

# FOR THE BETTERMENT <sup>OF THE</sup> WORLD



The Worldwide Bahá'í Community's Approach  
to Social and Economic Development





“Take ye counsel together, and let your concern be only for that which profiteth mankind and bettereth the condition thereof...”

—BAHÁ'U'LLÁH





# INTRODUCTION

The Bahá'í community's commitment to social and economic development is rooted in its sacred scriptures, which state that all human beings "have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization." Fundamental to Bahá'í belief is the conviction that every person, every people, every nation has a part to play in building a peaceful and prosperous global society.

In traditional thinking about development, theories of modernization were based on particular definitions of progress and held certain assumptions about the nature of religion and its role in social advancement. In this context, religion was seen as irrelevant at best, or as an obstacle to meaningful progress—a source of taboo and a strong force for social inertia. Development, it was assumed, would necessarily lead to a decline in religion as countries progressively adopted the technologies, institutions, and patterns of life of more industrialized nations. Yet over the decades that

ensued, thinking in the field of development was sobered by a more realistic assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the prevailing approach. Years of rigorous effort and an enormous outlay of funds, while leading to tangible progress in areas such as public health and access to education, still saw the persistence and in some cases worsening of numerous social and economic ills, such as the gap between the rich and the poor, the vast number of people living in poverty, migration on an unprecedented scale, and a host of environmental issues. The results of such effort gave rise to a range of fundamental questions about the nature and purpose of the entire development enterprise. Social and economic development, it is now widely recognized, is a complex process, unresponsive to simple formulae that are based on raising income or the propagation of technological packages. Under intense pressure to find solutions, development thought has focused increasingly on people—their cultures, values, and worldviews, which, for the vast majority of the earth's inhabitants, are shaped by religion. In such an expanded perspective, it has become abundantly clear that materialistic approaches alone will never succeed in releasing the capacity of individuals and communities to transform the world around them; neither will they resolve the many complex challenges facing humanity today, whether related to environmental crises, extremes of wealth and poverty, global public health concerns, food security, or eroding systems of governance.

Interest has thus grown markedly in recent years in the potential contribution that spirituality and religion can make to development discourse, in what some scholars refer to as a "turn to religion." While attempts thus far to engage with religion have generally failed to escape a tendency to view it as an instrument toward predefined development objectives, a more fundamental question beckons: how can insights and principles drawn from religion be brought to bear on the search for ways to harness the scientific, technical, economic, and cultural creativity of the modern world so as to foster prosperity among the diverse inhabitants of the planet and learn about new conceptions of, and pathways for, collective progress?

This publication is about the modest efforts of the Bahá'í community working with collaborators from all walks of life, irrespective of background or belief, to contribute to the social and economic well-being of their societies. More broadly defined as social action, such endeavors are motivated by a desire to serve humanity and contribute to constructive social change. Together they form part of an ongoing process of learning from the local to the global level about applying spiritual principles such as the oneness of humankind and justice, along with knowledge accumulated in different fields of human endeavor, to social and material reality. We hope this booklet provides a vivid illustration of how Bahá'í social and economic development is being carried out in practice.

*Bahá'í International Development Organization*

*“Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.”*

—BAHÁ'U'LLÁH





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# THE PATH THUS FAR

*“The supreme need of humanity is cooperation and reciprocity. The stronger the ties of fellowship and solidarity amongst men, the greater will be the power of constructiveness and accomplishment in all the planes of human activity.”*

—‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ

Bahá’í experience in the field of development stretches back to the beginnings of the Faith in Iran during the nineteenth century. The emphasis placed in the Bahá’í teachings on education provided the impulse for the establishment of a network of Bahá’í schools across the country. Among them was the Tarbiyat school for girls that was initiated in the early 1900s in the capital and gained national renown. In that country, the community of adherents was able, in just a few generations, to advance from a population consisting largely of individuals without an ability to read and write to one whose members were in the forefront of many areas of endeavor. By 1973, Iranian Bahá’ís had achieved a 100 percent literacy rate among women followers under the age of 40, in contrast to a national literacy rate among women of less than 20 percent at that time.

In the decades that followed, efforts to give practical expression to Bahá’u’lláh’s exhortation to “render service to the world of humanity” continued to take shape across Asia, the Pacific, Africa, and Latin America, albeit on a modest and sporadic scale. Social and economic

development initiatives such as literacy programs and schools were being carried out as isolated projects by groups and individuals. Radio projects and efforts to advance the status of women also began to emerge.

The Bahá’í community’s involvement in social and economic development became more widespread and received greater emphasis in the early 1980s, chiefly as a result of a substantial increase in the Bahá’í populations of many nations. The years that followed constituted a period of experimentation, characterized simultaneously by enthusiasm and hesitation, thoughtful planning and haphazard action, achievements and setbacks. While most projects found it difficult to escape the patterns of development practice prevalent in the world, some offered glimpses of promising paradigms of action. From this initial stage of diverse activity, the community emerged in the early 1990s with the pursuit of social and economic development firmly established as a feature of its organic life, and with enhanced capacity to forge over time a distinctly Bahá’í approach.

The decades since then have seen a marked increase in capacity for undertaking social action, leading to an efflorescence of activity. Compared with 1996, when some 250 social and economic development projects were being sustained from year to year, in 2022 there were over 2,000, and the number of Bahá’í-inspired development organizations had quadrupled to exceed 170. The number of grassroots social action initiatives of short duration being undertaken each year has seen a seventy-fold increase over this period, surpassing 100,000 in total and being carried out in a diversity of cultural, social, and economic contexts—from small towns and villages in the West to large urban centers in Africa and Asia.

Tarbiyat School, Iran, 1933



Left to Right: “On the Air” at Radio Bahá’í, Panama. Horticulture project in Erdenebulgan, Mongolia. Sewing class, India. Youth education program, Colombia. Bahá’í House of Worship, Matunda Soy, Kenya, 2022

A major factor propelling this progress has been the emergence of a global network of some 330 national and regional training institutes. Functioning in virtually every country, these institutes offer courses that assist individuals to draw insights from the Bahá’í writings and advance in their capacity to contribute to the betterment of their communities. In tens of thousands of localities, through their involvement in these institute courses, groups of people from all walks of life are engaged in a participatory process of study, action, and reflection aimed at enhancing the spiritual and material lives of their communities. A natural outcome of this process of capacity building has been the multiplication of community-based initiatives and greater collaboration among a range of actors as they strive to advance various aspects of community life. Still modest when considering the magnitude of the challenges that lie ahead, the collective endeavor under way across the globe offers early glimpses of how individuals, communities, and institutions can work together to re-create the world around them in light of spiritual principles.

Integral to this rise in activity over the years has been an evolving process of learning about development. The ongoing efforts of Bahá’í institutions and agencies at various levels to foster and support action, reflection on action, study, and consultation, and to systematize the accumulating body of experience, has gradually given rise to a broad framework for collective learning that guides the efforts of the worldwide Bahá’í community in the field of social action. This framework will continue to evolve in the decades and centuries ahead, as peoples in diverse settings take charge of their spiritual, social, and material development and generate new knowledge about the path toward a prosperous future.





# AN EVOLVING FRAMEWORK FOR COLLECTIVE LEARNING

Endeavors of social and economic development play a distinct function in the life of the Bahá'í community. They represent the efforts of individuals, groups, and institutions to apply spiritual principles, together with the contents and methods of science, to the achievement of material and social progress. They are intended not to serve Bahá'ís alone but people of all backgrounds and beliefs. The practice of dividing the world into dichotomous groups of “the developed” and “the underdeveloped” is foreign to Bahá'í efforts in the field of development. Indeed, social change, as a matter of principle, is not a project that one group carries out for the benefit of another. Rather, it is recognized that no nation or people has achieved a state of true peace and prosperity that can serve as a model for others to follow; what is required instead is a long-term, worldwide, and collective process of learning in diverse contexts about the meaning and implications of development in all its dimensions—physical, intellectual, and spiritual.

In this light, the central theme of all Bahá'í development endeavors is learning. Over the decades, a broad framework for collective learning has emerged that informs the efforts of Bahá'ís in the field of development and evolves as experience accumulates. A number of the elements of this framework are briefly described below.

## Humanity's movement toward its collective maturity

Bahá'ís view development as a global enterprise that must pursue its aim in the context of an emerging world civilization. Humanity, the Bahá'í writings explain, is experiencing an age of

transition best described as a passage from collective childhood to collective maturity. The revolutionary changes that are occurring with bewildering swiftness in every department of life assume their real meaning in this light. During this period, the barriers raised by the thoughts, attitudes, and habits of the childhood of humankind are gradually being uprooted, and the structures of a new civilization that reflect the powers of adulthood are taking shape. This conception of history endows every instance of social action with a particular purpose: to foster true prosperity, with its spiritual and material dimensions, among the diverse inhabitants of the planet.

## Oneness and justice

According to the Bahá'í teachings, the hallmark of the age of maturity will be the unification of the human race, when the oneness of humankind—the ultimate goal and operating principle of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation—is fully recognized and integrated into the patterns of life at all levels of society. A recognition of humanity's oneness does not, however, imply uniformity, but contains within it the essential concept of diversity, preserving various aspects of culture around the world while embodying a set of common values and principles.

The principle of unity in diversity is increasingly finding widespread recognition in contemporary development thought. Yet, as significant as this growing consciousness may be, acknowledgment of humanity's oneness is only one step in its movement toward its collective maturity. The growing disparity between rich and poor cannot be permitted to persist. All of the earth's inhabitants should be able to enjoy the fruits of a

materially and spiritually prosperous global society. Intimately tied to oneness, then, is the principle of justice, which calls for a reconceptualization of the relationships that sustain society. Thus, at the heart of the learning process about development is inquiry into the nature of the relationships that bind the individual, the community, and the institutions of society—actors on the stage of history who have been locked in a struggle for power throughout time. In this context, the assumption that relations among them will inevitably conform to the dictates of competition, a notion that ignores the extraordinary potential of the human spirit, has been set aside in favor of the more likely premise that their harmonious interactions can foster a civilization befitting a mature humanity.

## Coherence between the spiritual and the material

A concept of vital relevance is that of achieving a dynamic coherence between the practical and spiritual requirements of life. The Bahá'í writings state that while “material civilization is one of the means for the progress of the world of mankind,” until it is “combined with Divine civilization, the desired result, which is the felicity of mankind, will not be attained.” The passage continues:

Material civilization is like a lamp-glass. Divine civilization is the lamp itself and the glass without the light is dark. Material civilization is like the body. No matter how infinitely graceful, elegant and beautiful it may be, it is dead. Divine civilization is like the spirit, and the body gets its life from the spirit...

To seek coherence between the spiritual and the material does not imply that the material goals of development are to be trivialized. It does require, however, the rejection of approaches to development which define it as the transfer to all societies of the ideological convictions, the



social structures, the economic practices, the models of governance—in the final analysis, the very patterns of life—prevalent in certain highly industrialized regions of the world, whether inspired by capitalist or by socialist ideologies. To chart an appropriate path forward, development theory and practice must seek to draw on the two basic knowledge systems that have propelled humanity's progress over the centuries: science and religion. Through these two agencies, the human race's experience has been organized, its environment interpreted, its latent powers explored, and its moral and intellectual life disciplined. Together, they have acted as the real progenitors of civilization.

Bahá'ís reject the notion that there is an inherent conflict between science and religion, a notion that became prevalent in intellectual discourse at a time when the very conception of each system was far from adequate. The harmony of science and religion is one of the fundamental principles of the Bahá'í Faith, which teaches that religion without science soon degenerates into superstition and fanaticism, while science without religion becomes merely the instrument

*“Material civilization is like a lamp-glass. Divine civilization is the lamp itself and the glass without the light is dark.”*

—'ABDU'L-BAHÁ





Consultation on institutional capacity, Democratic Republic of the Congo

of crude materialism. “Religion,” according to the Faith’s writings, “is the outer expression of the divine reality. Therefore, it must be living, vitalized, moving and progressive.” “Science is the first emanation from God toward man. All created beings embody the potentiality of material perfection, but the power of intellectual investigation and scientific acquisition is a higher virtue specialized to man alone.” An imaginary duality between reason and faith—a duality that would confine reason to the realm of empirical evidence and logical argumentation and which would associate faith with superstition and irrational thought—must be avoided. The process of development has to be rational and systematic—incorporating, for example, scientific capabilities of observing, of measuring, and of rigorously testing ideas. At the same time, it must be deeply aware of faith and spiritual convictions, contributing, for instance, to virtue, good character, high resolve, cooperation, and sacrificial endeavor.

### Universal participation

A civilization befitting a humanity which, having passed through earlier stages of social evolution, is coming of age will not emerge through the efforts exerted by a select group of nations or even a network of national and international agencies. Rather, the challenge must be faced by all of humanity. Every member of the human family has not only the right to benefit from a materially and spiritually prosperous civilization but also an obligation to contribute toward its construction. Social action should operate, then, on the principle of universal participation.

Issues related to participation have been discussed at length in development literature. Yet, in both theory and practice, this vital principle has often been approached at the level of technique—for example, through the utilization of surveys and focus groups. Such tools, of course, have their merits, as do more ambitious efforts intended to increase participation in political processes or to offer training to the beneficiaries of services delivered by one or another governmental or non-governmental

agency. Still, these measures seem to fall short of the kind of participation envisioned above. What appears to be called for in any given region is the involvement of a growing number of people and institutions in a collective process of learning, one which is focused on the nature and dynamics of a path that conduces to the material and spiritual progress of their villages or neighborhoods.

It is important to note here that Bahá’í endeavors of social and economic development are intended to serve people of all beliefs, and they strive to elicit the widest possible participation. In the Bahá’í Faith, proselytizing is prohibited, and development projects are not conducted for the purpose of public relations or as a means of converting people. Often, projects are undertaken in collaboration with government agencies and organizations of civil society that share similar aims. In the appropriate context, funding for projects of a humanitarian nature can be accepted from government and donor agencies, but Bahá’ís do not accept or use funds from outside sources for the progress of their internal community affairs. There are, of course, opportunities for people to learn about the precepts of the Faith and to join it if they wish; so, too, there are a range of community activities, including those for worship and for education, in which all are welcome to take part irrespective of religious belief. Development activities are, however, intended to involve Bahá’ís and their collaborators in disinterested service to humanity.

Because the Bahá’í community is global in scope, it transcends divisions prevalent in society today, such as urban and rural and “developed” and “developing.” In whatever country Bahá’ís reside, whether in their native lands or elsewhere, they participate in the process of learning about development and contribute their talents as members of that national community. Bonds of collaboration extend across national boundaries, and resources flow from more materially prosperous countries to those with less. In doing so, Bahá’ís believe that it is the right of every people to trace its own path of development and direct its own affairs, and the Bahá’í global administrative

structure safeguards this right. Thus, while outside support and resources may be readily available to a project, it is left to those directing it to determine whether the capacity exists to utilize such support constructively.

### Capacity building

When development is seen in terms of the participation of more and more people in a collective process of learning, then the concept of capacity building assumes particular importance—a concept that has received growing attention in contemporary development thought and practice. While any instance of social action would naturally aim at improving some aspect of the life of a population, it cannot focus simply on the provision of goods and services—an approach to development that often carries with it attitudes of paternalism and employs methods that can disempower those who should be the protagonists of change. Setting and achieving specific goals to improve conditions is a legitimate concern of social action; yet, it has become increasingly clear in the development field that the accompanying rise in the capacity of participants to contribute to progress is far more essential. Of course, the imperative to build capacity is not only relevant to the individual; it is equally applicable to institutions and the community, the other two protagonists in the advancement of civilization.

For the individual, building capacity implies developing a number of interrelated capabilities—scientific, artistic, technical, social, moral, and spiritual. Individuals must be endowed with an understanding of concepts, knowledge of facts, and mastery of methods, as well as the skills, attitudes, and qualities required to lead a productive life. In terms of the community, capacity building entails fostering its development so that it can act as an environment conducive to the enrichment of culture. On the community rests the challenge of providing the milieu in which individual wills combine, in which powers are multiplied and manifest themselves in collective action, and in which higher expressions of the human spirit can appear.

*“We must now highly resolve to arise and lay hold of all those instrumentalities that promote the peace and well-being and happiness, the knowledge, culture and industry, the dignity, value and station, of the entire human race.”*

—‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ



Beyond the training of individuals and the cultivation of community life, development strategies have to pay attention to the strengthening of institutional capacity. At every level of society, institutions are needed that can act as channels through which the talents and energies of individuals and groups can be expressed in service to humanity. One of the accomplishments in which the Bahá'í community takes particular pride is the erection over its 180 years of existence—sometimes under the most adverse circumstances—of a structure of elected bodies that operate at the local, regional, national, and international levels. This collective hierarchy devolves decision-making to the lowest level practicable—providing thereby a unique vehicle for grassroots action—while at the same time conferring a degree of coordination and authority that makes cooperation possible on a global scale. Bahá'í development efforts throughout the world benefit from the guidance and support supplied by this administrative order.

**Organic growth**

Progress in the development field, from a Bahá'í perspective, depends largely on natural stirrings at the grassroots of the community, and it is from such stirrings that it should derive its motivating force. In general, then, Bahá'í efforts in social and economic development emerge in localities where a pronounced sense of community exists and a growing collective consciousness and will is becoming manifest. These efforts often begin with a relatively simple set of actions that can be managed by the local community itself. Complexity emerges naturally and in an organic fashion as the participants achieve success, gain experience, and increase their capacity to make and implement decisions about their spiritual and material progress. Local action gives rise to projects of a more sustained nature with more ambitious goals. Invariably, organizational structures are created to support such projects, and some of these nascent agencies possess the potential to evolve into fully fledged development organizations with the ability to undertake programs in a wide field of action.

The existence of such organizations in a region is imperative if significant progress is to be achieved. For while an isolated project can yield tangible results, experience worldwide amply demonstrates that fragmented activities in health, education, agriculture, and so on do not lead to sustainable development. No one discipline can offer solutions to all the problems besetting humanity. Effective development calls unequivocally for coordinated, interdisciplinary, and multisectoral action. Organizational structures capable of dealing with increasing degrees of theoretical and administrative complexity are needed to integrate efforts across various fields and to provide the coherence required for consistent advancement. The growing network of such organizations in the Bahá'í world community allows, too, for well-conceived methods and approaches that have emerged in one country or region to be shared with others, providing a natural channel for the flow of knowledge.

**Learning as a mode of operation**

At whatever level they operate, the central theme of all Bahá'í development efforts is learning. As members of a religious community, Bahá'ís hold to a common set of beliefs and fundamental principles. Yet the wise application of these principles to social transformation is something that must be learned through experience. At the heart of all collective action fostered by the Bahá'í community, therefore, is a concern for the application of spiritual principles. Not only do such principles point the way to practical solutions, but they also induce the attitudes, the will, and the dynamics that facilitate implementation. Equally important to the learning process are the contents and methods of science, for by religious truth is not meant mere assertions about the esoteric, but statements that lead to experimentation, application, and the creation of systems and processes whose results can be validated through observation and the use of reason. Further, the advancement of society requires the multiplication of material means, and these are generated by scientific endeavor in areas such as economics, agriculture, and environmental

protection. Development as a learning process, then, can best be described as one of study, consultation, action, and reflection on action—all carried out in the light of the guidance inherent in religious teachings and knowledge drawn from science.

When efforts are carried out in this manner, visions and strategies are re-examined time and again. As tasks are accomplished, obstacles removed, resources multiplied, and lessons learned, modifications are made in goals and methods. The learning process, which is given direction through appropriate institutional arrangements, unfolds in a way that resembles the growth and differentiation of a living organism. Haphazard change is avoided, and continuity of action maintained.

In the worldwide Bahá'í community, the process of learning about development unfolds at various levels. Fundamentally, it emerges at the local level, in villages and neighborhoods throughout the world where a growing number of people and institutions are striving to promote the material and spiritual progress of their communities. These efforts grow in effectiveness to the extent that they are able to contribute to and draw from a global process of learning concerned with the material and spiritual prosperity of humanity as a whole. Structures are required, then, at all levels, from the local to the national and international, to facilitate learning about development. At the international level, the Bahá'í International Development Organization has been established at the Faith's world headquarters in Haifa, Israel. It helps to strengthen institutional capacity in every country to promote Bahá'í development efforts, ensures that material resources become increasingly available to such efforts, and offers general advice, based on insights gained around the world, in response to questions that arise. The Development Organization sees itself as a learning entity dedicated to the systematization of a growing worldwide experience made possible by the participation of increasing numbers of individuals, agencies, and communities in the development of their societies. The



approach to development that comes into focus, then, defies categorization into either “top-down” or “bottom-up”; it is one, rather, of reciprocity and interconnectedness.

Top: Canary Islands. Bottom left and right: United States.

The following pages offer an overview of Bahá'í efforts in the area of development. Not discussed in depth here, but no less significant, are the contributions to the development field made by thousands of Bahá'ís who, in their professional lives, are working within a host of agencies—in the public sector and in civil society—to bring about the betterment of humanity.

United States





## *An Overview of Bahá'í* DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

**B**ahá'ís live and work alongside others in more than 100,000 localities spread across almost every country and territory of the globe. Viewed together, they can be said to represent the diversity of the entire human race.

Wherever they reside, Bahá'í families and their friends engage in efforts to draw insights from the Bahá'í teachings and apply them to the spiritual and material progress of their communities. In a mode characterized by a willingness to learn, and without claiming exclusive understanding of truth, they work to contribute to a process of community building in which all are free to participate, regardless of religious background, social standing, gender, race, or ethnicity. They strive to cultivate hope for the future of humanity, to foster purposeful effort, and to celebrate the endeavors of all those in the world who work to promote unity and alleviate human suffering.

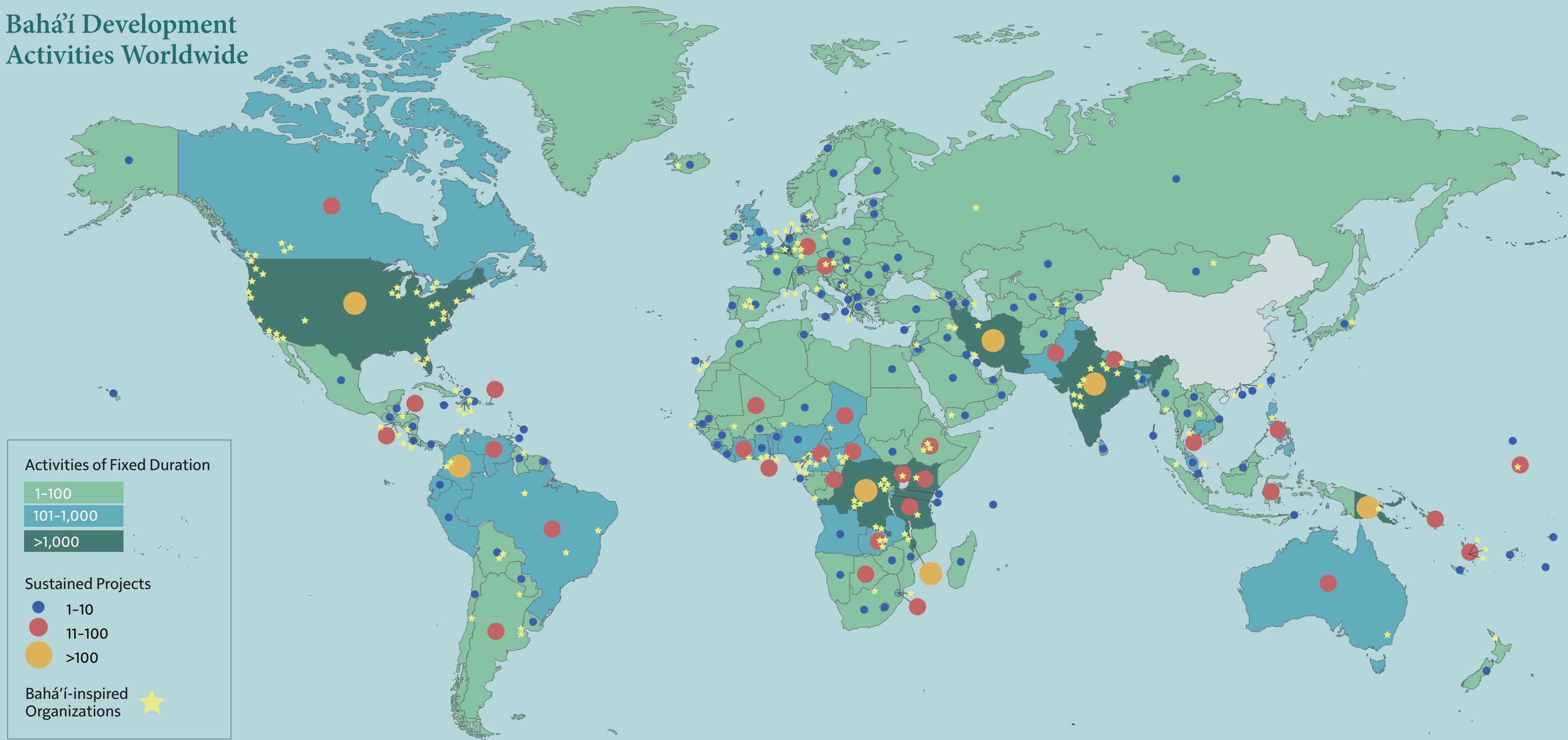
Among the efforts that Bahá'ís carry out, together with collaborators from all walks of life, are those aimed at the social and economic development of the communities and nations of

which they are a part. Such activities fall along a spectrum of complexity. They include fairly informal efforts of limited duration undertaken by small groups of individuals, projects that have become more sustained over time, and programs with a higher level of complexity and sophistication implemented by Bahá'í-inspired development organizations. Irrespective of circumstances, the scope and complexity of such social action at any given moment must be commensurate with the number and capacities of people in a community who can carry it forward. As discussed in the previous section, complexity emerges in an organic fashion.

Regardless of where along the spectrum it falls, every instance of social action represents an attempt to apply concepts and principles from the Bahá'í teachings to improve some aspect of the material life of society. The next few sections provide an illustration of development activities at different points along the spectrum and discuss how such endeavors emerge. The map that follows provides an illustration of the scale of these activities in countries around the world.

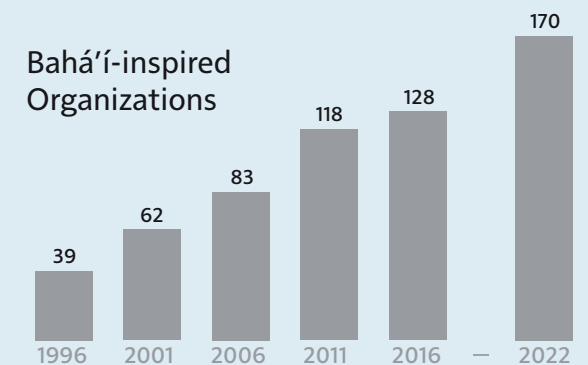
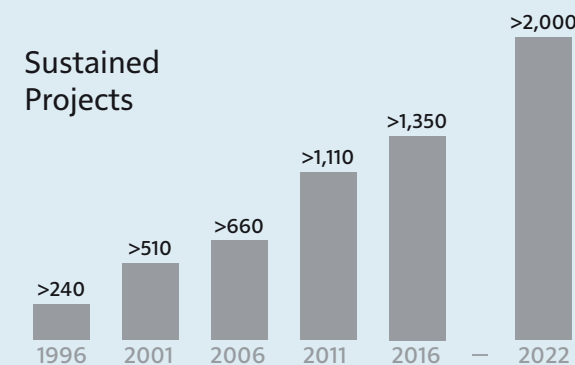
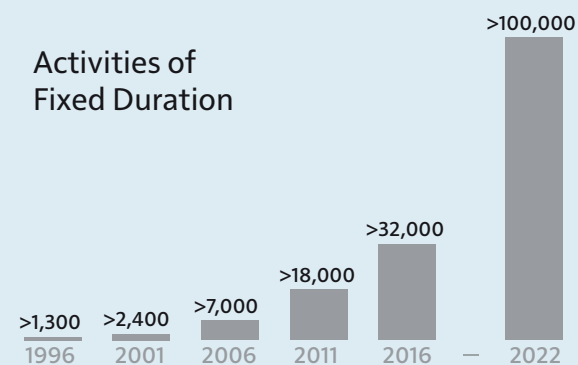


# Bahá'í Development Activities Worldwide



## Trends in the Number of Development Activities from 1996–2022\*

\* Numbers given are conservative estimates based on information provided to the Bahá'í International Development Organization by national Bahá'í institutions. For further explanation of these categories, see pages 18 to 33.





## First Stirrings

The first stirrings of social action can be viewed as an indication of a people cultivating within themselves the capacity to apply spiritual principles to the social and material betterment of society. Typically modest in scale, a vast majority of such initiatives are, by nature, fairly informal and of a limited duration.

The pattern of community life that Bahá'ís endeavor to create is one that weaves together acts of worship with activities that promote the common good. Learning is at the heart of these efforts. Gathering with other members of their local community, irrespective of belief and background, groups of individuals explore, through an ongoing process of study, action, consultation, and reflection, how to translate spiritual teachings to the life of the village or neighborhood in which they reside. In an environment that is free from any sense of superiority, these small groups of friends study materials that help them acquire the skills, attitudes, qualities, and knowledge needed to serve their communities. The energies of the participants are channeled into action through consultation, a process of collective decision-making prescribed in the Bahá'í writings. In addition to providing a space within which collective decisions can be taken, consultation also serves as a means of harmonizing points of view, promoting unity among diverse members of a community, strengthening the bonds of trust and love between individuals and institutions, and allowing new insights into complex issues to be brought forth and examined dispassionately.

Study and consultation leads to well-informed and purposeful action. Among the acts of service carried out by individuals and groups are classes that tend to the spiritual education of children, a moral empowerment program that channels the energies of young people at a critical transitional age toward the betterment of society, circles of

study that enhance capabilities for service among youth and adults, and gatherings for collective worship that strengthen the devotional character of the community. By arising to carry out these and other acts of service, men and women, young and old alike, come to recognize that, through the power of pure and goodly deeds, they have the ability to transform the world around them.

### Activities of fixed duration

Often, in a locality where such a process of capacity building is in place and a pronounced sense of community exists, the first stirrings of heightened social awareness can be observed in the emergence of small groups which, addressing a particular social or economic concern, initiate a simple set of appropriate actions.

Most of the local initiatives of this kind are informal in nature and of fixed duration, coming to a close when their objectives have been met. They may be related to any one of a variety of concerns depending on the social conditions of a place. The forms they can assume are diverse and could include, for instance, efforts to support children in their education, activities to address an environmental issue, projects to respond to a particular health concern or prevent a particular disease, and initiatives to raise consciousness of matters of import. It is estimated that over 100,000 activities of this type occur annually in communities where Bahá'ís reside. A few examples of such initiatives are presented on the next page.



Austria

### INSTANCES OF ACTIVITIES OF FIXED DURATION

In order to provide a space for meaningful conversations in the community, a family in a neighborhood in Stockholm, **Sweden**, arranged an artistic workshop in a public space open to all. Through this effort, a number of volunteers, including a few local artists, created a mural together on the theme of spiritual and material transformation.

Inspired by the important role that young people play in serving society, a group of youth in Makeni, **Sierra Leone**, created a film to convey information on effective health measures at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The initiative assisted doctors, village leaders, and the broader community during a time of great need.

In São Sebastião, **Brazil**, a group of youth were consulting about the local environment and decided to clean a river which had been littered with trash. The group also created a newsletter to raise awareness around protection of the environment and share uplifting news. Over time, a municipal official became aware of the clean-up effort and provided resources to reinforce the initiative.

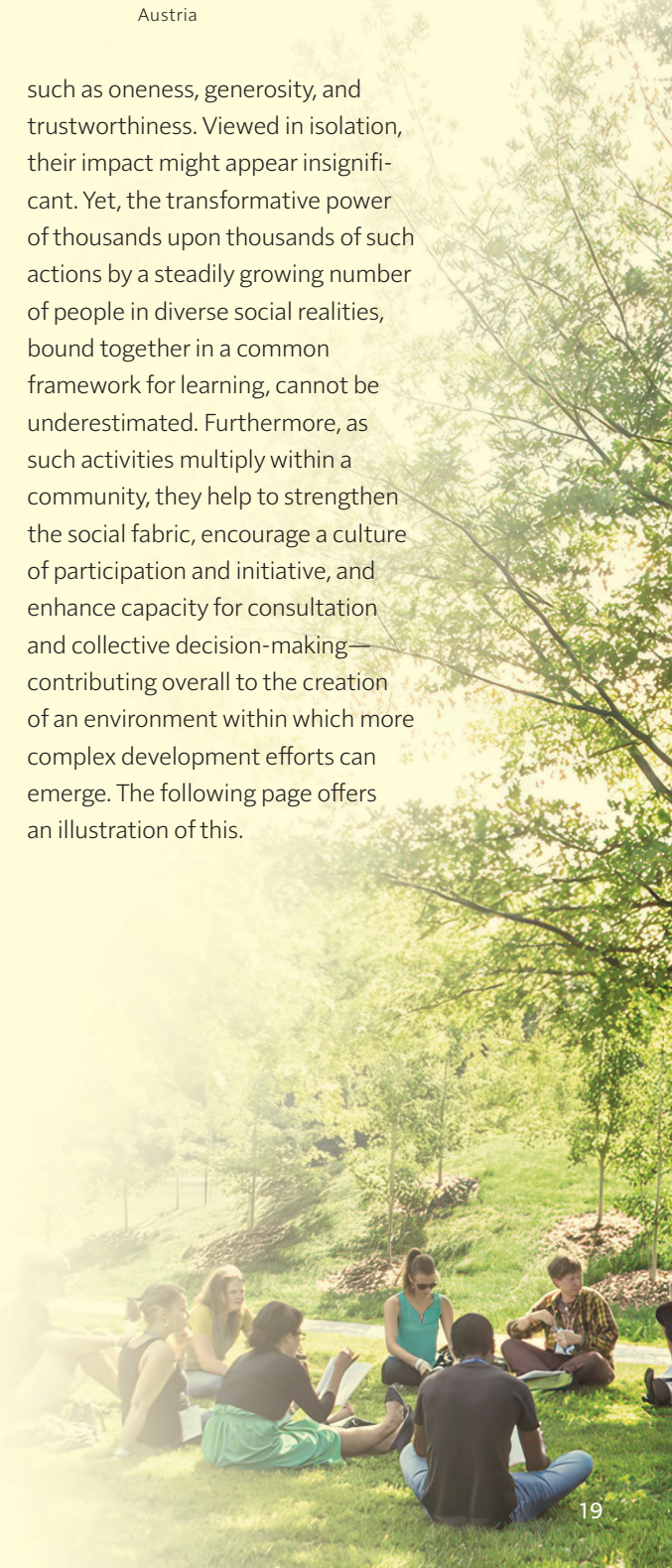
In Durham, the **United States**, a number of community gatherings were held to consult about how groups of families can share resources and support one another. Several initiatives emerged including a vaccination pop-up clinic and language classes for parents new to the country.

A group of youth in Battambang, **Cambodia**, planted trees along a road to beautify the village and provide shelter from heat. The group did not anticipate that these efforts would later protect that section of the road from severe erosion at the onset of flooding one year later.

Bahá'í institutions and local officials worked shoulder to shoulder with communities in Dili, **Timor Leste**, to provide relief after a cyclone struck the island. The Bahá'í community facilitated the distribution of packages of food, mosquito nets, and other essentials that have assisted more than 7,000 people across 13 villages and neighborhoods, regardless of background or belief.

However modest such activities may be, they represent a response of a people to the particular challenges facing their own communities through the application of spiritual principles

such as oneness, generosity, and trustworthiness. Viewed in isolation, their impact might appear insignificant. Yet, the transformative power of thousands upon thousands of such actions by a steadily growing number of people in diverse social realities, bound together in a common framework for learning, cannot be underestimated. Furthermore, as such activities multiply within a community, they help to strengthen the social fabric, encourage a culture of participation and initiative, and enhance capacity for consultation and collective decision-making—contributing overall to the creation of an environment within which more complex development efforts can emerge. The following page offers an illustration of this.



*“Irrespective of its scope and scale, all social action seeks to apply the teachings and principles of the Faith to improve some aspect of the social or economic life of a population, however modestly.”*

—THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE



**IN DEPTH: A DIVERSITY OF INITIATIVES IN A COMMUNITY**

Mtandire is a densely populated neighborhood in Lilongwe, **Malawi**, where several grassroots initiatives have been under way in an area of about 500 homes. A group of youth who had participated in Bahá'í educational programs began taking steps to offer spiritual education classes for children and to initiate junior youth groups (see p. 52) around their homes. The number of participants in these activities quickly increased, as parents readily encouraged efforts to contribute to the academic and moral development of their children. Other youth also expressed interest in receiving training to be able to conduct their own voluntary classes. Over time, a pattern of community life bringing together acts of worship and service took root and expanded to include many of the families of the young people as well.



As this growing nucleus of individuals worked together and consulted about the efforts they were undertaking, the spirit of mutual support and concern for the well-being of their community naturally led to additional endeavors. A range of service projects sprang from the initiative of groups of junior youth, including visits to the sick and elderly to offer assistance and the establishment of a vegetable garden where harvested food could be shared with those in need. Members of one such group expressed, "It is important to show love to one another, to come together and learn to live as members of one family. We should develop the habit of sharing with friends the things they might not have and are in need of; whenever we have something, we need to share with those who don't have."

The youth would also gather regularly to consult about their academic education, as they strove to overcome limitations they encountered in their local schools. The conversations led to several informal efforts to arrange tutorial support. They would help one another by sharing what they already knew, or request assistance from individuals with more experience in a subject matter. Such a spirit of sharing and draw-

ing on one another's talents also extended to the area of the arts. Some of the youth who had particular interest in music production opened up their homes to teach their skills to younger youth. In these lessons, they also strove to create songs with a positive message—ones that reflected the highest aspirations of the community. Through these efforts, this expanding group of youth has been striving to learn how the diverse talents existing in the community can find expression in initiatives that contribute to the well-being of others.

The emerging pattern of community life also included regular visits to homes and conversations with parents of children involved, both individually and in groups. In these conversations, it became clear that the mothers who were supporting the spiritual education of children were eager to enhance their own education as well. A number of young people volunteered to hold adult literacy classes for those interested. Some of the young mothers also began to work together to start small income-generating activities in order to improve their economic circumstances. Eventually, two savings groups were formed, which enabled the participants to access small loans for their business activities.



Naturally, the friends became more conscious of various professionals and organizations in the community that were working for the well-being of the population. Some of the grassroots initiatives that emerged, then, involved collaborating with these agencies to help resolve one or another challenge. In one instance, when they were consulting about how to assist a few young girls who had dropped out of school, the friends reached out to an organization in the community involved in promoting the education of girls. Through its support, they were able to assist the girls to re-enter school. As another example, when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, youth volunteered with a community group engaged in promoting health and helped raise awareness in the neighborhood around the disease and ways it can be prevented and treated.

Building on the experience that has been gained and on the culture of mutual support and consultation that has emerged, the youth and their families are also beginning to learn about managing more sustained and complex undertakings. For example, a community preschool was recently established in the neighborhood,

sustained by local resources. The families and teachers envision that it will gradually grow to offer all grades of primary education with the assistance of a nearby Bahá'í-inspired organization that offers teacher training.



**MORE ON ACTIVITIES OF FIXED DURATION**

**Canada and France:** Mental health awareness campaigns (p. 64 in "Health").

**Ecuador and Kenya:** Ecological awareness campaigns (p. 66 in "Environment").

**Bahrain and Nepal:** Tree-planting initiatives (p. 66 in "Environment").

**Costa Rica and Brazil:** River clean-up projects (p. 66 in "Environment").

**Vanuatu:** Junior youth environmental awareness service projects (p. 67 in "Environment").

**Tunisia:** Gathering promoting culture of cooperation (p. 71 in "Advancement of Women").

**Australia:** Youth creating songs to inspire hope (p. 75 in "Arts and Media").

**Mozambique and Malaysia:** Distributing supplies after floods (p. 76 in "Humanitarian Relief").

**United States:** Youth providing pandemic relief (p. 78 in "Humanitarian Relief").

**Italy:** Youth creating songs to provide hope (p. 78 in "Humanitarian Relief").

**India:** Bahá'í institution distributing food to families (p. 78 in "Humanitarian Relief").

**Iraq:** Task force providing health assistance (p. 79 in "Humanitarian Relief").

**Jordan and Spain:** Media efforts and pandemic information (p. 79 in "Humanitarian Relief").



## Sustained Community-Based Projects

In addition to carrying out more than a hundred thousand grassroots initiatives of fixed duration yearly, Bahá'ís—often working shoulder to shoulder with others—are engaged in over 2,000 ongoing projects that are sustained over time and are generally larger in scope. Some emerge from the kinds of smaller efforts described in the forgoing pages, while others are established from the beginning as structured projects.

As informal initiatives of social action emerge at the grassroots, there may be circumstances in which certain efforts, through a process of consultation, action, and reflection, give rise to endeavors of a more sustained nature. This occurs as those carrying out a particular effort observe fruitful results, gain greater experience, and identify constructive pathways for systematic action. In some instances, a long-term project may be envisioned as such from the outset. Ownership of sustained social action endeavors must rest with the community itself, given that capacity building is central to Bahá'í efforts in the area of development. In this light, those involved increase the range of their activities in an organic fashion, informed by their reading of reality and without undue pressure from outside. Their mode of operation remains one of learning in action. Though concerted action is expected to lead to concrete results over time, success is measured chiefly in terms of the effect the action has on building the capacity of the population to address development issues at progressively higher levels of complexity and effectiveness.

Where such endeavors are emerging, local Bahá'í administrative institutions have also played an important role in providing encouragement and support. As a voice of moral authority, they help ensure that groups of individuals working to improve the conditions of their societies proceed in a manner that is

increasingly coherent with other processes of community life and is consistent with principles such as trustworthiness, integrity, and selfless service. In a growing number of places, communities are able to draw on promising educational programs that have been developed further afield and that are consistent with their local reality (see more on pp. 80–85). Such programs serve to reinforce individual and institutional capacities that exist in a community, often giving rise to the creation of additional sustained projects focusing on one or another aspect of community life.

Today, there are over 2,000 sustained community-based initiatives under way around the world, some of which have evolved further into community-based organizations with basic administrative structures. Examples include community schools providing education to children, larger academic schools reaching a broader cross-section of a region, local clinics offering basic health services, radio stations producing programs for the surrounding population, cooperatives that encourage the sharing of resources and provide assistance to each member, language and literacy programs offered to newcomers in a country to help them participate more meaningfully in community life, or community gardens in urban neighborhoods that provide nutritious food for the local residents and strengthen social ties. The example on the next page offers an illustration of the nature of such an initiative and how it might emerge.

*“The seed does not suddenly become the tree; the embryo does not at once become the man; the mineral substance does not in a moment become the stone: No, all these grow and develop gradually until they attain the limit of perfection.”*

—‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ



Haiti



Colombia



United States



Panama



Belgium

### MORE ON SUSTAINED COMMUNITY-BASED PROJECTS

**United States:** Network of micro-schools (p. 41 in “Schools”).

**South Africa:** Tutorial program to improve student marks (p. 50 in “Releasing the Potential of Youth”).

**Cameroon:** Cooperative supporting social action initiatives (p. 56 in “Preparation for social action”).

**Singapore:** Community garden (p. 61 in “Agriculture”).

**Romania:** Health clinic (p. 64 in “Health”).

**Iceland:** Reforestation project (p. 66 in “Environment”).

**Vanuatu:** Initiative protecting the environment (p. 67 in “Environment”).

**Myanmar:** Microfinance project (p. 68 in “Economic Life”).

**Panama:** Radio station giving voice to indigenous peoples (p. 74 in “Arts and Media”).

**Spain:** Music project inspired by spiritual themes (p. 75 in “Arts and Media”).

**Democratic Republic of the Congo:** Choir creating songs (p. 75 in “Arts and Media”).

**The Philippines:** Radio station (p. 79 in “Humanitarian Relief”).



**IN DEPTH: THE EMERGENCE OF A SUSTAINED COMMUNITY-BASED INITIATIVE IN INDIA**

A group of high school students who had been engaged for a few years in a Bahá'í educational program that builds capacity for service began having a number of conversations about their educational aspirations. One of the challenges they and their peers faced was access to suitable environments for study outside of school hours. The closest library, for instance, was located almost three kilometers away, a significant travel distance that was often not safe in the evenings, especially for girls. The group also reflected on how youth often felt isolated in their studying and how much more effective it would be if they could study together.

**A collective response to a local challenge**

A few weeks later, the group attended a gathering offered by the Bahá'í community for all youth in the village to reflect on their unique role in contributing to the betterment of society. They raised and explored the idea of collectively creating a library, and discussed the importance of involving their parents and others in the community. A series of consultations with parents and elders, who all lent their support to the idea, led to the identification of an extra room in a village temple that could be used as a venue for the library. Seeing the need for finances to set up such a study space, the village head pledged funds and donated magazine and newspaper subscriptions. Youth collected and contributed books, while others donated items for furnishing. Funds were raised in the community and, over time, more books were added, including high school textbooks, storybooks, and scriptures from various religions.

**Creating a space for youth to study and support each other**

To administer the effort, the youth decided to elect annually, through secret ballot, a chairperson who could voluntarily facilitate the needs of the library in consultation with others. Initially, a small monthly fee was set for meeting basic costs related to materials and equipment.

Over the following years, more than 100 youth became members of the library. Gradually, the library influenced community life in a few noticeable ways. While in the past youth would prepare for exams individually, leaving behind many who struggled on their own, the library helped nurture a culture of collective study and mutual support among young people. Those involved had to learn to create an uplifting and inclusive environment. One of the girls who would often visit the library shared:

“On coming here, what I like the most are the relationships. We interact and openly talk to each other. No one feels nervous or awkward in the group, or worried that others will make fun of us if we say something incorrect. Both girls and boys are respected and given a chance. We have also done many practical projects as a result of which many concepts in science have become much clearer for us.”

As the youth were advancing in their studies, many of them were simultaneously concerned about the academic progress of those younger than themselves. Several informal tutorial classes emerged in the evenings and the youth teaching them would meet regularly to discuss enhancing the standard of the education of their village. They

gradually became more conscious of the significant struggles of children and younger youth studying in the public school and thus started a second line of action: a special tutorial initiative for children and junior youth.

**Overcoming crises and reaching higher levels of unity**

Challenges and temporary setbacks are inherent to the development of any sustained community-based initiative. As specific difficulties emerged, the youth who were facilitating the work of the library reflected regularly on the importance of applying spiritual principles such as unity, patience, and selfless service. With the advice and encouragement of local Bahá'í institutions, they redoubled their efforts to deepen bonds of friendship and to learn to collaborate with individuals and institutions from diverse backgrounds. In doing so, they saw that crises can be opportunities to reach higher levels of unity and effectiveness.

This conviction was put to the test four years into the functioning of the library when it became clear that the facilities that were being voluntarily offered would no longer be available and that the library might need to close. This incident was an occasion for the community to consult again on the nature and purpose of the effort. In reflecting on the experience gained until that point, they observed that the library not only assisted youth to have an adequate space for study, but also inspired the emergence of other educational initiatives and provided an opportunity to promote collective action in the community. The influence of the effort also spread beyond the community, as a number of youth from neighboring localities joined the



library and the head of one of the villages arranged to build one for young people in his community.

Following a number of discussions and community gatherings, an expanded vision emerged. With the support of local institutions, the library was shifted to a larger hall at the center of the village. This location was more accessible for all ages, for girls and boys alike, and was also better suited to serve as a space for a range of educational activities, including the tutorial classes for children and junior youth. The consultations gave rise to a new name: Samudaaya Shiksha Kendra—Community Education Center.

**Increased demands and expanded reading of reality**

Soon after, the country began to experience the first wave of lockdowns as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The closure of schools meant the initiation of many new tutorial classes in the vicinity of the education center. To coordinate the increasing number of activities in and around the center, the loose arrangements that were in place formalized into a five-member education team.

In order to enhance its own capacity, the education team drew on the technical support of a Bahá'í-inspired development organization operating in the region that had experience in

the area of teacher training and supporting community schools. In recognizing that the education center was just one of many educational actors in the community, the team analyzed more deeply the existing system of education, including the contribution of public schools, private schools, tutorials, local child-care centers, moral education classes, peer study groups, and online classes. In addition to the lines of action already under way, the education team set before itself the objective of strengthening bonds of collaboration with others who were similarly concerned about education in the village. In what can at times be a competitive environment, the team sought to foster a spirit of mutual collaboration and support in service to the common weal. As an initial step, the education center began to host reflection gatherings for individuals involved in education to share their experiences and learn from one another. When it came to their attention that a public school in the village stopped functioning because of inadequate facilities, the education team mobilized others in the community to ensure that the school continued to serve the village.

As the community education center's activities continue to evolve, the friends coordinating its work have described a number of areas of learning for the coming years:

“We are planning to organize a community gathering where we can consult with everyone about how to improve the community education center, how more of the young ones of the village could take advantage of it, how more girls could come to the center for school and college studies, and how a spirit of cooperation and mutual assistance can be enhanced. The education team is also trying to learn how to increase the quality of the tutorial support and how to strengthen an environment of learning and mutual support among all tutors and teachers in the village.”

A number of factors have been important for the evolution of this effort. From the outset, it reflected the aspirations of the community, and it has grown organically according to locally available resources and capacities. Reinforced by ongoing support from the community and its institutions, at the heart of the process has been the effort of a group of youth to cultivate within themselves certain capacities such as the ability to operate in a learning mode and promote environments of unity in diversity. All the while, the youth have supported one another to advance in their tertiary education in a nearby city while continuing to reside in and serve their community.



**ONGOING GATHERINGS FOR  
COMMUNITY CONSULTATION  
AND ACTION**

The majority of Bahá'í development efforts have arisen in villages and neighborhoods where an increasingly pronounced sense of community exists. In such settings it is especially apparent that, irrespective of the area of action—be it education, agriculture, health, or others—sustained progress is dependent not only on the empowerment of individuals and groups but more broadly on the capacities and nature of interaction between individuals, the community, and its institutions. The more that the qualities of cooperation and mutual assistance are manifested by a people, the Bahá'í writings state, “the more will human society advance in progress and prosperity.”

Animated by this conviction, opportunities are being created among inhabitants, groups, and institutions at various levels around the world to gather together to engage in an ongoing process of reading the material and social conditions of their communities. Such collaborative spaces involve all segments of the population in a conversation where experiences and resources are readily shared. In addition to enhancing unity of vision and thought, such gatherings also often lead to the emergence of initiatives of fixed duration to resolve one or another issue, as well as the creation of projects that are sustained over time.

In one such community gathering in **India**, 40 families in the periphery of a village that was previously disconnected from government programs have been discussing the material and social advancement of their locality. When a member of the village council was invited by a local Bahá'í institution to attend this community gathering, the relationship between the community and the government was strengthened, and the government officials became more acutely aware of the reality of that segment of the village. The community took systematic actions as a result of these gatherings, which fostered collaboration with the local leaders and helped connect the community to various schemes offered by government



Democratic Republic of the Congo

*“Take ye counsel together in all matters, inasmuch as consultation is the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding.”*

—BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

structures, such as those for microfinance and child welfare. Through such steps, what was previously characterized as a relationship of distance and mistrust between the community and local government gradually began to change to one of mutual collaboration and trust.

In **Papua New Guinea**, a three-day community gathering with over 600 participants was arranged by the local Bahá'í institutions in collaboration with local government officials. Rich conversations involving the inhabitants of the area, representatives of the local government, and ward councilors explored the historical account of steps taken thus far, as well as social, economic, or cultural barriers that have been impeding the population's spiritual and material progress. Participants of the gathering also discussed ways to strengthen cooperation among various entities concerned with process-

es central to the community's life, including secondary and tertiary education, healthcare, and infrastructure. Following the gathering, thought was given to establishing a committee within the community that could engage in a more systematic and profound collaboration with the local government over issues of concern.

In addition to regular conferences that bring together members of the community, special gatherings have been taking place in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo** convening local chiefs. One example is a three-day meeting of 60 village and tribal chiefs, many of whom were on opposing sides of armed conflict in the past, coming together to discuss the promotion of social progress and decide on practical action that could transform tense coexistence into constructive and peaceful collaboration among

various ethnic groups and religious communities. A notable result of the conference was the decision by many of the chiefs to call regular meetings of all the women in their villages to discuss taking steps toward this goal, realizing that their participation was essential for successful reconciliation.





## Development Organizations

Among the range of Bahá'í endeavors that are contributing to the field of development are formal development organizations. While generally overseeing one or more sophisticated development programs, such initiatives also grow organically in scale and complexity, depending on circumstances. Some of these organizations have gained the capacity to engage in relatively complex areas of activity and to establish working relations with agencies of government and civil society.

As projects of social action grow and diversify, organizational structures evolve to ensure their long-term viability and to meet expanding needs. At present, Bahá'í development organizations fall into one of two categories. Some are agencies of Bahá'í governing councils, while others are initiatives undertaken by groups of individual Bahá'ís—often with like-minded colleagues—as nonprofit, nongovernmental organizations operating under the laws of their respective countries. Both types of organizations have as their aim the application of the Faith's teachings to one or more areas of social concern.

Typically brought into being by a small group of individuals, such an agency begins its work on a small scale and increases the range of its activities as resources and learning permit. Over time, it may develop the capacity to pursue a number of lines of action to address challenges of local communities and entire regions in a coordinated fashion. To this end, it systematically raises human resources and promotes the generation, application, and diffusion of knowledge about one or another aspect of development. By fostering action and reflection in diverse fields and systematizing the knowledge being gained, such an organization supports the efforts of individuals, communities, and institutions to learn about and contribute to the transformation of society.

When a Bahá'í-inspired development organization is established, emphasis is naturally placed on the quality of its activities; clarity about an optimal size is gradually achieved as the notion that “bigger is better” is set aside. An organization operating in a region derives meaning, in part, from its relationship to other efforts; it is one of several interacting endeavors through which consistent progress is achieved. Local Bahá'í institutions typically provide advice and encouragement to such agencies as they learn to maintain coherence between the interacting processes within a community. As an organization grows in its capacity and its work becomes more defined, it is able to establish increasingly effective and meaningful working relations with agencies of government and civil society.

Today, there are over 170 Bahá'í-inspired development organizations worldwide with relatively complex programmatic structures and significant spheres of influence, each at a different stage of evolution. The following pages provide a glimpse into the work of some of these agencies.

*“We should continually be establishing new bases for human happiness and creating and promoting new instrumentalities toward this end.”*

—‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ



Canada



Zambia



Luxembourg



Kiribati

### MORE ON BAHÁ'Í-INSPIRED DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS

**The Netherlands:** Breakwell Institute (p. 50 in “Releasing the Potential of Youth”).

**North America:** Network of organizations (p. 51 in “Releasing the Potential of Youth”).

**Colombia:** FUNDAEC (p. 56 in “Preparation for social action”).

**Cameroon:** Emergence Foundation for Education and Development (p. 56 in “Preparation for social action”).

**Uganda:** Kimanya-Ngeyo Foundation (see p. 62 in “Agriculture”).

**Zambia:** Inshindo Foundation (p. 62 in “Agriculture”).

**Democratic Republic of the Congo:** Fondation Erfan-Connaissance (p. 62 in “Agriculture”).

**Democratic Republic of the Congo:** Graine d’Espoir (p. 64 in “Health”).

**India:** Foundation for the Advancement of Science (p. 65 in “Health”).

**Luxembourg:** Unity Foundation (p. 89 in “Contributing to the Discourse on Development at Various Levels”).



**IN BRIEF: SELECTED DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS**

**Emergence Foundation for Education and Development**

Emergence Foundation for Education and Development was established in 2003 in **Cameroon** to contribute to the moral empowerment of young people in the country. Its efforts are focused on implementing the Preparation for Social Action program and on conducting action research in the area of agriculture (for more, see p. 56).

**Colibri Learning Foundation**

Colibri Learning Foundation, based in British Columbia, **Canada**, was established in 2012 to help raise the capacity of groups of newcomers in the country to contribute to the development of inclusive, welcoming, and mutually supportive communities in urban environments. In recent years, Colibri has begun to accompany youth at different stages of their lives to identify and pursue appropriate academic and professional opportunities as they strive to contribute to the betterment of society.

**FUNDAEC**

Fundación para la Aplicación y Enseñanza de las Ciencias (FUNDAEC) was established in 1974 to engage in research and action to address the needs of rural populations in **Colombia**. After having developed a secondary education program known as Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial (SAT), which generated much interest among other Bahá'í-inspired organizations, it developed the Preparation for Social Action program,

and has since been learning about its implementation. FUNDAEC's other lines of action include the Supporting Community Leaders program, which assists young people to pursue a path of study and work, and the Leadership and Community Development program, which aims to learn alongside local leaders and organizations how to resolve challenges facing their communities.

**Graine d'Espoir**

Graine d'Espoir in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo** emerged in 2013 as a response to health needs in the Kivu region of the country. It has been involved in training teachers to promote health among school students and their families and has been learning to work with community health workers to offer holistic forms of healthcare (for more, see p. 64).

**Beyond e.V., Germany**

Beyond e.V. is an agency operating in **Germany** that was established in 2012 and is focused primarily on raising funds for educational programs offered by Bahá'í-inspired organizations. The agency serves as a channel of funds for projects in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific, and engages in conversations with individuals and institutions in Germany about the spiritual principles that underlie the social progress of all nations.

**Foundation for the Advancement of Science**

Foundation for the Advancement of Science in Uttar Pradesh, **India**, has been engaged since 1996 in training teachers from schools in rural communities. Since 2020, in response to the closure of schools as a result of



Zambia



Kiribati



Eswatini



Papua New Guinea



Mongolia



Cambodia



India



Colombia

the coronavirus pandemic, it has been learning about helping youth to offer tutorial assistance in their communities. The Foundation has also been learning how to promote health through the training of young mothers as well as the creation of awareness-raising materials on the subject for use in local gatherings (for more, see p. 65).

**Yayasan Bhinneka Tunggal Ika Universal**

Yayasan Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (Unity in Diversity Foundation) was established in **Indonesia** in 1996 with the aim of contributing to the advancement of remote communities in the country by improving educational opportunities for children. In 2011, the organization began promoting the establishment of local schools in the Mentawai Islands and North Sumatra. By late 2022, it was supporting 31 early childhood development centers and offering ongoing training for 41 teachers (for more, see p. 44).

**Ootan Marawa Educational Institute (OMEI)**

The Ootan Marawa Educational Institute began in the 1990s with the aim of supporting teachers in **Kiribati** in building capacity in their students for service to society. Over time, the organization extended its educational efforts by offering the junior youth spiritual empowerment program in public schools and supporting the emergence of community schools. As of 2022, around 900 youth were participating in the program, and OMEI provided technical support to 17 kindergartens serving over 200 students (for more, see p. 55).

**Mwelekeo Organization**

Mwelekeo Organization was established in **Kenya** in 2007 to work with young people in rural areas to promote the material and spiritual well-being of their communities. It engages several hundred young people, primarily in Western Kenya, in an educational program that develops their capabilities for social action, including in the areas of agriculture, environment, and early childhood education.

**Rays of Light Foundation**

The Rays of Light Foundation was established in 2007 to help address educational needs in **Papua New Guinea**, where access to education is limited. The Foundation offers the Preparation for Social Action program to assist youth and adults to build capacity to promote the well-being of their communities, and conducts a teacher-training program for individuals who wish to work with their communities to establish nursery and primary schools.

**Inshindo Foundation**

With a conviction that knowledge lies at the heart of social progress, the Inshindo Foundation was formed in 2006 in **Zambia** to learn about how young people can build their scientific capabilities in order to promote the well-being of their communities. Over the years, its efforts have also led to the establishment of community schools and centers for community agriculture, which strive to generate knowledge about sustainable food production (for more, see p. 62).



### IN DEPTH: THE EVOLUTION OF A DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

In 2003, a group of individuals in the **Central African Republic** began to consult on how they could contribute to the social and economic progress of their country. Inspired by the Bahá'í writings that state that human beings should be regarded as a "mine rich in gems of inestimable value" and that "Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom," their attention focused on the state of pre-primary and primary education. Many communities, especially those in rural areas, had limited access to education, owing to the debilitating effect of years of internal strife on the nation's educational system.

Building on experience they had gained in supporting informal educational initiatives, the group established Fondation Nahid et Hushang Ahdieh (Ahdieh Foundation) as a means to engage in a more systematic process of learning. While keenly aware of the challenges involved, the founders saw in the people of their country a vast source of talent that could, if channeled appropriately, be key in overcoming these challenges. Drawing on insights and training materials from Bahá'í-inspired organizations in Chad and Mali, they set out to learn about how to assist communities to establish and manage their own primary schools.

#### Developing a program through ongoing action and reflection

Among the first actions of the Foundation was a training seminar for some 20 aspiring teachers selected by their respective communities for

the interest they had already shown in the education of young children. The purpose of the training was to help build the participants' capacity to start kindergartens in their own communities. Five locally operated preschools which were supported fully by financial resources from within the community were subsequently established. The Foundation followed the work of these schools closely and gained insights into areas such as raising consciousness in a community about the nature of education, training new teachers, and building capacity in a community to sustain the livelihood of teachers and administer a growing school.

In its efforts to develop its program, the Foundation had to be conscious of the reality of the population with which it was working, and able to adjust its plans accordingly. For instance, many of the aspiring teachers were young mothers with limited formal education and responsibilities that did not allow them to participate in training programs of several months' duration. In response, the Foundation adopted an approach to teacher training that wove together theory and practice: rather than requiring participants to relocate for extended periods, the Foundation offered training annually for one to two months, after which the teachers were encouraged to quickly apply in practice what they learned. Teachers were trained to offer one grade level at a time, starting first with kindergarten. Through regular visits from staff of the Foundation and a system in which more experienced teachers support newer ones, gradual improvements were made to the quality of instruction.

Naturally, the schools had to overcome many challenges as part of their

evolution. In the early years, for instance, school inspectors were at times skeptical of the schools, which generally operated in simple structures constructed with locally available materials, or sometimes even under a tree. Nevertheless, through a continuous process of action, reflection, and refinement, the Foundation developed various elements of a program for the multiplication of community schools (see p. 42). Within five years, there were some 28 schools in operation and over 100 teachers who had received training.

#### Consolidating structures and enhancing collaboration

The promising results of the program led to requests from a growing number of organizations in other countries in Africa that aspired to follow a similar path of learning. In 2008, the Foundation began assisting the staff of these organizations to develop teacher-training programs in their respective countries.

To ensure that capacity for the implementation of the program continued to grow within the Central African Republic, a few university graduates from the city of Bangui were invited to join the organization. Five training sites were also established in various parts of the country to decentralize some of its activities. By 2011, the Foundation was working in 13 municipal areas with 33 schools providing education to nearly 2,800 children. Despite the general state of civil unrest in the country, the Foundation's activities continued to develop. The quality of the education it offered had also earned the appreciation not only of parents but also of education practitioners and government officials across the country.



As collaboration with officials and other actors became stronger, the Foundation began to consider how it could participate more regularly in national dialogues about primary education. In April 2012, the Foundation organized a seminar for representatives of government and nongovernmental agencies during which ideas related to the purpose of education and the role of the teacher in society were explored. The following year, the Foundation entered into an agreement with the Ministry of Education providing official recognition for all schools established through its support. In 2014, the University of Bangui accredited the Foundation as a teacher-training organization and offered its collaborators access to degree programs.

#### Additional lines of action

As the Foundation gained experience in education, it found itself drawn more deeply into related concerns of the population.

For instance, a common challenge faced by many of the communities was children's nutrition and health. The children attending the schools were often not adequately nourished and had difficulties concentrating during the school day. In response, the organization began assisting the teachers of certain schools, along with members of the community, to

study materials aimed at building capacity to engage in highly productive, sustainable agricultural practices. These communities established and began tending to experimental agricultural plots, using the harvests to provide a meal to the students each day. Around the experimental plots, local farmers were also supported to generate, apply, and disseminate knowledge about how to diversify and increase the volume of food production in order to help meet the nutritional needs of families while also increasing their income.

Another line of action emerged at the request of parents and involved working with young adolescents who had graduated from community schools. Over the last several years, the Foundation has been assisting such youth to participate in a program that aims to raise promoters of community well-being (see p. 56). A number of these youth have, in turn, arisen to contribute to various processes of community life, such as education, environment, health, and agriculture.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, when most schools in the country had temporarily closed, the Foundation supported teachers of community schools, together with families of their students, to offer decentralized education according to national health regulations. Working

with small groups of families in their homes, the teachers engaged parents in assisting students with their writing, reading, and arithmetic. As parents became more familiar with educational principles and skills, they began to see themselves more as active agents, in partnership with the teachers, in offering education to the younger generation.

At present, Ahdieh Foundation is part of a network of seven organizations in the region implementing the community schools program and consulting about various areas of learning. Together, they are working with more than 850 teachers who are tending to the education of over 24,300 students in about 190 community schools.

Since its inception, the evolution of the Foundation's work has rested on the collective will of local communities, and its lines of action have been sustained by a steady rise in the number of human resources. As teachers have gained experience, they have begun to support newer teachers and to refine the content of the curriculum used in the classrooms. Several have also been assisted to advance in their tertiary education. In considering the questions that lie ahead, the organization has been reflecting on how to systematize and offer more widely in the country what has been learned over the years. In this regard, steps have been taken by the Foundation and the University of Bangui to jointly establish a Chair that will advance research on community education and offer accredited courses—thus contributing further to raising the country's next generation of educators.





# AREAS *of* ACTION

As described in the foregoing pages, Bahá'í efforts in the sphere of social action comprise a broad spectrum, ranging from simple grassroots initiatives of limited duration undertaken by individuals or small groups of friends to programs of social and economic development with a high level of sophistication implemented by Bahá'í-inspired development organizations. They represent responses to the needs of the particular communities or societies in which they are initiated. As such, they may be related to one or more areas, including education, agriculture, the environment, arts and media, health, the local economy, the advancement of women, and humanitarian relief.

Over the years, there has been a significant advance in humanity's collective knowledge in these areas, especially those that are part of one or another scientific discipline. A question at the heart of Bahá'í development activities in each of

these areas, then, is how knowledge from both science and religion can be drawn on and applied in coherent ways to specific challenges, and in so doing generate new insights and reveal new pathways for the betterment of the human condition. Given the complexity of such a task, the learning process in all fields of endeavor in which Bahá'ís are engaged is necessarily at a nascent stage and will continue to be explored in the coming decades.

The pages that follow outline a selection of endeavors in a few areas of action, carried out in a number of settings where Bahá'ís reside. The efforts profiled within each area are by no means exhaustive—they merely serve to provide a glimpse into the range and diversity of activities under way.





## Education

The Bahá'í writings place a special emphasis on the importance of education, describing it as the “primary, the most urgent requirement” for achieving the prosperity of nations. Bahá'u'lláh states: “Knowledge is as wings to man’s life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone.” “Every child is potentially the light of the world—and at the same time its darkness.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá adds, “wherefore must the question of education be accounted as of primary importance.”

He further writes: “The education and training of children is among the most meritorious acts of humankind and draweth down the grace and favor of the All-Merciful, for education is the indispensable foundation of all human excellence and alloweth man to work his way to the heights of abiding glory.”

A growing number of individuals and communities around the world, inspired by these principles, are undertaking a wide variety of educational initiatives, ranging in complexity from informal after-school tutorials to universities. They include classes for children in kindergartens and primary schools that explore moral principles, literacy projects for youth and adults, education and training for women and girls, programs aimed at enhancing capacities of young people to promote social well-being, and organizations offering post-secondary education programs, developing curricula, or providing teacher training. Additionally, hundreds of Bahá'í-inspired academic schools have been established worldwide. Regardless of the form they take, all such educational endeavors have as their primary objective the release of human potential—assisting generation after generation to cultivate the qualities of heart and mind that can enable them to understand the world around them and contribute to the betterment of society.

One of the fruits of the Bahá'í community's commitment to education is the development, since the mid-1990s, of a global network of some 330 national and regional training institutes. The training institute is conceived as an educational agency whose purpose is to assist individuals to gain the spiritual insights and

practical skills they need to serve their communities. In tens of thousands of localities, groups of people from all walks of life are engaged in a participatory process of study, action, and reflection aimed at enhancing the spiritual life of their communities. The courses of the training institute help the individual enter into the conversation of what the Bahá'í community has learned through experience as it has explored the Bahá'í writings and endeavored to contribute to the progress of society. More crucially, the courses seek to involve the individual in this process of learning and in the generation and diffusion of relevant knowledge.

In most parts of the world, as groups of individuals engage in this educational process and begin to carry out acts of service aimed at the common good, one of the first concerns that emerges is to ensure that children and youth in their communities have access to a sound academic education. Diverse informal initiatives have sprung up, including one-on-one or group tutorial assistance, simple literacy classes, and peer groups for homework help and further study. In a growing number of places, more sustained initiatives that lend further structure to the delivery of tutorial assistance and draw on a variety of interested volunteers in the community have been a natural outcome. Local Bahá'í institutions have also taken steps to collaborate with teachers and educational institutions to collectively work for the well-being of all the young people in a community.

Beyond such informal efforts, the establishment of schools has been a significant feature of Bahá'í experience in the field of development stretching back to the beginnings of the Faith in



Honduras

*“Knowledge is as wings to man’s life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone.”*

—BAHÁ'U'LLÁH



India

Iran and evolving in different parts of the world through the years. Pages 40 to 42 include a few examples of such educational initiatives. Further, since the early 2000s, an approach has emerged through the experience of a number of Bahá'í-inspired organizations in Africa working for the promotion of community schools. The efforts of one such organization is discussed on pages 32 to 33, and the various elements of this approach, as it has been refined through a collective learning process on the continent, are described on page 83. Given the important role that teachers play in society and how vital their contribution is to the education of the younger generation, teacher training is a theme that runs across all of these formal educational initiatives—a topic that is discussed on page 46, as illustrated through the example of an organization in Uganda. The last few decades have also seen a steady accumulation of experience in the area of tertiary education. Some examples of universities and organizations offering post-secondary programs are included on page 47.

Within this wide range of educational endeavors, those aimed at learning to release the potential of young people to contribute to the betterment of society occupy a special place. While they fall within the broader area of education, they are explored in a subsequent section, starting on page 48.



Brazil





Thailand



Philippines



Ghana



United States

**SELECTED EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES**

**Tutorial center, Dominican Republic**

During the period of lockdowns caused by the coronavirus pandemic, a group of individuals in the San Juan province of the **Dominican Republic** initiated a project to help meet the educational needs of children in the community. The Florece Project serves close to 40 children from ages 5 to 11, drawing on teachers and volunteers from the community who provide tutorial support around a range of subjects, including literacy, mathematics, English, and art.

**Supporting kindergartens, Mongolia**

Established in 1993, the Mongolian Development Centre carries out programs that respond to the need for quality spiritual and intellectual pre-primary education. The organization supports teachers in government kindergartens to strengthen the quality of teaching. This has naturally led to additional lines of action, including training for parents and principals. As of 2022, the organization

was working with educators at 29 kindergartens throughout **Mongolia** and reaching more than 4,500 children. The Centre has also collaborated with schools and officials in the country to host spaces for contributing to the discourse on the education of children in Mongolian society.

**Student hostel, Thailand**

A hostel is run in Omkoi, **Thailand**, for students from the Karen ethnic group who live in the surrounding areas but are too far away to commute from home to school. Some 50 students stay at the hostel, which pays attention to their spiritual and intellectual well-being and offers them a training program to supplement the education they receive at school. In addition to supporting their academic education, the program engages them in opportunities for service in surrounding villages and neighborhoods. Given that the hostel has been in operation for almost two decades, several former students who went on to obtain university education have returned to offer their support to the project.

**Literacy, Philippines**

In 1991, the Dawnbreakers Foundation was established in the **Philippines** to support the education of populations within the country. For over a decade, it has been assisting teachers to tend to the well-being of children through the promotion of community schools and learning about building the capacity of youth to contribute to the betterment of their communities. Included in its efforts has been learning how to increase literacy within the indigenous Mangyan population. Part of its approach has been to engage youth and young adolescents in the study of moral education texts that aim to improve language capabilities, and to assist them to carry out educational activities in their villages at increasing levels of complexity. In one village, the community is building a simple facility to serve as a venue for local gatherings as well as training, in order to reduce the distance young people would typically travel to engage in educational programs.

**Literacy, Ghana**

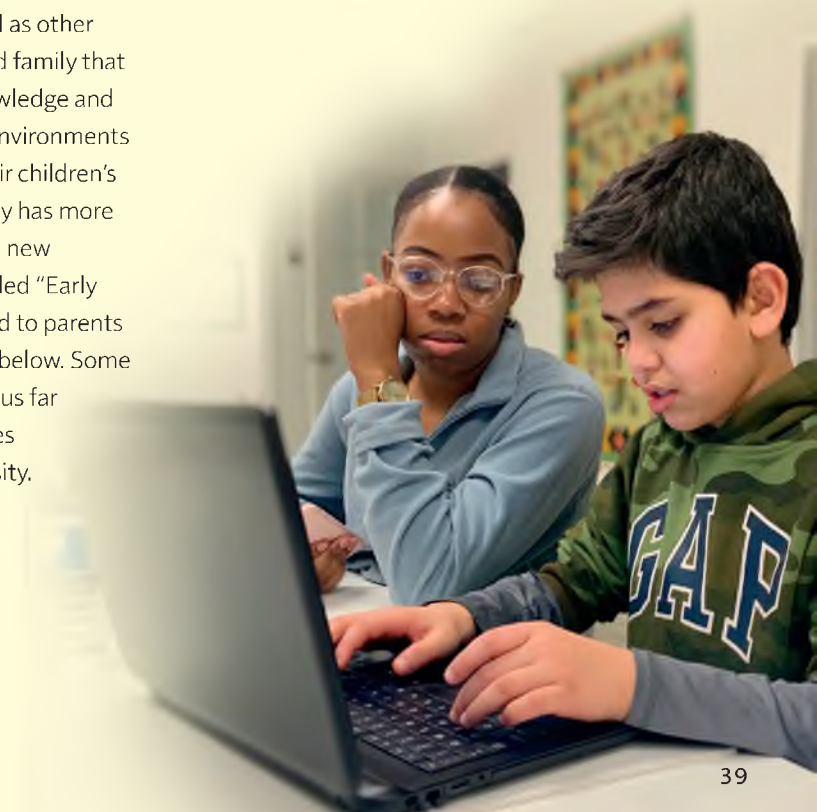
In the mid-1990s, the Bahá'í community of **Ghana** initiated a moral education and literacy campaign entitled "Enlightening the Hearts" in several regions of the country. The effectiveness of this experience led to the establishment of the Olinga Foundation for Human Development in 2001, which has extended the reach of the campaign to students of public schools. The organization collaborates with district education offices in addressing high illiteracy rates among upper primary students in rural regions. Teachers are trained to help students improve reading and writing skills in the local language over a period of nine months. In addition to receiving training on the organization's methodology for literacy instruction, the teachers study materials that are aimed at building their moral capabilities and improving attitudes toward teaching. Through the influence of the program, cases of corporal punishment have been completely eliminated in several schools, and greater attention is being given to the educational needs of girls.

**Parent education, United States**

Parent University was established in 2000 in the **United States** with an aim of helping families in low-income neighborhoods of Savannah to take greater ownership of the education of their children and to assist them to overcome certain social issues facing the local population, such as poverty and relatively low access to formal educational opportunities. The organization offers a variety of courses to parents as well as other members of the extended family that equip them with the knowledge and skills required to create environments that are conducive to their children's learning. Parent University has more recently started to offer a new multi-session module called "Early Learning College," tailored to parents of children aged five and below. Some 3,000 individuals have thus far participated in the courses offered by Parent University.

*"The education and training of children is among the most meritorious acts of humankind..."*

—'ABDU'L-BAHÁ





## Schools

The establishment of schools has been a significant feature of Bahá'í experience in the field of development. More than 800 Bahá'í-inspired academic schools are currently operating worldwide. Over half of these are in Africa, about 200 are in Asia, some 100 are in Australasia, and a few dozen are in the Americas and in Europe. These educational centers exist in a variety of settings and range from simple kindergartens serving tens of children to large schools at elementary and secondary levels offering education to thousands of students. All aim at academic excellence, place special emphasis on service to the community through the application of moral values and spiritual principles, and strive to meet the particular needs of the society in which they operate. A few examples from various parts of the globe illustrate how the schools are attempting to put these ideals into practice.

Located in **Brazil's** capital city, Brasília, the School of the Nations provides academic instruction in English and Portuguese to over 850 students attending nursery school through grade 12. Community service is at the heart of the school's program, as staff and students alike strive to put high ideals into action. By way of example, the school provides assistance to a number of kindergartens in the city, helping them to beautify their surroundings and enhance their educational activities.

In West Africa, Lycée Enoch Olinga in Niamey, **Niger**, offers preschool through secondary education to around 450 students. In addition to being considered one of the foremost academic institutions in the country, the school has found various ways it can extend its efforts beyond its own student population. It has gained experience, for instance, in collaborating with other schools in the city by providing training to their teachers, and has more recently been considering ways in which it can support the establishment of schools in rural areas of the country where there is limited access to quality formal education.



Brazil

The New Day School in Karachi, **Pakistan**, was established in 1978 with just three students. It now offers a complete primary and secondary program with an enrollment of over 700 students. A group of students first took the public examination conducted by the Board of Secondary Education in 1991, and since that time, the school has maintained a distinguished record of academic achievement. Its moral development program from early childhood through secondary school helps to cultivate within students a spirit of service to humanity.

In **Tonga**, the Ocean of Light International School offers pre-tertiary grade levels to some 400 students, with an aim of raising individuals who not only excel academically but also develop exemplary habits and spiritual qualities that can be channeled toward service to their local communities and society at large. Beyond receiving the support of parents, the school's approach has also gained official recognition from the nation's Minister of Education.

### *Striving to integrate academic and moral education*

With modest beginnings, the School of the Nations in **Macau** originally operated out of an apartment with seven teachers and five students in 1988. Currently, it offers education to over 600 students from kindergarten to high school. Over the years, the school has come to be known for providing a high standard of academic education and has received awards at both the national and international levels for its character development program.

Since its establishment, the initiators of the school recognized the need for an educational approach that develops the intellectual powers of students together with the moral and spiritual foundations that can guide them through life. Rather than viewing moral education as a standalone class, the school has been focused on ensuring that elements of moral education, including principles such as kindness towards others, service to one's community, honesty, generosity, and unity and harmony, are woven into all aspects of its academic instruction. Placing emphasis on raising up students who could contribute to the well-being and progress of their society, the school also incorporates service projects as a critical component of the curriculum. Through study and practical service, the school's program aims to assist students to learn to identify local needs and engage in projects to improve the material and social reality of their community. A pattern of study, action, and reflection among the staff enables the school to learn from experience and make modifications over time. The school has also been collaborating with other schools in the vicinity, inviting them to explore particular concepts, such as the harmony between science and religion, the oneness of humankind, and the independent investigation of truth, that have proven especially effective in enhancing the quality of their operations as well as the content of their curricula.

### *Networks to facilitate the flow of learning*

Over the years, a number of spaces have emerged to assist similar schools to learn from each other, from the local to the international level. These spaces have prompted schools to reflect on the implications of spiritual principles on their efforts, make refinements to their curricula and administration, and explore new ways to engage with parents and the wider community, conceiving of all actors as active protagonists in shaping the education of the students.

In the **United States**, a network of micro-schools began as a natural outcome of conversations between a teacher offering moral education classes and the parents of participating children. Beginning with a few children in a homeschool group, the efforts were gradually formalized, and a Bahá'í-inspired private school offering classes from kindergarten through high school was licensed. The founders of the initial effort developed relationships with neighborhood communities as well as local groups interested in learning about the micro-school model. The formation of this network assisted individuals to identify teachers who could start their own micro-schools and allowed those involved to learn from one another's experiences. Central to the mode of operation and mission of these schools is the conviction that service to one's community and the oneness of humanity are fundamental aspects of human nature. Efforts to overcome racial prejudice within society also constitute a large aspect of the schools' mandate.

In the city of Pointe-Noire in the **Congo Republic**, a collaborative network emerged among eleven Bahá'í-inspired community schools (see next page) as the initiators of these schools met regularly to reflect and consult together. Through



Macau

*“Among the greatest of all great services is the education of children, and promotion of the various sciences, crafts and arts.”*

—'ABDU'L-BAHÁ



continued from previous page

this network, which includes teachers and members of management committees, the schools have been able to exchange insights and facilitate a flow of resources between them to ensure constancy in education. Teachers and administrators are also learning to contribute to educational discourses unfolding in the area.

In **India**, a group of 20 schools from across the country has come together for regular seminars, hosted by the New Era High School in Panchgani, to articulate what they have been learning about providing high-quality education, especially around how to raise young people known for their academic excellence and spirit of service to society. Their discussions center around the various institutional capacities required to translate the ideals contained in the Bahá'í teachings into the curriculum and functioning of a school. An outcome of this process has been that a number of these schools have been inspired to contribute to networks of schools in their own local states.

At the continental and international levels, the Bahá'í International Development Organization has also arranged gatherings for groups of schools to come together to explore areas of learning such as identifying and training teachers, infusing spiritual concepts into curricula, enhancing a school's relationship with parents and the wider community, and strengthening relationships with government and civil society.



United Arab Emirates

### Promotion of community schools

A significant proportion of Bahá'í-inspired schools in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific, some of which were mentioned in the previous section, have emerged through the assistance of development organizations learning about the promotion of community schools. A pressing concern to which many Bahá'í communities around the world have endeavored to respond has been the extension of academic instruction at the pre-primary and primary school levels where the reach of the national education system is significantly limited. Since the early 2000s, a growing number of Bahá'í-inspired agencies in the aforementioned regions have been working toward the multiplication of community schools in villages and towns (for more information about the history of this program, see p. 83). Presently, the establishment of community schools is being supported by organizations in 22 countries. Collectively, these agencies collaborate with approximately 2,000 teachers in 575 schools reaching up to 43,000 students.

#### Organic growth of a school

Drawing primarily on locally available resources, community schools often begin with a single class at the preschool level. They expand organically according to circumstances in the locality, gradually adding more teachers and grade levels up until the last year of primary school, and in some cases advancing beyond the primary level.

#### Ongoing teacher training

At the heart of the work of the organizations promoting community schools is the development of a teacher-training program that helps build the capacity of youth and adults to offer pre-primary and primary academic instruction to children in their communities. These organizations are animated by the vision offered in the Bahá'í teachings of raising up teachers who are “distinguished for their high standards of conduct and general excellence” and are “scholars and educators with a thorough knowledge of sciences and arts.” The approach to teacher training seeks to integrate theory and practice



Nepal

by creating regular opportunities for the teachers to study relevant content and reflect with others on the experience they are gaining in the classroom.

#### The community as a protagonist

A basic conviction held by the organizations promoting community schools is that local communities can be protagonists in providing for the education of younger generations within their society. In this regard, experience highlights the importance of communities having a sense of ownership around the process of education and support for the establishment of a school. Thus, much of the effort of the organizations is focused on helping communities explore their aspirations for the education of their children as well as supporting them in considering how they can take charge of meeting this imperative. As consciousness is raised around this important responsibility, individuals are identified within their localities who can be entrusted with the education of the younger generations. Once schools are established, community members often demonstrate their commitment to sustaining the schools in a variety of ways beyond the payment of school fees. For instance, individuals have provided food for the students and teachers, contributed land, assisted with the construction of classrooms, and maintained school agricultural plots.

Experience gained in various parts of the world, including the examples cited in this section, offers a glimpse into the potential that exists when a spirit of reciprocity and mutual support is established among various actors concerned with the education of children—the school, teachers, parents, and community at large. Rather than being seen as a passive deliverer of content, a teacher can be an essential protagonist, along with other collaborators, in the spiritual and intellectual development of children and in the overall progress of a community. In addition to assisting children to acquire knowledge in various subjects, teachers can help nurture a culture of learning in a community, cultivate a spirit of service to others, and promote the application of principles such as love, unity, and trustworthiness. As an integral part of the life of a population, a community school can also learn to contribute more deliberately to various aspects of community life as it gains in strength. Often in simple ways and as an organic extension of the education it provides, a community school can, for example, begin to undertake systematic action in areas such as local food production and health, and can provide access to a wide range of knowledge through means such as the establishment of a library.

*“This school is one of the vital and essential institutions which indeed support and bulwark the edifice of humankind.”*

—'ABDU'L-BAHÁ



**IN BRIEF: COMMUNITY SCHOOLS  
IN THE LIFE OF SOCIETY**

**Eswatini**

The Setsembiso Sebunye Foundation has been supporting community schools in **Eswatini** for over a decade. Initially, it helped to identify localities where conditions were propitious for the emergence of community schools, but over time, a number of new communities began to approach the organization themselves. In one such place, the inhabitants of the Mqolo village in the Hhohho region contacted the Foundation to request for a prospective educator, whom the population itself had identified, to participate in the teacher training offered by the organization. While the individual was receiving training, the community began constructing a classroom on the land donated by the village chief. In a gathering called for by local leaders, everyone was encouraged to contribute. Bricklayers and electricians from within the community offered their skills, many, particularly the youth, volunteered to collect water and build a structure, and others cooked meals for those involved. Once the Mqolo Preschool was established, the community continued to support it by providing food for the children and covering the teacher's salary, expressing in various ways its appreciation for the teacher and ongoing concern that the youngest members of their community receive a holistic education.



Malawi

**Indonesia**

Through the work of community schools in **Indonesia**, various actors are becoming increasingly involved in the processes of education in their localities. In many places, the education of young children had not always been perceived as closely related to the responsibility of village government, but over time, the connection between teachers, schools, and the local government has strengthened. A pattern is beginning to emerge where teachers are actively involved in processes concerned with the advancement of the community, and members of local government are engaging in activities at the schools. Members of the Department of Education have actively participated in seminars for teacher training, and additional spaces involving the local community and government have provided opportunities for consultation, planning, and action around preschool education and the development of capacity in the village.

Parents are similarly becoming increasingly involved in the education of their children. Seminars are being held with parents in collaboration with local government to foster their connection to the processes of education. In some instances, materials have been developed to assist them to reflect on the nature and importance of education, encompassing topics such as the role of parents as well as more holistic conceptions of education.



Indonesia



Tanzania

**Malawi**

Inhabitants of many localities in **Malawi** have taken responsibility for sustaining community schools and consulting about their ongoing development, including the well-being of teachers and the overall health of students. With the support of school management committees, many communities have established school gardens to provide food for the children. Where the land to establish plots is not sufficiently large to provide for the entire student population, families and other members of the community often contribute maize, soya beans, or groundnuts to assist the school. Participation involves members of the entire community, not only those whose children attend the community schools. At the level of institutions, existing community groups that give attention to village development have come together with the management committees to consider the progress of the schools.

The influence of the schools has also started to extend to surrounding localities. For instance, teachers often provide extra tutorial classes to children from other schools who need additional help. Further, the organization supporting community schools in the country, the Bambino Foundation, has worked together with local government, like-minded organizations, and other schools to foster the education of young people in rural communities by providing

in-service training to teachers and encouraging measures to increase access to preschool education.

**Chad**

The collaboration between the teachers and the community in the Guéra region of **Chad** led to a rise in consciousness of the importance of early childhood education. In L'École Nouvelle Vision — one of the community schools being supported by Fondation Ilm, a Bahá'í-inspired organization — strengthening bonds of friendship between teachers and parents has enabled the school to become a learning center for all. A literacy course has been organized for parents and other adults, mainly women, in the community to learn to read and write in French. The Foundation has also begun to train a few members in several communities in an agricultural program to establish a garden plot close to the community school. Further, when most schools closed owing to the health crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic, teachers of community schools found ways to offer intellectual and spiritual education to children as well as further strengthen ties with parents within the localities in which they live. They also assisted with the provision of reliable information to the population concerning the pandemic and prevention measures.

**MORE ON  
COMMUNITY SCHOOLS**

**Central African Republic:** Fondation Ahdieh (p. 32 in "Development Organizations").

**Congo Republic:** Network of community schools (p. 41 in "Schools").

**Democratic Republic of the Congo:** Fondation Erfan-Connaissance (p. 63 in "Agriculture").

**Democratic Republic of the Congo:** Graine d'Espoir (p. 64 in "Health").

**Systematization of Learning** Community schools (p. 83).



**IN DEPTH: TEACHER TRAINING**

A theme that runs across all of the areas of education is teacher training, whether in the context of assisting communities to establish their own schools, supporting the ongoing development of teachers in larger Bahá'í-inspired schools, or offering supplementary training to teachers in the public education system.

The Kimanya-Ngeyo Foundation for Science and Education in **Uganda** has been functioning since 2007 in a number of districts in the Eastern Region of the country, with a focus on programs that build capacity in youth and adults to advance various aspects of community life. As an extension of its ongoing efforts, in 2014, the organization initiated a pilot study with the aim of gaining insight into the professional development of primary school teachers in the districts in which it had been working. An initial three-year phase involved the study of selected texts of the Preparation for Social Action program (see pp. 56–58) by teachers from various government schools. Over the course of this period, some of the participating teachers began to consider topics such as pedagogy and how a scientific methodology could inform their work. They also examined the national curriculum in light of the ideas they were studying and devised concrete teaching plans to help students fulfill the educational objectives.



*“...the hope is that through showerings from the clouds of grace, ye will become teachers; that ye will flourish even as flowers and fragrant herbs in the garden of that knowledge which is both of the mind and of the heart...”*

—'ABDU'L-BAHÁ

Over time, a perceptible shift in the dynamic between teachers and students was observed as classroom environments became more participatory and as relationships strengthened. Teachers also demonstrated greater capacity to assist students to acquire conceptual understanding of the curriculum and move beyond rote learning and memorization methods. An external academic study found that national test scores of students in participating schools rose by 25 percentage points.

The second phase of the program, which began in 2018, extended its reach and addressed questions about its impact more broadly. For instance, the Foundation began to pay attention to how the coherence and quality of the education offered in a school could be enhanced if a growing number of teachers from within a given school joined the training. It also strove to learn about how increased participation could contribute to transformation in both the school and the community.

An important element of this process over the years has been the active support of education officials. Many of them have visited the training centers, mobilized administrators for the seminars, participated in the Foundation's graduation ceremonies, and invited the Foundation into other spaces. Some of the teachers have also gone on to cultivate relationships with members of the government by engaging in conversations about a common vision for education in the country.

Building on the positive contribution of these efforts, the Foundation is investigating possibilities to extend the training to other localities and has started developing short courses for families of students. It is also finding various means to contribute to the discourse on education in the country as well as the advancement of the educational system in the country at large.

**Tertiary education projects**

There are over 30 Bahá'í or Bahá'í-inspired agencies providing post-secondary or tertiary education, some registered as colleges or universities. The majority offer specific courses for university students and graduates or provide teacher-training programs. The University of Lilongwe in **Malawi**, for instance, offers undergraduate, postgraduate, and PhD programs, provides further training for teachers, and supports the promotion of research and discourse about early childhood education.

Some agencies offer programs in collaboration with other universities. For instance, the School of the Nations in **Guyana** offers accredited tertiary education programs in collaboration with universities in the **United Kingdom**. The School of the Nations in **Macau** provides an internship program for students of education at Macau University. The Bahá'í Academy in **India** collaborates with some six universities in Maharashtra and many more affiliated colleges to offer various courses on values education, and participates in discourses related to this theme. Other agencies have been offering courses to interested individuals and institutions, including Lazos Learning in **Canada** and Universidad de las Naciones, Integración, Desarrollo y Ambiente (UNIDA) in **Argentina**.



**IN DEPTH: A SPECIALIZED MASTER'S PROGRAM INSPIRED BY SPIRITUAL PRINCIPLES**

Núr University in **Bolivia** is an agency that has worked to develop its financial and administrative capacity over three decades and has systematically explored ways to apply spiritual principles in the areas of education and social action. The university promotes the integration of academic knowledge with the teaching of basic moral principles, while emphasizing community service, social justice, and a respect for human diversity.

One of its specialized master's programs, developed in 2017 in collaboration with FUN-DAEC in **Colombia**, focuses on social and economic development in light of the evolving conceptual framework guiding the efforts of the Bahá'í community. Centered on the areas of research and the management of development projects and institutions, the program aims to address a need for highly trained people to serve in development and administration in Latin America and respond to the aspirations of professionals from various disciplines to deepen their theoretical and practical knowledge in these areas. Though still nascent in its operation, the program is beginning to show glimpses into the nature of a postgraduate program that raises the capacity of individuals to administer large development projects, in the context of Latin America, that combine knowledge from both science and religion.

In addition to its specialized degree, the university offers diploma, undergraduate, and postgraduate programs in areas such as management, administration, auditing, law, teaching, marketing, consulting and coaching, social and economic development, and public health. By 2022, over 3,000 students were enrolled in the university's undergraduate and postgraduate programs, which have also included teachers and government administrators from hundreds of rural communities within the country.



## Releasing the Potential of Youth

If development is viewed in terms of the capacity of a population to take charge of its spiritual and material progress, then the empowerment of young people assumes particular significance.

The Bahá'í writings describe the period of youth as life's springtime—"the choicest time of life." During this period, young people will need to progressively acquire the knowledge, abilities, qualities, and skills that will prepare them for the world they will inherit. Regardless of their social situations, young people have energy, idealism, and the desire to contribute to the betterment of the world.

Over the years, Bahá'í communities and institutions around the world have striven to learn about educational processes that would enable youth to pursue a twofold moral purpose—that of fostering their own growth and contributing to the upliftment of society. A range of initiatives has emerged as a result, including moral education efforts, projects that offer tutorial assistance, special training programs in one or another area of community service, organizations that provide support for higher education, and formal secondary and tertiary institutions that provide higher academic training. Animated by a desire to explore the enormous potential of young people, at the heart of this learning process has been inquiry into the content and methods that enable youth to draw on humanity's intellectual and spiritual heritage as they analyze the world around them and take steps to improve its conditions.

While the previous section includes a few examples of formal educational institutions that engage young people, the pages that follow illustrate a wider range of projects and programs that have striven to contribute to the spiritual and intellectual development of youth. The examples on pages 50 and 51 offer a small sampling of initiatives, formal and informal, that have emerged in different communities that focus on supporting youth along their educational and professional paths. In addition to such efforts, there are a few programs that have emerged over the years through the efforts of several Bahá'í-inspired organizations around the world that are being drawn on more widely. Pages 52 to 55 discuss a program for the moral empowerment of young people from the ages of 12 to 15—an age group that represents a population of enormous talent for every community. For older youth, pages 56 to 58 describe a rigorous educational program that aims at raising "promoters of community well-being" who are assisted to develop the capacity to take collective action in fields such as education, health, and food production and to contribute to the overall well-being of their communities. Indeed, a significant proportion of social action efforts illustrated in this publication have sprung from the initiative of groups of young people involved in educational processes that recognize their inherent capacities, help them fulfill their noble aspirations, and assist them to channel their energies toward the betterment of their societies.

*“After a time he enters the period of youth.... His faculties of observation are broadened and deepened; his intelligent capacities are trained and awakened; the limitations and environment of childhood no longer restrict his energies and accomplishments.”*

—'ABDU'L-BAHÁ



Colombia



Belgium



Brazil



Cambodia



Zambia



**SELECTED INITIATIVES**

In different realities, communities and institutions are finding ways to assist youth to obtain an education that enables them to pursue a life of meaningful service to society. In many places, groups of youth support one another in this regard, in some cases leading to the creation of sustained projects, such as the community education center in **India** illustrated on pages 24 to 25. Below is a selection of other formal and informal efforts in a few communities around the world that are contributing to the intellectual development of young people, and in some cases helping them to identify and pursue a professional path.

**Tutorial center for junior youth in Malaysia**

In a neighborhood in **Malaysia**, a few friends began to observe a gap in literacy and mathematical and scientific knowledge among those aged 12 to 15. Given how consequential this period is in a young person’s educational path, parents and their neighbors in the community were consulted and the idea of an after-school tuition center emerged. To provide a conducive space for learning, materials were compiled and capable teachers sought. In order to provide financial support for teachers and materials, as well as the rental of a suitable facility, an arrangement was devised whereby those who could afford to pay for tuition would do so while those who were unable would be subsidized. The friends involved are now learning how to enable more young people in the locality to offer their services toward the tuition center. They are also learning how to strengthen relationships among all participants who come from diverse backgrounds,



Canada

especially those from historically marginalized communities.

**Community-based tutorial support for youth in South Africa**

In a neighborhood in Mahikeng, **South Africa**, as a response to the adverse effects to learning caused by the global coronavirus pandemic, a group of people in the community, together with the support of a local official and village chief, arranged a daily program with the aim of assisting students to improve their academic results and to study materials related to spiritual principles and service to society. Attention was given to identifying educational



South Africa

content that effectively supplemented the youth’s formal schooling as well as to drawing on the support of teachers in the community. Though a modest effort to support youth to advance both spiritually and intellectually, these steps have assisted larger numbers to feel a greater degree of coherence in their lives as they identify how they can continue to contribute to the progress of their community through their work and service.

**Assisting young people along educational pathways in the Netherlands**

A group of youth and young professionals in Midden, the **Netherlands**, reflected on the systemic forms of injustice and unequal access to education that exist in their neighborhood and that narrow employment and income-generating prospects for many young people. Over several years, the process of action and reflection in which they were engaged together with the youth and their families became formalized, and an organization

called the Breakwell Institute was formed. This development allowed the group to more effectively collaborate with local agencies, including community centers, organizations, and a mosque, to support the families. Continued efforts to learn about supporting young people have led to the gradual development of educational materials which assist youth to identify ways to channel their talents toward the betterment of their societies and explore potential avenues for study and work that correspond with their noble aspirations.

**Scholarships for tertiary education in Zambia**

In **Zambia**, the Bahá’í community has been learning over a few decades about how to support youth who have been facing obstacles related to their academic education. Many young people, particularly in the rural areas of the country, have experienced difficulties obtaining adequate funding to be able to pursue higher education. Starting as a personal initiative, a number of individuals began financially supporting a handful of youth to

enable them to benefit more fully from academic education, alongside the spiritual education they were already receiving through their participation in various programs offered by the Bahá’í community. To systematize these efforts, a fund for education was created. Over time, the Lomthunzi Foundation was established as a means of further formalizing the fund as well as helping young people to enhance their capacity to make sound choices related to personal growth and their contribution to the advancement of society. A formal scholarship program eventually emerged to assist such young people who require financial assistance. Beyond this support, the Foundation provides guidance and counseling services and connects youth to schools. It has also been accompanying youth to seek out existing support offered through government and civil society programs as they cultivate skills to take ownership of their further education.

**Collaborative action research in Canada and the United States**

In the **United States** and **Canada**, four Bahá’í-inspired organizations—the Center for Studies in Community Progress, Coherent Development Research Institute (CDRI), Colibri

Learning Foundation, and Wordswell Association for Community Learning—have initiated a process of collaborative action research around shared areas of endeavor. The network convenes periodic reflection spaces to exchange insights, share approaches, and enhance understanding of the various forces in society operating on the lives of youth that influence their attitudes and the choices they make. In order to assist youth to navigate these realities and connect to deeper sources of motivation, the network of organizations has been learning how youth can increasingly develop certain capacities, skills, attitudes, and convictions that can help them meet their noble aspirations. The organizations have also been learning how to assist youth to view the choices they make around education, work, and family life as part of a life of service in which all of the components interact with and enhance each other. In practice, strategies to assist the youth have included daily academic tutorial assistance, scholarship application support, camps for more intensive study, mentoring, career guidance, and internships, as well as community service projects and workshops for families to explore themes such as the purpose of education and work.



Canada



### Moral and spiritual empowerment of junior youth

The period between the ages of 12 and 15 represents a special time in the life of an individual, for it is during these years that he or she leaves childhood behind and undergoes profound change. Not yet in the fullness of youth, individuals in this age range are often referred to as “junior youth.”

For the Bahá’í community, engaging junior youth in activities that seek to enhance their capacities and prepare them to participate effectively in the affairs of their communities has been a significant area of learning for many years. The junior youth spiritual empowerment program, developed through the efforts of a range of institutions and agencies in different parts of the world (see p. 82), is one of the fruits of this learning process. The program is based on the conviction that the short and critical period of young adolescence represents a time of transition during which ideas about the individual and society, which shape the rest of one’s life, are formed. While some conceptions paint a dark picture of adolescence, viewing this stage of life as one fraught with difficulties and crisis, the Bahá’í teachings hold the conviction that young people are invaluable protagonists in constructing a better society. The program, then, aims at awakening the junior youth to their own potential, developing their talents, and directing their abilities and energies toward service to humanity.



The program is carried out in the context of a “junior youth group,” which serves as an environment of mutual support and profound friendship for its members. Guided by older youth who serve as “animators,” junior youth study a set of materials based on moral and spiritual concepts. Some of these materials also enter into the areas of mathematics and science in order to assist youth to investigate reality in a scientific manner. While inspired by the Bahá’í Faith, the program does not explore themes in a mode of religious instruction. In addition to study, the groups engage in artistic activities and carry out service projects, devised by the groups themselves, toward the betterment of their communities. Overall, the program seeks to engage the expanding consciousness of junior youth in an exploration of reality that helps them recognize the constructive and destructive forces at work in society and to discern the spiritual reality underlying every condition. It aims to endow young people with the capabilities of reading with good comprehension and expressing thoughts clearly and eloquently. Emphasis is placed on the need for positive words and thoughts to be accompanied by pure deeds.

The program is being carried out by a network of training institutes and organizations in over 180 countries involving over 300,000 junior youth in more than 35,000 groups.

The words of young people engaged in the program offer glimpses into the potential of this age group—their altruism, acute sense of justice, eagerness to learn about the universe, and desire to become agents of positive change in their communities. Comments such as the ones on the next page have come from junior youth in all continents.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

### PERSPECTIVES OF YOUNG PEOPLE FROM AROUND THE WORLD

#### Europe

*“All can and all must make a difference, it doesn’t matter how little an action could be—making a cake for the neighbors, bringing around the dogs of a friend, offering moral support in this difficult time, even only speaking to someone as a friend; these are all actions that can bring not only the community or the city, but the whole of humanity, one step closer to the unity of the world. People are made to stay together ... if we want prosperity and well-being for all, we need unity. Taking the pieces of something old we can build something completely new. We can take the world from which we come so far, take the best parts, re-create them with our common will and build a new society in which all can be happy, none excluded.”*

#### Latin America

*“A factor that helps us with many dilemmas in our lives is learning to listen and to understand what another person is saying. This has been a very important insight for me—to be able to listen without any type of prejudice, nor anything that I think against the other person, but to understand his or her point. I feel that it is something that many people need and it was something that I needed also.”*

#### Australasia

*“We also need spiritual qualities to learn things. If someone did not have humility, then they could think that they already know everything and that would prevent them from learning. But if someone is humble, then they always look to learn things from others.”*



India

#### Africa

*“We love as a group to learn together, to discover and develop our talents, and our spiritual and intellectual qualities. It is important to develop a rich vocabulary. We need to learn to interact and collaborate better with other members of the community in the village and worldwide. Our parents appreciate our efforts and encourage us, especially as they begin to see our altruism. Because of our desire to serve, we make efforts to be of help in the home and also to carry out projects to help our community. We ask ourselves in our group whether we did some service that week and what kind of service it was. This brings us joy.”*

#### North America

*“I think science is used to help the world be a better place, just like a character in one of our books saying, ‘I will study science, then I will work for the betterment of the world.’ For example, she is saying that she will come back and work for the progress of their village. Scientists observe before they get the answer to a question, and science should be used to help communities, people, and the world.”*

#### Asia

*“We should live together in unity. For example, if someone is of a higher caste and you are of a lower caste, the higher caste people will not let you set foot in their house. But I don’t think this way. I think they have come to my house, so they should sit with me, pray with me. As we read in the books of the junior youth program, we should live in unity so that all prejudices will come to an end.”*

*“Starting from this village we will bring peace to the village, then the state, the country, and the world, and in this way we will become united and live in harmony.”*



Canary Islands



### CONTRIBUTIONS OF JUNIOR YOUTH TO THE LIFE OF THE COMMUNITY

A group of junior youth in **Cambodia** consulted on how to support their family members who were struggling financially after losing their means of livelihood. To address the issue, they first made observations about the patterns of life in their community. One reflection that emerged as a result was that some families in their village had orange trees that only produced fruit once in a year, and, when harvesting season was over, income would be scarce until the next harvest. To respond to this challenge, the youngsters investigated various crops and decided that diverse types of produce could be cultivated together in complementarity with the orange trees.

The group of friends consulted with community members in their village, including parents and other farmers, who offered help to sow seeds and transplant saplings. The youth learned that eggplants, bananas, coconuts, and cucumbers, among others, could grow well side by side. Over time, the assortment of crops grown together with the orange trees became productive and the parents of the group joined together to share planting experience at community gatherings. These initial efforts were observed by others in the village, who also learned to apply the same techniques from the successful farming plots. As the community saw the benefits of this approach, its members considered their own contributions to their locality and also appreciated the important role that young people play, reflecting on ways to give encouragement to junior youth.



Brazil

In **Canada**, a group of young people, inspired by their study of materials of the junior youth spiritual empowerment program, which fostered an appreciation for the world's natural resources, decided to take steps to support sustainable water consumption in their neighborhood. Recognizing the need to make accurate observations, they had conversations with various community members and local businesses to understand how water was being used in their locality. Based on these discussions, they researched ways in which water could be conserved and how water leaks could be identified. They made flyers and posters with their findings and went back to members of the community to continue the conversations. Parents of the youngsters noted that this process of striving to apply scientific and spiritual principles toward a challenge facing their community helped to enhance a love for learning in their children.

In the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, a group of young people considered the importance of a natural fountain which served as a source of water to the local community for cooking, washing clothes and dishes, and bathing. They realized that, after much usage, a great deal of mud was accumulating, and wild grass and stumps created obstacles along the path leading to the fountain. During a session of their group, 35 junior youth decided to improve the conditions of the fountain as a service to the community. Arrangements were made with parents and neighborhood residents who contributed shovels, dustpans, rakes, and other supplies. The residents praised the initiative of the young people for bringing the community together toward a noble goal and recognized the enduring impact of this effort to ensure access to drinking water. A monthly system to maintain the fountain was also devised to ensure more consistent water supply amongst the residents.

### BUILDING CAPACITY FOR SERVICE IN FORMAL SETTINGS: THE JUNIOR YOUTH PROGRAM IN SCHOOLS

In a number of places worldwide, the junior youth spiritual empowerment program has been adopted by academic schools which have made the program available to their students in order to contribute to their moral empowerment and enhance their capacity to serve society.

In **Kiribati**, where the Ootan Marawa Educational Institute has been offering the program in public schools, a growing number of teachers, principals, and parents have described how the participants of the program have strengthened their ability to express themselves with clarity, improved their academic performance, and enhanced the development of their character. Older youth in the schools have been offering their service as animators for groups of their junior youth peers and

have built their own capacity for service in the process. On various occasions, the organization has been invited to speak at formal gatherings arranged by the nation's Ministry of Education on the importance of creating environments for students that foster mutual support and reinforce academic progress and moral empowerment.

In **New Zealand**, the Prosperity Foundation collaborates with public schools to form junior youth groups with students in their seventh year of schooling and accompany youth in high schools to serve those younger than themselves. The efforts are leading to further insight around the involvement of parents and teachers in supporting this unique age group. The families of young people participating in the school setting are also connected to community-building activities taking shape in surrounding neighborhoods throughout the school year and into the holiday periods.



New Zealand

In **Tajikistan**, the junior youth spiritual empowerment program has been offered in schools since 2007 with the assistance of a nongovernmental organization, Education Science Advancement Foundation. Over the years, many service projects have been carried out by junior youth groups in these settings, such as tree planting, street clean ups, and, in one village, efforts to support the community and local government to install road signs. These service projects and numerous others have had positive effects on the wider community. Particularly significant is the fact that, in some places, long-lasting prejudices between various ethnic groups in the area are gradually fading away, as the youth have been learning to build more enduring bonds of friendships based on working together for the common weal. As of 2022, there were over 600 young people participating in the program in schools across the country.

#### MORE ON JUNIOR YOUTH SERVICE PROJECTS

**Vanuatu:** Junior youth environmental awareness service projects (p. 67 in "Environment").

**Spain:** Junior youth producing songs on spiritual themes (p. 75 in "Arts and Media").

**Activities of Fixed Duration** (various examples on pp. 18-21).



### Preparation for social action

Over the years, a number of organizations have emerged in different parts of the world with the aim of releasing the potential of youth—helping them develop a strong sense of purpose to take charge of their own intellectual and spiritual growth and to contribute to the transformation of society. One of these organizations, FUNDAEC in **Colombia** (see p. 30), has been engaged for over four decades in an ongoing process of action and research to address the educational needs of young people in the country. The Preparation for Social Action (PSA) program is one of the results of this endeavor. The program strives to raise within a region individuals of progressively higher proficiency, capable of applying scientific knowledge together with spiritual principles to advance particular processes of community life. The program’s seventy-four units of instruction are divided into three levels of study. The first level, consisting of twenty-five units of study, leads to the designation “Promoter of Community Well-Being.” The next two levels seek to increase the capacity of youth to support the sound development of communities. In a number of countries where the entire program has been recognized by the government as a fully accredited option open for secondary education, it goes by the name “Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial” (see pp. 58–59).

The PSA curriculum is organized around the cultivation of a “developed capacity to think and act effectively within a particular sphere of activity and according to an explicit purpose.” The units that make up the program help participants acquire one or more capabilities in the areas of language, mathematics, science, and processes of community life, including education, agriculture, health, and environmental conservation. Each unit aims at enabling the participants to serve their region by imparting relevant concepts, presenting pertinent information, and strengthening a set of related skills and abilities, as well as attitudes and spiritual qualities. Rather than using the traditionally accepted division of knowledge into disciplines as the basis for curriculum development, FUNDAEC strives to integrate

relevant elements from the universe of knowledge in order to create educational materials that prepare students to work for the transformation of present-day society.

The program is tutorial in nature—carried out in small groups in a local setting with the assistance of a tutor. Tutors guide the students through the textbooks, raise questions and help find answers, clarify obscure matters, encourage reflection on real-life experience, and supervise experiments and social action. They do not lecture or dictate nor are they mere facilitators of group discussion. The tutorial approach allows students to be engaged in society and participate both in productive activities and in service to the community. Further, it permits a flexible management of time.

In the last decade and a half, Bahá’í-inspired organizations in several countries have been learning to draw on the first level of the PSA program to raise up promoters of community well-being. Additional details about how this program has been introduced into other countries together with the emergence of structures to facilitate the flow of learning about its implementation are outlined on page 84 in the section “Systematization of Learning.” The following paragraphs offer some insights into the capabilities being developed by promoters of community well-being in various contexts and the kinds of actions they are carrying out to support the advancement of their communities.

#### **Contributions of promoters of community well-being**

In certain villages in eastern **Cameroon**, the Emergence Foundation for Education and Development has been learning to assist a sizeable number of individuals to benefit from the study of the PSA program. Various communities and institutions in the region have also begun to draw on the experiences of graduates of the program, who have gone on to start their own development initiatives addressing a range of concerns related to health, the environment, conflict resolution, and economic prosperity.

Several of these graduates have since formed a cooperative called Association des promoteurs de bien-être communautaire (APROBEC) to structure and systematize their initiatives. The cooperative supports a number of projects throughout four localities, known as units, in the eastern region of the country and has been involved in organizing seminars for continued study of the PSA materials as well as gatherings for graduates of the program within each unit. The gatherings have proven to be useful spaces to exchange insights, connect the graduates with others engaging in similar work, and document the various projects emerging within each unit. One of the groups operating within the town of Kette has been carrying out its activities from a community youth center and has been involved in organizing youth activities in the locality. Through involvement with a rural radio station, the group has also been participating in broader dialogues on subjects related to education and protection of the environment.

The strengthening of various capabilities such as creating environments of unity based on diversity and promoting collective action assist those going through the PSA program to contribute to social change in their localities. For instance, in Lubumbashi, **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, the promoters of community well-being have been holding periodic gatherings where families, local authorities, and Bahá’í institutions and agencies are brought together to address particular issues of concern to their communities. In one such meeting, the question of safety in the neighborhood was raised, and it was decided that steps be taken to provide electricity for streetlights on five roads. Trusting the participants’ commitment to the betterment of their communities, many families have shown their support by providing funds for the realization of the project. As a result of continuous collaboration with local authorities, the promoters of community well-being have begun to act as consultative bodies in some neighborhoods, their perspectives being sought when consideration is given to projects aimed at contributing to the progress of the community.



Costa Rica



Vanuatu

Other capabilities in areas related to food, health, and education have also assisted promoters of community well-being to be of service according to the conditions of the community in which they reside. Over the years, participants in the program in Talamanca, **Costa Rica**—a part of the country where agriculture is central to the life of the population—began to learn about food production on small farms. In particular, participants sought to gain insight into obtaining higher yields, protecting indigenous crops, and increasing nutritional diversity. These efforts inspired many families to establish their own plots of land, enabling them to become producers of crops, earn additional income, and participate in the generation of knowledge in this area. As the diversity of crops in the region increased, gatherings were held where families shared their produce, seeds, and insights, thus contributing to a burgeoning sense of common purpose.

Similarly, the participants of the program in **Uganda** have engaged in a series of conversations with the local population regarding common health concerns and identified water-borne illnesses as a prevalent ailment afflicting their village. Consultative spaces were created to bring together members of the community and local leaders in order to assess the knowledge, technical skills, and material resources available to build a clean water supply. In these meetings, the possible social and environmental impact of the project was

*“All blessings are divine in origin, but none can be compared with this power of intellectual investigation and research, which is an eternal gift producing fruits of unending delight.... Therefore, you should put forward your most earnest efforts toward the acquisition of science and arts.”*

—‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ





Honduras

[continued from previous page](#)

discussed, and many members sacrificially contributed their technical and financial resources to the project. After two months of work, the construction of a spring well was completed and many could feel that the capacity of the community to chart its own path of development had greatly increased.

Promoters of community well-being also strive to enhance access to education in their own communities. An example of how participants became active agents of their own education through participation in the program can be seen in the transformation of a group of young mothers in **Ecuador**. Although many had not yet completed their formal education, their growing understanding of various fields of knowledge became a source of encouragement that enabled them to advance in their studies. While continuing to move through the program, they began to motivate each other to further their education. By the time the group had completed the study of the available materials of the program, many had also obtained formal educational degrees. The activities of the young mothers also lent impetus to ensuring the spiritual education of children in the community, and inspired groups of other women to strengthen their capacities.

### SAT PROGRAM, HONDURAS

In several countries, the texts that have been developed by FUNDAEC can be offered as a fully accredited option for secondary education. In these contexts, the program goes by the name “Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial” (SAT). One example of this experience is in **Honduras** where Asociación Bayan has been implementing this program for over three decades. While in the initial years of its establishment the organization was involved in rural health in the Department of Gracias a Dios, in the mid-1990s, it turned its attention to the field of education. Seeing that only primary level schooling was offered in the area—a factor that limited the development of human resources in the region—the organization began to collaborate with FUNDAEC, having learned about the efficacy of its programs in **Colombia**.

In the initial stage, the program was offered in 12 villages in the departments of Gracias a Dios and Colón. The results of this first phase were not only positive for the local communities but were also noticed by educational authorities as an effective alternative for secondary education in rural areas of the country. Gradually, in collaboration with the government and various actors, the program was introduced into an increasing

number of municipal areas. Over time, the system of education provided through the efforts of Asociación Bayan gained national recognition both for the quality of instruction and for its contributions to community life. Currently, the organization offers the SAT program in 12 of the 18 departments of Honduras, with legal recognition from the Ministry of Education, and is implemented under a multi-sectoral model in which the community, social organizations, and the state are all involved. The government funds 90 percent of the program, including tutors’ salaries.

The experience with the SAT program in Honduras has been highlighted by various entities such as the Brookings Institution, a nonprofit policy organization based in the United States, as an illustration of how new approaches to education can be conceptualized, designed, and delivered. According to the Institution, the SAT program is “catalyzing an education revolution.” One account by an author working at the Institution observed: “It focuses on skills that are beyond the traditional academic skills, such as moral and character development, and it conceives of learning as something much broader,” incorporating community service as a part of its core curriculum. Commenting on the nature of instruction, the institute has

highlighted that the lack of a rigid hierarchy in offering the program is an important distinction, as it creates a culture of mutual respect and trust between tutors and students. In 2018, Generation Unlimited—a global public-private partnership convened by UNICEF—recognized the SAT program in Honduras as an innovative solution for extending high quality secondary education to rural areas and contributing to rural development. Among the findings highlighted were that youth who had participated in SAT in a number of villages in Honduras had test scores 45 percent higher than those in neighboring conventional schools.

Beyond the delivery of secondary education, Asociación Bayan is also giving attention to learning how the SAT program is interacting with various processes of community life, such as the education of younger generations, food production, or community health in localities where large numbers of graduates of the program reside. The program is offered annually to over 8,000 people, having reached over 100,000 students in total. In other countries in Latin America, the program has also been offered in the formal education system by organizations in Brazil, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, having reached more than 300,000 participants in total.

#### MORE INITIATIVES ARISING FROM PSA PARTICIPANTS

**Uganda:** Kimanya-Ngeyo Foundation (p. 62 in “Agriculture”).

**Zambia:** Inshindo Foundation (p. 62 in “Agriculture”).

**Vanuatu:** Groups creating protected areas (p. 67 in “Environment”).

**Papua New Guinea:** Group establishing informal rural bank (p. 69 in “Economic Life”).

**Systematization of Learning:** Preparation for social action (p. 84).



## Agriculture

The Bahá'í teachings place agriculture at the heart of community life and urge that special regard be paid to the advancement of this field. “The fundamental basis of the community,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states, “is agriculture, tillage of the soil. All must be producers.”

*“Strive as much as possible to become proficient in the science of agriculture, for in accordance with the divine teachings the acquisition of sciences and the perfection of arts are considered acts of worship.”*

—‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ

A range of initiatives and projects inspired by these teachings have emerged over the decades to contribute to agricultural development. In both rural and urban settings, groups of individuals have collectively undertaken crop production or animal husbandry activities to improve food security and nutrition within their communities, as well as to generate income for families. Some have established schools offering technical training in agriculture or organizations with the aim of building capacity in farmers, while others have formed village farmers’ groups.

In **Venezuela**, as a response to challenging economic conditions and food shortages, groups of families and their friends initiated pilot farming projects in a number of localities. The approach initially involved consultation with members of various communities. Steps were taken to establish family vegetable gardens at homes in addition to communal lands, gradually extending the initiative to some 10 locations. As these efforts progressed, opportunities emerged for neighbors to learn alongside one another by sharing experience related to good agricultural practices. Such interactions also helped foster a spirit of love and unity between families and friends. Over time, these initial projects extended beyond rural areas to include around 100 backyard gardens in urban areas. The ensuing conversations and interactions, together with the support of local institutions, also led to the emergence of complementary lines of collective action, such as families sourcing potable water for their community, finding alternative means for the education of children during the pandemic, and initiating other small projects for economic development.

In **Mauritius**, a non-profit agricultural learning center was founded by a couple who identified a need to make nutritious organic vegetables accessible to everyone in the community. The farm center was established with the aim of removing barriers to the equitable supply of food by strengthening local food systems. A notable initiative of the organization has been the involvement of 150 young people in a training related to organic farming and the development of entrepreneurial capabilities for agricultural social enterprises oriented toward community development. Among the activities of these youth have been efforts to establish community gardens and to grow their own supply of vegetables at home, thereby reducing their living costs. The organization strives to involve local communities in its work and has received support for its programs through public grants.

In urban settings, local initiatives have also given rise to learning about agriculture as a means of community development and as a response to pressing concerns in society. In the **United Kingdom**, a community garden was initially set up by a group of young people to create a shared vegetable plot as well as more green space in their neighborhood. Over several years, this initiative led to regular gatherings of neighbors who would naturally come together to socialize in the garden. During the period of restrictions created by the coronavirus pandemic, the garden became an important community space to support families in need of food supplies. A wooden hut was set up in the garden, serving as a community hub where non-perishable food supplies and books could be made easily accessible to neighbors.



In **Canada**, an urban farming initiative was established to rehabilitate backyards in Toronto and convert them into spaces to grow nutrient-rich and organic seasonal vegetables. The endeavor serves a part of the city that is considered a “food desert,” where residents do not have easy access to grocery stores. Youth living in the neighborhood have also taken part in work on a nearby farm, and junior youth have been included in the study of materials related to nutrition and farming. In addition to backyards, crops are also grown in greenhouses that are open for youth to further cultivate their interest in agricultural science.

In **Singapore**, a group of individuals who were exploring how to serve their community reached out to the National Parks Board in order to use part of a park to foster ties between neighbors through gardening. They were connected by the Board to a preschool that needed volunteers to manage a garden that had fallen into disrepair. After the group devised a proposal, the school

contributed some funds for the garden and access to water, while the Board provided seeds and soil. What was important from the outset was a unity of vision between the group and the school, which involved connecting the younger generation to principles related to sustainability, building an appreciation around food production, and bringing together members of the neighborhood to work collectively around this endeavor. Throughout the process, the group employed principles of sustainable planting, using recycled car tires and bottles as planter bed borders, fallen tree stumps as garden stools, paper waste and old cardboard boxes for mulch, and domestic kitchen waste for composting. Many have shared that the garden has cultivated a greater sense of trust within the community and has also become a place of friendship and diversity, where the younger and older generations from many backgrounds come together to exchange stories and insights. Within the space of nine months, the initiative expanded from engaging 15 individuals to approximately 60.

Participants of a Bahá'í-inspired agricultural initiative in India develop skills for local agriculture



## LEARNING ABOUT AGRICULTURE IN AFRICA: SOME GLIMPSES

In Sub-Saharan Africa, where approximately two-thirds of the population is engaged in farming on either a full- or part-time basis, the past decades have provided an especially rich opportunity for learning about the application of spiritual teachings and scientific knowledge to the area of agriculture. Page 85 describes the systematization of a learning process among a growing number of Bahá'í development organizations on the continent engaged in agricultural research together with farmers. Below are a few glimpses of the actions under way.

In **Uganda**, the Kimanya-Ngeyo Foundation for Science and Education has established an agricultural research farm for participants in the Preparation for Social Action program (see pp. 56–58) to apply the knowledge and capacities they gain from their study. A group of youth studying a text that assists them to make well-informed technological choices carefully

considered an offer they had received from a larger organization promoting maize monoculture with high usage of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Recognizing the long-term economic and environmental implications of the proposed system, they politely declined and continued to focus on exploring more sustainable agricultural approaches that could serve the community's needs more effectively.

In **Zambia**, the Inshindo Foundation has been engaging more than 500 farmers in the study of materials on sustainable food production on small farms. The Foundation has also supported a campaign promoting backyard gardens and has launched a Center for Community Agriculture. The Center, which was created in collaboration with the local government, includes a seed bank and a simple laboratory open to the community. The Center also provides a space for study, exchange of insights, and experimentation with farming techniques.

In scores of villages in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, community agriculture groups

have been formed that collectively work to apply certain principles—such as mutual support, consultation, and service—to their food production efforts. In many community schools, teachers have been able to strengthen agriculture education and have established or improved simple food production plots for the school. In some cases, conversations have extended further into the community and led to refinements in agricultural practices of families. Educational programs for youth that build capacity for social action have also led to an increased interest in this area and to the emergence of small agricultural initiatives.

Building on these processes, Fondation Erfan-Connaissance, which has promoted the establishment of community schools in the Kivu region of the country since 2007, began to incorporate materials on agriculture in its teacher-training seminars in 2016. Through this, the organization has aimed to develop the scientific capabilities of teachers and parents around food production and nutrition. Such training, combined with ongoing visits, has also assisted teachers who typically work as farmers to increase their household income. In some of the community schools where there are sufficient resources, plots have been established to grow food for students and to provide a space for them to learn about food production with their families. From these initial efforts to broaden the scope of the training of teachers, a large number of backyard gardens have emerged, and a seed bank has been established in one of the villages in the region, serving some 1,500 farmers.

In the more urban context of Goma, teachers have supported the establishment of backyard gardens with the support of the families of their students. Many of these teachers have noted how the process of learning to manage and

nurture a garden has enhanced the patience, determination, and generosity of their students. Others involved have also observed a shift in the nature of interactions between families in neighborhoods with backyard gardens, in some instances showing glimpses of greater collaboration and collective endeavor. In one neighborhood, for instance, six families collaborated closely to grow medicinal plants and food crops. Some were able to sell their produce in the local market.

In the Nshimbi village of South Kivu, a local teacher together with an agronomist from Fondation Erfan-Connaissance began a conversation with the village chief about the need to diversify food production systems and establish a seed bank. As a result of these initial conversations, the chief convened a meeting with over 500 individuals, which led to the allocation of two large plots of land to produce seeds and cuttings of a variety of species. The community took ownership of the project by contributing materials for the seed bank and engaged a local development organization to help with its construction. Soon, various committees were formed to systematize the work of the seed bank—a management committee to organize meetings and handle the bank's records, a monitoring committee to distribute seeds, and an advisory committee including the village chief to safeguard the integrity of the initiative and ensure that it reflects the values of the community. A number of other groups have since emerged around the seed bank related to the sale of produce, animal husbandry, and adult literacy. Over the course of a year, membership increased from 25 to 200 individuals. Community members have noted that the initiative has helped the village respond to the challenge of malnutrition and has encouraged women to engage in more community consultations.





## Health

The principle of the harmony between science and religion, enshrined in the Bahá'í teachings, has also informed the development of numerous endeavors in the field of health. The Bahá'í writings refer to “the bounty of good health” as “the greatest of gifts” and as a means to pursuing a long, dignified, and fulfilling life of service to humanity.

Bahá'í endeavors in this area strive to expand access to competent medical care, with a focus on assisting local populations to develop the capacity to promote the physical, spiritual, and mental health of their communities. Initiatives take diverse forms, including hospitals, clinics, and medical associations. Other efforts have involved the organization of medical camps and campaigns to raise awareness about habits and practices that promote health, the implementation of health-education programs in schools, and the development of programs to train community health workers who can help bridge the gap between health needs at the grassroots and medical services of government agencies. All such initiatives envision the development of a culture in which individuals, communities, and institutions work together to apply scientific knowledge and spiritual principles to a growing range of local health concerns. A few examples of initiatives that have contributed to enhancing the health of communities are provided below. A number of efforts that emerged as a result of the spread of the coronavirus pandemic are described on pages 78 to 79.

In various settings, conversations around health concerns faced within the community at large, whether related to nutrition, the uncertainties associated with a global pandemic, or the impact of alcoholism in a society, for instance, have created pathways to local action. Groups of young people in thousands of localities have created spaces to disseminate health information, such as awareness campaigns around nutrition or mental health in **Canada** and **France** or community gatherings in the **Philippines** to discuss the harmful effects of alcohol. Teachers working in community schools across Africa have incorporated health education in their

classes and in conversations with families. Groups of parents have established community farms to grow vegetables and other crops that could help meet the nutritional needs of students or entire neighborhoods. In **Jordan** and other parts of the Arab region, health professionals have arranged workshops and seminars in their own communities to increase consciousness of pertinent health issues and consult with individuals who are suffering from one or another malady.

Some initiatives have become more formalized and sustained. In **Romania**, for example, Fundația Inovații Sociale Regina Maria has established two clinics in the city of Bucharest to offer high quality health services at low or no cost to people without access to health insurance. In addition to providing services within the clinic itself, a medical team carries out home visits to patients when they are alone or too sick to come to the clinic. The team has also offered extensive services to refugees from Ukraine. In the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, the organization Graine d'Espoir emerged as a response to the health needs of the population and has devised three lines of action to promote health within communities. The first involves training teachers to hold conversations with families about health and to learn how to provide a sanitary environment and access to basic medical supplies in their schools. Additionally, the organization works with clinics to bring into their work the harmony between science and spiritual principles—for instance, by strengthening health workers' understanding of the nobility of the human being as a means to enhance the quality of their care and interaction with the patients they serve. Finally, the organization gives attention to raising community

health educators who can complement and enhance the work of clinics within the community by providing outpatient support, following up with individuals who are sick, and visiting them in their homes.

Efforts have also been under way through the work of the Foundation for the Advancement of Science in Uttar Pradesh, **India**, to train community health educators. The organization has mainly been focusing on two areas of action. First, it has been learning about increasing knowledge around primary healthcare and strengthening conversations about health in the community. In this regard, materials have been developed addressing themes such as nutrition, cleanliness, and the avoidance of unnecessary medicines, and are being studied in various community spaces, including prayer gatherings among groups of families. Secondly, the organization has been taking steps to strengthen the community's capacity to provide healthcare. This has involved the development of a training program to build capacity among community members to identify basic health-related

concerns in their neighborhoods and to find ways to support existing health services in their localities. Initial research from these efforts to better understand the needs of the community, along with an analysis of health statistics in the region, has been shedding light on the need for more human resources to promote healthcare for children below the age of five. In this connection, efforts are under way to assist interested youth in the communities to identify and participate in formal training programs that respond to this need.

Inshindo Foundation, Mwinilunga Health Awareness Campaign, Zambia

*“Let them also study whatever will nurture the health of the body and its physical soundness, and how to guard their children from disease.”*

—'ABDU'L-BAHÁ



The Gambia



Romania



United States





Above: Vanuatu  
Right corner: Iceland

## Environment

In various localities where Bahá'ís reside, individuals and communities are learning how to give practical expression to the conviction that humanity is organic with the natural world. “Nature is God’s Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world,” Bahá’u’lláh writes. Cast in this light, the natural world is a trust for which all members of the human family are responsible.

Efforts to contribute to environmental sustainability are taking a range of forms as diverse groups are learning how to redefine progress in ways that are more harmonious with the environment, whether through building capacity in communities to create sustainable patterns of life or exploring and cultivating attitudes and habits that could contribute toward stewardship of the planet for present and future generations.

Young people are at the forefront of many community-based environmental initiatives. Every year, youth in diverse communities across the globe (see pp. 19 and 54) are devising and carrying out thousands of simple projects that respond to some aspect of the natural environment. Whether in the form of ecological awareness campaigns in **Ecuador** and **Kenya**, tree-planting initiatives in **Bahrain** and **Nepal**, river clean-up projects in **Costa Rica** and **Brazil**, or collaborative efforts with local communities

and agencies to enhance systems for recycling in the **United States** and **India**, such simple initiatives indicate a growing consciousness of the younger generation around the imperative of safeguarding the planet’s resources.

In a number of places, sustained projects in the area of environment have also been established. A group of individuals in **Iceland** has been learning to have conversations about the moral dimensions of tree planting through the Skógar reforestation project, which was first initiated in the 1990s in response to the significant challenge that deforestation and soil erosion pose in the country. The project has brought the Bahá’í community into contact with various entities in the wider society including the Icelandic Forest Service under the government’s Ministry of Environment, which provides plants, technical advice, and financial contributions toward the initiative; the Soil Conservation Service, which contributes fertilizers; and members of the

neighboring farming community. Initial conversations with universities are also exploring the possibility of using the land as a study site for multiple-use forestry. Most recently, a dialogue with other religious organizations has unfolded around the spiritual objectives of tree planting as part of the United Nations Environment Programme’s Faith for Earth initiative, which aims to “lay the foundation for inter-faith collaboration for sustainable and regenerative development to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.”

### A whole-society approach to restoring the local ecosystem

Though still nascent, there are also accounts emerging of entire communities learning to collaborate together in support of the environment, with their efforts gaining in complexity over time. An example from the island of Tanna in **Vanuatu** provides a glimpse into the possibilities that are created through such collective action. As with many efforts in the area of social action, the initial impulse came through groups of young people who were consulting about the local environment with the support of a local Bahá’í-inspired organization. In light of the knowledge they were gaining through collective study, some of the youth arranged workshops on environmental awareness within their communities. As a result of these workshops and other informal projects carried out by junior youth, six communities, with the active support of their village leaders, decided to designate an area surrounding a source of water as protected, where no human activity could take place other than for conservation purposes. Two of the communities decided to replant species that are in danger of becoming extinct. The other four communities, catalyzed by the service projects of junior youth to raise awareness about the importance of protecting marine life and the dangers of overfishing, decided to take steps to protect the lagoon. Through the modest efforts of the junior youth to raise consciousness, village chiefs were inspired to hold community gatherings to consult on the issues at hand. Steps were taken to protect the area, including placing a ban on fishing and putting up signs to demarcate it. Ecological camps supported by the Department

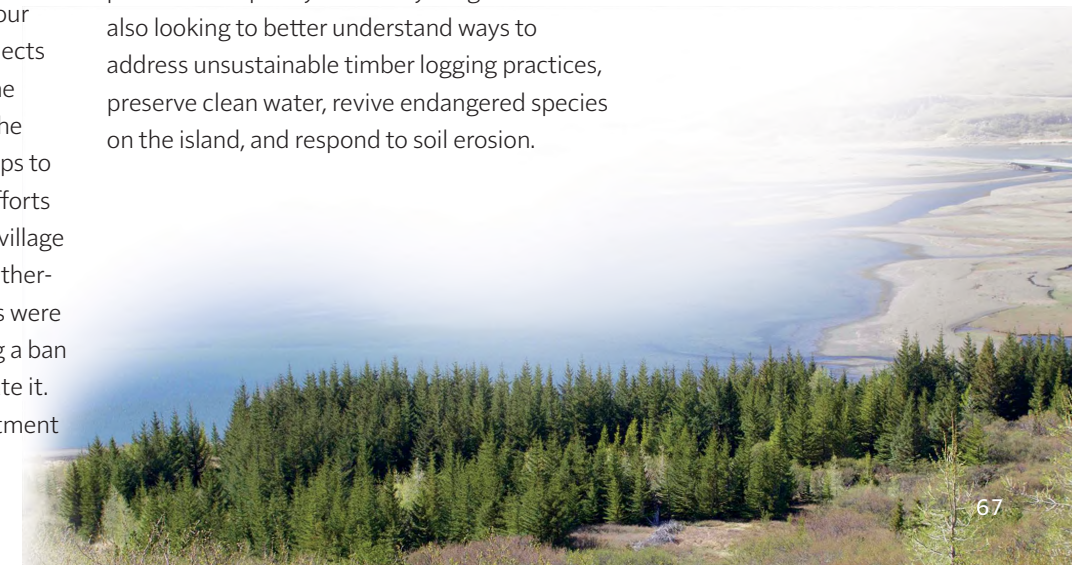
of Forestry were arranged for young people to gain a deeper appreciation for the environment. After sufficient time, marine life that had been presumed extinct began to restore itself.

Efforts to regenerate the area had been attempted in the past, yet what seemed to be distinct about these initiatives was the collective vision that had been fostered and the role of the community in designing and taking ownership of the endeavors. Many members observed that as they considered a spiritual dimension to the progress of their community—which involved reflecting on the importance of caring for the environment and gaining an understanding of the consequences of excessive materialism and competition that are driving unsustainable practices—they felt it was their moral responsibility to protect the lagoon and the area around it. Generations became connected to each other as young adolescents and youth drew on the insights and support of those older than themselves, and species that were once only known to some could now be experienced and appreciated by rising generations. Central to these efforts was the dynamic and harmonious interplay between individuals, the local institutions and village chiefs, and the communities themselves.

Other conservation initiatives on the island include the formation of committees to establish additional protected areas throughout the island, both land and marine; the restoration of coral reefs; the setting up of nurseries for tree planting around gardens, some of which have been a source of protection from cyclones; and the designation of areas to dispose of single use plastics. Groups of youth and young adults are also looking to better understand ways to address unsustainable timber logging practices, preserve clean water, revive endangered species on the island, and respond to soil erosion.

*“This span of earth is but one homeland and one habitation. It behooveth you to abandon vainglory which causeth alienation and to set your hearts on whatever will ensure harmony.”*

—‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ





## Economic Life

**Among the basic tenets of the Bahá'í Faith is the elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty through the promotion of just economic systems and the voluntary striving of everyone, irrespective of means.**

Bahá'ís everywhere are called to learn about how to advance collective prosperity through the implementation of methods and approaches that promote unity and justice, as well as the application of spiritual principles and concepts such as generosity, trustworthiness, and integrity to economic affairs. A handful of examples of activities that have contributed in one way or another to learning about the higher purpose of economic activity and enhancing the economic life of families and communities, albeit modestly, is provided below.

At the level of the individual, Bahá'ís are striving to learn about the implications of the teachings on various economic choices, such as those related to their business ventures. Many have also taken steps to foster a culture of mutual support and assistance among their colleagues and to ensure that profits from their businesses are distributed fairly among all of the employees. In **Costa Rica**, through the application of these principles and values, a private company in the area of technology reimagined itself as a social enterprise. Such a vision enabled it to use its income to venture into new areas, such as collaborating with various government agencies on technology for science education, apiculture, energy efficiency, and urban agriculture. In Europe, the Bahá'í-inspired agency Ethical Business Building the Future (EBBF) has created spaces for individuals and groups involved in various business enterprises to discuss insights they are gaining around the application of relevant principles, including justice and sustainability, in their workspaces.

### Initiatives of mutual support

In the context of community building, groups of individuals in many places have been coming together to learn to address specific needs. Having cultivated the habit of studying relevant materials together, including pertinent selec-

tions from the Bahá'í writings, they have started simple social or economic initiatives aimed at improving an aspect of their collective life. Following a pattern of study, consultation, action, and reflection, some of these initiatives have, over time, grown in scope and had significant impact on the wider community. Particularly in localities where qualities and attitudes such as mutual support, trustworthiness, and a mode of learning form a part of the culture of a community, diverse initiatives, including cooperatives of various kinds, from savings groups and community banks to women's or farmers' associations, have naturally emerged.

In many communities in Africa, agricultural cooperatives that emphasize the sharing of knowledge and resources have helped bring about a significant improvement in both primary and secondary production. Better yields, combined with a growing capacity to engage in collective action, have prompted the emergence of several income-generating projects that have contributed to the material well-being of families. A group of farmers in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, for example, began to cultivate beetroots as a cash crop in order to produce and sell juice, in addition to farming other food crops to address dietary needs in the community. They also pooled their resources to purchase a basic milling machine to grind their own flour, producing donuts that have since become popular in neighboring towns and villages. Ever conscious of the needs of the community, the group has been able to use funds generated from the sale of these products to purchase school supplies and address other community needs.

In a village in **Myanmar**, a microfinance project was started under the auspices of a local Bahá'í institution in order to provide material support

to local farmers and vendors in the aftermath of a cyclone. A three-member task force was formed to oversee the project and to seek the assistance of local institutions with the matters they were unable to resolve, such as instances when individuals took too long to repay their loans. The microfinance project was later extended to individuals in surrounding villages.

In a neighborhood in the **United States**, a space for financial literacy has emerged through the efforts of a number of young people. The space, which is also supported by a few individuals in the community with the relevant expertise, has helped provide practical assistance to youth in navigating financial questions. Parents of the youth, coming from a diversity of backgrounds, also attend with their children, contributing to stronger relationships in the neighborhood and leading to meaningful conversations across generations on a variety of themes.

### Bahá'í-inspired programs

Many Bahá'í educational programs, while not directly focused on strengthening local economies, have also helped build the capacity of individuals to earn a livelihood as they strive to contribute to the advancement of their communities. In **Colombia**, the Supporting Community Leaders program of FUNDAEC has assisted young people living in rural regions of the country to select and pursue a path related to one or another trade or profession with the aim of contributing to society. The youth take part in apprenticeships and technical or undergraduate degree programs, and some are assisted to pursue a path of entrepreneurship by starting a production project or a small business. In **Papua New Guinea**, groups of individuals engaged in educational activities that build their capacity for social action have undertaken a number of initiatives to better economic conditions in their communities. One such group carried out a survey among community members regarding their saving and spending habits, which ultimately led to the creation of an informal rural bank. The bank began by facilitating savings, and after 50 people had deposited their funds, it proceeded to consider ways to lend and translate such loans into fruitful action. Stimulated by the conversations carried out by this

group, families in a number of communities began augmenting the amount they could contribute to the bank by increasing production of local varieties of vanilla and coffee, which are packaged and sold around the country with the assistance of a local business. These additional crops are being grown alongside subsistence crops that can contribute to better nutrition within the community.

Specific programs that have become more systematized over time have also contributed to one or another aspect of economic activity in a number of localities. For example, the Bahá'í-inspired organization Education, Curriculum, and Training Associates (ECTA) in **Nepal** developed a community banking program over two decades ago. The program offers training to groups of 10 to 30 individuals, who can then form their own community bank by learning to save small sums and make modest loans available to bank members at a reasonable rate of interest. The banks are managed entirely by the members themselves, and interest earned is divided proportionally according to the amount each holds in savings. Further, a portion of the profits is put into a social and economic development fund for the benefit of the community at large. The banks provide their members with the opportunity to learn skills around sound financial management and support them to establish or expand their own businesses.

A number of organizations in other parts of the world, primarily in Africa and Latin America, have implemented this program in different settings. Among these is Asociación Bayan in **Honduras** which supports over 70 banks. By saving consistently over a period of time, young people have been able to continue their education or pursue a means of livelihood within their own communities, alleviating, to a certain degree, pressures that lead youth in the rural regions of Honduras to move away. Some of these banking groups have also been able to carry out a variety of community development initiatives of fixed duration through the support of their development funds. Examples include digging a well, constructing a bridge, building and painting classrooms, installing a culvert beneath a road, and engaging in agricultural experiments.



Honduras

*“Wealth must serve humanity. Its use must accord with spiritual principles; systems must be created in their light.”*

—THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE



## Advancement of Women

The equality of women and men is another cardinal principle of the Bahá'í Faith. "The world of humanity has two wings—one is women and the other men," 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote. "Not until both wings are equally developed can the bird fly."

Intrinsic to every instance of social action undertaken by Bahá'ís, regardless of the area of action, is a commitment to the goal of ensuring that women and men are allowed to advance shoulder to shoulder in all fields of human endeavor—scientific, political, economic, social, and cultural. In addition, certain programs have focused specifically on the advancement of women by, for instance, providing education to women and girls to assist them to take their rightful place in society, striving to eliminate prejudices against women, and establishing mechanisms to protect their well-being.

At the grassroots, Bahá'ís strive to increase the participation of women and girls in educational programs as students and participants, teachers and tutors, and coordinators and directors. These efforts have contributed to enhancing the role of women and changing attitudes in villages and neighborhoods. In a locality in **Cambodia**,

for instance, it used to be that preference was given for boys to attend school, and they would consequently receive higher levels of education than girls. Some years ago, in one of the communities in this area, the first girl to attend secondary school was assisted to do so by an older youth facilitating a junior youth group in which she was a participant (pp. 52–55). As the community's awareness of the inherent equality of women and men grew through the activities of the Bahá'í community and a rising consciousness in society at large, it gradually became common practice for all girls in the village to receive formal education, with several now having received tertiary education and adopted prominent roles in the community.

There are also sustained projects that aim to provide high quality academic education to girls and women. Banani International School in **Zambia** offers secondary education to young women of diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds to assist them to acquire a global vision as well as the capacity to act locally to address the needs of the community in which they live. Starfish International in **The Gambia** provides scholarships and supplemental education to girls in high school, with the aim of empowering Gambian girls by providing them with an advanced education that is focused on service to humanity. The young women who are part of its program are assisted to pursue a trade or craft and to offer tutoring to younger students. A portion of the funds they receive through their efforts is used to support individuals in the community to carry out an initiative for the common good.



The Gambia



United Arab Emirates

The Barli Development Institute for Rural Women in **India** was established in 1985 with the aim of empowering rural and tribal women to become agents of social change in their communities. The Institute offers a free six-month residential training program each year to 260 women with limited ability to read and write in areas including literacy moral leadership, nutrition and health, environmental conservation, and income generation. It also builds the capacity of a smaller group of women who have received secondary education to facilitate similar training in extension centers. Recognizing that attitudinal change on the part of husbands, parents, children, grassroots leaders, local institutions, and other members of the community is equally essential to the process of empowering women, the Institute continues

to visit the villages of former participants and conducts conferences and meetings as well as short-term courses. Close to 10,000 women from approximately 800 villages of Madhya Pradesh and other parts of the country have thus far taken part in the Institute's program.

Dialogues with various civil society actors have also served as opportunities to raise awareness and contribute to change in culture. The Bahá'í community in **Tunisia**, for instance, arranged a gathering with various religious and civil society leaders to discuss the advancement of women and to explore how to foster a culture of cooperation within family structures as well as in all spheres of society.



**A GATHERING OF WOMEN IN ZAMBIA**

In the Katuyola village in **Zambia**, a local Bahá'í institution organized a two-day gathering to explore questions related to the role of women, engaging some 120 women of various faith backgrounds. Participants expressed how moved they were by the support of the male members of the institution organizing the gathering, who tended to logistical arrangements such as cooking and serving food so that the female members of the institution could fully participate in the gathering. This level of support was described by many participants as unique within the historical context of their society.

As they came together to reflect on passages from the Bahá'í teachings on the station of women as well as women's critical role in the education of children in the village and more broadly in fostering a peaceful society, participants discussed how such dialogue is critical in providing women with an opportunity to reflect on some of the barriers to their full engagement in society. One such barrier that was discussed was a lack of educational opportunities for women caused by financial constraints and outworn beliefs that prioritize the education of boys over girls. Such a cycle has also prevented many women from being able to support their children in their learning. Limited secondary school access in the village has also hindered large numbers of children from focusing on their education. Many, for instance, have to leave their homes to attend school elsewhere, and end up working to earn money for food instead of attending classes, or drop out of school because of early marriages or pregnancies. In the latter instances, girls are often ashamed to return to school or become preoccupied with household responsibilities. Many parents feel unable to support their children in navigating these challenges because they are far away.

A central question emerged amidst the deliberations: how can women fully support the spiritual and intellectual education of their children when they do not receive adequate opportunities of their own? Furthermore, how can they be empowered to respond to these aspirations, and what adjustments in the structure and functioning of the village are required?

The space allowed the women to reflect on these questions and to explore possible responses. A number of community members in the gathering volunteered to offer support. Professional teachers, for instance, decided to initiate literacy classes for women. Some offered to assist women to start their own backyard gardens as well as a savings bank so that they can generate their own income. Other opportunities to support families in the education of their children were found in some of the programs carried out by the Bahá'í community, such as the community schools, moral education classes for children, and junior youth groups for young adolescents.

This gathering, far from being an isolated event, was connected to an ongoing process of consultation and collaboration within the village—engaging traditional leaders, Bahá'í agencies involved in promoting spiritual and material education in the village, parents, youth, and children—to explore broader questions related to the needs of the community. These conversations have resulted in the decision to establish a center of learning in the village where many classes and activities for all ages can take place, including academic tutoring for those in secondary school. This would alleviate the need for many youth to leave their village for secondary schooling and assist them in channeling their energies toward addressing the needs of their own community.

*“...the greatness of this wondrous Age will be manifested as a result of progress in the world of women.”*

—'ABDU'L-BAHÁ

**A few reflections from the women in the community are included below:**

*“My hope is that both women and men advance in their knowledge about the role of women in society. With a better understanding about the importance of education, the community will make sure that their children attain both spiritual and material education in order for us to witness social transformation.”*



*“The best way to educate our children is by being an example to them.... Women need to uplift themselves in order to be equal to men. We have learned that women and men are like the wings of a bird; for the bird to fly, both wings need to be strong.”*

*“This gathering has helped me to see the power of a united people even if they come from various religious backgrounds.”*



*“We all need to work together to follow up on the development of each child in the village.... Teachers and parents will need to collaborate to ensure their children receive both spiritual and material education. This will assist in laying a strong foundation for the future growth of their children who will in turn contribute to the progress of their community.”*



## Arts and Media

The Bahá'í teachings give particular significance to the arts, asserting their capacity to “uplift the world of being” and to “awaken noble sentiments” among the masses of people. Inspired by these and other writings of the Faith, individuals and communities have been learning to use various means of communication to help inspire high aims and raise consciousness about principles pertinent to the material and spiritual progress of a population.

They have been creatively endeavoring to express concepts and themes drawn from the principles of the Faith in order to move hearts to contribute toward constructive social change.

Some early efforts in the field of the arts and communications media have involved the formation of Bahá'í radio stations in Latin America and Asia, such as Radio Bahá'í Soloy in **Panama**, which was established in the 1980s to give voice to and serve as an educational and cultural channel for indigenous peoples. Some of these radio stations have been creating content in the form of original songs, stories, and interviews inspired by concepts such as service to society, cohesiveness, love, and generosity.

A number of dance workshops and theater companies were also created over the years in an effort to raise awareness about certain social issues through the arts. One such example is the Children's Theater Company in the **United States**, which works with children and youth between the ages of five and nineteen to produce musicals and perform them for the general public in communities within New York City. Cast members meet regularly to reflect on the social and moral implications of the musicals, which address such themes as racial unity, the advancement of women, the elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty, and preservation of the environment. In **Russia**, the Association for Creative Moral Education (ACME) uses arts and media to introduce moral education lessons into schools in the Republic of Tatarstan. Through its Golden Way (Altyn Iul) program for social competence and ethical decision making, the program utilizes video skits presenting conflict situations of varying natures, which form

a basis for discussion. More than 8,000 students in over 40 schools and other educational organizations have participated in this program. The organization also assists youth to make short films conveying ethical and moral concepts to their peers and offers training to educators and social workers. Drawing on a similar methodology, the People's Theatre in Frankfurt, **Germany** annually trains 10 to 15 young people to implement interactive theater projects in schools as well as other settings such as juvenile detention centers and senior citizen homes. Reaching over 10,000 people every year through some 900 shows, the participatory skits promote qualities such as compassion and friendship and encourage participants to develop the ability to consult and transcend conflicts through identifying points of unity.

In recent years, groups of Bahá'ís in a number of villages and neighborhoods have engaged in a process of learning aimed at creating and sharing meaningful content within their communities through means of communication most suited to their settings. They have utilized such means as film, music, and theater in a way that raises collective understanding and contributes to the transformation of their social environment, leading at times to the creation of community-based media projects. The following are examples of such efforts in the area of music.



Pakistan



Canada



Australia

### COMMUNITY-BASED MUSIC INITIATIVES

In a neighborhood in Sydney, **Australia**, a group of young friends participating in Bahá'í educational programs have been creating songs to instill hope and express the noble aspirations of individuals and families in their neighborhood, which has historically been portrayed negatively in the media. Through this process, the youth have been describing how they have been empowered to be the change they want to see in their community, highlighting starkly different themes to those widely promoted in the community. The group's efforts have been recognized by various news outlets in the country as a source of social cohesion, and the members have been invited by local institutions to facilitate discussions about the themes raised in the songs among school students, teachers, and other community members. Youth

participating in the junior youth spiritual empowerment program in Gran Canaria, **Spain**, have also been learning over the years about the influence of music on hearts as they compose songs to share their vision for society. Developed through workshops held during junior youth camps as well as in other spaces, the songs, which have now been recorded on several albums, are performed in annual community concerts and other events. What began as an informal initiative among an expanding group of friends, “Nuestra Voz” (Our Voice) has formalized into a community-based media project.

In some communities where the arts are a central feature of culture and where music is naturally infused into various aspects of life, such as in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, choirs have been composing and sharing songs to raise awareness around profound and uplifting

spiritual themes. These songs have also been an important means to share insights with those who have not had access to academic education and are not able to read. Members of the Bahá'í community in Mbuji Mayi have been learning about how to create and share songs, inspired by elevated concepts, as a natural part of community life. Some of these songs have become widely known within the broader community as they have been shared in various gatherings and have stimulated meaningful dialogue. As one example, a group of young adolescents in the community has described how the songs help them to think more about the principle of justice, and how they have felt more empowered to ask constructive questions in instances where they observe expressions of injustice in society.



## Humanitarian Relief

As humanitarian crises of various kinds proliferate, Bahá'í communities are stirred to put into practice Bahá'u'lláh's call for all human beings to be "an answerer of the cry of the needy," "a balm to the suffering," "a home for the stranger," and "an upholder and defender of the victim of oppression."

*"The stronger the ties of fellowship and solidarity amongst men, the greater will be the power of constructiveness and accomplishment in all the planes of human activity."*

—'ABDU'L-BAHÁ

In different parts of the world, individuals, communities, and institutions are learning about how the community building efforts fostered by the Bahá'í community can contribute to greater resilience and can cultivate certain capacities that are also essential during times of acute peril. Some of these capacities, for instance, include engaging in disinterested service to society, facilitating collective action, enhancing collaboration among diverse actors, operating in a learning mode, and devising solutions based on spiritual principles and scientific knowledge.

At the level of approach, the work of the Bahá'í community in the area of humanitarian relief falls under three related categories: relief, recovery, and sustained development endeavors. A global body of knowledge is gradually accumulating as populations learn to exercise the aforementioned capacities in the wake of disasters such as floods and earthquakes, food shortages, war, and health crises. Insights are also being gained about how various institutional arrangements that emerge as a natural outcome of a vibrant pattern of community life can facilitate rapid, coordinated action, and can be a source of stability and security. In some instances, communities that have gained a considerable degree of experience in disaster relief have also extended their efforts to rehabilitation and incorporated a number of risk reduction measures into their regular activities. At the international level, the Bahá'í International Development Organization coordinates efforts in this area and helps systematize the knowledge being gained.

### Resilience as an expression of cohesion

Numerous accounts from around the world are emerging from communities channeling a spirit

of service and collective action in the wake of disaster. In both **Malaysia** and **Mozambique**, for instance, when heavy rainfall caused severe flooding, local Bahá'í institutions moved to action, using Bahá'í centers as hubs for the collection and distribution of food, clothing, cleaning materials, and other essentials, while families opened their homes as shelters throughout the country. The networks that had already been established through the pattern of activity under way also served as a channel for youth to collaborate and act swiftly to provide various forms of relief. One member of a local Bahá'í institution commented: "Many people now see themselves as part of an extended family, and not just as strangers, friends, or acquaintances who happen to live next to one another." Additionally, the culture of consultation that has emerged over time assisted communities to plan, act, and collaborate with other organizations of civil society.

Ongoing activities aimed at the spiritual empowerment of youth have given young people experience with fostering cooperation and a sense of shared endeavor, which have proven to be critical capacities during times of need. After an explosion in Beirut, **Lebanon**, youth participating in these programs felt a sense of urgency to take action and quickly met to make plans for assisting with relief and recovery. At first they were just ten individuals, but their efforts rapidly inspired some 80 volunteers of different ages and backgrounds to offer assistance, whether in the form of preparing meals, arranging clothing donations, or helping to clean damaged properties. Prayer gatherings were also arranged. Many who joined commented on how such spaces to deepen spiritual roots not only strengthened social ties, but also provided hope and made them feel more resilient.



Honduras



Timor-Leste



Lebanon



**IN DEPTH: RESPONSES TO A GLOBAL HEALTH CRISIS**

In the wake of the global pandemic caused by the COVID-19 coronavirus, existing systems around the world were tested in unprecedented ways at all levels and across all sectors of society. Against this backdrop, individuals, communities, and institutions have been learning how to alleviate the suffering so prevalent in society. Across diverse settings, the Bahá'í community, working shoulder to shoulder with those in the localities in which they reside, became even more deeply engaged in the life of society and devised a range of responses, from simple to complex. In many instances, local Bahá'í institutions responded swiftly to the needs of communities and developed greater capacity to engage with government and civil society actors to provide pandemic relief.

**Collaboration at all levels of society**

Adolescents around the world devised a myriad of creative responses to the issues caused by the pandemic in their communities. In the **United States**, for instance, a group of youth in a suburb of New York City coordinated an effort with the board of education and vendors in the area to donate meals to children whose primary source of food each day was no longer available due to school closures. They arranged for the community room in their apartment complex to be made available as a distribution point, with measures to ensure physical distancing and sanitation. Youth in **Italy** explored how to use online platforms to offer songs and artistic presenta-



Honduras

tions as well as to create a space to reflect on meaningful themes and connect when in-person gatherings were not possible.

The capacity of Bahá'í institutions to mobilize and channel local resources and collaborate with other local entities has been instrumental in relieving the suffering of many communities. One local Bahá'í institution in **India**, for instance, approached farmers who were throwing away their produce owing to limited access to markets during the pandemic and distributed these food items to families in need. The institution also collaborated with the village head and local health workers to organize a medical health camp and distribute medicine. In **Myanmar**, a national Bahá'í institution, with the help of local and regional Bahá'í institutions, identified a list of some 1,000 individuals facing economic hardship owing to the pandemic and worked to respond to their immediate needs by making funds available through suitable channels.

Many Bahá'í communities worldwide also established funds for humanitarian relief at the neighborhood or village level, and when local means were exhausted, regional and national resources were sought. Some established national, regional, and local task forces, with doctors and nurses, to coordinate pandemic relief efforts. Some of these task forces formed sub-committees to focus on ways to alleviate economic, educational, or medical needs. In **India**, local task forces divided their jurisdictions



India

into sectors and contacted as many families as possible in each to determine the nature of assistance required—such as food, medicine or financial support—and encouraged those with means to contribute to local funds that others in need could draw upon. In order to channel resources effectively, task forces in **Ecuador** identified families based on the nature of support required. Resources aimed at preventing the spread of the virus were shared with the whole community, and steps were taken to support families who lost their sources of income by providing food items or helping them to apply for other schemes made available by government agencies or non-governmental organizations. Those who faced health issues were assisted to access healthcare. In places where healthcare was not available, the task forces ensured that friends could receive medical advice from a group of doctors via telephone. In **Iraq**, the national Bahá'í institution formed a task force whose members included health professionals. The task force worked to provide individuals with reliable information and health support if needed. It also offered weekly online educational gatherings focusing on themes that were relevant to the pandemic. One task force that was formed to channel resources and connect people in **Honduras** during the pandemic has since proven to be an essential mechanism in responding to other crises, such as hurricanes.

Many Bahá'í-inspired organizations also responded to the challenges caused by the pandemic as their circumstances allowed. The Kimanya-Ngeyo Foundation in **Uganda**, for instance, took steps to address food shortages by working with youth who had participated in their capacity-building programs (see p. 62) to initiate hundreds of backyard gardens. Bahá'í radio stations in places such as the **Philippines** contributed to bringing hope and joy to listeners by broadcasting uplifting stories, which in some cases inspired listeners to support others, or by offering educational lessons for children whose schools had been closed. Organizations involved

with community schools began by trying to understand the reality facing students, teachers, and families. For instance, a number of organizations maintained regular telephone meetings with each teacher to understand their circumstances and those of their students. Other organizations created opportunities for school founders to exchange insights and experience, and teachers conducted regular visits to families while applying appropriate health measures. In **Malawi**, some schools prepared lists of all the children in their community to ensure that no child was overlooked, and arranged video or phone calls, messaging check-ins, or regular visits by teachers who lived in the neighborhood. In the **Central African Republic**, teachers began to hold decentralized classes in the homes of families, which also created an opportunity for parents to take on a more active role in the spiritual and intellectual education of their children.

Critical to the effectiveness of these efforts was the ability of those involved to engage relevant government agencies and other entities in society. In **Chile**, a program was prepared by the Bahá'í community in partnership with the Chilean Association for Interreligious Dialogue for a national media outlet to explore how faith can inspire hope in responding constructively to the health crisis. Around the world, including in **Jordan** and **Spain**, members of the Bahá'í community engaged in conversations with journalists and other social actors about the media's important role in responding to the pandemic.

*“However difficult matters are at present, and however close to the limits of their endurance some sections of societies are brought, humanity will ultimately pass through this ordeal, and it will emerge on the other side with greater insight and with a deeper appreciation of its inherent oneness and interdependence.”*

—THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE



Mozambique



# SYSTEMATIZATION *of* LEARNING

Within the Bahá'í community, learning about development theory and practice unfolds with the support of appropriate institutional arrangements from the local to the international level. Knowledge gained in different areas of action is gradually systematized, at times leading to the emergence of methods or programs that can be adopted more widely and applied according to local circumstances.

In villages and neighborhoods throughout the world, as a growing number of people take steps to acquire and apply knowledge—both spiritual and scientific—to the progress of their communities, insights are gained through experience. It is here, in these local contexts, that the systematization of learning begins to take shape. The first lessons learned may consist of occasional stories, anecdotes, and personal accounts. Over time, patterns tend to emerge which can be documented and carefully analyzed. To facilitate the systematization of learning, appropriate structures have to be in place at the local level, among them institutions and agencies invested with authority to safeguard the integrity of the learning process and to ensure that it is not reduced to opinion or the mere collection of various experiences. In this regard, the Faith's administrative institutions working at the grassroots play a critical role in harmonizing individual volition with collective will and nurturing participation.

No matter how essential, a process of learning at the local level will remain limited in its effectiveness if it is not connected to a broader body of knowledge. In some cases, institutions of the Faith operating at a regional or national level arrange gatherings for reflection among groups of individuals carrying out actions in a similar field, or create specialized agencies for this purpose. At other times, networks of schools or organizations naturally form within and across borders, as illustrated on pages 41 to 42 with respect to academic schools and page 51 for initiatives focused on supporting youth.

At the international level, a process of learning about development calls for a degree of conceptualization that takes into account the broader processes of global transformation under way and which serves to adjust the overall direction of development activities accordingly. In this respect, the Bahá'í International Development Organization, located at the Faith's worldwide headquarters, sees itself as a learning entity dedicated to the systematization of a growing worldwide experience made possible by the participation of increasing numbers of individuals, agencies, and communities. The functions performed by the Organization provide it with the perspective needed to gather learning about development taking place in Bahá'í communities around the world, to identify and analyze patterns that emerge under one or more sets of circumstances, and to disseminate the knowl-

edge thus generated. When it identifies certain approaches and methodologies that are achieving particularly promising results in some area of action, it can arrange, through consultation with relevant institutions, for pilot projects to be initiated on different continents, the aim being to refine the content and methods and assemble them in a tested program. The program is then disseminated to other countries with suitable conditions and national Bahá'í communities can then adapt it to their specific needs. As the number of institutions involved in carrying out the program grows, arrangements and structures for facilitating the flow of

information and learning evolve accordingly, ensuring that communities around the world not only benefit from the program, but can also contribute to its further advancement.

To one or another extent, efforts to systematize and facilitate the flow of learning have been under way with respect to each of the areas described in the previous section. The four examples below will help illustrate how this process unfolds.





**Moral empowerment of junior youth**

In the mid-1990s, a group of individuals was invited by the Office of Social and Economic Development (OSED)—the precursor of the Bahá’í International Development Organization—to analyze the experience gained by Bahá’í communities in promoting literacy. On this basis, pilot literacy projects were created in a number of countries. In subsequent consultations, which were arranged to share observations and reflect on achievements, it became increasingly clear that young people aged between, say, 12 and 15, had a particular idealism and energy, and a special receptivity to programs that enhance the power of expression. The junior youth spiritual empowerment program was developed as a result (see pp. 52–55).

In 2002, OSED drafted a document describing the background, characteristics, and general parameters of endeavors aimed at the spiritual empowerment of junior youth. The dissemination of the document lent further impetus to the work with that age group worldwide, and a new stage in the process of learning opened. As projects for junior youth multiplied, OSED sponsored several continental seminars in which representatives from different countries could share their experience, receive training, and

formulate plans. When a certain degree of capacity to sustain activity had been developed, the focus of the seminars shifted to the preparation of resource persons in each country who could be deployed to strengthen and enhance the quality of the program.

Over the following two decades, the program was adopted by some 330 Bahá’í training institutes and organizations worldwide. In response to the considerable demand for the program, beginning in 2008, a network of sites for the dissemination of learning was established in all continents in order to support the efforts of these training institutes. These sites, some 60 of which are currently in operation, provide training to coordinators of the program and help systematize and diffuse knowledge accruing in diverse contexts. Gradually, informal arrangements among networks of learning sites in each region have given rise to nine continental or sub-continental offices, established to facilitate the flow of learning in each region. As this process continues to unfold, thought is being given to the further evolution of organizational arrangements at various levels for systematizing and disseminating learning about this program.



Brazil



Democratic Republic of the Congo

**Community schools**

The promotion of community schools in regions of the world where the reach of the national education system is significantly limited is a second area receiving systematic attention. In the 1970s and early 1980s, simultaneous to the introduction by the Bahá’í community of large academic schools throughout the world, a global campaign was launched to promote tutorial schools—schools with modest facilities, typically in rural settings, and usually managed by local Bahá’í institutions. Numerous Bahá’í communities around the world were successful in establishing such schools. However, in the absence of institutional capacity at the regional or national levels to support their continued progress, it proved impossible to sustain them.

Over time, two Bahá’í development organizations emerged in Africa, in the **Central African Republic** (CAR) and **Mali**, to promote community schools through the provision of a coherent teacher-training program. The evolution of the efforts of Fondation Nahid et Hushang Ahdieh in CAR is described in more detail on pages 32 to 33. Informed by the experience accumulated by

these two agencies, as well as insights that had previously been gained, in 2007, OSED outlined elements of a strategy to assist in the systematic establishment of community schools in countries with the institutional and human resources to embark on such an effort.

Since that time, a growing number of Bahá’í-inspired agencies in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific have been working toward the multiplication of community schools in villages and towns. As their number has increased, arrangements have been put in place to facilitate the sharing of learning among them. A few organizations with significant experience have begun to act as training centers for emerging agencies, assisting them in their efforts to develop and refine their teacher-training program. In Africa, a secretariat for the network of agencies promoting community schools has been in operation to help develop the institutional capacity of these organizations and to systematize the knowledge being gained across the continent. Questions are now being explored regarding the emergence of similar arrangements in other regions.

*“The purpose of learning should be the promotion of the welfare of the people...”*

—BAHÁ’U’LLÁH





Colombia



### Preparation for social action

Addressing the educational needs of youth, especially in rural areas, has long been a concern for many Bahá'í-inspired organizations. Various programs and materials developed by Bahá'í-inspired agencies have been collected and shared with others, and spaces arranged to consult about their efficacy. Within Latin America, the educational materials developed by FUNDAEC (see p. 56) over many years of research and action showed particular promise in both their academic rigor and their effectiveness in assisting young people to develop the capabilities that would enable them to contribute to the spiritual and material progress of their communities.

To respond to the interest shown by an increasing number of Bahá'í-inspired organizations around the world, in the early 2000s FUNDAEC, in consultation with OSED, modified some of its curricular elements and assembled them into a program called "Preparation for Social Action" (PSA). In 2006, OSED consulted with Bahá'í-inspired organizations in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific that were interested in learning about the application of this program in their own countries. In these initial years,

FUNDAEC offered technical advice and training, as these organizations learned about the content and the educational approach underlying the materials. Gradually, a global network of organizations began to form, with each contributing to a growing body of knowledge about the implementation of the program in diverse settings. As these organizations gained in strength, they were increasingly in a position to support interested institutions in neighboring countries.

Until now, the PSA program has been implemented in close to 20 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific, reaching over 17,000 participants. Institutions in a number of other countries have requested the introduction of the program, and steps are being taken in this direction. In each continental region, the collaboration of an emerging network of individuals and agencies is giving further impetus to learning about the use of the materials and the capabilities of a promoter of community well-being. In light of possibilities for the further extension of the program, it is envisioned that more formal mechanisms for the systematization of learning will emerge within different continental regions.

### Agriculture

Another area in which learning is being systematized is in the field of agriculture. In Africa, while Bahá'í communities have historically given special attention to agriculture, it is only since 2010 that a more systematic approach began to emerge. In that year, OSED initiated conversations with a small number of Bahá'í-inspired organizations on the continent that had gained notable experience with supporting community schools or offering the PSA program. The conversations explored how the capacities and structures that had emerged at the village level as a result of their efforts could lay the basis for an increasingly systematic process of learning around agriculture. Given the reality of the communities in which these organizations were working, such a process, it was agreed, would need to aim at increasing and diversifying production on small farms to help address issues of food insecurity and to contribute to the economic development of farming households. Particular attention would need to be given to enhancing the scientific and technological capabilities of farmers, assisting them not only to make informed choices that are consistent with their values and the aspirations they hold for their communities, but also to participate in the process of developing and disseminating new technologies that would merge new advances in agricultural sciences with traditional knowledge. It was hoped that the progress achieved would benefit entire communities rather than a privileged few and would promote relationships of reciprocity and cooperation among farmers, gradually influencing the local food market.

The perspective that emerged as a result of these conversations was that groups of individuals who benefited from these educational programs, most of whom were themselves farmers, could help lead the process of learning

at the level of the village, either around the physical and social space of a community school or as part of the collective efforts of a PSA group. The content that was identified to stimulate the process of learning at its initial stages was a text from FUNDAEC focused on food production on small farms, which is at once a record of the organization's research with farmers in **Colombia** and a tool for the documentation of context-specific knowledge generated in each country. Research plots that are described in these materials would be established in selected communities to serve as the setting in which new methods related to the production process could be tested and evaluated.

The effort that began in a small number of Bahá'í-inspired community schools in the **Central African Republic** and **Malawi** expanded over time to eight other countries including **Cameroon, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia**. The agronomists within this emerging network of organizations meet periodically in gatherings supported by the Bahá'í International Development Organization to reflect on and analyze their experiences and identify new areas of learning. A continental gathering that took place in **Uganda** in late 2019 allowed a month-long period of study, consultation, and reflection—preparing agronomists to intensify the learning process under way, especially in light of new challenges being faced by the food systems on the continent as a result of issues such as climate change, health crises, and insecurity. Among the questions under consideration at this stage are: what kind of institutional capacity is needed at the local or national levels to sustain an endeavor of this nature? And how can the insights that have been gained be extended to places where Bahá'í-inspired organizations are beginning to engage in the area of agriculture? Glimpses of some of these efforts are described on pages 62 to 63.







## *Contributing to the* **DISCOURSE** *on* **DEVELOPMENT** *at Various Levels*

For the Bahá'í community, the expanding network of activities described in the foregoing pages has had significance well beyond the immediate benefits for those involved. The experience of applying principles found in the writings of the Bahá'í Faith to a wide range of situations has enabled the Bahá'í community and its collaborators to progressively gain insight into the current challenges in the development field and equipped it to contribute ever more confidently to the global discourse taking place.

The purpose of Bahá'í participation in various discourses is not to persuade others to accept a Bahá'í position on this or that subject. Nor is effort in this area of endeavor pursued as a public relations activity or an academic exercise. Rather, Bahá'ís are eager to share what they are learning in their efforts to apply Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to contribute toward the advancement of civilization and to learn with and from other individuals and groups about how to respond to the common concerns facing humanity.



### Contributions of individuals

At any given moment, and in social spaces at all levels of society, there are ongoing conversations concerned with various aspects of humanity's well-being and progress. At the local level, the involvement of individuals in discussions relevant to social progress as well as the cultivation of capacities to engage in meaningful conversation on spiritual themes are a natural part of efforts to build vibrant communities. This could range from an act as simple as introducing Bahá'í concepts into everyday conversations to more formal activities such as the preparation of articles and attendance at gatherings dedicated to themes of social concern. Such conversations enhance collective understanding of the nature of the challenges a community faces and can shed light on possible avenues for constructive action. Countless individuals have also, through their professional and voluntary efforts, contributed to dialogues related to the common good.

### Bahá'í-inspired organizations and schools

Bahá'í-inspired organizations also contribute to discourses pertinent to their work. While such an orientation is generally present from the earliest stages of an agency's efforts, opportunities to participate in relevant conversations and fora grow naturally with an agency's accumulating experience.

A number of Bahá'í-inspired schools and agencies in **India**, for instance, have been learning to contribute to conversations related to education at the local and national levels. In Sikkim, several Bahá'í-inspired schools have extended invitations to other schools in the wider community to learn how to better serve their society, collectively identify some of the challenges they face, and unlock the potential of the young students they serve. These consultative gatherings have resulted in greater support and collaboration between the schools, including through the sharing of insights and resources. Recently, some of the schools involved in this initiative have been invited to offer their thoughts regarding state policy in the



India

area of education and have been interviewed by a number of media outlets on the subject.

The Bahá'í Chair for Studies in Development at Devi Ahilya University in Indore, which was established nearly 30 years ago, promotes interdisciplinary research and scholarship in the field of development from a perspective that regards human prosperity as an outcome of both material and spiritual progress. As part of this work, the Chair has been hosting seminars on themes pertinent to development challenges in the country, including education policy, agriculture, local economic growth, and climate change, and has published research papers focusing on how communities and organizations make use of spiritual principles in their efforts to contribute toward the common good.

In **Luxembourg**, Unity Foundation is a Bahá'í-inspired organization that specializes in identifying and working with like-minded donors on behalf of agencies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America that have reached a certain level of programmatic and administrative capacity. One of the Foundation's most significant donors is the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A core feature of the Foundation's approach involves respecting the independence of the development organizations with which it partners. It establishes relationships of mutual collaboration and learning in which it serves as an advocate for its partners in front of donors. In recent years, the organization has been learning how to contribute to the discourse on development within Luxembourg, drawing on insights gained by the agencies with which it collaborates. In this regard, its efforts are focused on promoting a constructive dialogue about principles underlying development. In various spaces—whether with donors, schools, in communities, in the media, or in other events open to the general public—participants are invited to explore themes such as justice, mutual support, gender equality, and overcoming prejudice, as well as to consider the application of these principles in their own lives. The Foundation also participates in different gatherings of Luxembourgish NGOs and invites these organizations to meet on a regular basis to reflect on the insights they are all gaining through experience.

### International level

The Bahá'í International Community (BIC) has been engaged for decades in several discourses related to the betterment of society within the United Nations (UN). In more recent years, it has participated in fora associated with the African Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the European Union, and other supranational groupings. Among the discourses it engages in are those concerned with global governance, development, equality of women and men, peace and security, the role of religion in society, human rights, the environment and climate change, food security, and the role of youth.

The BIC also regularly participates with government diplomats, UN agencies, and civil society actors in international conferences and nongovernmental fora such as the UN Commissions on Social Development and on the Status of Women and the United Nations Climate Change Conferences, to name a few. Over the years, the BIC has also published numerous statements addressing concepts relevant to the discourses mentioned above. As long ago as the mid-1990s, a major document that was released and that continues to assist at various levels is *The Prosperity of Humankind*. The document examines the concept of global prosperity in the context of the Bahá'í teachings. It presents an exploration of essential matters such as the nature and purpose of the development process as well as the different roles assigned to its various protagonists.

Among the more recent statements of the BIC, *A Governance Befitting: Humanity and the Path Toward a Just Global Order* was released on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the UN. The statement explores governance dimensions—particularly considering how the international community can strengthen its systems of global cooperation and recast its affairs in light of the oneness and interdependence of the human family in order to respond to global challenges and seize unprecedented possibilities in the coming years.

*“The publication of high thoughts is the dynamic power in the arteries of life; it is the very soul of the world.”*

—'ABDU'L-BAHÁ



France



Papua New Guinea



Azerbaijan

“Religion is the outer expression of the divine reality. Therefore, it must be living, vitalized, moving and progressive.”

—‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ

Another statement, *One Planet, One Habitation: A Bahá’í Perspective on Recasting Humanity’s Relationship with the Natural World*, was released on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment. Drawing on the experiences of several national communities as well as the specialized knowledge of Bahá’ís involved in environmental action, the document explores how advancing a materially and spiritually flourishing civilization in harmony with the natural world is central to the human sense of meaning and purpose. The statement has been used by various Bahá’í communities to contribute to relevant conversations at the local and national levels and has since been complemented with other resources sharing the experience of several communities, including **Colombia**, the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, **Dominica**, the Navajo Nation in the **United States**, **Singapore**, **Vanuatu**, and **Zambia**.

In addition to the efforts of the BIC, the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, established some 25 years ago, provides a permanent forum for ongoing, in-depth exploration of concerns relevant to the advancement of civilization. One of its first initiatives involved sponsoring a series of colloquia on science, religion, and development in several countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. As a continuation of its earlier work, the Institute collaborates with like-minded individuals and institutions in exploring vital themes such as peace and justice in societies in

transition, the global movement of populations, the role of religion in migration, and growth and development of cities. It shares its findings, often in association with the Bahá’í International Community, in the form of publications and at colloquia of various kinds—this, with the aim of bringing to the forefront of public discourse ideas that point to enduring social change.

No serious observer can fail to appreciate the need for the massive investments of human and material resources that governments and organizations of civil society dedicate to promoting the well-being of the human race; nor can they overlook the intelligence and spirit of idealism that animates this work. Committed to the further expansion and enhancement of its development endeavors, the Bahá’í community continues to refine its vision that learning and capacity building lie at the heart of successful development. Such a vision calls for engaging people everywhere, from all walks of life and representing the full diversity of the human family, in the generation and application of knowledge. Spiritual principles and the methods of science, together, can mediate such engagement. It is in sharing the insights thus acquired, as a result of systematic experience, that the Bahá’í community believes its most useful contribution to the discourses on development must ultimately lie.



Brazil



Australia



Luxembourg



“...the purpose for which mortal men have, from utter nothingness, stepped into the realm of being, is that they may work for the betterment of the world and live together in concord and harmony.”

— BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

## To Learn More

### Websites

#### **bahai.org**

The official website of the worldwide Bahá'í community.

#### **bahai.org/action/involvement-life-society/social-action**

Information and resources about Bahá'í development efforts.

#### **news.bahai.org/socialaction**

*Bahá'í World New Service*, stories about development endeavors.

#### **bahaiworld.bahai.org/special-collections/contributing-to-social-transformation/**

A special collection of articles and essays about contribution to social transformation.

#### **bic.org**

Information about the Bahá'í community's participation in discourses at the international level.

#### **globalprosperity.org**

Website of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity.

### Suggested Reading

#### **The Secret of Divine Civilization**

A treatise written by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Persian in 1875, addressed to the rulers and people of Persia. It provides a detailed commentary on the immense capacity inherent in the human race and presents the qualities and attributes, structures and processes of a civilization informed by that capacity.

#### **Compilation on Social Action**

A compilation prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice on the subject of social action.

#### **The Prosperity of Humankind**

A statement that was commissioned by the Universal House of Justice on the concept of global prosperity in the context of the Bahá'í teachings.

#### **Statement on Social Action**

A document prepared by the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá'í World Centre in 2012 describing the evolving conceptual framework that guides Bahá'í efforts in the field of social action.

#### **Promoting a Discourse on Science, Religion, and Development**

by Farzam Arbab

A chapter in the publication *The Lab, the Temple, and the Market* by the International Development Research Centre. The paper explores a conception of development that has at its heart the generation and application of knowledge, drawn from both science and religion.

#### **Revelation & Social Reality: Learning to Translate What is Written into Reality**

by Paul Lample

This book discusses how Bahá'ís try to understand Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation and act to fulfill His vision of an ever-advancing civilization.

#### **Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy**

by Sona Farid-Arbab

A book that explores a conceptual framework, inspired by the teachings of the Faith, that can guide educational programs seeking the moral empowerment of students.



# FOR THE BETTERMENT OF THE WORLD

The Worldwide Bahá'í Community's Approach to Social and Economic Development

Prepared by the Bahá'í International Development Organization