

REPORT on Agriculture Activities
at the Rabbani Trust sponsored “2001 Bahá’í Development Seminar” and
“Bahá’í Conference on Social and Economic Development”
Orlando, Florida

A significant portion of Seminar and Conference attendees participated in the agriculture sessions. Networking opportunities continued to multiply this year among the participants interested in applying the Baha’i Writings on agriculture and community development to SED. Following are some highlights of the activities.

1. Conference Session: Applying the Writings to Achieve Progress in Agriculture:

Facilitators from Blue Ridge SED Initiative - Rosemary Closson, Kitty Herriott, Winnie Merritt – utilized adult learning strategies in the format of the session which looks, from a Bahá’í perspective, at the role of agriculture in achieving global prosperity. Through a series of learning tasks the participants: 1) Discovered the relationship between the advancement of mankind and Bahá’u’lláh’s instruction to pay "special regard" to agriculture, 2) Articulated the role of agriculture in achieving global prosperity, and 3) Created a simple action plan to promote “special regard” for agriculture.

Integral to the spirit and success of the session was the participation of the Native American drum groups whose participants come from Canada and the United States. They are Sohnela Wiji Bahá’í Drum and Honor All Nations.

A copy of the session plan for utilization in local communities, as well as a brief session paper, are available by email. Requests may be sent Winnie Merritt at omerritt@aol.com with “Session Plan” in Subject line.

2. Lobby Agriculture and the Writings Display:

This was the third year for mounting a display of the Writings on agriculture, environment, and community development in a prominent alcove area of the lobby. Many attendees who were primarily interested in other topics were attracted to the exhibit as well. They often expressed amazement that the Writings are so clear about the relationship of agriculture to community development and the reconstruction of the world. Several projects mounted posters in the alcove area and distributed materials there. Conference participants once more were encouraged to wear green and yellow lapel ribbons to pay “special regard” for agriculture and the resulting curiosity brought inquiries and visits to the display area and to the networking sessions.

3. “Ag Chat”:

Poster presentations at the lobby display area during free time were a new feature this year. Representatives of SED projects in agriculture and the environment were on hand to give a brief presentation and answer questions. Presentations included:

Ahmad Newton – AgroEcology for Junior Youth in Ecuador

Melinda Salazar –Participatory Processes that Empower Communities – The Coral Gardens Initiative (Fiji)

Oscar Merritt – All-Terrain Tire Gardens

John Bradley – Eco Ag Service

Sandy Gershuny and Alma Lo – Three Sisters Agriculture Project

Sohnela Wiji Bahá’í Drum – Teaching Trip

Lloyd Brown – Environmental Education Slides

4. IEF Seminar Sessions related to Agriculture:

Continuing the collaboration with International Environment Forum, the Ag Forum recruited two of the programs presented on Wednesday at the IEF Seminar. These were both from Native American SED projects.

The session entitled “Three Sisters Garden Project: Indigenous Agricultural Values Respectful of the Environment” was led by Sandy Gershuny and Alma Lo. Also attending to support the project was Iowne Anderson, mother of Alma Lo. The Three Sisters project is located in Ontario, Canada.

The session “And All Life is Sacred: First Nations Reflections on the Environment” was facilitated by the Sohnela Wiji Bahá’í Drum, represented by Paul Carignan and Sylvia Bertolini of Canada and by Bob and

Linda Fall of the USA, and by Honor All Nations, represented by Linda Loft-Pappenberger and Pauline Tuttle of Canada. Drawing on East Coast First Nations Teachings and the Baha'i Sacred Writings on Agriculture and the Environment, the drum group facilitators shared insights on the role of women and communities.

Although Ag Forum was not responsible for recruitment of the IEF session by Bob Zuber entitled "Reconnecting Faith with Home", it was interesting to note how often agriculture was mentioned in this project presentation primarily focusing on cities. Dr. Zuber, a Christian minister, is the initiator of "Green Mapping" projects around the world, including New York City where he lives, and he is vitally concerned with people knowing where their food comes from. The projects help people understand more about their local environments, including identifying and encouraging community gardens and agriculture-related centers such as farmers' markets within the cities.

5. Agriculture Special Interest Session (Development Seminar):

Attendance was about ten people, which was a reflection of the nature of the smaller Pre-Conference Seminar itself. During this first of two networking sessions, sharing of experiences of incorporating agriculture into the vitality of community life led to a focus on the successes and challenges faced by Iowne Anderson in her efforts to establish a center for the study of agriculture among the First Nations people in Canada. Iowne accompanied her Baha'i friend, Sandy Gershuny, and her daughter, Alma Lo, to the Conference. She is a Seneca elder whose work with troubled youth has been an interesting aspect of the project. Paul Carignan of Sohnela Wiji in Canada also addressed the need of a New Guinea farmer for technical information. He was given the Volunteers in Technical Assistance information by Dan Johnson of USA, a VITA volunteer. The issues related to sustainability of Ag Forum were also discussed and enthusiasm relayed for its further development.

6. Agriculture/Environment Special Interest Session (SED Conference):

Rabbani Trust's continued encouragement of collaboration of the two interest groups, agriculture and environment, resulted in a joint session led by the International Environment Forum and Ag Forum. Approximately 30 people attended the session, becoming acquainted with each other's experience and interests through interactive games. Small groups consulted on the following topics: Community and Gardens, Agriculture and Environment Intersections, Environmental Education, and Activities related to the IEF/Upcoming World Summit on Sustainable Development. For a brief report on feedback from the groups, write to omerritt@aol.com and put Ag/Env Networking in the Subject line.

7. Ag Forum General Meeting:

Approximately 25 participants met over lunch for the working meeting of the Ag Forum during the lunch break on Saturday, December 15. The format of the session was set out in four questions:

A. Who are we? A Baha'i inspired SED project promoting Bahá'u'lláh's principle that the advancement of humanity and reconstruction of the world depends upon a worldwide commitment to a just, equitable and sustainable agriculture.

B. What are we envisioning? The Mission of the Agriculture Forum is to promote the Forum's Vision by facilitating the participation of interested individuals and local, regional and international agriculture associations, agencies and projects in a network:

- dedicated to a cooperative and consultative approach to a just, equitable and sustainable agriculture, and related areas of environment and community development
- where ideas can be exchanged on broad issues of agriculture in society and on solutions to specific issues in specific communities
- which uses the Internet to provide a virtual network of exchange
- which sponsors occasional international gatherings and promotes local and regional meetings

C. What has happened this year? A website committee is constructing a site at

http://www.bcca.org/orgs/ag_forum/ and submissions are requested. They have also set up an email membership list at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ag-forum>, which sends mail under the name of ag_forum@yahoo.com. All are invited to join. Thirty-eight attendees at the 2001 Conference signed up for the Ag Forum membership list which brings the current membership to 82. A book of essays on various topics

related to agriculture is being edited by Paul Hanley of Canada. A steering committee, guided by a letter from the Office of Social and Economic Development in Haifa, consulted through virtual meetings to create vision and mission statements. Eco Ag Service agreed to mentor the development of Ag Forum. Invitations to membership were issued to those who signed networking lists at the 2000 Bahá'í SED Conference in Orlando. The 2001 Orlando events were sponsored by Ag Forum, including collaborative efforts with the International Environment Forum. Moira Couper in Canada is making efforts to create a national network there.

D. Where do we go from here? In response to the fourth question, the group divided into two smaller groups working on education and on organizational structure. Enthusiasm was high for developing a viable board of directors, and David Gillette of the USA agreed to serve on the body. Ken Dunsworth of Canada offered to assist development of Seminar activities for next year's Orlando events. Suggestions were also received for developing education opportunities. (A copy of the group suggestions can be obtained from Interim Coordinator of Ag Forum, Winnie Merritt at: omerritt@aol.com)

8. Ben Levy Scholars:

For the first time, Eco Ag Service awarded scholarships in honor of Ben Levy, retired Trustee of the Rabbani Charitable Trust who served with great distinction as Program Director of the Conference for a number of years and assisted in bringing the issues of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Development to the attention of his fellow Bahá'ís. The Scholars brought to the Conference wide ranging skills and experience in these same areas. They are Dr. Hamid Farabi of Trinidad, Mohammed Fikri of Canada, Sandy Gershuny of Canada, David Gillette of the USA, and Ahmad Newton-Bernal of Ecuador. Donations toward further scholarships were received.

Submitted by Ag Forum Interim Coordinator, Winnie Merritt
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