

ETHICS AND SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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- The fact that we are Bahá'ís, that we are firm in the Covenant, that we live to bring about the oneness of humankind all serve to define our approach to social and economic development. Without such definers, we are no different than any other religion or organization, which seeks to promote the welfare of humanity. Our approach is different because we are Bahá'ís. This reality frames our vision and our actions.

“It cannot be over-emphasized that venturing into social and economic development rests upon the fundamental principles enshrined in the Teachings concerning the inter-relationship between the spiritual and material aspects of life, and if social and economic activity is not placed on a spiritual basis it may well prove counter-productive or even harmful, as without a spiritual base the people are likely to become corrupt or materialistic.”

[Universal House of Justice to an individual dated 12 July 1984]

- When it comes to examining the relationship of ethics and social and economic development, some of the relevant spiritual principles can be found in the following quotes from the Central Figures of the Faith. First from Bahá'u'lláh:

“Say: Honesty, virtue, wisdom and a saintly character redound to the exaltation of man, while dishonesty, imposture, ignorance and hypocrisy lead to his abasement.”

[Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p.57]

And 'Abdu'l-Bahá reminds us:

“...any agency whatever, though it be the instrument of mankind's greatest good, is capable of misuse. Its proper use or abuse depends on the varying degrees of enlightenment, capacity, faith, honesty, devotion and high mindedness of the leaders of public opinion.”

[Secret of Divine Civilization, p. 16]

Let there be no doubt then that these are the critical spiritual principles that should be guiding our social and economic development projects. Further, there should be no doubt that any social and economic project characterized with unethical conduct is dead in the water. That is why when we take on such projects we must be detached from any selfish desires, for it is the

development and progress of humanity that must carry the day. We are after all engaged in the reconstruction of society.

- Beyond these factors, we put particular emphasis on ethics because
 - We must protect the reputation of the Faith
 - Our teachings demand that we be role models of trustworthiness
 - It is the right thing to do.

- At West Point, the United States Military Academy honor code states that a cadet will not lie, cheat or steal, or tolerate those who do. I dare say that these could very well be elements of a SED honor code.
 - An important feature of the West Point code is its non-tolerance clause.
 - Any Bahá'í SED project would do well to establish a climate of non-tolerance for unethical behavior.
 - This is easy to say but hard to do.
 - Need to determine the facts around unethical behavior.
 - Must be prepared to make hard decisions.

- Ethical shortcomings or traps, which can be found in social and economic development projects, can manifest themselves in many ways. Some are less obvious than others. Management practices that can put a project in jeopardy may include but are not limited to the following:
 - The first ethical disconnect is not delivering on what the project promises. In some respects each project has a customer. Failing to deliver to the customer after they have established expectations and placed their trust in the project is unethical. They made an investment in the project, even though it may be psychological and not financial, there is still a disappointment; a feeling of being let down. We need to be sure that we do not promise what we cannot deliver.
 - Another ethical shortcoming is when a project provides a service but with an unacceptable level of quality. This can be particularly damaging when it comes to health care related projects in countries with no patients' rights laws. Careless health care is clearly unethical. An instance in which patients may become victims is unethical. In this light, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's exhortation of "excellence in all things" attains

a position of increased importance. But service quality is not limited to health care. Schools that offer education that is well below the acceptable standards are also unethical.

- Another area requiring close attention is management of project funds. I dare say there are few, if any, SED projects requiring no funds to operate. The absence of adequate financial controls is more than a shortcoming. It represents both neglect and unethical behavior. At best, it may give the appearance of incompetence and at worst, stealing. And it makes no difference who is funding the project, Bahá'í or non-Bahá'í. The poor handling of funds violates the donors' trust. Moreover it cheats the others involved in the project who are dedicated to providing honorable service. No person or institution should initiate a social and economic project without a clear understanding of how the funds will be controlled. Idealism is no substitute for sound business practices.
- It is also unethical to promote a project to satisfy one's ego. We all have egos. The challenge is to control it because even when we are well intended it can be the source of difficulties. Here is what the Guardian has to say about the ego:

"Regarding the questions you asked: Self has really two meanings, or is used in two senses, in the Bahá'í writings; one is self, the identity of the individual created by God. This is the self mentioned in such passages as 'he hath known God who hath known himself, etc'. The other self is the ego, the dark, animalistic heritage each one of us has, the lower nature that can develop into a monster of selfishness, brutality, lust and so on. It is this self we must struggle against, or this side of our natures, in order to strengthen and free the spirit within us and help it to attain perfection."

"Self-sacrifice means to subordinate this lower nature and its desires to the more godly and noble side of ourselves. Ultimately, in its highest sense, self-sacrifice means to give our will and our all to God to do with as He pleases.

[Lights of Guidance]

As you can well imagine, ego management is a necessary, albeit difficult and personal task that may require our attention from time to time.

- It is perfectly acceptable to partner with a non-Bahá'í organization to conduct a social and economic development project. In the business world such partnering is called a merger or acquisition. Before two companies merge, each performs what is called due diligence. This is basically a review of each companies entire operation to avoid any

surprises after the merger. Bahá'ís who partner on an SED project with another organization would be well advised to perform due diligence, a piece of which should involve an examination of the organization's ethical track record. A simple way to accomplish this would be to discuss the organization's practices with those who may have had anything to do with the organization in the past. There may even be a non-profit organization-monitoring agency akin to the Better Business Bureau that can help with the due diligence. If not, you may want to develop your own screen based on Bahá'í principles. Whatever the case, it is always advisable to look before you leap.

- Partnering with an organization from another country may be even more problematic. Due diligence will be more difficult, especially when it comes to insuring that adequate financial controls are in place and the organization is in compliance with local tax laws for non-profit organizations. In the case of partnering with organizations from another country, it would be in the project leaders best interest to contact the National Spiritual Assembly and Counsellor serving that country.
- Each social and economic development project has its unique ethical challenges. However, there are a number of actions that can be taken to safeguard the integrity of the project.
 - A first step is one that is often over-looked. Study the Writings on trustworthiness and related topics. And then convey the spirit and letter of that which is applicable in the projects statement of purpose and management philosophy or value statement. In doing so, don't bury the ethical standards somewhere in the middle or at the end of the document. Lead off with ethics, if it is to be remembered and taken seriously. I used to work for the General Electric Company, a well-regarded and large global company that really works at guarding its reputation. But unfortunately and thanks to the crooked dealings of one its salesmen involved in the sale of jet engines, the company was faced with federal charges for unethical business practices. As you might guess, the response of the company was swift and decisive. One of the first things it did was to revise and strengthened its values statement. Of their seven stated values, they made integrity number one and put management procedures in place to ensure that everyone understood that the action was not mere rhetoric. This case is an example of the

unethical behavior of one person damaging the reputation of thousands of employees, not to mention the reputation of the company itself.

- The same misfortune can happen to a Bahá'í SED project as a result of the unethical behavior of one bad apple. Bahá'í social and economic projects need to go beyond local acceptable standards of behavior. Instead they need to operate in accordance with the Bahá'í standards of ethical behavior.
- Whatever, wherever, and whoever is involved in the project, it is particularly important to maintain Bahá'í standards of behavior even if others find them unacceptable. In the long run the project will occupy a higher level of prominence and acceptability because of its high standards.
- Another action to take is to be upfront and let those who will partake of or otherwise benefit from the project understand that it is in fact sponsored by the Bahá'ís and operates according to Bahá'í spiritual principals. As a result some may choose not to be a part of the project for one reason or another. That would be more acceptable than knowingly or unknowingly deceiving the prospective participants due to the silence on the part of the responsible Bahá'ís.
- Encourage the efforts of those involved in the project. Encouragement engenders a sense of spiritual self-confidence, which empowers and increases the probability that the staff will conduct themselves according Bahá'í standards of equity, justice, honesty, and trustworthiness. Everyone must walk the talk. Don't let up on encouragement. Its payback is invaluable. Trustworthiness and encouragement are two powerful antidotes sure to protect the reputation and viability of the project.
- In addition to encouragement, promote ethical behavior through modeling the expected behavior. Humiliating the staff well may actually prove harmful to the project.
- If the project is operating in a culture whose standards of ethical behavior are at the first grade level, abruptly trying to push them into the twelfth grade with self-righteous rhetoric will probably not work. Remember the third letter in SED stands for development. Be patient unless the situation clearly jeopardizes the project.

- Before closing, it may be useful to talk about a dilemma that frequents many social and economic development projects. Specifically, is it ethical to use a SED project to convert the recipients of the service to become Bahá'ís? This can be especially problematic when the project is designed to help children. Fortunately the question has been addressed by the World Centre's Office of Social and Economic Development. They state in a letter dated November 1999:

“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 which the friends should seize upon through their expansion and consolidation activities.”

Bottom line: SED projects should not be confused with teaching projects.

- Finally, it is clear to me that Bahá'í SED projects provide their constituents with a two-fold experience. The first is the development of a community's capacity, and the second is learning what it means to be part of a project that operates according to spiritual principles, principles that promote ethical behavior.

“Trustworthiness, wisdom and honesty are, of a truth, God's beautiful ornaments for His creatures. These fair garments are a befitting vesture for every temple. Happy are those who comprehend, and well is it with them that acquire such virtues.”

[Bahá'u'lláh, Trustworthiness, p.334