberts, Hayden 1979 and Bopp and Bopp [2000 forthcoming], and the more recent literature on “civil society” (see Burbidge 1997), sustainable development (see Korten, David 1990, 1999) and “social capital” (see Robert Putnam 1993a, 1993b).

and problems. How to address the rapidly exploding peri-urban squatter settlement problems resulting from rural to urban migration; how to improve the health status of hundreds of thousands of women and their babies; how to address an alarming spread of lawlessness, violent crime and youth gang activity; how to pay for a twenty percent increase in access to basic and primary education—these sorts of problem definitions focus on populations rather than on people, and require system-wide interventions at many levels: international, national, provincial and local.

The strength of this point of view (and that is exactly what it is—a perspective from which problems are viewed), is the ability to see and to work on those determinations of well-being that are truly macro in nature.

For example, the incursion of foreign fishing trawlers into domestic fishing grounds (wiping out fish supplies that had sustained local populations for millennia), the rapid spread of HIV-AIDS, or the price secured for agricultural commodities (such as coffee) when sold for international market—these are problems that are beyond the scope of most local communities to resolve on their own. Paradoxically, this ability to focus and work on the macro level tends to blind practitioners to some of the most critical dimensions of all in social and economic development, which are elements such as cultural values, beliefs and practices, morality, human relations, human will, knowledge and the capacity to act upon the world. These “software” elements are difficult to understand and nearly impossible to influence except from the inside-out of local communities and individual participants in the development process.

The “bottom-up” metaphor refers to “seeing” development problems and processes from the standpoint of the communities that are supposed to be the beneficiaries of social and economic development processes. It also refers to the idea that direction and control of the process should come primarily from developing people, and not from the professionals who serve them.

When development is viewed from within developing societies, rather than from the outside as is almost always the case with expert driven approaches, it is possible to understand (in enough detail to be able to take local action) what the fundamental determinants of well-being and prosperity are, and to sort out which of these are susceptible to being influenced or changed by strategies initiated from within.

There are many stories in development literature of problems that seemed absolutely intractable until local people became engaged in the process of problem solving on their own behalf. Examples of these include a youth violence and crime crisis in Los Angeles, an alcohol and drug abuse epidemic in Canadian aboriginal communities and low levels of functional literacy among the eight hundred sixty-nine different language communities of Papua New Guinea.

The people-centered approach tends to focus on engaging community-level people and their local or regional organizations in capacity building, and on fostering people-driven actions intended to address common problems or opportunities. Therefore, those parts of the development solution that cannot be delivered to people (like cargo), but rather which must be developed from within a population (elements such as individual behaviour change or the taking of collective actions) are best addressed by a people-centered approach.

But the bottom-up approach too has its limitations. Some development problems really are beyond the power or the capacity of local populations to address. In reality, there is often a glass ceiling which limits how much can be achieved through a community development process, particularly when local interests collide with those of corporations or governments.

Another danger of a (too dogmatic) bottom-up approach is that every local population has its own power structure, elites and vested interests, and also its own groups which are silenced or ignored. Sometimes people-centered rhetoric is used to mask other agendas and to prevent outside influences from disturbing an unjust balance of power and inequitable patterns of resource distribution. Who benefits from development initiatives and who does not is a key question to ask in seeking to understand how the benefits of development (resources, education, knowledge, status, power, options) can be directed and controlled by some at the expense of others.

A too-local perspective can simply be self-limiting, and can block the natural unfolding of human potential. “The way we do things around here,” can be recited as a mantra to discredit or block the acceptance of approaches that come from outside. Sometimes outside influences are indeed harmful and should be questioned, but on the

other hand, labeling something as “satanic” or “useless” because it comes from someone who is not “one of us” can be self-defeating, or even dangerous.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, local populations often lack knowledge, resources, organizational capacity, and even will to address serious development challenges, and really are in need of help from the outside. The challenge is to bring that help in a way that creates a healthy balance between development from within, and aid and support from the outside.

## *Summary*

Here, in summary, is a listing of the flaws with too much top-down or too much bottom-up thinking in social and economic development practice.

### **1. Too Much Top Down**

- a) Active agents of change are outside the development population. When the money stops, so does the work. No ownership from within. No sustainability.
- b) The hearts, minds, and will of developing people are not engaged in healing, learning and change from within. Therefore the essence of development (which is the unfolding of God-given human potential and well-being from within) cannot be achieved. No participation, no development.
- c) Top-down approaches are often blind to fundamental social dynamics embedded in culture, local power arrangements, local development history, and current patterns of human relations.
- d) The top-down perspective tends to miss important details and dynamics related to the basic determinants of well-being and prosperity, and to introduce generic strategies extrapolated from other places rather than developing a locally appropriate strategy

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<sup>4</sup> For example, some Aboriginal community leaders in Canada initially blocked HIV-AIDS education programs because (they said) cultural mores prohibited discussion of sexually related topics in public and across gender lines. The response was denial: “Our young people are not promiscuous. AIDS is not and never will be a problem,” they argued. In fact the opposite was true. Many youth were promiscuous, and at that point, several had already died from the disease. It took intensive community consultation to move past this barrier.

from within. As a result, projects and programs which are intended to address specific local or regional development challenges often miss the mark.

- e) As top-down, expert-driven processes unfold, they tend to become internally driven and self-referential (i.e. the agency and professional priorities and timelines overshadow local needs and concerns). Continuous feedback on the actual impact of the initiatives on local people and their development challenges tends to become obscured, and even (defacto) unimportant. An approach which is too top-down becomes self-serving for the agencies and professionals who are driving the process.

## **2. Too Much Bottom-Up**

- a) There are limits to what can be changed from the bottom up. Too much bottom-up tends to be (ideologically) blind to these limitations. A dogmatic “power to the people” approach often ignores the larger socio-economic, political and cultural context within which bottom-up efforts are taking place.
- b) Bottom-up approaches can be manipulated by various self-interested individuals or groups who may oppose certain aspects of an initiative because it could change the current pattern of who has a voice and who does not, who has access to and control over resources and who does not, and whose ideas shape and influence the lives of the people and whose do not.
- c) Too much bottom-up tends to discredit and devalue the contributions of outside helpers, and to dogmatically reject thinking and approaches that may well be of great importance to the people’s well-being.
- d) Too much bottom-up may shut the door of opportunity for local populations to learn and to benefit from access to resources and innovations.

### ***The Wings of A Bird***

Our starting point in this paper is to argue that the top-down and bottom-up approaches are like the wings of a bird. The development process will not fly very far unless *both* wings are working together.

Having said that, we have just passed over one of the most persistent and difficult challenges that exists in development practice. How can this actually be done? How can a practical synergy be achieved between top-down and bottom-up in our implementation of development efforts?

### **III. The Bahá'í Administrative Order as a Model that Balances Top-Down and Bottom-Up.**

In this section we will outline a few prominent features of the Bahá'í system that we believe reveals pathways for synergistically balancing top-down and bottom-up approaches in Bahá'í social and economic development. Our intention is only to point the way to a very rich field of source of guidance for strengthening SED practice.

#### **1. Collaboration**

The Bahá'í system is infused with the spirit of collaboration. Indeed it operates in sharp contrast to the adversarial systems in the world around us, which are often animated by assumptions of mistrust, suspicion and a belief in the inherent inclination of human beings to be self-serving. Within the Bahá'í system, all parts of the system are seen to be organically interconnected and interdependent, and the system is animated by an unqualified belief in the inherent nobility of human nature and in the expectation that people will respond nobly to the call of a noble task.

Local assemblies are not supposed to respond to their national spiritual assembly with suspicion and resistance, and should not fear an encroachment on local sovereignty. Rather, each level is seen to have its own contributions to make and its own spheres of responsibility. The proper relationship between the rulers and the learned is another key example of Bahá'í collaboration. The learned love, respect and obey the institutions. The rulers love, respect and carefully consider the advice of the learned.

Indeed all leadership within the Bahá'í system is collaborative by nature. Assembly members are encouraged to avoid any impression of superiority or aloofness and to “take the friends into their confidence.” Decisions are taken only after frank and

loving consultation, and not unilaterally by individuals (or even institutions) in positions of power.

Finally, we know that while the rulers make the goals and plans, the power to carry them out and to actually propel the community forward in its development resides within the body of the believers. The role of the learned is to “release” that power, which is primarily an animation role.

*What animates all of these relationships is love. Indeed the Bahá'í system is a development promoting a leadership and administration system whose chief operating principle is love.*

### ***Application***

In Bahá'í social and economic development practice, the standoff between the advocates of the grassroots, bottom-up approach versus the expert-driven, top-down approach is transformed into a loving and respectful collaboration between those who are struggling to bring improvements into their own lives and societies and those who are working to assist and support them. This implies that outside helpers must:

- a) *Be servant-leaders*, deeply committed to respectfully supporting the development from within (healing, capacity building, change-making) that must occur, while at the same time courageously holding up the mirror of truth, and lovingly and kindly facilitating the learning that is needed.
- b) It also implies that outside helpers must recognize the limitations of their role; that the power to actually bring about development resides within the populations of developing people, and not in the hands of outside animators, though outsiders may have a great deal to contribute to the process.
- c) Finally, it implies the need for a facilitative approach to the task of animating development processes; one that is oriented to and capable of fostering meaningful and sustained participation.

## 2. Authority versus Initiative

There are clear lines of authority within the Bahá'í system. The primary authority is God's, as revealed by Bahá'u'lláh in His world-embracing revelation. All Bahá'ís are drawn together by this transcendent vision.

The implementation of that vision is not left to chance, or to the whims of diverse groups within humanity pursuing their own narrow self-interests. The institutions of the Faith serve as guardians of the vision, protecting it from distortion and guiding its implementation in all parts of the world. It is within this framework of certitude and safety (the arc of the covenant) that the Bahá'í system is able to provide illumination and support for the development of the many cultures and communities it serves.

Individuals are called to love, serve and obey the institutions of the Faith, but this love and obedience is by no means blind. "The wisdom of every command shall be tested," writes Bahá'u'lláh. Individuals are encouraged to make their own independent investigation of reality, and every individual has the "duty and obligation" to put forth in consultation, without fear of retaliation or reprisal, those views s/he is moved to present.

Individuals are told to arise, to "act, act now and continue to act," not to be deterred, even if "thou performest it thyself alone." We are not to wait for the institutions to tell us what to do, and we are continually urged to take individual initiative. We are told, in fact, that a great diversity of action is required, that everyone cannot be doing the same thing at the same time, and that it is the aggregate effect of all our combined individual efforts that will comprise the dynamic growth of the Faith. (Universal House: Ridván Message 1990)

In short, the real power to change ourselves, our communities and the world resides within us, but unless we allow our actions to be guided by the Revelation and the institutions of the Faith, they will probably not be effective and will not contribute significantly to the overall advancement of the world. Here again is the balance: administrative authority and individual initiative, like two wings of a bird.

### *Application*

In Bahá'í-inspired social and economic development, the tension between top-down and bottom-up may be understood as follows:

- a) On the one hand we know that developing people need to be engaged (heart, mind, will and energy) in the process of their own development.
- b) On the other hand the people are not always right in their collective conclusions, and they do not always have all the knowledge and skills they need to address their own development challenges.
- c) There are “spiritual principles, or what some call human values, by which solutions may be found for every social problem. The essential merit of spiritual principle is that it not only presents a perspective which harmonizes with that which is imminent in human nature, it also induces an attitude, a dynamic, a will, an aspiration which facilitates the discovery and implementation of practical measures.” The Universal House of Justice, “The Promise of World Peace,” pp. 8-9).
- d) We contend that without a principle-centered approach, authentic development is not possible. The unfolding of human potential for well-being and prosperity is not a random affair to be left to whim and chance. Clear principles need to be articulated and development processes should be held accountable to them. (Principles such as “no participation; no development” and “unity first and development will follow” are examples we have tested in our own practice). Those who promote development processes should “call themselves to account” systematically and on a very regular basis in relationship to the principles they have chosen to guide their work.
- e) Both insiders and outside helpers should be answerable to the authority of the vision and principles that animate SED work. Some mechanism (such as a joint-development council consisting of selected representatives from both inside and outside) should be created to ensure that the vision and principles of sound development are understood and carried out by both outsiders and insiders.

We submit that taking a principle-centered approach is a very important effective strategy in bringing about a synthesis of top-down and bottom-up in social and economic development work, because it calls forth attitudes, values, and strategies that are

grounded in human nature and thereby harmonize diverse contributions to the development process.

### **3. The Call to Higher Ground**

The Bahá'í system calls individuals and groups beyond narrow identities and self-interests and toward a devotion to the truth and the rigorous application of principles. It does this through a variety of mechanisms and processes and the norms and values which animate their application.

#### **Consultation**

The most obvious of these is *consultation*. Within the Bahá'í system of consultation, individuals are asked to “become as one soul in many bodies,” united in heart and mind with others in the process, with their purposes harmonized to the greater purpose of serving mankind in accordance with the Divine teachings. Contributions are to be heartfelt, frank and lovingly presented. We are not to hold back what we anticipate may be unpopular views. On the other hand we are to listen with open minds and hearts, and we are not to disregard or denigrate a contribution based on who has given it, but rather to carefully consider it without passion or prejudice, and strive to reach consensus based on spiritual principles. Within the circle of Bahá'í consultation, every individual has a right and a duty to express his or her views, and to expect to be respected and heard. And none (on the other hand) should attempt to force their views on others. On the contrary, once a contribution has been given in consultation, we are told to detach ourselves from it as though we had given a gift which no longer belongs to us. Once a decision is made, everyone is obliged to respect and follow it, and is strongly discouraged from speaking against that decision outside the circle of consultation. If we feel a decision is wrong, it is our right and our duty to bring the question back to the consulting body, but at the same time to support it until a new decision is made, thus preserving unity.

### ***Application***

Consultation is a primary law of human progress. No consultation; no progress. In a Bahá'í-inspired SED process, consultation is a fundamental methodology without which we could not proceed. We have found that the principles of Bahá'í consultation are practicable in almost every context. When top-down and bottom-up attempt to collaborate, the direct application of the principles of Bahá'í consultation radically shift the playing field. The hierarchical power positions held by outside experts become mitigated and harmonized by the grounded energy and practical wisdom of development insiders. Decisions have to be both collective and based on spiritual principles.

One of the most powerful ways we know of to ensure this in professional projects is to place financial control into the hands of a joint committee consisting of insiders and outside helpers, and to require project management decisions to flow through that committee. Such an approach, while not common, is not only workable, but extremely effective for building and helping to maintain constructive relationships between outside helpers and developing people.

However, such an arrangement would be totally unworkable without consultation. Professional agencies operate with different assumptions, organizational norms and requirements, timelines and goals than local communities do. This should come as no surprise. They are inherently different social organisms. Yet it is their very diversity that potentially contributes the building of a powerful partnership, *if* those differences are harmonized through effective consultation. The challenge to all participants in this process is to develop the spiritual attributes and personal qualities necessary to allow the process to work.

### **Bahá'í Elections**

The Bahá'í electoral process offers yet another set of lessons and pathways that are applicable to problems of harmonizing top-down and bottom-up approaches. One of the very powerful outcomes of this process is the way it (like consultation) calls all participants to higher ground.

When we consider how leadership is defined and chosen in the wider world, even in the most democratic of situations, the results seldom even approach the ideal of choosing servant-leaders to facilitate consensual processes for the common good.

Features of the Bahá'í electoral system that are readily transferable to social and economic development processes include the following.

- The emphasis on moral leadership; i.e. leadership that is committed to facilitating processes of transformation leading to human betterment, and guided by high ethical principles.
- Secret ballot, plurality vote, and the obligation to vote (without the least trace of passion and prejudice) for those individuals who “best combine” the qualities asked of those who are elected. This procedure, coupled with a ban on electioneering, elevates the electoral process from a factional struggle for control to an earnest search for the best possible leadership for the situation.
- Shifting the electoral process from a “political” to a “spiritual” exercise, imbued with prayer and meditation on the qualities for election, in a serious and respectful tone.
- Rallying unconditionally behind whosoever is chosen for leadership positions, and ensuring that the process of leadership takes place in an atmosphere of trust, love, support and mutual respect.
- Renewing leadership through annual elections.
- Allowing all stakeholders in the process (all registered Bahá'ís in good standing within the Bahá'í system), to be voters and candidates in all elections.
- Power is not held by the individuals who are elected. All power resides in groups (assemblies, councils, etc.). Individuals neither expect nor receive reward for service.

### *Application*

While there are many benefits to the use of this marvelous system, we want to focus on those related to the top-down, bottom-up dilemma.

- a) By use of the Bahá'í approach, the entire process of choosing leadership brings unity rather than inciting and further aggravating factionalism.

- b) The Bahá'í system is difficult to manipulate by local elites, both because it prohibits focusing public dialogue on platforms and on personalities, and because it generates consultation on the spiritual qualities and relevant capacities for leadership. Additionally, because there are no special privileges (only service) for those elected, self-interested individuals are far less likely to rise to leadership positions. These features allow populations to shift their focus to the vision and values of the development process itself and to the actual leadership requirements of that process.

### **Relevancy to the Top-Down, Bottom-Up Dilemma**

One of the biggest obstacles to constructive participatory development comes from within developing populations in the form of human relations conflicts, factional splits, and power struggles. When these dynamics are occurring, it is exceedingly difficult and sometimes impossible for outside helpers to work with insiders in constructive development partnerships. Collaboration is only possible if both partners are internally healthy enough to play their respective parts with integrity. The Bahá'í electoral model offers communities and development organizations an effective framework for clarifying and uplifting internal processes of leadership and management.

In the foregoing discussion we have only scratched the surface in terms of the richness of the Bahá'í system of leadership and administration and its applicability to development processes.

Other aspects of the Bahá'í system that are directly relevant to the top-down, bottom-up tension include the following.

1. The Nineteen-Day Feast as a model for bringing the grassroots beneficiaries and the technical and administrative leaders of an SED process together for regular consultation, planning, re-dedication to vision and values, assessment of progress to date, and community building.
2. The Bahá'í fund as a model for how to generate money from within developing populations, and to combine these with resources from outside, all transparently

managed within the framework of principles and for the benefit of purposes agreed upon in consultation.

3. The role of the learned, as wise and well-trained animators and advisors to the process, who themselves neither have nor seek power or personal advantage, and whose only desire is to serve the process.

These, and many other aspects of the Bahá'í system, provide a rich source of practical principles and models useful for addressing critical issues in social and economical development practice, including the harmonization of the top-down and bottom-up dimensions of the work.

## **IV. Key Concepts, Processes and Strategies**

From the foregoing discussion, we want to focus on three critical concepts that have direct application to Bahá'í-inspired SED processes, and to raise a number of strategic challenges and propositions about them. Those concepts are: a) fostering participatory development; b) collaboration and the building of development “collaboratives”; and c) the need for intermediary facilitation between top-down and bottom-up.

### **1. Fostering participatory development processes**

We began by arguing (based on the writings of Bahá'u'lláh) that participatory approaches to SED are not merely an option; they are an imperative (no participation; no development).

In the course of our work with communities, we have developed a tool for identifying barriers to effective participation.<sup>5</sup> The intent of focusing on barriers is to understand more deeply what authentic participation requires, and to learn how to

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<sup>5</sup> See Bopp, M. (1994). “Three Scales for Assessing Barriers to People’s Participation in Community Program Work.” This publication can be order from The Four Worlds Centre for Development Learning, Box 395, Cochrane, Alberta, Canada T0L 0W0, phone: 403-932-0882, fax 403-932-0883, or e-mail 4worlds@cadvision.com.

(gradually) reduce or even eliminate barriers that inhibit or block it. Three categories of barriers were identified.

- a) **External/Structural** — having to do with insider-outsider power relationships and focused on who (insider or outsider) controls various important aspects of the process, aspects such as vision, plans, personnel, money, evaluation, etc.
- b) **Internal/Relational** — having to do with the internal patterns of human relations, power and the social climate that either inhibits or supports people’s participation within developing populations.
- c) **Intermediary/Facilitative** — having to do with the roles, skills, styles and approaches taken by professional helpers and project leaders, and focused on the degree to which these roles are played out in ways that build capacity and facilitate empowerment.

The reason we are concerned about participation at all is because it is a critical dynamic in the human development process, and not because it is an end in itself. We submit that fostering participatory development processes is far more complex and challenging than it may appear at first glance. Early attempts to evaluate participation tended to count warm bodies at meetings. However, since participation clearly means engaging the hearts, minds, will and energy of developing people in the process of their own development (which we have previously defined as primarily, though not exclusively, an inside-out process), there are clearly many other dimensions to consider. Following is a list of guiding questions to assist SED initiatives to begin to consider the participation dimension.

- Who is supposed to benefit from the development initiative?
- How did the project or program and the people who are supposed to benefit come together?
- Did the intended beneficiaries have some say in the design phase of the program?
- Whose goals and aspirations are being fulfilled by the project? How so?
- Who is actually benefiting? How?
- Who is actually participating? To what degree? Tokenism? Control? In what phase of the project?

- How have local people’s ability to understand and analyze their own situations and to further their own aims and aspirations changed?
- Who is learning what from the project?
- Is intervention and training needed to facilitate more meaningful and effective levels of participation?
- Who needs to learn what? What needs to change?

## **2. Collaboration and the Building of Development “Collaborations”**

“Cooperation and reciprocity are essential properties which are inherent in the unified system of the world of existence, and without which the entire creation would be reduced to nothingness. The more this inter-relationship is strengthened and expanded, the more will human society advance in progress and prosperity.”  
(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Cited in Compilation on Huqúqu’lláh, p. 14)

The Rockefeller Foundation published an important report in 1997 by Joan Walsh entitled “Stories of Renewal: Community Building and the Future of Urban America,” in which the author documents case examples of a “new” approach to solving the complex dilemma of urban poverty in America. It tells the story of large multi-agency, multi-level initiatives in places like Oakland, Atlanta, the Bronx, New York, and Baltimore.

The study argues that community building (i.e. the building of personal relationships and social networks) is proving to be more effective an approach to addressing urban poverty and social problems than many of the specially designed anti-poverty programs of the past.

One key element of success described in the report is the foundation of “collaboratives” which consist of a network of professional, business and voluntary organizations (some very grassroots) working together to develop a common analysis, common strategies, and to create a synergy between the strengths of the various organizations.

We have seen many such attempts to build development collaboratives succeed and others fail. We suggest that, in essence, a collaborative is kind of “community,” bound together by the common commitment of its members to the goals and the process of development. However, very often, development collaboratives break down or are

seriously hampered by internal conflict and mistrust because of the cultural incompatibility that exists between grassroots community groups and professional or business organizations, or from sheer lack of effective coordination.

We propose that the Bahá'í community has much to contribute in the building of collaboratives, largely because of the spirit and practice of collaboration that exists in the Baha'i administrative order. We submit that wherever Bahá'ís live, there are others (outside the Bahá'í community) who share our interest and concern for the critical human issues our societies face. While many Bahá'í communities may not be ready to take on large social and economic problems on their own, Bahá'ís could become very useful and important contributors to a collaborative effort.

In that context, the contribution of Bahá'í participants can go well beyond the simple service-oriented contribution of carrying out volunteer tasks, useful as that may be. We know that Bahá'ís working within development collaboratives (in many well-documented instances) have been able to have a transformative impact on the entire collaborative's way of working and pattern of internal relations. These contributions have often been made by a handful of Bahá'ís working in a much larger organization. The potential for being catalysts of transformative change in such situations differs, of course, from case to case, depending on the nature and quality of the Bahá'í contributors, as well as the particular circumstances of the collaborative at any given time.

We believe the Bahá'í community is particularly well equipped to contribute to the work of building effective working relationships between top-down and bottom-up elements in SED processes, and further, that collaboratives (consisting of working partnerships within which Bahá'ís play even a small part) may provide an excellent context within which to do this important work.

### **3. The Need for Intermediary Facilitation between Top-Down and Bottom-Up**

One of the unique roles Bahá'ís are well positioned to play is that of facilitative intermediaries *between* the various players in social and economic development processes, and especially between grassroots community people (and their organizations) and professional agencies and business groups. The Rockefeller report (Walsh 1997) identifies the need for the development of new roles and structures, and highlights the fact that “community building initiatives have involved a stunning diversity of participants” (p. 34). There is real need, in most broad-based development processes, for someone to play the role of facilitators/intermediaries. This role entails growing and nurturing the “connective tissue” between the major component players in the system. The problem many development initiatives trip over is that none of the constituent partners have the energy, the time, the will, or the capacity to do this very important “in-between” work that provides the glue which holds the whole system together. Each partner is willing to play its own part, but in a living system the whole is greater than the sum of the parts and attention and care for the connective relationship is a vital role that needs to be played.

The facilitator/intermediary role is one that requires a great deal of capacity to accept and integrate diversity, along with a deep and abiding respect for the unique gifts and contributions each of the partners bring to the circle. It requires considerable depth of experience in the art of consultation, and strength in moral leadership of the kind that calls people to higher ground, inspires them in the service of common ideals, and facilitates learning and growth to propel participants through difficult situations.

We propose that the Bahá'í community is abundantly rich (when compared to other groups) in all of these characteristics and that the role of facilitator/intermediary is one that Bahá'ís can well play in many social and economic development settings. In our view, the institution of the learned provides a living model (within the Bahá'í system) of how this role can be played and an in-depth description was provided by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in “The Secrets of Divine Civilization” of the role of learned in the development of society.

## **FINAL REMARKS**

We close with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s call to all of us to become “the learned” to the generality of mankind.

“How excellent; how honourable is man if he arises to fulfill his responsibilities; how wretched and contemptible, if he shuts his eyes to the welfare of society and wastes his precious life in pursuing his own selfish interests and personal advantages. Supreme happiness is mans, and he beholds the Signs of God in the work and in the human soul, if he urges on the steed of high endeavour in the arena of civilization and justice.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá (SDC:3-4)

We propose that the necessary tension between top-down, expert-driven approaches and bottom-up, participatory approaches can be constructively harmonized for the benefit of all, and that pathways, principles and models for how to do this are laid out in the Bahá’í administrative order. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá calls us to arise, but with wisdom, appropriate knowledge and armed with the mantle of virtue. It seems that we only dimly grasp the significance of the Bahá’í administrative system. Most of us think of it as “the way we do things.” And yet there is hidden within this wondrous system a veritable blueprint for building peace, order and well-being in the world around us. Our challenge is to learn how to apply this system in the heart of the world.

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