THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

26 November 2012

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

Enclosed is a statement prepared by the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá'í World Centre on the subject of social action, which has been approved by the Universal House of Justice for distribution. We have been asked to provide you with a copy and to commend it to your study. As you will see, the statement offers a brief overview of the involvement of the Bahá'í community in the area of social and economic development, placing it in the context of current activity at the level of the cluster. In this connection, the House of Justice has requested us to make clear that the distribution of the document should not be seen as a call for widespread action in this area; it is intended as an instrument to raise further consciousness about the nature of social action and some of the methods it employs. The opening paragraph of the statement sets out the conditions, as explained by the House of Justice, that make engagement in this sphere of endeavour propitious.

You are encouraged to share the document with those friends and agencies in your communities you feel would do well to become acquainted with its content. For your information, the International Teaching Centre, at the request of the House of Justice, will be advising the Continental Counsellors to provide the statement to all members of the Auxiliary Boards for the Propagation and Protection of the Faith, that they might study it thoroughly and stand ready to lend the necessary assistance to the friends in clusters where the institute process is strong and human resources adequately abundant to support activity in this arena.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

## SOCIAL ACTION

*A paper prepared by the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá'í World Centre*

*26 November 2012*

In its Riḍván 2010 message, the Universal House of Justice called on the Bahá'ís of the world to reflect on the contributions that their growing, vibrant communities will make to the material and spiritual progress of society. In this connection, the House of Justice made reference to the process of community building set in motion in so many clusters across the globe by the core activities associated with the current series of global Plans. "A rich tapestry of community life", it was noted, "begins to emerge in every cluster as acts of communal worship, interspersed with discussions undertaken in the intimate setting of the home, are woven together with activities that provide spiritual education to all members of the population—adults, youth and children." "Social consciousness is heightened naturally as, for example," the message went on to explain, "lively conversations proliferate among parents regarding the aspirations of their children and service projects spring up at the initiative of junior youth." The House of Justice then made the following statement: "Once human resources in a cluster are in sufficient abundance, and the pattern of growth firmly established, the community's engagement with society can, and indeed must, increase." Later in the same message, the House of Justice defined the sphere of social action in these terms:

> Most appropriately conceived in terms of a spectrum, social action can range from fairly informal efforts of limited duration undertaken by individuals or small groups of friends to programmes of social and economic development with a high level of complexity and sophistication implemented by Bahá'í-inspired organizations. 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.

To contribute to discussions under way at all levels of the Bahá'í community about the nature of its involvement in social action, we have prepared this paper on the basis of experience gained over the years in the area of social and economic development. The insights presented are drawn from relatively complex development endeavours, yet they shed light on the character of initiatives across the entire spectrum, as all instances of social action, irrespective of size, rely on a shared set of concepts, principles, methods, and approaches.

*I. The Bahá'í world's involvement in social and economic development*

The endeavours of the worldwide Bahá'í community can be seen in terms of a number of interacting processes—the spiritual enrichment of the individual, the development of local and national communities, the maturation of administrative institutions, to mention but a few—which trace their origins back to the time of Bahá'u'lláh Himself and which gathered strength during the ministries of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. Under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, these processes have continued to advance steadily: the scope of their influence has gradually been extended and new dimensions added to their operation. Social and economic development is among them. This particular process, pursued most notably through a variety of educational activities down the years, received considerable impetus in 1983, when the House of Justice, in a message dated 20 October, asked for "systematic attention" to be given to this area of activity following the rapid expansion of the Bahá'í community during the 1970s.

The 1983 message emphasized that progress in the development field would depend largely on natural stirrings at the grassroots of the community. It also announced the establishment of the Office of Social and Economic Development (OSED) at the Bahá'í World Centre to "promote and coordinate the activities of the friends" in this field. Bahá'ís in every continent sought to respond to the call raised in the message in a number of ways, and the ensuing ten years 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 decade of diverse activity, then, the Bahá'í community emerged 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.

In September 1993, the document "Bahá'í Social and Economic Development: Prospects for the Future", prepared at the World Centre, was approved by the Universal House of Justice for use by OSED in orienting and guiding the work in this area. It set the stage for the next ten years of activity and beyond. Drawing on the significant body of experience that had accumulated over the preceding decade, the document elaborated several features common to all such efforts. Awareness worldwide of the nature of Bahá'í social and economic development grew significantly during this period as a result, and a highly consistent, much more systematic approach began to take shape. The vision that emerged at the time called for the promotion of development activities at different levels of complexity. Most central to this vision was the question of capacity building. That activities should start on a modest scale and only grow in complexity in keeping with available human resources was a concept that gradually came to influence development thought and practice.

In 2001, the Universal House of Justice introduced to the Bahá'í world the concept of a cluster —a geographic construct, generally defined as a group of villages or as a city with its surrounding suburbs, intended to assist in planning and implementing activities associated with community life. This step was made possible by the establishment of training institutes at the national and regional levels during the 1990s, which employed a system of distance education to reach large numbers with a sequence of courses designed to increase capacity for service. The House of Justice encouraged the Bahá'í world to extend this system progressively to more and more clusters in order to promote their steady progress, laying first the strong spiritual foundations upon which a vibrant community life is built. Efforts in a cluster were initially to focus on the multiplication of certain core activities, open to all of the inhabitants, but with a view to developing the collective capacity needed to address in due time various aspects of the social and economic life of the population as well.

In the decade that followed, then, social action would increasingly come to be conceived within the context of the cluster. The conception of grassroots social action that began to emerge was thus able to assume a much more pronounced collective dimension than had been previously articulated. During the same period, notable progress was also being made by OSED in its attempts to help systematize the experience of especially promising programmes and to learn about structures and methods required to enable communities around the world not only to benefit from them but to contribute to their further advancement. Today, in the establishment of continental and subcontinental offices—each serving either a network of sites for the dissemination of learning about the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme or a group of Bahá'í-inspired organizations dedicated to the promotion of some other educational programme—can be seen the first fruits of OSED's efforts to raise up structures across the globe to enhance collective capacity for this purpose. Underscoring the importance of what has been achieved so far, the Universal House of Justice wrote in its message dated 28 December 2010:

> Eventually the strength of the institute process in the village, and the enhanced capabilities it has fostered in individuals, may enable the friends to take advantage of methods and programmes of proven effectiveness, which have been developed by one or another Bahá'í-inspired organization and which have been introduced into the cluster at the suggestion of, and with support from, our Office of Social and Economic Development.

Accomplishments over the past three decades in the area of social and economic development, then, combined with the consistent rise in human resources in clusters everywhere, have brought the Bahá'í world to a new stage in its efforts to engage in grassroots social action.

*II. A framework for collective learning*

The mode of operation adopted in the area of social and economic development, in common with other areas of Bahá'í activity, is one of learning in action. When efforts are carried out in a learning mode—characterized by constant action, reflection, consultation, and study—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.

On several occasions, the Universal House of Justice, referring to the way in which those serving at the level of the cluster will be drawn further and further into the life of society, has indicated: "In the approaches you take, the methods you adopt, and the instruments you employ, you will need to achieve the same degree of coherence that characterizes the pattern of growth presently under way." How the first stirrings in the area of social action will manifest themselves in cluster after cluster where the dual process of expansion and consolidation is robust, the extent to which cultivation and direction from the institutions will be required, and the ways in which

endeavours of social action will strengthen the fabric of community life—these are among the issues that will be the subject of an increasingly intense process of learning in the coming years.

Achieving progressively higher degrees of coherence both within and among the broad interconnected fields of endeavour in which the Bahá'í community is engaged is clearly a vital concern. It suggests that areas of activity are to be complementary, integrated, and mutually supportive. Further, it implies the existence of a common, overarching framework that gives shape to activities and which evolves and becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates. The expression of the divers elements of the framework will not, of course, be uniform in all spheres of action. In relation to any given area of activity, some elements move to the fore, while others act only in the background. The next three sections of this document describe a few of these, identified over many years of experience, as they find expression in social action.

Among the elements most relevant to social action are statements that define the character of progress—that civilization has both a material and a spiritual dimension, that humanity is on the threshold of its collective maturity, that there are destructive and constructive forces operating in the world which serve to propel humanity along the path towards its full maturity, that the relationships necessary to sustain society must be recast in the light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, that the transformation required must occur simultaneously within human consciousness and the structure of social institutions. Such statements shed light on the nature of Bahá'í development efforts, a topic taken up in Section III of the document.

Other elements that speak to the nature of social action are derived from a particular perspective on the role of knowledge in the development of society. The complementarity of science and religion, the imperative of spiritual and material education, the influence of values inherent to technology on the organization of society, and the relevance of appropriate technology to social progress are among the issues involved. Views related to the generation and application of knowledge have implications not only for the nature of development but also for the question of methodology, which is the theme of Section IV. Implicit in the discussions of Sections III and IV is yet another set of elements of the framework, namely, those statements that analyse concepts such as individualism, power, authority, personal comfort, selfless service, work, and excellence.

Finally, at the heart of the conceptual framework for social action lie elements that describe beliefs about fundamental issues of existence, such as the nature of the human being, the purpose of life, the oneness of humanity, and the equality of men and women. While for Bahá'ís these touch on immutable convictions, they are not static—the way in which they are understood and find expression in various contexts evolves over time. Many of these convictions underlie the discussion elaborated throughout the document; a few are explicitly addressed in Section V to illustrate their implications for development work.

*III. The nature of Bahá'í social and economic development*

Bahá'í activity in the field of social and economic development seeks to promote the well-being of people of all walks of life, whatever their beliefs or background. It represents the efforts of the Bahá'í community to effect constructive social change, as it learns to apply the teachings of the Faith, together with knowledge accumulated in different fields of human endeavour, to social reality. Its purpose is neither to proclaim the Cause nor to serve as a vehicle for conversion. What follows below is a discussion of some of the elements of the conceptual framework that help to define its nature.

*(i) Coherence between the spiritual and the material*

An exploration of the nature of social action, undertaken from a Bahá'í perspective, must necessarily place it in the broad context of the advancement of civilization. That a global civilization which is both materially and spiritually prosperous represents the next stage of a

millennia-long process of social evolution provides a conception of history that 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. A concept of vital relevance, then, is the imperative to achieve a dynamic coherence between the practical and spiritual requirements of life. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states 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”. He 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, otherwise it becomes a corpse. It has thus been made evident that the world of mankind is in need of the breaths of the Holy Spirit. Without the spirit the world of mankind is lifeless, and without this light the world of mankind is in utter darkness.

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. When the material and spiritual dimensions of the life of a community are kept in mind and due attention is given to both scientific and spiritual knowledge, the tendency to reduce development to the mere consumption of goods and services and the naive use of technological packages is avoided. Scientific knowledge, to take but one simple example, helps the members of a community to analyse the physical and social implications of a given technological proposal—say, its environmental impact—and spiritual insight gives rise to moral imperatives that uphold social harmony and that ensure technology serves the common good. Together, these two sources of knowledge tap roots of motivation in individuals and communities, so essential in breaking free from the shelter of passivity, and enable them to uncover the traps of consumerism.

Although the relevance of scientific knowledge to development efforts is readily acknowledged in the world at large, there appears to be less agreement on the part to be played by religion. Too often views about religion carry with them notions of division, strife, and repression, creating a reluctance to turn to it as a source of knowledge—even among those who question the adequacy of entirely materialistic approaches. Interestingly, the high esteem in which science is held does not necessarily imply that its practice and purpose are well understood. Its underlying meaning, too, is surrounded by misconception. Not infrequently it is conceived in terms of the application of certain techniques and formulas, which, as if by magic, lead to this or that effect. It is not surprising, then, that what is considered to be religious knowledge is not in harmony with science, and much of what is propagated in the name of science denies the spiritual capacities cultivated by religion.

Social action, of whatever size and complexity, should strive to remain free of simplistic and distorted conceptions of science and religion. To this end, 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, of rigorously testing ideas—and at the same time deeply aware of faith and spiritual convictions. In the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: “faith compriseth both knowledge and the performance of good works.” Faith and reason can best be understood as attributes of the human soul through which

insights and knowledge can be gained about the physical and the spiritual dimensions of existence. They make it possible to recognize the powers and capacities latent in individuals and in humanity as a whole and enable people to work for the realization of these potentialities.

*(ii) 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 towards 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, microregion or cluster is the involvement of a growing number of people 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 neighbourhoods. Such a process would allow its participants to engage in the generation, application, and diffusion of knowledge, a most potent and indispensable force in the advancement of civilization.

In this connection, it is important to realize that the application and propagation of existing knowledge is invariably accompanied by the generation of new knowledge—much of which takes the form of insights acquired through experience. Here the systematization of learning is crucial. As a group of people working at the grassroots begins to gain experience in social action, the first lessons learned may consist of little more than occasional stories, anecdotes, and personal accounts. Over time, patterns tend to emerge which can be documented and carefully analysed. To facilitate the systematization of knowledge, appropriate structures have to be put 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 short, to see to it that veritable knowledge is generated. In this regard, the authority invested in the institutions of the Administrative Order working at the grassroots to harmonize individual volition with collective will endows the Bahá'í community with a remarkable capacity to nurture 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 global process concerned with the material and spiritual prosperity of humanity as a whole. Structures are required, then, at all levels, from the local to the international, to facilitate learning about development. At the international level, such learning 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, OSED 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. As this participation widens, the Office strives to develop its own capacity to observe activity at the grassroots, to identify and analyse patterns that emerge under one or more sets of circumstances, and to disseminate the knowledge thus generated, strengthening structures for

this purpose and lending impetus to the process of learning at all levels. 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.

*(iii) 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. Thus, 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 so prevalent in the world today, one which often carries with it attitudes of paternalism and which employs methods that 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, far more essential is the accompanying rise in the capacity of the participants in an endeavour to contribute to progress. Of course, the imperative to build capacity is not only relevant to the individual, important though that may be; it is equally applicable to institutions and the community, the other two protagonists in the advancement of civilization.

At the level of the individual, the influence of the training institute is vital. As it helps to equip individuals with the spiritual insights and knowledge, the qualities and attitudes, and the skills and abilities needed to carry out acts of service integral to Bahá'í community life, the institute creates a pool of human resources that makes it possible for endeavours of social and economic development to flourish. The participants in such endeavours are able to acquire, in turn, knowledge and skills pertinent to the specific areas of action in which they are engaged—health, agricultural production, and education, to name but a few—while continuing to strengthen those capacities already cultivated by the institute, for instance, fostering unity in diversity, promoting justice, participating effectively in consultation, and accompanying others in their efforts to serve humanity.

Similarly, the question of institutional capacity requires due attention. As the institutions of the Faith gain experience, particularly in the context of their efforts to ensure that the provisions of the global Plans are met, they become increasingly adept at offering assistance, resources, encouragement, and loving guidance to appropriate initiatives; at consulting freely and harmoniously among themselves and with people they serve; and at channelling individual and collective energies towards the transformation of society. So, too, must every effort pursued in the sphere of social action consider the question of institutional capacity. After all, even the smallest group of individuals labouring at the grassroots must be able to maintain a consultative environment characterized by qualities of honesty, fairness, patience, tolerance, and courtesy. At a higher level of complexity, an organization dedicated to social action needs to develop the capacity to read society and identify the forces operating within it, to translate a vision of progress into projects and distinct, interconnected lines of action, to manage financial resources, and to interact with both governmental and non-governmental agencies.

The building of capacity in individuals and institutions goes hand in hand with the development of communities. In villages and neighbourhoods throughout the world, Bahá'ís are engaged in activities that enrich the devotional character of their communities, that tend to the spiritual education of children, that enhance the spiritual perception of junior youth and strengthen their powers of expression, and that enable increasing numbers to explore the application of the teachings of the Faith to their individual and collective lives. A process of community development, however, needs to reach beyond the level of activity and concern itself with those modes of expression and patterns of thought and behaviour that are to characterize a humanity which has come of age. In short, it must enter into the realm of culture. Viewed in this light, social action can become an occasion to raise collective

consciousness of such vital principles as oneness, justice, and the equality of women and men; to promote an environment distinguished by traits such as truthfulness, equity, trustworthiness, and generosity; to enhance the ability of a community to resist the influence of destructive social forces; to demonstrate the value of cooperation as an organizing principle for activity; to fortify collective volition; and to infuse practice with insight from the teachings. For, in the final analysis, many of the questions most central to the emergence of a prosperous global civilization are to be addressed at the level of culture.

What seems necessary to acknowledge here is that the increase of capacity in each of these three protagonists does not occur in isolation; the development of any one is inextricably linked to the progress of the other two. The following statement of Shoghi Effendi speaks to this point:

> We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions.

*(iv) Degrees of complexity*

That the development process is inherently complex is undeniable. It can involve activity in areas such as agriculture and animal husbandry, manufacturing and marketing, the management of funds and natural resources, health and sanitation, education and socialization, communication and community organization. The knowledge that must be brought to bear on the development concerns of the communities of the world, then, does not fit into a single area or discipline. Interdisciplinary and multisectoral action is clearly called for. Yet the capacity to pursue such coordinated action will only appear in the Bahá'í community over the course of decades, as will the capacity to address development issues at increasingly higher levels of complexity and effectiveness.

Social action can range from fairly informal efforts of limited duration undertaken by small groups of individuals to programmes of social and economic development with some level of complexity and sophistication implemented by Bahá'í-inspired organizations. Experience makes clear that the interplay of processes that give rise to social action does not lend itself to a single formulaic description. Irrespective of circumstances, however, the scope and complexity of social action at any given moment must be commensurate with the human resources available in a community to carry it forward. What is more, ownership of the undertaking rests with the community itself, which suggests the existence of a certain degree of collective will.

Efforts, whatever their specific nature, generally begin on a modest scale. Often, in a locality where the educational activities of the training institute are firmly established and a pronounced sense of community exists, the first stirrings of heightened social awareness can be observed in the emergence of a small group which, addressing a particular social and economic reality, initiates a simple set of appropriate actions. While some efforts of this kind will naturally come to a close when their objectives have been met, others will continue. Insistence on perpetuating or even expanding every initiative, whether in terms of number of participants, expenditure, geographical coverage or complexity of work, is counterproductive. Yet there may be circumstances in which efforts will, through a continuous process of consultation, action, and reflection, give rise to an endeavour of a more sustained nature. What is important in such cases is that those involved be allowed to increase the range of their activities in an organic fashion, without undue pressure from opinions that are often based solely on theoretical considerations. The process moves forward in a flexible way as they reflect on the results of experience. The Local Spiritual Assembly, of course, serves as

the voice of moral authority to make certain that, as small groups of individuals strive to improve conditions, the integrity of their endeavours is not compromised. It also remains ever vigilant, ensuring that efforts do not run counter to the overall direction in which the community is moving.

At some point, members of the community may also be able to take advantage of educational programmes promoted by a Bahá'í-inspired organization operating in the region, supported by OSED. The steady expansion of such a programme in the community will serve to increase its human resources and to reinforce organizational structures that sustain ongoing work. Eventually many of those who benefit from such programmes will, in turn, bend their energies towards the implementation of the kind of grassroots social action mentioned above. Yet, here again, whatever the ultimate vision, care is taken to begin work in a single area of action and to expand activities gradually over time. A community school, for example, can in principle become a centre for activities such as agricultural production, health education, and family counselling. But, in most cases, it is advisable for it to start simply as a school, focusing all of its resources on the children it proposes to serve.

In this respect, OSED's efforts to strengthen the institutional capacity of Bahá'í-inspired organizations take on significance, and a few words should be added here about the appearance of such organizations worldwide. Whether in the practice of their professions, in the discharge of occupational responsibilities, or in dealings of other kinds, all Bahá'ís derive inspiration from the teachings and principles of the Faith and endeavour to reflect their high standards in day-to-day interactions. Further, given the nature of the field of development, a number of Bahá'ís will choose to associate themselves with one or another national or international agency working for the good of humankind and will, to the extent possible, bring Bahá'í teachings to bear on their operations. In this sense their efforts are inspired by the Faith. Yet, in the context of the work of the Bahá'í community itself, the term has come to be used in a very specific way. Typically brought into being by a small group of believers, a Bahá'í-inspired organization—while remaining under the general guidance and moral authority of Bahá'í institutions—can pursue a range of development initiatives in a region with a degree of latitude in administrating its daily affairs. When such an 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. Bahá'í institutions and agencies, including OSED, provide encouragement and direction and, where appropriate, channel resources to these organizations. A small handful of these have, over many years, evolved into fully fledged development organizations with the capacity to engage in relatively complex areas of activity and to establish working relations with the agencies of government and civil society.

However useful the concept of a Bahá'í-inspired organization may be, its application under divers circumstances requires careful consideration. The way that such an organization emerges from the life of a region and contributes to its progress is of paramount importance. Its establishment cannot be haphazard, nor can its creation proceed solely from the longing of two or three individuals to fulfil a personal, albeit altruistic, desire. A Bahá'í-inspired organization operating in a region derives meaning, in part, from its relationship to other activities; it is one of several interacting endeavours through which consistent progress is achieved. The value of such organizations in the different regions of the world to the development work is evident. Yet, the transformative power of thousands upon thousands of simple actions undertaken at the grassroots tied together in a common framework should not be underestimated.

*(v) Flow of resources*

All Bahá'í activity is carried forward in light of a fundamental belief in the oneness of humankind. All contribute their talents and resources to the advancement of a common

purpose, and all share in the joy of progress. Clearly, then, the emphasis placed on local action should not be construed as favouring isolation.

Social and economic development requires the flow of resources, both material and intellectual. Bahá'í communities are linked by institutions and agencies at the local, regional, national, continental, and international levels, each committed to upholding the principle of the oneness of humankind. These institutional arrangements allow for resources to flow in a structured and systematic manner, and communities in rural areas as well as in highly industrialized regions benefit equally from them. The practice of dividing the world into dichotomous groups of "the developed" and "the underdeveloped", of "the advanced" and "the backward", is foreign to Bahá'í efforts in the field of development—indeed, to all Bahá'í endeavours.

However, it should be acknowledged plainly that poverty cannot be alleviated without a just distribution of material wealth among the peoples of the world. In fact, the institution of Ḥuqúqu'lláh provides a powerful means for fostering the prosperity of humankind. As they observe the law of Ḥuqúqu'lláh, which requires them to offer a percentage of their excess wealth, Bahá'ís across the globe understand that, by placing funds at the disposal of the Universal House of Justice, they are facilitating the transfer of material resources in ways that promote the welfare of society. At this point, the amounts available fall far short of the needs of the vast regions of the planet that lack the requisite financial means. Nevertheless, the observance of this law makes it possible for the House of Justice to provide funds to development projects under way in all continents.

Apart from the funds accessible through the institution of Ḥuqúqu'lláh and regular contributions made to other institutions, including those earmarked specifically for social action, efforts in the area of social and economic development can tap into resources available from governments and donor agencies. Yet, irrespective of their sources, in no way do such funds set the agenda for development efforts in the communities that accept assistance. The relationship of dependence so prevalent in the world today, whereby certain regions are beholden to others for access to resources, is unacceptable.

"Social change", the Universal House of Justice made clear in its Riḍván 2010 message, "is not a project that one group of people carries out for the benefit of another", and in general Bahá'ís from one area do not establish development projects for others. The movement of individuals from community to community, and across borders, does occur however, and here every Bahá'í is guided by the words of Bahá'u'lláh: "Shut your eyes to estrangement, then fix your gaze upon unity." When Bahá'ís move residence or travel to another place in the context of some work, they form part of the collectivity of their new local communities, and all the others also see them as such. They now come under the guidance of local institutions, which are responsible for facilitating the flow of knowledge and for channelling the energies of every member of their communities; the idea of an expert from outside being allowed to impose his or her professional aspirations on the local population is thus avoided.

In the efforts of Bahá'ís everywhere, then, can be seen the emergence of a global community which, connected through its institutions, is striving to establish a pattern of activity that gives due respect to local autonomy without creating a sense of isolation from the whole, that attaches importance to material means without allowing them to become instruments of control, that provides for the flow of knowledge without introducing paternalistic attitudes, that strengthens capacity in individuals without any regard for their economic background. While vigorously engaged in activities to improve their immediate surroundings, Bahá'ís feel part of a process of development that is global in scope and influence.

*IV. The methodology of Bahá'í social and economic development*

In addition to those elements of the conceptual framework that define the nature of Bahá'í development efforts, there are a number of concepts which shed light on the methods to be adopted. That the collective investigation of reality can best be undertaken in an atmosphere which encourages detachment from personal views, that such an ongoing investigation should give due importance to valid empirical information, that mere opinion should not be raised to the status of fact, that conclusions should correspond to the complexity of the issues at hand and not be broken up into a series of simplistic points, that the articulation of observations and conclusions should be presented in precise and dispassionate language, that progress in every area of endeavour is contingent upon the creation of an environment where powers are multiplied and manifest themselves in unified action—general concepts such as these, drawn from both science and religion, inform the specific methodological perspective discussed below.

*(i) Reading society and formulating a vision*

As mentioned earlier, endeavours in the sphere of social action frequently take the form of modest acts carried out by small groups of individuals residing in a locality. In a sense, these stirrings at the grassroots can be considered responses to readings of social reality, even though they are seldom expressed explicitly as such at that level. For more elaborate endeavours of social and economic development, reading society with higher and higher degrees of accuracy has to become an explicit element of the methodology of learning.

Every development effort can be said to represent a response to some understanding of the nature and state of society, its challenges, the institutions operating in it, the forces influencing it, and the capacities of its peoples. To read society in this way is not to explore every detail of the social reality. Nor does it necessarily involve formal studies. Conditions need to be understood progressively, both from the perspective of a particular endeavour's purpose and in the context of a vision of humanity's collective existence. Indeed, it is vital that the reading of society be consistent with the teachings of the Faith. That the true nature of a human being is spiritual, that every human being is a "mine rich in gems" of limitless potential, that the forces of integration and disintegration each in their own way are propelling humanity towards its destiny are but a few examples of teachings that would shape one's understanding of social reality. Bahá'í-inspired organizations supporting relatively complex lines of action need to continually refine their reading of society, using the methods of science to the best of their abilities.

It is important to note that reading the social reality of a population from within is different than studying it as an outsider. In instances where the population in question is relatively poor in material resources, outsiders with access to greater means frequently see only deprivation—the wealth of talent in the population, the aspirations of its members, and their capacity to arise and become the protagonists of change may all be overlooked. Furthermore, external observers of poverty are all too often unaware of the tendency to allow their own feelings of pity, fear, indignation or ambivalence to affect their reading of society and to base their proposed solutions on the value they place on their own experiences. However, when an effort is participatory, in the sense that it seeks to involve the people themselves in the generation and application of knowledge, as all forge together a path of progress, dualities such as "outsider-insider" and "knowledgeable-ignorant" quickly disappear.

According to their reading of society, those engaged in social action form and refine a vision of their work within the social space available to them. The word "vision" here does not simply mean a set of goals or a description of an idealized future condition. Particularly when a Bahá'í-inspired organization is involved, a vision has to express a general idea of how goals are to be achieved: the nature of the strategies to be devised, the approaches to be taken, the attitudes to be assumed, and even an outline of some of the methods to be employed. The vision of work articulated by such an organization is never complete; it has to become more

and more precise, be able to accommodate constantly evolving and ever more complex action, and attain increasingly high levels of accuracy in its operation.

*(ii) Consultation*

If learning in action is to be the primary mode of operation in the area of social and economic development, the Bahá'í principle of consultation needs to be fully appreciated. Whether concerned with analysing a specific problem, attaining higher degrees of understanding on a given issue, or exploring possible courses of action, consultation may be seen as collective search for truth. Participants in a consultative process see reality from different points of view, and as these views are examined and understood, clarity is achieved. In this conception of the collective investigation of reality, truth is not a compromise between opposing interest groups. Nor does the desire to exercise power over one another animate participants in the consultative process. What they seek, rather, is the power of unified thought and action.

In the context of social action, the principle of consultation is expressed in a variety of forms, each appropriate to the space within which it occurs. Often, when a small group is engaged in an endeavour, every matter of concern is the subject of consultation. Yet, within an organization, the principle will find expression in different ways. What should be noted in this connection is that, at times, consultation is undertaken between those regarded as equals with the aim of reaching a joint decision, as in the case of the deliberations of a Spiritual Assembly. Under other circumstances, it takes the form of a discussion, as may be necessary, to draw out thoughts and information towards the enrichment of common understanding, but with the decision being made by those with authority. It is this latter form that would distinguish the operations of a Bahá'í-inspired organization, where a degree of individual or group authority is given to those on whom responsibility has been conferred.

Clearly, then, not every person within an organization will participate equally in making every decision. Responsibility needs to be appropriately structured and defined. For example, there will be many spaces in which individuals involved in a particular component of the work will have the opportunity to share insights, reach higher levels of understanding, and make certain decisions pertaining to their area of functioning. In the case of an organization with a board and an executive director, they will often take decisions without the need to consult with every member of the organization. But theirs is also the responsibility to create an atmosphere in which relevant information and knowledge flow openly and in which the results of consultation in all the spaces of the organization are conveyed in ways that promote understanding and consensus among its members.

Beyond such considerations, a consultative spirit pervades the interactions of those engaged in social action, of whatever size and complexity, and the population they serve. This does not imply that formal mechanisms are necessarily in place for this purpose. It suggests, rather, that the aspirations of the people, their observations and ideas, are ever present and are consciously incorporated into plans and programmes.

*(iii) Action and reflection on action*

At the heart of every development endeavour is consistent, systematic action. Action, however, needs to be accompanied by constant reflection to ensure that it continues to serve the aims of the endeavour. Development strategies that are formulated simply in terms of projects with well-stated goals, followed by evaluation of how and why they were or were not achieved, have limitations. An approach to development defined in terms of learning does, at times, admit formal evaluation. Yet, it depends far more on structured reflection woven into a pattern of action, through which questions can emerge and methods and approaches be adjusted.

Given the multitude of humanity's needs and the enthusiasm with which programmes inspired by the teachings of the Faith are frequently received, it can be tempting for a Bahá'í-inspired organization to try to pursue every opportunity and become engaged in frenetic action. Learning to be systematic and focused is a challenge that all those involved in development efforts, from a small group to the community itself, have to meet.

A notion that has proven useful in this respect is that of a line of action. A line of action is conceived as a sequence of activities, each of which builds on the previous one and prepares the way for the next. Endeavours often begin with a single line of action, but gradually a number of interrelated lines emerge, constituting a whole area of action. For example, to be effective, even an effort at the grassroots focusing solely on the area of child education needs to simultaneously follow such lines of action as the training of teachers and consciousness-raising in the community about education, as well as attending to the teaching-learning experience.

Focused, systematic thinking and persistent, meticulous labour do not, of course, detract from the spirit of service that animates social action. While paying attention to the smallest practical details, one can be occupied with the most profound spiritual matters. A distinguishing feature of any Bahá'í endeavour has to be the emphasis it places on the spirit with which action is undertaken. This requires from the participants purity of motive, rectitude of conduct, humility, selflessness, and respect for human dignity. As Bahá'u'lláh states:

> One righteous act is endowed with a potency that can so elevate the dust as to cause it to pass beyond the heaven of heavens. It can tear every bond asunder, and hath the power to restore the force that hath spent itself and vanished.

*(iv) Utilizing material means*

To accomplish their aims, endeavours in the area of social action require material means. There is a tendency among many organizations in the world—including those working to achieve praiseworthy ends—to measure success principally in terms of the amount of money received and spent. Bahá'í development efforts are expected to set aside such criteria. In modest instances of social action, resources are typically contributed by the community. A more complex endeavour will have to acquire greater capacity to draw upon and utilize funds. In the case of a Bahá'í-inspired organization, this may extend, as mentioned earlier, to receiving grants from donor agencies. Here great care is required to ensure that, in attempting to secure funds, an organization is not distracted from its primary purpose: capacity building within a given population.

However modest the amounts expended may be, it is vital that a system be put in place to oversee the proper management of finances. The integrity of an endeavour is, of course, secured by the trustworthiness and honesty of its participants. Yet, a proven system of financial management within an organization serves to protect against an atmosphere of carelessness and imprecision that can open the door to temptation.

In addition to a sound financial system, the question of efficiency needs attention. What should be avoided are limited conceptions of efficiency, for instance, those that consider only the relation of output to material input, even when the latter includes some quantitative measure of effort. A more sophisticated understanding of efficiency seems to be required. With regard to input, for example, work that is motivated by a spirit of service and an inner urge to excel clearly has a different value than work that is used as a vehicle to advance one's personal interests. As to results, to give another example, the accomplishment of a particular

task—say, the construction of a small facility for a school—may be far less important than the development of the participants' capacity to cooperate and engage in unified action.

There is also a wealth of spiritual and intellectual resources upon which endeavours can draw, whatever the material resources available. A number of these are mentioned in the Bahá'í writings, such as "unrelaxing resolve and harmonious cooperation", "energy, loyalty and resourcefulness", "determination", "spirit of absolute consecration", "organizing ability", "zeal", "tenacity, sagacity and fidelity", "single-minded devotion", "absolute dedication", "perseverance", "vigour", "courage", "audacity", "consistency", "tenacity of purpose", "tenacity of resolution", and "unrelaxing vigilance". What the Bahá'í community has so far achieved in the work of expansion and consolidation with limited material means is a testimony to the efficacy of these spiritual resources, which should be increasingly extended to the sphere of social action.

Those involved in social action also need to be constantly aware of the solemn responsibility for the money that has been placed at their disposal. In this connection, it is helpful to keep in mind the attitude Bahá'ís evince in relation to the sacred funds of the Faith —contributions are offered liberally, joyfully, and sacrificially, and institutions observe prudence and a high degree of economy in the expenditure of that money.

*V. Guiding principles*

Social action, it has been suggested in this paper, is to be carried out in the context of a much larger enterprise—namely, the advancement of a civilization that ensures the material and spiritual prosperity of the entire human race. The fundamental teachings of the Faith that will inspire this civilization, some of which have been mentioned in these pages, need to find expression in the sphere of social action. Clearly, the application of the requisite principles to the social and material progress of communities involves a vast process of learning.

In general, a challenge for any instance of social action is to ensure consistency—among the explicit and implicit convictions which underpin an initiative, the values promoted by it, the attitudes adopted by its participants, the methods they employ, and the ends they seek. Achieving consistency between belief and practice is no small task: a deep-seated recognition of the oneness of humanity should prevent all efforts from fostering disunity, isolation, separateness or competition; an unshakeable conviction in the nobility of human beings, capable of subduing their lower passions and evincing heavenly qualities, should serve to protect against prejudice and paternalism, both of which violate the dignity of people; an immutable belief in justice should guide an endeavour to allocate resources according to the real needs and aspirations of the community rather than the whims and wishes of a privileged few; the principle of the equality of women and men should open the way not only for women to assume their role as protagonists of development and benefit from its fruits but also for the experience of that half of the world's population to be given more and more emphasis in development thought. These few examples illustrate how closely spiritual principles are to guide development practice.

If contradictions are to be avoided, the participants in an endeavour need to become increasingly aware of the environment within which their work advances. On the one hand, they are to freely draw insights from the range of philosophies, academic theories, community programmes and social movements within that environment and to keep current with the technological trends that influence progress. On the other hand, they should remain watchful lest they allow the teachings to be bent into conformity with this or that ideology, intellectual fad or fashionable practice. In this connection, the capacity to measure the value of prevalent approaches, ideas, attitudes, and methods in the balance of the Faith is vital. This capacity enables one, for example, to uncover the aggrandizement of self so often lying behind initiatives that are nominally concerned with empowerment, to discern the tendency of certain development efforts to foist upon the poor an entirely materialistic worldview, to perceive the subtle ways in which

competitiveness and greed can be promoted in the name of justice and prosperity, and ultimately to abandon the notion that one or another theory or movement which may fleetingly acquire some prominence in the wider society can provide a shortcut to meaningful change. The following passage written by the Universal House of Justice provides guidance in this connection:

> Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is vast. It calls for profound change not only at the level of the individual but also in the structure of society. "Is not the object of every Revelation", He Himself proclaims, "to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself, both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions?" The work advancing in every corner of the globe today represents the latest stage of the ongoing Bahá'í endeavour to create the nucleus of the glorious civilization enshrined in His teachings, the building of which is an enterprise of infinite complexity and scale, one that will demand centuries of exertion by humanity to bring to fruition. There are no shortcuts, no formulas. Only as effort is made to draw on insights from His Revelation, to tap into the accumulating knowledge of the human race, to apply His teachings intelligently to the life of humanity, and to consult on the questions that arise will the necessary learning occur and capacity be developed.

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