

RISING TOGETHER:

Building the Capacity to Recover from Within

A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community
to the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, Turkey

“Now our [local governing body] will meet and lead the reconstruction process for the community to follow. We know that we should not depend on aid donors, but that we should take charge of our own development. For the reconstruction process, we will use the same tools and instruments that we used for the [advancement] of our community.”

— Member of a village struck by a cyclone in the Pacific Islands

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THE HUMAN FAMILY IS ONE. Sharing a common heritage received from those who have come before, as well as a joint legacy to bequeath to those who will follow, the peoples of the world are connected in ways that can no longer be denied or ignored. The great masses of humanity also represent a vast reservoir of capacity for the advancement of civilization — not merely in the abstract but in countless cities, towns, and villages where society unfolds and daily life is lived. This is a reality that humanitarian agencies are witnessing the world over. For their part, Bahá'í communities around the globe are seeing growing numbers of individuals taking charge of their own spiritual, social, and material development, building new patterns of collective life and viewing themselves as protagonists in the development of society. And when natural disasters strike, communities such as these are more capable of taking meaningful and effective steps to respond and recover. Indeed, experience has shown that people can exhibit remarkable resilience, selflessness, resourcefulness, and creativity in such times.

Appreciation for the importance of human capacity in disaster situations is not absent from contemporary discourse. It can be seen in the increasing prominence of notions like participation, empowerment, and subsidiarity in humanitarian and development circles. “People are the central agents of their lives and are the first and last responders to any crisis,” declares the Secretary General of the United Nations in his report to the World Humanitarian Summit. Yet translating such ideals into tangible, on-the-ground realities remains a formidable challenge. A central question therefore faces those who seek to “do better to … alleviate suffering, and reduce risk and vulnerability.”¹ Namely, what capacities and qualities help a local population take the lead in undertaking its own response, recovery, and development efforts?

Natural disasters do much to drive the attention of the international community. But for local populations, such events, however destructive in their immediate effects, represent just one period in a vast sweep of collective life that stretches long into the past and will continue indefinitely into the future. An area’s ability to respond therefore has much to do with the capacities, attitudes, and qualities of community that characterized it long before the rivers rose or the cyclone made landfall.

Culture and patterns of community life

Bahá’í experience with disaster situations suggests that patterns of community life and qualities of culture are of

1 United Nations, *One Humanity: Shared Responsibility*, Report of the Secretary-General for the World Humanitarian Summit, A/70/709

particular importance. Communities that have been especially effective in responding have — prior to the disaster — been consciously working to create distinctive and beneficial patterns of collective life. Building consensus and unity of vision over time, they make intentional and purposeful choices about the kinds of interaction found in the community, about how people relate to one another in various spaces, and about the kinds of relationships found between community members, between different groups or sub-populations, and between institutions of governance.

Taking steps in this direction requires the development of capacities in a range of areas. Some will pertain primarily to intellectual, technical, and scientific pursuits. Others will be more social in nature, focused on strengthening and refining patterns of interaction, association, and relationship among inhabitants. Still others will focus on the moral and normative aspects of collective life, drawing on the religious heritage of humankind to address foundational issues of meaning, higher motivation, and moral purpose. Due attention must be given to the development of all these capacities, if progress is to continue apace and pitfalls such as narrow materialism, social fragmentation, selfishness, and passivity are to be avoided.

Given these realities, Bahá'í communities have devoted particular attention to learning how religion can serve as a means to awaken and cultivate, at the practical and grassroots level, the high-minded and noble attributes latent in every soul. Within such an environment, religious communities come to function as communities of practice where spiritual principles and teachings are applied thoughtfully to the life of society, for the benefit

of all. Within them, a process of capacity building that enables increasing numbers to participate in the transformation of society — and protects and nurtures them — can be set in motion. The innate human attraction to that which is good and beautiful is channeled into tangible patterns of behavior. Moral foundations of integrity and generosity, nobility and compassion are reinforced. And growing numbers work together to learn about patterns of relationship and corresponding social structures that reflect the fundamental oneness of the human family.

Efforts of the Bahá’í community

What might such a process look like in practice? Bahá’í communities, initial as their efforts are, offer one example that can be considered. Over the past two decades Bahá’ís and likeminded collaborators have worked to establish a worldwide process of spiritual and moral education, open to all. Structured in stages to meet the developmental needs of differing ages, this 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.

Unfolding in rural and urban settings, across neighborhoods and villages, the system as a whole seeks to build capacity within a population to trace its own path of development and contribute to the common good. Those sustaining its efforts at the grassroots strive to create an environment in which growing numbers of their friends, family members, neighbors, and acquaintances come to see themselves as active agents of their own development

and protagonists of a constant effort to apply knowledge toward individual and collective transformation.

Crucially, the central organizing principle of this process is the development of capabilities for service to the community and society. Assisted to undertake increasingly complex acts of service, participants gradually gain the vision, confidence, and skills necessary to begin offering activities and programs to others with less experience than themselves. In this way, a good portion of those who enter the process simply as participants go on to shoulder increasing responsibility for its perpetuation and expansion. Serving in voluntary roles such as teachers of classes or facilitators of study groups, they become key contributors and vital resources. And as their capacity and experience expands still further, a percentage begin to coordinate and support the efforts of other collaborators, at levels ranging from the neighborhood to the national.

Community building capacities in times of disaster

Though such efforts are not focused on response or recovery per se, the abilities they strengthen and patterns of behavior they foster have a profound impact in times of natural disaster. The capacity to organize large numbers into coordinated action provides one clear example. As community building efforts grow to the point where hundreds of inhabitants are supporting the participation of thousands of their fellow residents, increasingly sophisticated systems of support and communication emerge to manage the growing complexity. Such structures greatly enhance a community's ability to undertake large-scale response

and reconstruction efforts. Organizational skills such as the ability to maintain basic statistics, to plan based on resources, and to operate in a mode of learning — characterized by regular and ongoing reflection on efforts undertaken, results seen, and adjustments needed — similarly allow efforts to expand as needed in scale and scope. And experience collaborating with institutions of government — which arises naturally as community-building efforts exert growing influence in an area — can be invaluable in deploying external resources efficiently and effectively.

Fostering cooperation and a sense of shared endeavor across a diverse populace is another crucial capacity that is developed. As effort is made to welcome increasing numbers into thoughtful discussion on the direction of their collective development, decision-making processes become more consultative and participatory. Perspectives of young and old, women and men, and backgrounds of all kinds are sought out and taken into account, which in turn attracts others to participate. And as such dynamics advance in a locality, leaders are enabled to better analyze specific problems, attain deeper understanding of complex issues, and evaluate courses of action with clarity and impartiality. The aspirations and ideas of local inhabitants are continually considered and consciously incorporated into plans and projects. And as unity of thought and action grows over time, the community strengthens its capacity to draw on shared resources in times of need.

Around the world, individuals are also working to strengthen the devotional character of their communities. Reaching out to neighbors of all backgrounds, they are creating, in the intimate setting of the home, spaces for shared worship, exploration of the deeper meaning of life,

and purposeful discussion of issues of common concern. Such explicitly spiritual objectives might seem tangential to traditional humanitarian concerns. Yet in times of natural disaster, people the world over grapple with existential questions at the most fundamental levels. And communities where people worship together in a variety of settings, make a habit of visiting one another in their homes, and regularly engage in conversations of significance are far better equipped to remain hopeful, to see meaning, and to persevere and recover when disasters occur. Communities in which social ties are strong and spiritual roots run deep are more resilient in the face of disaster.

Resilient in times of disaster, vibrant in times of calm

A growing body of experience demonstrates that the qualities and capacities that make a community resilient in times of disaster also make it strong and vibrant in times of calm. This is of critical importance to the international community, as it seeks to “transcend the humanitarian-development divide” and “set aside artificial institutional labels of “development” or “humanitarian.”² 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 need no justification beyond themselves. But when adopted as shared elements of culture at the local level, they greatly

2 United Nations, *One Humanity: Shared Responsibility*, Report of the Secretary-General for the World Humanitarian Summit, A/70/709

bolster a population's ability to respond effectively to a range of challenging situations. It is not that the community becomes self-sufficient, for natural disasters are, by definition, events that strain local capacity for response. But the sense of collective vision and volition inhabitants are developing gives them greater capacity to absorb external assistance in ways that strengthen local ownership and agency, rather than undermining or replacing them.

"One Humanity: Shared Responsibility" is what the Secretary-General chose to title his report for the World Humanitarian Summit. In light of this affirmation of the oneness of humankind, it is worth noting that the process of building new models of collective life can be advanced by all segments of humanity, regardless of location, nationality, race, formal education, or other characteristics. Communities in low-income areas are, for example, every bit as capable of building cohesive and vibrant patterns of social life as those in high-income areas. It therefore seems likely that the "developed" world will have as much to learn from the "developing" world, as vice-versa in the coming years. Such reciprocal support and assistance is a source of great strength, and through it, expression is given to the fundamental principle that social action should operate on the ideal of universal participation. Every member of the human family has not only the right to benefit from a materially and spiritually prosperous civilization but also the capacity to contribute towards its construction through the fundamentally humanitarian idea of committed and selfless service to others.

“As we were approaching the village, we saw three ... youth walking in the opposite direction under strong sun. We asked where they were going, and they said they were going to a nearby village to conduct their children’s classes and junior youth groups. Later, in the village, we saw that their houses were destroyed and still unbuilt.”

— Member of a response team
assessing damage from a cyclone
in the Pacific Islands



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