National Plan of Action for a World Fit for Children

Submitted by Bahá'í Community of Canada
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Preamble
The priorities, goals and strategies identified herein were selected on the basis of the following beliefs:

Children's wellbeing and their hope for the future is bound up with their understanding of themselves, their purpose and their relationship to others and with that which is variously referred to as God, the Creator, the Divine, or the transcendent.

Children are born into the world as a trust of the whole and require nurturing, love, education and training, and meaningful opportunities to be of service for their intellectual, emotional, spiritual and moral development.

Children who are aware of their latent spiritual capacities and who have developed moral capability have more resilience in the face of hardship and greater ability to act in partnership with others to remedy problems and to achieve social justice.

"The acute challenges facing our country and our world will not be met by a struggle among competing ambitions or by protest against one or another of the countless wrongs afflicting humankind. It calls for a fundamental change of consciousness, a recognition that the time has come when each human being on earth must learn to accept responsibility for the welfare of the entire human family. This revolutionizing principle and latent spiritual and moral capacities can change this world into another world. …Youth, who are blessed with the enviable advantages of high energy, flexibility of mind and, to a great extent, freedom of movement, are inheriting a world in which the distribution of educational, economic and other basic opportunities is grossly unjust. Their challenge is to understand the real condition of humanity and to forge among themselves enduring spiritual bonds that free them not only from racial and national divisions but also from those created by social and material conditions. Their responsibility is to take moral leadership and to commit themselves to the transformation of society." [1]

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1 Universal House of Justice, 24 May 2002.

CANADA'S NATIONAL PLAN FOR ACTION

1. Promoting healthy lives – physical, psychological, spiritual, and emotional health.

Priorities
The capacity of children and youth to discover and express their own unique identity, their latent spiritual capacities, their relatedness to others as a member of the entire human family and their will to serve the common good could be described as spiritual health. The promotion of spiritual health entails, in part, measures to ensure that the education and training received, informally in families, formally in schools and through the media, counters the forces of materialism, prejudice and unbridled nationalism so inimical to spiritual health.

Goal
Increase emphasis on the responsibility and capacity of families, schools, faith communities and government agencies—each operating in their own spheres—for the moral development and spiritual education of children and youth, leading to rectitude of conduct, self-discipline and freedom from the prejudices that cripple collective action in the society around us and frustrate positive impulses towards change.

Strategies
Review Federal, Provincial and Municipal policies to ensure that they support and/or increase the ability of families to provide safe, stable, nurturing and learning environments for children.

Call on religious leadership and communities to share the best of what is being learned through initiatives to support families in their efforts to foster the moral development and provide for the spiritual education of their children and youth.

Call on mental health agencies, public health agencies and leaders of religious communities to provide interfaith for a for parents to share information, best practice, insights and ideas for the spiritual education and moral development of children at home, ensuring deep respect for diversity of views.

Call on all agencies to assist families and strengthen their capacity to promote the equality of girls and boys and to recognize the shared responsibility of men and boys in the advancement of women and girls.

Call on public health institutions and school boards to offer tools for media awareness for parents, teachers, and caregivers.

2. Providing quality education (success at learning)

Priorities

According to article 26, paragraph 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the goal of education is not only "the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity" but also the promotion of "understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial, ethnic or religious groups..." [2] To accomplish these broad goals, education must seek to develop the full range of human capacities–intellectual, social, physical and spiritual.

"It must be borne in mind, too, that children live in a world that informs them of harsh realities through direct experience with the horrors already described or through the unavoidable outpourings of the mass media. Many of them are thereby forced to mature prematurely, and among these are those who look for standards and discipline by which to guide their lives." [3]

"The aim of education is, all too often, understood as empowering the person to achieve material wellbeing and prosperity, with little regard for his or her responsibility towards others and humanity as a whole. Such a materialistic approach to education will continue to exacerbate the disparity between the wealthy few and the impoverished many— perpetuating the injustices of social stratification and contributing to the increasing instability in the world. If, however, material education goes hand in hand with spiritual education and moral development, it will be the means for ensuring the wellbeing and prosperity of humanity as a whole." [4]

"The Bahá'í Writings speak to three kinds of education: material, human and spiritual. Material education concerns itself with the progress and development of the body, that is to say, teaching people how to improve physical wellbeing including better nutrition and hygiene, better family health and greater capacity to earn and provide food, shelter and clothing. Human education concerns civilization and progress in those activities, which are essential to mankind as distinct from the animal world, such as knowledge of commerce, the sciences and arts, and the understanding of institutions and policy. Spiritual or moral education addresses values and shapes character; it largely determines to what end an individual will use whatever knowledge he or she acquires.

…Spiritual or moral education is almost never seen outside of parochial schools or religious institutions, is shunned in most developed countries as irrelevant or intrusive to modern education, and is rarely funded by international donors. It is the one kind of

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2 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted and proclaimed by General Assembly Resolution 217 A (III) of 10 December 1948.

3 Universal House of Justice, To the Bahá'ís of the World, April 2000.

4 Selections from written statement submitted by the Bahá'í International Community to the 56th session of the UN Commission on Human Rights, under item 10 of the provisional agenda: Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and circulated as UN Document #E/CN.4/2000/NGO/13 Geneva, Switzerland March 2000.

education which asserts the dignity of the human spirit in all its diversity, and formalizes its relationship to the Divine." [5]

"Instead of emphasizing competition, education would do well, at this point in history, to foster the attitudes and skills necessary for cooperation; for the very survival of humankind now depends on our ability to cooperate and on our collective commitment to justice and human rights for all." [6]

Goal

Increase the capacity of formal and informal education to understand and meet common moral development and spiritual education requirements of children and youth, while fostering respect for the diversity of religion and belief (including the right not to have a religion) in the pluralist society that is Canada.

Strategies

Ministries of Education:

Fund research on curriculum content for moral and spiritual education programs that seek out and reflect the universal values and norms at the core of all religions.[7]

Ensure that teacher-training programs prepare teachers to foster the moral development of the children in their care and to incorporate this objective across all subject areas and in all extra-curricular contact with children. This must necessarily include creating an environment and support system that encourages the development of the teachers' own moral capabilities.[8]

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5 The Greatness Which Might Be Theirs: Educating Girls: An Investment in the Future, Chapter 1 of "The Greatness Which Might Be Theirs", Bahá'í International Community statement submitted as an official document to the 39th session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. Item 2 of the provisional agenda: "Priority Themes: Development: Promotion of literacy, education and training, including technological skills", New York, USA 15 March - 4 April 1995.

6 Op. Cit.

7 For discussion of common values see *The Millennium World Peace Summit: A Bahá'í Perspective* presented by Dr. Albert Lincoln, Secretary-General of the Bahá'í International Community. New York, U.S.A. 29 August 2000.

8 "The moral development of students does not depend primarily on explicit character education efforts but on the maturity and ethical capacities of the adults with whom they interact – especially parents, but also teachers, coaches, and other community adults. Educators influence students' moral development not simply by being good role models – important as that is – but also by what they bring to their relationships with students day to day: their ability to appreciate students' perspectives and to disentangle them from their own, their ability to admit and learn from moral error, their moral energy and idealism, their generosity, and their ability to help students develop moral thinking without shying away from their own moral authority. That level of influence makes being an adult in a school a profound moral challenge. And it means that we will never greatly improve students' moral development in schools without taking on the complex task of developing adults' maturity and ethical capacities.

Minimally, an effective moral education effort would include specific strategies for helping adults deal with disillusionment and helplessness and would focus on creating a culture that supports teachers in their emotional and moral growth." Weissbourd, Rick, "Moral Teachers, Moral Students", Educational Leadership, March 2003.

School systems:
Sponsor periodic reflection meetings with and between parents, community groups and faith communities concerning the purpose, content and process of spiritual education and moral development provided through the school system and the collaboration of all parties in achieving it.

Teach all children their fundamental rights and freedoms, as outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the rights and freedoms of others and the responsibilities that accompany the exercise of those rights and freedoms.

Assist children and youth to develop the values, attitudes and skills required for consultation, alternate dispute resolution and personal character development.

In fulfillment of the schools' responsibility to promote tolerance, call upon provincial ministries of education to develop a plan for the phased implementation of recommendations agreed to in the International Consultative Conference on School Education in Relation with Freedom of Religion and Belief, Tolerance and Non-discrimination (Madrid, 23-25 November 2001) to include an implementation and reporting schedule. (See Appendix I)

3. Protecting against abuse, exploitation and violence (safety and security)

Priorities
In July 2000, the international governing body of the Bahá'ís addressed the condition of children as follows: "In many parts of the world children are employed as soldiers, exploited as labourers, sold into virtual slavery, forced into prostitution, made the objects of pornography, abandoned by parents centered on their own desires, and subjected to other forms of victimization too numerous to mention. Many such horrors are inflicted by the parents themselves upon their own children. The spiritual and psychological damage defies estimation. Our worldwide community cannot escape the consequences of these conditions. This realization should spur us all to urgent and sustained effort in the interests of children and the future." [9]

Goal
Ensure a safe and secure social, political and familial environment in which the nurturing of children is a priority, in order to ensure their protection from physical, spiritual and psychological abuse, exploitation and violence.

Strategies
Call on communities to create interdisciplinary committees or working groups that coordinate the efforts of family oriented social service agencies such as health and welfare, schools, religious communities, police and justice agencies. Task these

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9 Universal House of Justice, April 2002 – Ridván Message to the Bahá'ís of the World.

coordinating committees with promoting the development of a vision of a healthy family; and, with initiating, learning from and refining prevention approaches that would improve the lives of all children in the community, bringing children from the margins into the centre where the flow of resources is appropriate to their developmental needs. [10]

Call on Public Health institutions and Faith communities to offer consultation and conflict resolution training to parents and caregivers—including the promotion of family meetings as a model for creating family unity and valuing children's contributions.

Call on Ministries of Education and Health to include parenting and family life classes for adolescents and adults who are to be parents, which include guidelines for the appropriate physical, spiritual and psychological nurturing and care according to the developmental needs of children.

4. Combating HIV/AIDS

It is recognized that research, education and cooperation among governments and civil society are of critical importance in order to understand and remedy the material and social factors that feed the HIV/AIDS pandemic and make effective prevention and treatment programs available. The relationship between the AIDS pandemic and gender inequality is gaining recognition globally. New HIV/AIDS infections are now increasing faster among women and girls than among males; therefore, last year half of all new cases occurred in females.

Awareness is also growing that a profound change of attitude—personal, political, and social—will be necessary to stop the spread of the disease and ensure assistance to those already infected and affected.

Priorities
This submission will focus on two of the more significant populations who need to be represented in these discussions: young men and boys, because of the inequitable power they exercise in relationships with young women and girls; and faith communities, because of the power they have to influence the hearts and minds of their members.

In order to curtail the spread of HIV/AIDS among youth, concrete changes need to occur in the sexual attitudes and behavior of both young men and women, but especially young men. Educating young women and girls is critically important, but the current power imbalance between men and women can prevent a young woman or girl from acting in her own interest. Indeed, experience has shown that educating women without educating the men in their lives may put the women at greater risk of violence. Efforts are needed, therefore, to educate both young men and boys and young women and girls to respect themselves and one another. A culture of mutual respect will improve not only the self-

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10 See A World Fit For Children, adopted by the UN General Assembly at the 27th Special Session, 10 May 2002. III, A, 20-23.

esteem of women and girls, but the self-esteem of men and boys as well, which will lead toward more responsible sexual behavior.

Leaders of faith communities have the responsibility to educate children, young men and women to respect the sanctity of the family by practicing abstinence before marriage, as called for in the teachings of most religions and to respond with love and compassion to the intense personal suffering of those either directly or indirectly affected by the AIDS crisis.

The tendency on the part of society as a whole to judge and blame those afflicted has, since the onset of this disease, stifled compassion for its victims. The subsequent stigmatization of individuals thus afflicted with HIV/AIDS has fostered a profound reluctance on the part of infected individuals to seek treatment and of societies to change cultural attitudes and practices necessary for the prevention and treatment of the disease. Such judgments can be particularly pronounced in religious communities struggling to uphold a high standard of personal conduct. … What is often forgotten is that "moral conduct includes not only personal restraint but compassion and humility as well. Faith communities will need to strive continually to rid themselves of judgmental attitudes so that they can exert the kind of moral leadership that encourages personal responsibility, love for one another, and the courage to protect vulnerable groups in society." [11]

Goal
To complement measures adopted to combat HIV/AIDS with an educational program that encourages the fostering of a culture of mutual respect and self-esteem and promotes a profound change of attitude in the personal, political and social spheres.

Strategies
Call upon Ministries of Education and Faith communities to focus on the education of young men and boys regarding HIV/AIDS because of the inequitable power they exercise in relationships with young women and girls.

Include faith communities in efforts to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS and to support those who suffer from HIV/AIDS – drawing on their strengths of love and compassion and their capacity to educate and influence the minds and hearts of their members. Call upon these communities to develop clear and compassionate protocols for including members who may be HIV positive.

Call upon Ministries of Education and Faith communities to focus on education of young men and women focused on self-respect and respect of others, aimed at promoting responsible sexual behaviour.

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11 Extracts from Bahá'í International Community Statement HIV/AIDS and Gender Equality: Transforming Attitudes and Behaviors.

Prepared for the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS New York, U.S.A. pages 25-27 June 2001.

5. Supporting social engagement and responsibility

Priorities

"The social dislocation of children alienated from adults preoccupied with material concerns and at times selfish interests, has serious consequences for the wellbeing of society at large. This phenomenon cuts across all races, classes, nations and economic conditions. While not rooted in active discrimination against children, the phenomena reflects a neglect of the needs of children, be they physical, emotional, intellectual or spiritual, that is equally concerning. Alienation and loss of a sense of purpose lead to hopelessness and disengagement.

"The years of early youth (10 to 16) in today's world in particular, are very difficult, but these children have the capacity to grasp fundamental moral and spiritual principles, upon which good character is based. These youth need to be seen by the entire community not simply as children for whom activity must be arranged, or as adjuncts to their parents, or as awaiting some future time when they take on adult responsibility, but as having a necessary contribution to make to the transformation that is underway in our society." [12]

Goal

To reduce the alienation and increase the engagement of children and youth through their purposeful participation in community and to promote their acquisition of the necessary leadership and strategic skills.

Strategies

To address the problem of parents not seeing their children for the better part of the day/week, call on community agencies and employers to mount a campaign promoting measures to enable parents to spend more time with their young family members.

Encourage increased use of community centres as a gathering place for the neighbourhood—in order to address the lack of relatedness to a physical community.

Call on the media to promote the social, spiritual, and moral wellbeing and physical and mental health of the child through the provision of programming that offers models of children and youth countering the forces of materialism, prejudice and nationalism and working to rectify situations of social injustice. This would reinforce faith in the human capacity to change, deepen commitment to serve the common good and strengthen identification with the whole human family.

Recognizing children as individuals with human rights, views and feelings of their own, establish participatory structures and forums through which children may express their views and ensure that such views are represented in all decisions taken by public authorities which affect children.

Ensure the child's right to freedom of expression, thought, conscience and religion, association and peaceful assembly, while respecting and promoting the family's primary

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12 Extracts from Ridván Message, Universal House of Justice, April 2000.

responsibility in nurturing and protecting the children in the exercise of their rights in a manner consistent with their evolving capacities.

In consultation with youth, develop service programs that provide avenues for youth to take up their responsibilities for the betterment of society, and to see themselves as agents of change. These programs should create ways and means of raising social awareness and empowerment as well as reward or recognition for initiative and commitment to positive social change by youth.

6. Emerging Issues

Priorities - Global Consciousness

The promotion of Canadian values and interests abroad has been a longstanding goal that has shaped Canadian foreign policy. In the document "A Dialogue on Foreign Policy" the Department of Foreign Affairs points to global changes that are creating challenges and opportunities and notes that "Canadians recognize that doing what is right for others is most often in our long-term interest." [13]

Recognition that the good of the part is best secured through the good of the whole signals a growing awareness of the organic oneness of humanity: that beyond all the differences that define groups and peoples, humanity is one people, infinite in the diversity of its constituent parts. This in turn requires an expansion of loyalty and sense of belonging beyond the family and the local, ethnic, religious, linguistic, racial or political community to all of humankind. The realization of the oneness of humanity provides the foundation for a vision of a peaceful and just global society. [14]

Goal

Give increased attention to fostering in children and youth a global consciousness and the development of the values, skills and capacities required for world citizenship. [15] Among

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13 A Dialogue on Foreign Policy, Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada as represented by the Minister of Foreign Affairs 2003, page 4.

14 "The greatest challenge facing the world community ... is to release the enormous financial, technical, human and moral resources required for sustainable development. These resources will be freed up only as the peoples of the world develop a profound sense of responsibility for the fate of the planet and for the well being of the entire human family. This sense of responsibility can only emerge from the acceptance of the oneness of humanity and will only be sustained by a unifying vision of a peaceful, prosperous world society. Without such a global ethic, people will be unable to become active, constructive participants in the world-wide process of sustainable development." The Bahá'í International Community, World Citizenship A Global Ethic for Sustainable Development (New York: Bahá'í International Community).

15 "World citizenship begins with acceptance of the oneness of the human family and recognition of the interconnectedness of the nations of 'the earth, our home.' While it encourages a sane and legitimate patriotism, it also insists upon a wider loyalty, a love of humanity as a whole. It does not imply abandonment of legitimate loyalties, the suppression of cultural diversity, the abolition of national autonomy, nor the imposition of uniformity. Its hallmark is "unity in diversity." World citizenship encompasses the principles of social and economic justice, both within and among nations; non-adversarial decision making at all levels of society; equality of the sexes; racial, ethnic, national and religious harmony; and the willingness to sacrifice for the common good. Other facets of world

the most critical elements of strategies to achieve this goal would be the linking of social justice to the process of consultation.[16]

Strategies
Foster in families and communities deeper recognition of the positive role of children and youth as community development agents and promoters of the oneness of humanity.

Promote and develop media campaigns that model the values, skills and capacities of world citizenship through the lives and actions of everyday children and youth. (See Footnote 14)

Support the broadcasting in Canada of children's television programming produced in 'southern' countries.

Provide incentives to religious communities and other community groups to support exchange service programs for junior youth and youth within Canada and overseas.

Encourage school districts, religious communities and other community organizations to draw on materials, such as the curriculum available through the United Nations Association of Canada and the 'Belonging' resources that have been produced by the Department of Citizenship and Immigration.

CONCLUSION

If we are to create a world fit for children, many problems will need to be addressed through scientific knowledge and material means. For these interventions to be effective over the long term, something further is required. The spiritual dimension of human nature and the organic oneness of humankind need to be recognized and addressed in policies and programs supporting the moral, emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual development of children and youth. Research in support of this initiative will necessarily include the knowledge found in the scriptures of the world's religions among the knowledge traditions consulted. It is to this priority that the preceding commentary is addressed.

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citizenship - all of which promote human honor and dignity, understanding, amity, cooperation, trustworthiness, compassion and a desire to serve - can be deduced from those already mentioned."

World Citizenship: A Global Ethic for Sustainable Development. A statement by the Bahá'í International Community to the 4th Pacific Islands Leaders Conference, based on a concept paper by the same name presented to the 1st session of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, 14 June 1993.

16 "… consultation is the operating expression of justice in human affairs. So vital is it to the success of collective endeavor that it must constitute a basic feature of a viable strategy of social and economic development." Bahá'í International Community, The Prosperity of Humankind, page 10.