

## **Bahá'í International Community**

### **Engagement with United Nations Sustainable Development Goals**

#### **Prepared for the Bristol, UK, Faith in the Future conference**

Founded over a century and a half ago, the Bahá'í Faith is an independent world religion whose members seek to apply spiritual principles to improve individual lives and advance society. Bahá'ís believe that humanity today is approaching the crowning stage of a millennia-long process of collective social and spiritual development. Behind so much of the turbulence and commotion of contemporary life are the fits and starts of a humanity struggling to come of age. The defining characteristic of this dawning age of maturity, we believe, is the oneness of all humankind, a principle whose implications are becoming increasingly clear in all facets of life. In this context, widely accepted practices and conventions, cherished attitudes and habits, will need to be re-examined as the imperatives of maturity assert themselves. In all of this, Bahá'ís see the hand of a loving and all-powerful Providence at work.

In thousands of settings across the planet, Bahá'ís are working shoulder to shoulder with their fellow human beings to learn about new patterns of human relationships and corresponding social structures that embody the principle of the oneness of humankind. “Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and centre your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements,”<sup>1</sup> writes Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, raising the call to action for the common good. Warning against passive belief or the mere intellectual acknowledgement of lofty principles, He counsels the peoples of the world to “strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action.”<sup>2</sup> Bahá'ís have therefore long sought to contribute to global processes of development by concrete actions undertaken in their neighborhoods, villages, and communities.

#### **Religion and Development: An Evolving Understanding**

The concept of “development” has evolved considerably over the past half-century, from a largely fiscal exercise focused on macroeconomic growth, to the multifaceted and holistic considerations contained in *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (Agenda 2030). Part of this advancing understanding is a growing appreciation of the unique role that religion, faith, and religious communities can play in global development efforts. Religion has been a feature of human civilization since the dawn of recorded history and has prompted countless multitudes to arise and exert themselves for the well-being of others. Religion offers an understanding of human existence and evolution that lifts the eye from the rocky path to the distant horizon. And when true to the spirit of its transcendent founders, religion has been one of the most powerful tools for the creation of new and beneficial patterns of individual and collective life. As the Universal House of Justice, the world governing body of the Bahá'í Faith, has written:

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<sup>1</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990) 346.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

“...[R]eligion promotes upright character, instils forbearance, compassion, forgiveness, magnanimity, high-mindedness. It prohibits harm to others and invites souls to the plane of sacrifice, that they may give of themselves for the good of others. It imparts a world-embracing vision and cleanses the heart from self-centredness and prejudice. It inspires souls to build unity, to endeavour for material and spiritual betterment for all, to see their own happiness in that of others, to advance learning and science, to be an instrument of true joy, and to revive the body of humankind. It burnishes the mirror of the soul until it reflects the qualities of the spirit with which it has been endowed. And then the power of the divine attributes is manifested in the individual and collective lives of humanity and aids the emergence of a new social order.”<sup>3</sup>

But while religion has long played a crucial role in empowering people to arise and act, the link between religious conviction and service to the common good is by no means automatic. It is entirely possible, for example, to have a congregation of noble-thinking and well-intentioned adherents whose actions do little to distinguish them from the wider society. Clearly there is much to learn about how noble ideals become expressed in committed, sustained action. Religious communities can be understood as communities of practice in which spiritual teachings are translated into social reality. Within them, a process of capacity building that enables people of all backgrounds to participate in the transformation of society, and protects and nurtures them, can be set in motion. How this process unfolds in different contexts and diverse environments promises to be an area of rich exploration over the coming years.

Another area ripe for investigation is the underlying causes of seemingly intractable challenges, in particular the complex interplay between material aspects and more intangible factors such as beliefs, values, norms, and ethics. Social ills often stem as much from distortions of relationships and values, as from a lack of resources. Agenda 2030, for example, asserts that “eradicating poverty in all its forms ... is the greatest global challenge.” Perhaps this is so because transforming personal and collective values and qualities of relationship that allow poverty to exist in a world with sufficient resources for all is the greatest challenge facing the planet.

The challenges addressed in the sustainable development goals (SDGs) will require technical and technological approaches. But a lasting, sustainable resolution will also require solutions which are consonant with the spiritual nature of human beings. Addressing the age-old malady of poverty might well require the redistribution of financial assets, the refinement of systems of taxation, and similar measures. But at a deeper level, eradicating poverty will require the construction of a global civilization characterized by generosity, solidarity, compassion, equity and a sustainable relationship of human beings with their environment. Corruption will ultimately be eradicated not solely by penal codes or sophisticated tracking systems, but by the establishment of a society in which honesty and trustworthiness are socially expected moral norms. And great indeed is the responsibility of religious communities to put these positive values – their values – into practice. The world’s great religious teachers each sought to promote human well-being and honour and to advance civilization. In this sense, religion, as a dynamic system of knowledge and action, fulfils an essential purpose: expanding the bonds of unity among the people of the world and transforming their inner character and outer life.

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<sup>3</sup> Message dated 29 January 2014, written by the Universal House of Justice

## Global Action Toward a Global Future

The process of developing the SDGs and Agenda 2030 was, in many ways, unprecedented in human history. Some 7.6 million people from 193 countries participated in the “Global Conversation” to define the new global development agenda – the largest consultation ever conducted by the United Nations. And despite the shortcomings to be expected in such an initial endeavour, the process expanded the boundaries of international consultation in important ways.

There is much to be learned from this conversation on the nature and direction of global development, and it must continue to incorporate ever more diverse voices. In this sense, the true test of Agenda 2030 will be its implementation, and particularly the degree that it is able to secure the commitment, support and labours of the peoples of the world. Structural reform, largely the purview of Member States, will be crucial in numerous areas. But it is people who enforce regulations or ignore them, who uphold positions of authority or abuse them. The ability of people, individually and as members of communities and institutions, to achieve something they collectively value is therefore an indispensable means of achieving lasting progress. And faith, whether faith in the development process, faith in the progress of humanity, or traditionally religious faith, can guide and spur people on to action.

Appreciation for the human element has by no means been absent from contemporary development discourse. The Secretary-General of the United Nations, for example, declared that “If we are to succeed, the new agenda cannot remain the exclusive domain of institutions and governments. It must be embraced by people.”<sup>4</sup> Yet the process of crafting the SDGs focused heavily, at times almost exclusively, on finance and technology as the means by which ambitious plans could be implemented. Financial and technological resources will of course be critical to global development. But attributing change primarily to institutions and structures significantly limits the agency of individuals and communities. People are at the centre of Agenda 2030, and this is a major victory. But care should be taken lest people be treated primarily as passive objects to be developed, rather than as protagonists of development in and of themselves.

To harness the constructive potential of multitudes around the world, the notion that access to financial resources is required to make meaningful contributions to society must be challenged. Material wealth is often equated with capacity in development thought and discourse. Yet financial capacity is not synonymous with the human capacity needed to advance constructive social transformation. Those with limited material means far outnumber those living in abundance, and no longer can it be realistically imagined that a small segment of humanity should decide for the rest and aim, on its own, to bring about their advancement. At this point in the development of the global community, such a proposition is neither feasible, nor desirable.

The aggregate talents of several billion individuals represent a phenomenal reservoir of resources for constructive change that has so far gone largely untapped. Human capacity is defined not only by one’s potential to achieve goals, but also one’s determination to take the needed actions. Leveraging that capacity has to do not only with what people are able to do, but also what they *actually choose to do*. Volition is therefore a resource of unparalleled importance. Efforts to achieve goals of the magnitude envisioned in Agenda 2030 will accordingly need to ensure that the contributions of those who have traditionally been regarded as passive recipients of aid are meaningfully integrated into

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<sup>4</sup> Synthesis report of the Secretary-General on the post-2015 sustainable development agenda “The road to dignity by 2030: ending poverty, transforming all lives and protecting the planet” (A/69/700).

global processes of development. People must become the protagonists of development that is both sustainable and just.

### **Efforts of the Bahá'í Community**

To understand how the Bahá'í community will engage with Agenda 2030 and the SDGs, it is helpful to first explore how Bahá'ís are currently striving to advance development efforts benefitting the whole of society, in keeping with the cardinal principle of the oneness of mankind.

Central to the Bahá'í community's understanding of the process of social betterment is the generation, application, and diffusion of knowledge. Over the past two decades the Bahá'í community has established a decentralized, worldwide process of spiritual and moral education that is open to all, regardless of religion or faith background. Structured in three stages to meet the developmental needs of differing ages, the system tends to the moral education of children, facilitates the spiritual empowerment of young adolescents, and allows increasing numbers of youth and adults to explore the application of spiritual teachings to daily life and to the challenges facing society.

This educational process seeks to raise capacity within a population to take charge of its own spiritual, social, and intellectual development. Working in the neighbourhood or village setting, its participants strive to create an environment conducive to the spiritual empowerment of individuals who will come to see themselves as active agents of their own learning and protagonists of a constant effort to apply knowledge to effect individual and collective transformation. Those involved gradually build capacity to engage in purposeful discussion with people they come in contact with in daily life – neighbours, parents from their children's schools, shopkeepers, students – about the spiritual and material conditions of their communities. Together, they are motivated to reject the torpor and indifference inculcated by the forces of society and to pursue, instead, patterns of action which can prove life altering.

Crucially, the organizing principle of this process is service, not information. The desired outcome is not for participants to simply learn things, but rather to build their capacity and increase their desire to be of tangible service to others. In this system of learning, individuals are assisted to undertake increasingly complex acts of service and make tangible contributions to the life of their community. Viewed in this light, social action raises collective consciousness about such vital principles as oneness, justice, and the equality of women and men; demonstrates the value of cooperation as an organizing principle for activity; fortifies collective volition and allows these principles to be infused into practice.

The development activities in which the Bahá'í community is engaged take many forms. Some begin when the first stirrings of heightened social awareness lead to the emergence of a small group which, addressing a particular social and economic reality, initiates a simple set of appropriate actions. In some cases, as those involved follow a continuous process of consultation, action, and reflection, initial efforts give rise to an endeavor of a more sustained nature. Some of these, in turn, evolve into fully fledged development organizations, with the capacity to engage in relatively complex areas of activity and to establish working relations with agencies of government and civil society.

To strengthen the effectiveness of such efforts, the Bahá'í community has built systems of learning and capacity building into its operational processes. To give one concrete example, coordinators of various kinds provide support, assistance, and accompaniment to those engaged in particular types of endeavours, helping them to face challenges, think through problems, and recover from inevitable

setbacks. Working at levels ranging from the national to the neighbourhood, they contribute to a global system of learning in which experiences around a particular line of action can be systematically collected from local communities, aggregated at the national or global level, and analysed to identify significant trends and emerging patterns. Insights that arise from this process can then be disseminated back to the grassroots through these same channels, thereby informing future planning and action.

These dynamics can have a significant impact on grassroots efforts. Those involved, wherever they may live, both feed into and benefit from a global system of learning and action, and that connection endows their activities with a far wider context and reach. It shapes a way of thinking and acting that carries over into other aspects of life, such as more formal projects of development or personal professions and occupations. And even when efforts falter or seem to fail, participants know that the challenges they faced will contribute to a body of experience from which further insights will spring and further success be built.

All of these systems and structures, if divorced from their wider purpose of the spiritual and material advancement of humankind, can come to seem mechanical and formulaic. In that vein, it is worth noting that strengthening the devotional character of a community is seen by Bahá'ís as a central aspect of sustainable development. Around the world, individual Bahá'ís and their likeminded collaborators are reaching out to neighbours of all backgrounds and, in the intimate setting of the home, creating spaces for shared worship and exploration of the deeper purpose and meaning of life. These devotional gatherings provide an accessible way to reach out to others and begin purposeful discussion around issues of shared concern. And in the context of more traditional development efforts, the spirit nurtured by communal prayer of this kind helps protect a community against reductionist views of human nature that collapse life down to its most materialistic elements alone. It imparts a growing awareness of the transcendent and non-material aspects of human well-being, and invites exploration of how these vital aspects of individual and social life can be strengthened.

### **Engagement with Agenda 2030 and the SDGs**

The above considerations, which shape Bahá'í initiatives of social action at the local and global levels, constitute the context in which integration with Agenda 2030 and the SDGs would take place. These concepts and principles – among them, the oneness of mankind, the spiritual nature of human reality, the need for universal participation in social action, and the centrality of a process of learning – constitute essential elements of the conceptual framework that shapes Bahá'í efforts to bring about advancements of the kind outlined in Agenda 2030.

Bahá'í contributions toward the SDGs are quite direct in some areas. The learning system in which youth and adults are engaged, for example, has courses that delve into specific, more technical, topics for those so interested. Individuals in a given community might, in response to local challenges and available resources, choose to study a course in public health, gaining skills related to the aims of SDG 3. A group of rural farmers might collectively choose to pursue a course in sustainable agriculture, thereby contributing to SDG 2 on hunger and food security. And of course the educational process as a whole, providing both content and training in child and adult education, is a powerful tool for pursuing the objectives of SDG 4 on inclusive education and lifelong learning.

More broadly, the efforts of the Bahá'í community are intended to build capacity in individuals and institutions for selfless service to others and contribute to the common good. They help participants to analyse and understand the constructive and destructive forces operating in society, to recognize

the influence these forces exert on their thoughts and actions, and to take constructive, principled action in response. Young adolescents, for example, build their capacity to undertake acts of service, but also to *discern what service is needed in their community*. Is there a lack of jobs providing a sufficient living wage (SDG 8)? Distrust and hostility between ethnic or racial groups (SDG 16)? Exploitation and pollution of the natural environment (SDG 13)? Developing the ability to make such assessments empowers individuals to formulate action according their own perceptions and values prompted by a dynamic and advancing process of action and reflection, and not only assist projects conceived and instituted by others.

Finally, Bahá'í efforts at social action seek to reach beyond a mere set of activities and address deeper issues of expression, thought, and behaviour. For the impact of transformation at the level of culture can be profound and have direct relevance to the goals articulated in Agenda 2030. As the elements of the framework described above begin to take root in an increasing number of localities, the principle of universal participation on which they are founded has dramatically impacted relationships between women and men (SDG 5). As women have become increasingly recognized as capable and valued resources, both on the ground and in positions of coordination, their sphere of personal action has grown, their voices carry more weight in the community, and long-standing assumptions about the relationship between the sexes have become a topic of thoughtful discussion and action. Exploration of the practical implications of the proposition that all human beings are created equal before God has strengthened solidarity between classes and castes, increasing equality across a number of fronts (SDG 10) and, in some places, addressing issues of poverty (SDG 1) and hunger (SDG 2) as decisions about the distribution of local resources have become more equitable and just. Similarly, in-depth exploration of the implications of the oneness of humankind has fostered a growing sense of world citizenship and strengthened commitment to more sustainable lifestyles (SDG 12).

Bahá'ís around the globe, in the most unassuming settings, are striving to establish a pattern of activity and community life that helps translate religious precepts into social realities. The Bahá'í community readily acknowledges that to uphold high ideals and to become their embodiment are not the same thing. Yet we remain committed to this path of learning, and seek to pursue it not only in explicitly “religious” settings or “development” venues, but across all spheres of life. The Bahá'í International Community commends the ambition captured in the goals and targets of Agenda 2030 and welcomes the growing global movement dedicated to learning about how this vision can gradually be translated into the reality of a spiritually and materially prospering world civilization.