



# SUMMONING OUR COMMON WILL

A Bahá'í Contribution  
to the United Nations  
Global Development Agenda




PeoplePlanet  
*Oneness of mankind*



Prosperity  
*The spiritual nature  
of human reality*

Peace  
Partnership  
*The centrality of a  
process of learning*



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The process of crafting the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and associated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was, in many ways, unprecedented in human history. Over eight million people from 193 countries participated in the "Global Conversation" to define the new development agenda — the largest consultation ever conducted by the UN. Shortcomings and false-steps were of course encountered, as is to be expected of any initial endeavour. Nevertheless, the boundaries of international consultation were expanded in important ways: the body of humanity today is able to envision and articulate, to a degree unsurpassed in previous ages, the world it collectively desires. The central task before the international community, then, will be to build capacity in more and more collaborators with the ultimate objective of promoting universal participation in the construction of that world.

To craft a development agenda that is “accepted by all countries” and “applicable to all countries”<sup>1</sup> is to acknowledge the interdependence and fundamental oneness of the human race. Development is increasingly understood as a process that must benefit all and draw on the talents and capacities of all. It is not without significance that Agenda 2030 uses the term “universal” 29 times in 29 pages. A sense of common cause has been placed at the heart of the global development agenda, reflecting growing commitment to the premise that every member of the human family has not only the right to benefit from a thriving global civilization,

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but also the capacity to contribute to its construction. Consciousness of the oneness of humankind must be the bedrock of any strategy that seeks to engage the world’s population in assuming responsibility for its collective destiny.

That humanity constitutes a single people is a truth that, once viewed with scepticism, claims widespread acceptance today. The rejection of the legitimacy of deeply ingrained prejudices and a growing sense of world citizenship are among the signs of this heightened awareness. But however promising this rise in collective consciousness may be, it should be seen as only the first step of a process that will unfold for years to come. For the principle of the oneness of humankind asks not merely for cooperation among people and nations. It calls, rather, for

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<sup>1</sup> *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*

a profound reconceptualization of the relationships that sustain society, including those among individuals, communities, and institutions of governance. How are human beings to relate and act towards one another in different settings, beginning within the family? What qualities are to characterize the life of society? What principles are to govern humanity's relationship with nature? What structures will be needed to support communities distinguished by a vibrant sense of purpose? How is ownership and commitment to global development nurtured in ever-larger numbers of protagonists?

Insight into such questions is gained not once-and-for-all, but through an ongoing process of action, reflection, consultation, and exploration. Collective learning of this kind has been a significant, if sometimes overlooked, aspect of international development efforts over the past 15 years. The lessons learned in striving to achieve the Millennium Development Goals — the need for more participation, a stronger sense of partnership, and a wider diversity of voices, to name just a few — laid the foundations that enabled the SDGs to be what they are today. The experience gained over the next 15 years will similarly shape the way development is understood and approached in the next agenda. Strengthening processes of learning at all levels, from the local to the global, is therefore a critical driver of continued progress.

## **Human Capacity and People as the Protagonists of Development**

Many have noted that the true test of Agenda 2030 will be its practical implementation. Particularly important will be the degree that its efforts are 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.

Appreciation for the human element has by no means been absent from contemporary discourse. The Secretary-General of the UN, 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>2</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 center of Agenda 2030, and this is a major victory. But care must 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, certain notions about what is required to make meaningful contributions to society will need to be

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<sup>2</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).



reconsidered. Material wealth, for example, is often equated with capacity in development thought and discourse. Those with access to greater financial resources are taken to be the engines of development and the rest are relegated to secondary functions, if not excluded altogether. 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, drawing on its own resources and according to its own views, 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.

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The aggregate talents of several billion individuals represent a phenomenal reservoir of resources for constructive change that has so far gone largely untapped. 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 global processes of development. Such systems will need to increasingly reflect the principle of universal participation in the betterment of society. Equally important will be building both volition and capacity in growing numbers to contribute, each according to his or her particular circumstances, to the common good. People must become the protagonists of development that is both sustainable and just.

## Roots of Motivation and Communities of Practice

Human capacity is defined not only by one's potential to achieve goals, but also one's determination to take needed actions. For this reason, leveraging capacity has to do not only with what people are able to do, but also what they *actually choose to do*. Volition is therefore an issue of unparalleled importance. Financial resources are being mobilized at historic scales to implement the SDGs, yet global development will never be sustainably achieved through monetary means alone. A central question to be answered,

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then, is how qualities such as commitment and dedication are generated in large numbers of people. How do individuals and communities become motivated to contribute their efforts toward a higher cause, with no expectation of immediate, material recompense?

Faith has shown itself to be key in this regard. Whether faith in the efficacy of the development process, the capacity of the human race, the virtues of family, community, or a host of other ideals, the combination of conviction and aspiration has been central to generating motivation. Among these, religious faith plays a unique and vital role in global development efforts. Though mentioned only twice in Agenda 2030, both in the context of non-discrimination, 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 development 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 forces for the creation of new and beneficial patterns of individual and collective life.

The link between religious conviction and service to the common good, however, 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 contribute to the betterment of society. Clearly there is much to learn about how noble ideals become expressed in committed, sustained action. In this sense, 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 in 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.” But this challenge itself stems from an even more fundamental issue: namely those personal and collective values that

allow poverty to exist in a world with sufficient resources for all. In this light, poverty reflects not simply a scarcity of material resources, but a deficiency in the way human beings perceive, relate to, and value one another.

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The challenges addressed in the SDGs will require many technical and technological approaches. But lasting, sustainable progress 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. It is incumbent on every person of insight and understanding, the Bahá'í Writings state, “to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action.” The world’s great religious teachers have 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.

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

The efforts of Bahá'ís and their like-minded collaborators around the world present one example of a community striving to learn about the tangible development of their neighborhoods, villages, and communities. To the extent that this experience can contribute to development efforts benefitting the whole of society, in keeping with the cardinal principle of the oneness of humankind, we are happy to offer it for exploration and conversation.

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 in tens of thousands of localities 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 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. Crucially, service is the organizing principle of this process. 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.

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. And 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.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Of the several thousand Bahá'í efforts in social and economic development, the vast majority are fairly simple grassroots endeavors of fixed duration while, as of 2015, several hundred are larger-scale, sustained projects, including formal and community schools and over 70 development agencies.

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.

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The impact of these dynamics on grassroots efforts can be significant. Those involved, wherever they may live, both contribute to and draw from a global process of learning. 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.

Development efforts grow in effectiveness as they increasingly reflect the numerous dimensions of human

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existence. For this reason, individual Bahá'ís and their likeminded collaborators around the world 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 means of fostering unity and generating the common will needed to take action on issues of shared concern. In the context of more traditional development efforts, the spirit nurtured by communal prayer also 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**

How do principles such as the oneness of mankind, the spiritual nature of human reality, and the centrality of a process of learning, find expression in tangible efforts to bring about advancements of the kind outlined in Agenda 2030? In the case of the Bahá'í community, contributions toward the SDGs can be 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 SDG 3 on healthy lives and well-being. 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 contribution 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 to their own perceptions and

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Many of the questions central to the emergence of a prosperous global civilization will need to be answered at least in part at the level of culture. Viewed in this light, social action may well take the form of raising collective consciousness in a village or neighborhood about vital principles such as oneness, justice, and the equality of women and men; demonstrating the value of cooperation as an organizing principle for activity; and fortifying collective volition. For this reason, Bahá'í efforts at social action seek to reach beyond establishing a mere set of activities, and address deeper issues such as modes of expression and patterns of thought and behaviour.

Such endeavours have direct relevance to the goals articulated in Agenda 2030. For example, 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 positively 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 a wide range of settings, are striving to establish a pattern of activity and community life that helps translate moral and spiritual precepts into the practical forms of a new social reality. 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.





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