



Coordination for the Common Good

GOVERNING INSTITUTIONS IN PARTNERSHIP WITH
COMMUNITY ACTION AND INDIVIDUAL INITIATIVE


A STATEMENT OF THE BAHÁ'Í INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY
TO THE 64TH SESSION OF THE COMMISSION FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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Social development advances most effectively when the efforts of local governing institutions, community groups, and individual people complement and reinforce one another, rather than duplicate or detract. In practice, relations between these central actors are often animated not by reciprocity and mutual assistance, but by the discord and struggles for power evident in so much of contemporary life. Yet the ills that so often arise as a result—from falling levels of trust in social institutions, to weakening ability to provide public goods and address public challenges—represent only one side of a complex story. Around the world, Bahá'í communities have seen the converse to be true as well: in places where individuals, the community, and the institutions of society have learned to collaborate closely toward a shared vision of the future, possibilities for transformative change are far more readily within reach. Unforeseen paths forward tend to emerge, and space is created for new ways of addressing long-standing and sometimes seemingly intractable social ills.



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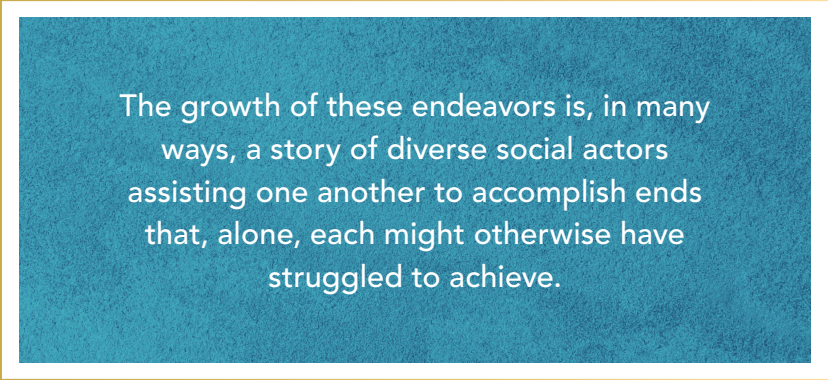
In this regard, the Bahá'í International Community welcomes the focus of this year's Commission for Social Development, on the importance of coordinated policies in advancing social development and social justice. In taking up this theme, those involved will encounter a range of questions touching on broader issues of how coordination and collaboration can be strengthened between social actors more generally. How, for example, do local governing authorities, on the one hand, and communities and individuals, on the other, combine their unique capacities in ways that foster lasting social progress? And how can the relationships that sustain society be recast in ways that assist growing numbers to contribute their share toward alleviating poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion?

These are questions that the worldwide Bahá'í community is exploring in contexts of all kinds. One example of how close cooperation between diverse stakeholders opens new possibilities can be found in Spain's Canary Islands. Like any locality, it faces its share of challenges, among them, growing trends toward apathy, alienation, and social isolation. Particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic, officials report seeing residents less willing to engage in civic or community activities, less invested and involved in the well-being of their neighborhoods, and less able to draw on the support of others in times of need. The islands have also seen rising levels of immigration in recent years, which has sparked robust conversation around themes of social cohesion and diversity, and raised concern about possibilities for conflict and hate speech.

At the same time, several neighborhoods across the Canary Islands have also been the site of a flourishing movement of hundreds of residents arising to better their own community by offering educational and training activities to groups of their neighbors, acquaintances, and colleagues. Focused on strengthening capacities to apply moral principles such as trustworthiness, generosity, and mutual support through concrete acts of service, this collective endeavor, supported by the local Bahá'í community, has welcomed the direct participation of over 3,000 community members of all backgrounds. Hundreds of additional family members and friends have been influenced more indirectly, and in some neighborhoods those connected in one way or another to the process described above have come to comprise a significant percentage of the overall population. From that starting point, dozens of locally-led development initiatives have arisen in response to neighborhood needs, ranging from

women's empowerment, environmental restoration, and immigrant resettlement, to tutorial assistance, community health, and parenting support.

The growth of these endeavors is, in many ways, a story of diverse social actors assisting one another to accomplish ends that, alone, each might otherwise have struggled to achieve. The efforts initially arose from the aspirations of local communities themselves and their growing ability to pursue a common vision of the future through unified action. In time, those beginnings were formalized through the establishment of the Bahá'í-inspired Institute for Community Training and Development (ICTD). The educational and development efforts it promotes have been sustained, first and foremost, through the voluntary initiative and sense of ownership of those involved, without reliance on external funding and the complications it can sometimes impose. Yet as the pattern of activity at the local level gradually assumed greater degrees of sophistication, the engagement of governing authorities became increasingly important in enabling large numbers to contribute to and benefit from the efforts.

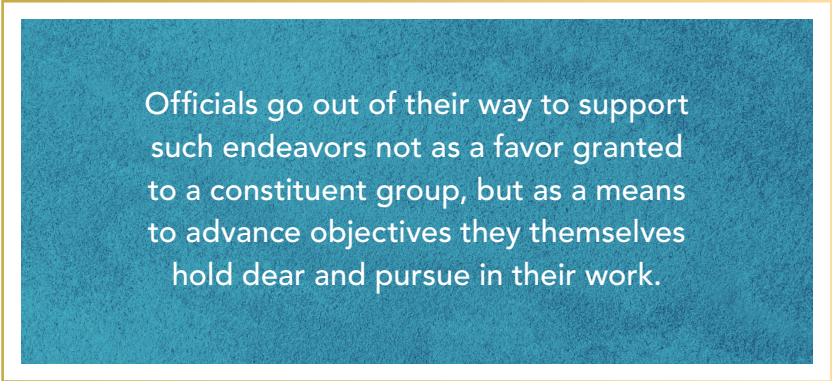


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Support for the activities fostered by the ICTD has come from a range of institutional actors, including mayors, city councils, heads of government departments, directors of health clinics, and school principals. In the neighborhood of Jinámar, for example, institutional collaboration has allowed daily training programs to be held during all school vacations, involving some 700 youth and children, as well as 80 community volunteers in workshops, community reflections, artistic exhibitions, and sports and service activities. ICTD collaborators organize all programming and content, while meeting spaces are donated by the heads of local educational centers and municipal authorities, who have seen the programs' positive impact on social cohesion. Officials at the local, island, and regional levels have also been inspired, for the past several years, to help provide food during a portion of the summer months.

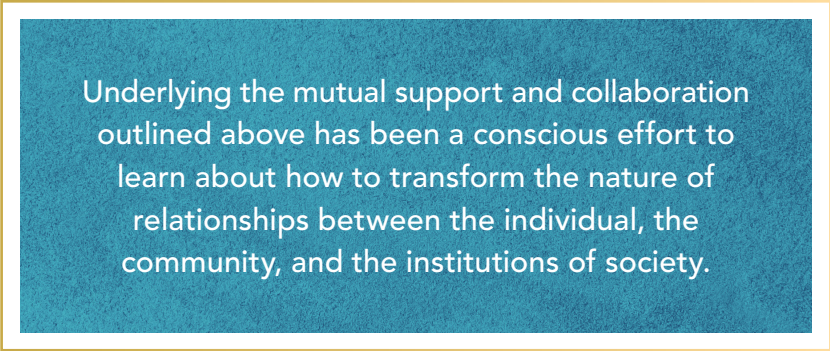
Just as the activities promoted by the ICTD have benefitted from the support of local authorities, the patterns of life nurtured by those very activities have enhanced the government's ability to advance development objectives it embraces. In the San Matías neighborhood, for example, the city council promoted a community mural project intended to beautify and unite the neighborhood. But while community participation and a sense of local ownership were among the council's primary aims, many residents initially saw the project as a priority of outsiders alone, and participation was low. Only when youth and children already engaged in the community-building programs in the neighborhood embraced the project as their own—contributing their designs to it and actively welcoming neighbors to join the effort alongside them—did participation begin to rise and a sense of shared endeavor strengthen.

Government officials have therefore warmly welcomed the ability of the ICTD and its collaborators to connect large numbers of residents with a collective pattern of activity that focuses on constructive themes such as fostering neighborhood unity while respecting diversity, applying moral principles to advance the common good, and undertaking voluntary service to society. Officials go out of their way to support such endeavors not as a favor granted to a constituent group, but as a means to advance objectives they themselves hold dear and pursue in their work. Describing this sense of shared endeavor for the common good, one coordinator with the ICTD noted, “When authorities feel they are a part of a meaningful and vibrant community-building process, it’s a gift to them.”



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Underlying the mutual support and collaboration outlined above has been a conscious effort to learn about how to transform the nature of relationships between the individual, the community, and the institutions of society. Patterns prevalent around the world today often set the stage for transactional encounters, in which community representatives request resources that governmental actors bestow or decline as they see fit. In contrast, those advancing the programs of the ICTD have sought to explicitly explore with government officials, through reflection and consultation, how those three main types of social actors are understood today and what new, more collaborative kinds of relationships might be created among them. “We try to help them see themselves in a different way, just as we are trying to visualize our own role in new ways,” the coordinator explained.



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The themes illustrated at the neighborhood and municipal levels in the Canary Islands hold lessons that can be applied just as fruitfully within the United Nations system itself, whether among

Member States, UN agencies, civil society actors, or others. Coordinated action and policy, at all levels, emerge as diverse actors increasingly shape their relationships around the shared imperative of advancing the common good. This sense of joint ownership in a collective process of transformation can be both an operating principle and intended objective of decision makers when drafting policy. And as new, more collaborative patterns of relationship are created and strengthened, the constructive capacity of all is naturally multiplied, and the objectives of social development and social justice can be more effectively advanced.



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Bahá'í International Community

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866 United Nations Plaza, Suite 120
New York, NY 10017, USA
www.bic.org