

Unlocking Human Capacity as a Driver of Social Development

A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community
On the 53rd Session of the Commission for Social Development

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At a time when Member States are not only reflecting on progress made since the 1995 World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, but also laying the foundations for the next global development agenda, rethinking social development is more important than ever. Critical in this regard will be reframing the role human capacity plays in the betterment of society. Structural reform is necessary in many areas. But it is people who enforce regulations or ignore them, who translate plans into action or hesitate on the sidelines, 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 meeting the Commission's central objectives of eradicating poverty, promoting full employment and fostering social integration.

Appreciation for the human dimension is by no means absent from contemporary discourse. In his recent synthesis report on the Post-2015 agenda, for example, the Secretary General notes that the challenges facing the global community “are not accidents of nature or the results of phenomena beyond our control. They result from actions and omissions of people.” His report on the priority theme of this Commission similarly notes that “in both economic and social terms, the most productive policies and investments were those that empowered people to maximize their capacities, resources and opportunities.”

Yet when considering means of implementation, the synthesis report devotes

31 paragraphs to financing and nine to technology, while giving only four to institutional capacity and exactly one each to volunteerism and culture. Financial and technological resources will, of course, be critical to global development – both will need to be generated far more robustly and distributed far more equitably if progress is to advance. But all too often change is attributed almost exclusively to institutions and structures, thereby limiting the power and agency of individuals and communities. People are at the center of the agenda, and this is a major victory of the World Summit. But care should be taken lest people be treated primarily as passive objects to be developed, rather than as active developers in their own right.

How will human well-being be advanced in widely varying contexts around the globe? How will efforts extend beyond capitals and population centers, to reach the countless rural areas that host nearly half the global population? Who will do this work? How will these individuals be supported? National governments have unique responsibilities in this work, and the obligations and commitments of the current global order cannot be neglected with impunity. But governmental action alone is not sufficient. As the Secretary General noted in the synthesis report, “If we are to succeed, the new agenda cannot remain the exclusive domain of institutions and governments. It must be embraced by people.”

To more effectively harness the constructive potential of humanity, 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, either explicitly or implicitly, in development thought and discourse. Those with greater financial assets are presumed to have more resources in general. They are taken to be the engines of development, the source of progress, and the rest are relegated to secondary functions, if not excluded altogether. Extreme poverty of course imposes

numerous hardships and limitations, and it must be eradicated on both pragmatic and moral grounds. Yet financial capacity is *not* synonymous with the human capacity needed to advance constructive social transformation. There is no guarantee, for example, that those living in affluence are taking any active role in the betterment of humankind. Conversely, the efforts that those who are materially impoverished to assist their communities are certainly not without significance or impact. At all levels of wealth, human capacity is defined not only by one's potential to achieve goals, but also one's volition to take the needed actions. Leveraging human capacity for the betterment of society therefore has to do not only with what people are able to do, but also what they *actually choose to do*. And no people, culture, or economic group has a monopoly on choosing to dedicate their abilities to the common good.

The Secretary General's report on the theme of this Commission notes that 3.8 billion people, about 53% of the current global population, live on less than \$4 per day. Though dollar-figure measures of poverty are inherently problematic, this is nevertheless a reality the implications of which can no longer be ignored. 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 will, on its own, be able to bring about the advancement of all the rest. 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 – in numerical terms if nothing else – that has so far gone largely untapped. Efforts to rethink and strengthen social development in the contemporary world therefore need to ensure that the contributions of those who have traditionally been treated largely as passive recipients of aid are meaningfully integrated into global processes of development.

Efforts along these lines will be central to mobilizing all available resources for global development. But participation in the advancement of society is also, beyond all practical considerations, meaningful in and of itself. Being of tangible service to others, working in collaboration toward worthy ends, exercising personal abilities in pursuit of the common good – factors such as these are intrinsic sources of human upliftment and satisfaction. They are defining features of the concept of “development”, both individual and social, and need no justification beyond themselves. Formulating goals for the advancement of civilization and making those goals a reality is therefore a task that will ultimately need to be pursued not only in working groups, commissions, and high-level panels, but also in growing numbers of farms and street corners, village councils and neighborhood gatherings around the world. In this way will humanity begin to assume responsibility for its collective destiny.

Because many of these concepts are implemented at the local level, applying them to the intergovernmental processes the Commission deals with can be challenging. We would therefore like to offer a number of suggestions for consideration. Specifically, development goals should:

- address the human resources needed to achieve transformative global progress as robustly as the financial and technological resources needed.
- make the building of capacity to contribute to social progress a central objective in formulating targets at the international level, planning interventions at the national level, and monitoring progress at all levels.
- prioritize universal participation in local development efforts, regardless of

demographic categories, such as gender, age, race, ethnicity, and religion.

- allow sufficient policy and reporting space for capacity building and empowerment efforts to develop organically and respond to local circumstances.

Twenty years ago, development took a large step forward when the World Summit gave a “human face” to a discourse that had previously centered on economic growth and structural adjustment. Progress in this area continues today as Member States engage in rethinking and strengthening social development in the contemporary world. The goals being considered – those first outlined in Copenhagen and many more proposed in the Post-2015 process – will require the mobilization of resources on scales never before attempted. They also call for a clear understanding of the kinds of resources by which progress can be achieved. The Bahá’í International Community hopes that the concepts touched on in this document contribute to an ongoing exploration of how the talents and abilities of the peoples of the world constitute a critical means of accomplishing this important work. In this regard, we welcome all perspectives on the broad-based leveraging of human capacity as means for the advancement of civilization.