Youth Participation in Decision Making

The Bahá'í community of Canada is a religious community dedicated to promoting the betterment of society. Working with thousands of youth of all ages and backgrounds to develop their talents and capacities is a central feature of our efforts to further this aim. Our experience is yielding insights into the process of youth empowerment and participation in society, and this paper is an initial effort to discuss some of these insights and contribute to the broader discourse on the role of youth in society.

Some characteristics of youth empowerment in relation to decision-making

In the public discourse on youth leadership in Ontario, the discussion on empowering youth is often connected to increasing their participation in decision-making processes. Little attention is given, however, to the capacities that need to be developed to make youth effective in this regard. This paper will look at some of these capacities and how they can be fostered.

A number of mechanisms have been used to engage youth in decision-making processes. Youth councils, youth-led media, youth advisory boards, and youth-led community development activities—operating within schools, at the neighbourhood, municipal and provincial level, through organizations in both the public and private sector—are but a few examples of spaces that have been opened for youth involvement. While the creation of these opportunities for youth to participate in decision-making structures and processes is laudable, attention also needs to be directed towards preparing young people to participate meaningfully in a range of social spaces where decisions are made. In this connection, a few questions must be considered: What constitutes a sound decision? What capacities are required to contribute effectively to sound

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decisions? What capacities are required to promote the wellbeing of others? Is the habit of making decisions, by itself, a practice that empowers young people?

The period of youth is associated with the development of new powers, which lead many young people to aspire to make some contribution to positive social change. However, these powers can be misdirected or manipulated when not channeled into meaningful contributions to social wellbeing. When given the opportunity to express their noble thoughts and aspirations in service to others, young people are able to develop the qualities, attitudes, skills and abilities that will serve them throughout their lives.

All too often, the notion of a powerful individual is associated with the capacity to compete, to dominate and to manipulate, or merely to accomplish one's own goals or serve one's self-interest. In contrast, the Baha'i teachings call on youth to develop "spiritual powers," to "…crush the forces of error and ignorance and to unfurl the standard of fellowship and guidance amidst the people." These "powers" are associated with the development of human capacity and potential, which reach their fullest expression when channeled toward the betterment of society. In the context of its programs, therefore, the Baha'i community has associated the concepts of "power" and "empowerment" with the capacity to cooperate, to unify, and to overcome prejudice. These are among the capacities that need to be considered in the broader conversation about youth leadership and the role of youth in decision-making processes.

Developing capacity to participate in decision-making processes

Our approach to youth empowerment has been aided by reflection on the capacities we wish to nurture in young people as they engage in community-building activities. Learning to identify the moral issues underlying the choices they make constitutes one such capacity. When young people are encouraged to make decisions without having developed this capacity, we have noticed an inclination to weigh decisions in light of personal preference and experience, the implications of which are explored later in this paper. What we seek to explore, then, is the nature of an educational process that empowers young people to take charge of their own development and contribute to social progress. How can these noble desires be actively cultivated in young people? How is the

capacity to recognize the moral implications of speech and action relevant, and important? How is the capacity to make moral choices being nurtured?

As young people are empowered to take charge of their personal development and contribute to the welfare of society, this sense of purpose finds expression in service to others. We are finding that a process of empowerment must concern itself with equipping youth with the qualities, attitudes, skills and abilities needed to contribute to the public good. This includes nurturing such powers as fair-minded discussion and sincere cooperation. While these can be considered tools of decision-making, they also gradually transform a decision-making process from one that centers on struggle over the ideas of an individual or group into collective deliberation on the welfare of the whole.

A key concept that has informed efforts of the Baha'i community to raise capacity in young people to contribute to decision-making processes is the investigation of reality. Developing the capacity to read one's social reality with increasing accuracy plays an important role when making decisions that affect a community. By this, we mean that developing analytical skills involves identifying both the constructive and destructive forces operating in one's environments, and learning to distinguish truth from falsehood. Such analytical skills pay particular attention to propaganda of various kinds, which are increasingly shaping the values, attitudes and views of young people. Young people's contributions to decision making are enhanced when young people appreciate the impact of social forces on themselves and those in their social environments.

Another concept that has shaped our efforts in the area of collective decision-making is participation. Reality is infinitely complex, and to describe it at higher levels of accuracy, allowing for sounder decision-making, requires the participation and shared perspectives of growing numbers of people. A decision-making process, while beginning with a few, cannot stay limited to the participation of a stagnant core, no matter how capable or well-intentioned the individuals are. For growing numbers to become involved, an environment of care and genuine respect needs to be fostered. It also requires from its members a detachment from personal views and an ability to listen carefully, without prejudice, to the thoughts of others, weighing them in light of moral and ethical

principles. While each perspective is valued and contributes to the richness of a discussion, emphasis should be placed on collective inquiry and the common good. Therefore, rather than focusing on the development of a single person or group to the exclusion of others, we are learning that a process of empowerment must be oriented towards promoting justice for the generality of people.

The capacity to identify destructive social forces operating in a community and to recognize the influence they exert on their thoughts and actions can enhance the ability of young people to resist them. Individualism, in emphasizing personal liberty as the highest of all social values, is just one example of a social force operating in our society that influences the values of young people. Paradoxically, although pursuing one's own desires supposedly brings more pleasure to the individual, it often leads to loneliness, alienation, and social injustice—as collective efforts are often dominated by those with strong personalities. As burgeoning powers become accessible to young people, it is important that they find meaningful expression in effort to work for the common good. In an age consumed by self-interest and the unbridled expression of personal opinion, even service to others is often weighed in the scales of personal reward. So powerful is the operation of this force within schools, peer groups and society in general that we have often encountered questions of this nature (such as, "What's in it for me?") posed by even those youth who are deeply concerned with the wellbeing of others, when given the opportunity to participate in our programs.

It is natural, especially in an unpredictable social and economic climate, that young people would want to ensure that they spend their time wisely, giving adequate time to preparing for their future. Media and a variety of social institutions remind youth that they need to be concerned about their future careers, which is not incorrect. However, when this desire for personal gain becomes so all-consuming that service to others is viewed through the lens of selfish advantage, our experience is that it is unlikely to lead to meaningful change, because individuals will not continue to serve others when it becomes difficult. In this connection, we ask ourselves: What makes young people weigh service to others in terms of personal gain? What happens when young people are motivated by self-interest to serve others? What observable differences would there be between a young person who is motivated to serve their

community out of a desire to contribute to it and a young person who is motivated by personal gain?

Materialism and self-indulgence are two more examples of forces that have dominated visions of human progress in society. For instance, the materialistic forces that govern propaganda have created the illusion that happiness comes from the acquisition of new products and technologies. How might such a conviction shape one's perception of strength and accomplishment? How might it influence thinking about what constitutes a strong community, or one that is in need? How might it shape a perspective of the needs of an individual, family, or community? These are just a few questions that help us to identify the influence of social forces on decision-making processes. One observation is that it conditions people to reduce their reading and description of the reality of an environment to its material and physical dimensions. For example, while the development of the physical environment—through the addition of gardens and parks and the acquisition of sports equipment and tools for arts and craft—is a necessary consideration of any community, the ability of a community to reach and sustain its goals also relies on the operation of the many positive forces that exist and bind together populations, such as unity, justice, love, and trust. We seek insight into the power to identify and draw on these constructive forces in nurturing a process of collective decision-making and action. How, otherwise, are goals to be met or instances of progress to be sustained if a community has not achieved some level of unity of thought on the subject of its needs?

Our experience in working with thousands of young people has demonstrated the intrinsic value of helping them to assume greater responsibility for the affairs of their community. We agree that youth empowerment can include taking on leadership roles through participation in decision-making processes. However, as we have described, the promotion of youth participation in decision-making needs to be accompanied by a sound and coherent process of capacity-building. In this respect, we all have a great deal to learn.

The Bahá'í community of Canada collaborates with a number of people to help develop contributions to thought on issues of social concern.

This paper represents thinking that is helping to inform the work of our community to participate in Canadian public discourses. This is not a position paper or official statement from the Bahá'í community, but rather a set of reflections that draws insight from the Bahá'í teachings and the experience of the community as we seek to apply them to the betterment of society.

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