

Readings on

**Bahá'í Social
& Economic
Development**

Readings on Bahá'í Social & Economic Development



Palabra Publications

Published November 2000

Palabra Publications
3735 B Shares Place
Riviera Beach, Florida 33404
USA
1-561-845-1919
1-561-845-0126
palabrapub@aol.com
www.palabrapublications.com



eBook version 1.0

Social and economic development efforts are undertaken by Bahá'ís, irrespective of the degree of material prosperity achieved by their nations, as they strive to apply the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh to the gradual process of building a new civilization.

—The Universal House of Justice

Contents

[Preface](#)

[1. Letter of October 20, 1983](#)

[2. Bahá'í Social And Economic Development: Prospects for the Future](#) 16 September 1993

[3. The Evolution of Institutional Capacity for Social and Economic Development](#) 28 August 1994

[4. The Prosperity of Humankind](#)

[5. A Clarification of Some Issues Concerning Social and Economic Development in Local and National Communities](#) November 1999

Preface

Gathered in this book are the major documents on Bahá'í social and economic development received from the Bahá'í World Centre to date. The first is the October 20, 1983 message of the Universal House of Justice introducing Bahá'í social and economic development. The second, "Bahá'í Social and Economic Development: Prospects for the Future," written ten years later and approved by the House of Justice, analyzes the first decade of experience in development activities and provides a framework for more systematic action. The third document, "The Evolution of Institutional Capacity for Social and Economic Development," was prepared the following year by the Office of Social and Economic Development at the World Centre. It describes two types of organizational arrangements that have emerged in the Bahá'í world capable of undertaking increasingly complex development efforts—training institutes and Bahá'í-inspired agencies. The fourth, "The Prosperity of Humankind," was issued by the Bahá'í International Community's Office of Public Information and disseminated at the United Nations' 1995 World Summit for Social Development held in Copenhagen, Denmark. It offers a vision of social and economic development based on Bahá'í concepts. Finally, the fifth and latest document, "A Clarification of Some Issues Concerning Social and Economic Development in Local and National Communities," was prepared by the Office of Social and Economic Development to respond to a number of questions that have arisen over the past few years. It touches on such issues as degrees of complexity in development activity, the relationship between teaching and development, and participation in development projects.

Study of these five documents would not be complete without a detailed examination of the nature and purpose of training institutes, since these agencies hold great potential for raising up human resources for development programs. Thus the book, *Training Institutes*, also compiled by Palabra Publications, serves as a companion to this volume.

The above-mentioned documents have not been compiled here merely because of their historical interest. They contain the mandate for current and future action. On November 26, 1999, the Universal House of Justice sent a message with far-reaching implications to the Bahá'ís of the world, charting a course to the year 2021 that marks the conclusion of the first century of the Faith's Formative Age. Surely, activities for social and economic development will be an integral component of the efforts of Bahá'í communities during these critical years. For, as the House of Justice explains, a Bahá'í community is a "comprehensive unit of civilization composed of individuals, families and institutions that are originators and encouragers of systems, agencies and organizations working together with a common purpose for the welfare of people both within and beyond its own borders." A reading of the documents in this volume offers insight into the challenges of the coming two decades in the area of social and economic development. Among these challenges are:

- learning about development through action, reflection on action, consultation, the systematization of experience, and training—all carried out in the light of the Teachings;
- increasing the involvement of individuals and institutions in social and economic development according to the needs and resources of their communities;
- understanding and maintaining the complementary relationship between activities for teaching and for social and economic development;
- integrating Bahá'í social and economic development with the spiritual, social, and intellectual life of Bahá'í communities;
- learning how to influence society through collaboration with like-minded organizations and programs;
- raising up an increasing number of human resources capable of becoming effective protagonists in the spiritual and material advancement of their people;
- creating institutional capacity—whether in training institutes or in Bahá'í-inspired agencies—to undertake increasingly complex development endeavors;
- utilizing methods and approaches that have proven to be effective in order to carry out campaigns to reach large numbers of people in areas such as literacy, health and the advancement of women; and
- systematizing Bahá'í-inspired approaches to education and learning to influence the educational systems of a growing number of countries.

We hope that this book will be a useful tool for those believers who devote their energies to meeting such challenges in the years ahead.

Letter of October 20, 1983

*from the Universal House of Justice
to the Bahá'ís of the World*

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

- 1.1 The soul-stirring events in Bahá'u'lláh's native land and the concomitant advance into the theater of world affairs of the agencies of His Administrative Order have combined to bring into focus new possibilities in the evolution of the Bahá'í world community. Our Ridván message this year captured these implications in its reference to the opening before us of a wider horizon in whose light can dimly be discerned new pursuits and undertakings upon which we must soon embark. These portend our greater involvement in the development of the social and economic life of peoples.
- 1.2 From the beginning of His stupendous mission, Bahá'u'lláh urged upon the attention of nations the necessity of ordering human affairs in such a way as to bring into being a world unified in all the essential aspects of its life. In unnumbered verses and tablets He repeatedly and variously declared the "progress of the world" and the "development of nations" as being among the ordinances of God for this day. The oneness of mankind, which is at once the operating principle and ultimate goal of His Revelation, implies the achievement of a dynamic coherence between the spiritual and practical requirements of life on earth. The indispensability of this coherence is unmistakably illustrated in His ordination of the Mashríqu'l-Adhikár, the spiritual centre of every Bahá'í community round which must flourish dependencies dedicated to the social, humanitarian, educational and scientific advancement of mankind. Thus, we can readily appreciate that although it has hitherto been impracticable for Bahá'í institutions generally to emphasize development activities, the concept of social and economic development is enshrined in the sacred Teachings of our Faith. The beloved Master, through His illuminating words and deeds, set the example for the application of this concept to the reconstruction of society. Witness, for instance, what social and economic progress the Iranian believers attained under His loving guidance and, subsequently, with the unfailing encouragement of the Guardian of the Cause.
- 1.3 Now, after all the years of constant teaching activity, the community of the Greatest Name has grown to the stage at which the processes of this development must be incorporated into its regular pursuits; particularly is action compelled by the expansion of the Faith in Third World countries where the vast majority of its adherents reside. The steps to be taken must necessarily begin in the Bahá'í Community itself, with the friends endeavoring, through their application of spiritual principles, their rectitude of conduct and the practice of the art of consultation, to uplift themselves and thus become self-sufficient and self-reliant. Moreover, these exertions will conduce to the preservation of human honor, so desired by Bahá'u'lláh. In the process and as a consequence, the friends will undoubtedly extend the benefits of their efforts to society as a whole, until all mankind achieves the progress intended by the Lord of the Age.
- 1.4 It is indeed propitious that systematic attention be given to this vital sphere of Bahá'í endeavor. We are happy, therefore, to announce the establishment at the World Centre of the Office of Social and Economic Development, which is to assist the Universal House of Justice to promote and coordinate the activities of the friends throughout the world in this new field.
- 1.5 The International Teaching Centre and, through it, the Continental Boards of Counselors are poised for the special responsibilities which devolve upon them to be alert to possibilities for extending the development of social and economic life both within and outside the Bahá'í Community, and to advise and encourage the Assemblies and friends in their strivings.
- 1.6 We call now upon National Spiritual Assemblies to consider the implications of this emerging trend for their respective communities, and to take well-conceived measures to involve the thought and actions of Local Spiritual Assemblies and individuals in the devising and implementing of plans, within the constraints of existing circumstances and available resources. Progress in the development field will largely depend on natural stirrings at the grassroots, and it should receive its driving force from those sources rather than from an imposition of plans and programs from the top. The major task of National Assemblies, therefore, is to increase the local communities' awareness of needs and possibilities, and to guide and coordinate the efforts resulting from such awareness. Already in many areas the friends are witnessing the confirmations of their initiatives in such pursuits as the founding of tutorial and other schools, the promotion of literacy, the launching of rural development programs, the inception of educational radio stations, and the operation of agricultural and medical projects. As they enlarge the scope of their endeavors other modes of development will undoubtedly emerge.

- 1.7 This challenge evokes the resourcefulness, flexibility and cohesiveness of the many communities composing the Bahá'í world. Different communities will, of course, perceive different approaches and different solutions to similar needs. Some can offer assistance abroad, while, at the outset, others must of necessity receive assistance; but all, irrespective of circumstances or resources, are endowed with the capacity to respond in some measure; all can share; all can participate in the joint enterprise of applying more systematically the principles of the Faith to upraising the quality of human life. The key to success is unity in spirit and in action.
- 1.8 We go forward confident that the wholehearted involvement of the friends in these activities will ensure a deeper consolidation of the community at all levels. Our engagement in the technical aspects of development should, however, not be allowed to supplant the essentials of teaching, which remains the primary duty of every follower of Bahá'u'lláh. Rather should our increased activities in the development field be viewed as a reinforcement of the teaching work, as a greater manifestation of faith in action. For, if expansion of the teaching work does not continue, there can be no hope of success for this enlarged dimension of the consolidation process.
- 1.9 Ultimately, the call to action is addressed to the individual friends, whether they be adult or youth, veteran or newly-enrolled. Let them step forth to take their places in the arena of service where their talents and skills, their specialized training, their material resources, their offers of time and energy and, above all, their dedication to Bahá'í principles, can be put to work in improving the lot of man.
- 1.10 May all derive enduring inspiration from the following statement written in 1933 by the hand of our beloved Guardian:
- 1.11 "The problems which confront the believers at the present time, whether social, spiritual, economic or administrative will be gradually solved as the number and the resources of the friends multiply and their capacity for service and for the application of Bahá'í principles develops. They should be patient, confident and active in utilizing every possible opportunity that presents itself within the limits now necessarily imposed upon them. May the Almighty aid them to fulfill their highest hopes."

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

The Universal House of Justice

Bahá'í Social And Economic Development: Prospects for the Future

16 September 1993

*A statement approved by the Universal House of Justice
for use in orienting and guiding the work of
Bahá'í social and economic development throughout the world*

A. THE DIRECTION OF BAHÁ'Í SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- 2.1 In its message of 20 October 1983 to the Bahá'í world, the Universal House of Justice called for the incorporation of social and economic development processes into the regular pursuits of the community of the Greatest Name. During the past ten years, many communities have responded to this call and a considerable number of projects—mostly in education but also several in health, agriculture and community development—are now being actively pursued. A few of these projects have achieved the stature of development organizations with reasonably complex programmatic structures and significant spheres of influence. Beyond the successes of this collection of projects and organizations, however, the most valuable outcome of the devoted efforts of the believers in this field has been the accumulated knowledge on how to operationalize a distinctively Bahá'í approach to social and economic development. The October 1983 message set out some of the most noteworthy elements of this approach, among which are the following:
- 2.2 • The oneness of mankind, which is at once the operating principle and ultimate goal of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, implies the achievement of a dynamic coherence between the spiritual and practical requirements of life on earth.
- 2.3 • The challenge of engaging in social and economic development evokes the resourcefulness, flexibility and cohesiveness of the many communities composing the Bahá'í world.
- 2.4 • The first steps to be taken must necessarily begin in the Bahá'í community itself, with the friends endeavoring, through their application of spiritual principles, their rectitude of conduct, and the practice of the art of consultation, to uplift themselves and thus become self-sufficient and self-reliant.
- 2.5 • Progress in the development field will depend largely on natural stirrings at the grass roots, and should receive its driving force from those sources rather than from an imposition of plans and programs from the top.
- 2.6 • All, irrespective of circumstances or resources, are endowed with the capacity to respond in some measure to this challenge, for all can participate in the joint enterprise of applying more systematically the principles of the Faith to raising the quality of human life.
- 2.7 • Activities in the development field should be viewed as a reinforcement of the teaching work, as a greater manifestation of faith in action.
- 2.8 • The wholehearted involvement of the friends in these activities will ensure a deeper consolidation of the community at all levels.
- 2.9 • The key to success is unity in spirit and in action.
- 2.10 • The experience gained during the past ten years is now sufficiently broad to allow the Bahá'í community to systematically expand the number and range of its social and economic development activities in the years to come. In this respect, a number of ideas merit careful consideration.

1. Degrees of complexity

- 2.11 In general, social and economic development projects at the grass roots best begin with a relatively simple set of actions. The friends should be allowed to gain experience from, and increase the range of, their activities naturally, without undue pressure from opinions that are often based solely on theoretical considerations. A tutorial school, for example, can in principle become a centre for activities such as health education, family counseling and reforestation, but in most cases, it is advisable for it to start simply as a school focusing all its resources on the children it proposes to serve. Insistence on initial simplicity of action at the local level does not, of course, contradict the inherent complexity of the development process itself. In fact, to raise local action to a reasonable level of effectiveness it is necessary to gradually develop

corresponding structures in the micro-region, the region, and the nation itself capable of dealing with increasing degrees of theoretical and administrative complexity. Otherwise social and economic development runs the danger of being reduced to a set of laudable activities lacking the coherence and integration which are indispensable for consistent progress.

2. Capacity building

- 2.12 It has often been said that development is not a product to be delivered by the “developed” to the “underdeveloped”. Rather, it is a process the main protagonists of which have to be the people themselves. The greatest concern of Bahá’í projects has to be the development of the friends’ capacity to make decisions about their spiritual and material progress and then to implement them. In an ideal project, while concrete action is directed towards visible improvement of some aspect of life, success is measured by the impact these actions have on the capacity of the community and its institutions to address development issues at increasingly higher levels of complexity and effectiveness.
- 2.13 In this context, the relationship between development and delivery of services needs to be examined. For Bahá’ís, of course, service is a basic principle of human existence; every act, every personal or community project, is to be carried out in the spirit of service. It is impossible to imagine a Bahá’í social and economic development project that does not operate on the principle of service. Nonetheless, the delivery of services should not be viewed as the main purpose of Bahá’í development undertakings. Approaches to development centered on the donation of goods and services, so characteristic of traditional religious charity and the programs of the welfare state, are known to have debilitating effects and often lead to paralysis. In the villages of the world, the Bahá’í community should become the spearhead of spiritual, social and economic transformation. A village does not develop merely because it receives simple services in primary health and sanitation, in primary education or in agricultural extension structured around credit and technological packages.

3. Learning

- 2.14 Central to the capacity of a Bahá’í community to lead a process of transformation is the ability of its members and institutions to apply the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh to various aspects of life and thereby establish consistent patterns of change. In fact, learning to apply the Teachings to achieve progress could be taken as the very definition of Bahá’í social and economic development. Such learning has to occur locally, regionally, nationally and internationally and become the axis around which our development efforts are organized at all levels.
- 2.15 Learning in this sense is not limited to study and evaluation. It comes about in combination with action. The believers must regularly engage in consultation, action, reflection—all in the light of the guidance inherent in the Teachings of the Faith. Such a learning process can occur in a very simple manner at the village and local level, but with greater sophistication by national agencies and institutions. At the international level, it calls for a higher degree of conceptualization, one that takes account of the broader processes of global transformation as described in the Writings and serves to adjust the overall direction of development activities in each country accordingly.

4. Development of Human Resources

- 2.16 Learning and the building of capacity are closely linked to the development of human resources. That development ideas and projects are not imposed from above, and that institutions are to respond to aspirations and initiatives at the grass roots, are established characteristics of Bahá’í development. However, the vigilant application of these principles does not imply that no initiative can be taken from the top. Proven and well-conceived programs and approaches to development can be promoted nationally or internationally, primarily through training. Training methods would, of course, have to foster participation and be carried out with a humble attitude towards learning. Otherwise, training tends to produce a cadre of individuals who are slaves to a given way of doing things.
- 2.17 Moreover, the need for development of human resources is not limited to the direct participants in the actual projects. Thousands of Bahá’í youth in colleges and universities throughout the world, as well as an increasing number of professionals working in fields related to social and economic development, should be encouraged to participate in a worldwide learning process designed to grow in size and range. Indeed, Bahá’í development projects may be seen as sites where training is provided for an increasing number of individuals from both materially poor and wealthy nations and from various sectors of society.

5. Influencing Society

- 2.18 Irrespective of whether or not an individual who has benefited from a period of collaboration with a development project finally becomes directly involved in such projects, the ability to apply the Teachings

of Bahá'u'lláh to the affairs of society—learned in action—constitutes a valuable asset for his or her future efforts to serve and influence society. Development projects in themselves offer great opportunities to the friends to become involved in the life of society in ways that far transcend efforts to improve the lot of a few people. Openness to collaboration with people of capacity and leaders of thought concerned with issues of progress, and willingness and ability to invite them to participate in applying the Teachings to specific problems, have to be created at all levels, if we are to fully exploit this dimension of our development endeavors.

6. Integration

- 2.19 Certain lessons that have been learned in the larger society need to be incorporated into Bahá'í thinking about social and economic development. Paramount among these is the inescapable need for integration. Experience has shown that fragmented activities in various fields such as health, education, agriculture, or industrial development do not lead to sustainable development. The knowledge that should be brought to bear on development problems of the communities of the world does not fit in a single discipline. Effective development unequivocally calls for coordinated interdisciplinary and multi-sectorial action.
- 2.20 The idea of integral development may seem to contradict the principle enunciated above that grass roots action must begin simply and in a way that can be managed by the community itself. However, this apparent contradiction disappears if local action is seen as a means for building capacity. In this case it does not matter with which activity the development of a community actually begins; complexity will arise naturally in an organic way. What is to be avoided is the artificial fragmentation created by separate programs set in motion in a given population by professionals in specific disciplines, each ignoring the knowledge and experience of other groups, each competing for resources and for the constant attention of the people they are to serve.
- 2.21 For Bahá'í programs integration poses an additional challenge. Within the Bahá'í framework, material progress cannot be separated from spiritual development. Social and economic development endeavors have to be carried out in the more general context of the expansion and consolidation of the Faith. When this does not occur, when the various institutions that serve the local community are not well aware of each others' efforts and do not consult on the nature and the range of their activities, development projects become difficult to manage. Divorced from the basic processes of the expansion and consolidation of the Faith, Bahá'í social and economic development cannot prosper and is prone to failure.
- 2.22 In our zeal to pursue social and economic development in the context of expansion and consolidation we should avoid a pitfall that leads to the dissipation of energy and confusion: impressed by the interconnectedness of all the factors that lead to community development, one may be tempted to define social and economic development as a synonym for the development of the Bahá'í community. According to such a definition, all efforts to develop the community, including the establishment of the Nineteen Day Feast, the holding of classes for the spiritual education of children, and the strengthening of Local and National Assemblies and their agencies, would have to be regarded as social and economic development projects. Such a broad definition overlooks the fact that the growth of the Bahá'í community is the result of a number of interacting processes, each directed by various institutions of the Administrative Order and their agencies in collaboration with one another. Social and economic development is only one component and must play a particular role in the growth process.

B. THE OFFICE OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- 2.23 The observations made in the previous section suggest the gradual establishment in each national community of channels through which institutions, agencies and organizations can serve the needs of the friends in their efforts to apply the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh to achieve material progress for themselves and their people. What flows through these channels is primarily learning, although the extending of financial support and the offering of guidance to solve problems that arise naturally through community action are also important.
- 2.24 The Office of Social and Economic Development (OSED) in Haifa assists the Universal House of Justice in the promotion and coordination of Bahá'í social and economic development worldwide. The primary purpose of OSED is to facilitate learning about development by fostering and supporting action, reflection on action, study, consultation, the gathering and systematization of experience, conceptualization, and training—all carried out in the light of the Teachings of the Faith. Ensuring that material resources become increasingly available to Bahá'í development efforts, coordinating the international flow of such resources and administering some of the funds intended for projects are also important functions of OSED.
- 2.25 Individuals and institutions frequently seek advice from OSED on how to design, implement and promote social and economic development projects. Based on the knowledge generated through the analysis of

substantive reports and the documentation of systematic advances in the Bahá'í experience of development, OSED is able to offer these individuals and institutions guidance and share with them the results of the learning occurring in the Bahá'í community.

2.26 As projects grow in size and complexity, whether they are under the direct aegis of National Spiritual Assemblies or administered by Bahá'í-inspired organizations enjoying the guidance and support of the institutions of the Faith, OSED's relationship with them often becomes more involved and demanding. In order to interact effectively with major Bahá'í programs and organizations, OSED invites individuals, experienced in the field of development, to collaborate with it, each in promoting the progress of one particular organization. In his or her role as a collaborator, such an individual assumes a number of responsibilities on behalf of OSED. Chief among these is to help the organization establish a clear vision of itself, its role and its purpose, a vision which will be periodically reexamined, modified and restated in keeping with the progress of the Faith in the region. According to this evolving vision, well-defined strategies are to be devised and regularly adjusted. On the basis of these strategies, projects are created along diverse lines of action and appropriate proposals are developed and properly presented to various agencies, both within and outside the country, for financing or other assistance. The designated collaborator also assists in developing a flexible organizational structure, one free of contradictions, with clear channels for decision-making, appropriate instruments for implementation, and adequate methods for evaluation. All of these tasks are, of course, to be carried out under the guidance of the National Spiritual Assembly and in consultation with the Counsellors, whose vital roles in this respect have been set forth in the 20 October 1983 message from the Universal House of Justice.

2.27 It is hoped that by facilitating direct contact among its collaborators, OSED will be able to develop an informal network through which experiences can be shared and learning can occur in a natural way. The existence of such a network of individuals, a number of whom will have their own contacts with funding sources, will significantly broaden the basis for the interaction of the Bahá'í community with donor agencies. These individuals will also help put university students and professionals interested in social and economic development in contact with Bahá'í programs so that, over time, an increasing number of these programs and organizations offer training through internships of various durations.

2.28 In addition to offering collaborative support to major programs and organizations, it is expected that OSED will itself promote, on an international scale, certain approaches and methodologies to development that have proven to be effective. For example, during the past few years a highly effective approach to literacy has emerged. A worldwide campaign is envisioned in which, in country after country, a group of selected individuals are familiarized with the underlying concepts of the approach and are asked to adapt its methods and prepare materials for use in their own country. Subsequently, these same individuals can train others to act as facilitators of literacy classes, so that classes can be established in hundreds of localities throughout the country. Likewise, in primary health care, excellent experience has been gained in recent years. This experience can now be analyzed, the appropriate methods and materials can be defined, and again, in country after country, the training of health workers can be vigorously pursued.

C. MAJOR AREAS OF ACTION

2.29 The major areas of action OSED is to pursue in the coming years include education, literacy, primary health care, and sustainable rural development. As mentioned above, literacy and primary health care are to be addressed by focusing on regional training campaigns. As for integral rural development, this is a field in which systematic Bahá'í experience is scarce. However, there is a great deal of valuable experience outside the Faith, and with the help of certain Bahá'í individuals who are known and accepted in the field, it is possible to gather the necessary knowledge, analyze it and make a beginning in this essential area of development. What is called for is not a complex development scheme but a path of action of increasing complexity that can lead to the establishment of programs of integral, sustainable development at the level of the micro-region.

2.30 There can be no doubt that education will continue to be the greatest concern of Bahá'í social and economic development endeavors throughout the world in the foreseeable future. Three interrelated areas—Bahá'í schools, special programs for junior youth and moral education—merit special attention.

2.31 Experience has shown that there are at least three challenges Bahá'í schools must face in various stages of their development. The first has to do with the functioning of the school—the organization of its physical space, the selection of an acceptable program, and the erection of a working academic and administrative structure. This has proven to be a formidable task for most schools and has required an inordinate amount of time and energy. With the experience gained over the past decade, however, it is now possible to develop a set of guidelines to help Bahá'í schools, whether privately owned or belonging to the institutions, to meet this challenge with greater ease.

2.32 A second challenge is related to the process by which the Bahá'í character of the school becomes manifest.

This is usually addressed in terms of the atmosphere of the school, relationships among people and extra-curricular activities. An hour or two of courses, vaguely described as moral education, are also offered at this stage. It is interesting to note that even with small changes in a few components of the educational process, Bahá'í schools become known for their standards of excellence and enjoy considerable esteem in the communities within which they operate.

2.33 A third challenge, scarcely addressed until now, concerns the development of Bahá'í-inspired curricula. The approach to such a development has to be uniquely suited to the conditions and opportunities of the worldwide Bahá'í community. It is unreasonable to expect that Bahá'í education will be invented by a group of individuals immersed in academia, no matter how profound their knowledge of the Faith and of education. The gradual development of contents and methods of Bahá'í education will most probably occur as the result of the diverse activities of an increasing number of educators working in varied cultural and ecological settings throughout the world. Systematic research and high quality academic study are called for, not as isolated activities, but as components, albeit important ones, of a process in which the design of curricula is closely connected with educational practice and systematization of educational experience. The role of OSED in fostering such a process is crucial. Any effort to ignore it by introducing, for example, the concept of a universal core curriculum at too early a stage would be counterproductive.

2.34 Significant as Bahá'í schools are, to concentrate all our energies on their development does not constitute a sound strategy. As the educational systems of the world collapse, the demands of educational establishments—beginning with villages, towns, and municipalities and soon reaching entire countries—for new content and for teacher training will rise dramatically. With the same effort that is spent to build and maintain one Bahá'í school, hundreds of teachers belonging to official systems can be trained how to include in their daily activities several educational elements inspired by the Faith. In two areas—namely, moral education and the preparation of youth and junior youth for future life—the opportunities for Bahá'í influence are almost unlimited.

The Evolution of Institutional Capacity for Social and Economic Development

28 August 1994

*prepared by the Office of Social and Economic Development
at the Bahá'í World Centre*

- 3.1 Bahá'í social and economic development focuses on increasing the capacity of the friends to make decisions about the spiritual and material progress of their communities and then implement them. While such development activities provide services that lead to a visible improvement in some aspect of life, their ultimate success is measured by the degree to which they enhance the ability to address issues of development at increasingly higher levels of complexity and effectiveness. This applies not only to individuals and communities but also to institutions. As development efforts grow, organizational structures should evolve to meet new challenges and opportunities.
- 3.2 The role of Bahá'í institutions in this process of social and economic development begins at its earliest stages. Local projects are initiated and administered directly by Local Spiritual Assemblies. A National Spiritual Assembly may appoint a national social and economic development committee, which, in the context of its work to stimulate grassroots efforts, also initiates a few projects. An education committee may start a tutorial school, or an institute process may expand by including training sessions in agriculture or health. In each of these cases, the institution or agency involved gains experience and provides guidance necessary to ensure the project's success. This is the first level of institutional support for social and economic development.
- 3.3 Over time projects become more complex. As development efforts evolve, local and national communities need to increase their institutional capacity to deal with them. In examining Bahá'í social and economic development projects around the world, the Office of Social and Economic Development has identified two types of organizational arrangements which are noteworthy. Both enhance institutional capacity and either increase the maturity of existing agencies or encourage the establishment of new ones capable of guiding development processes.
- 3.4 The first organizational pattern has emerged from the evolution of Bahá'í institutes for the development of human resources, on the one hand, and of Bahá'í schools for the formal education of children, on the other. Initially, in an effort to meet the demands of expansion and consolidation, national communities conduct deepening classes or organize weekend "institutes" for new believers. From among these somewhat random activities there emerge some with a more systematic form as regular training sessions are scheduled and series of courses on specific topics are developed. Eventually, one or more of these may lead to the creation of a permanent institute that serves either the entire country or one of its regions in the development of human resources. At this level of operation, the programs of the institute include a number of courses that build on one another to help enrich the spiritual life of the participants and enable them to perform specific acts of service such as engaging in teaching activities, giving deepening courses, teaching children's classes, and activating Bahá'í community life. Acts of service related to social and economic development, such as literacy, health and agriculture, may also be included. Training is not only provided at a central location, but teachers associated with the institute also travel to localities throughout the region or country and organize appropriate training activities.
- 3.5 In the early stage of its development, the permanent institute is often managed by a committee of the National Spiritual Assembly. However, as institute activities and programs become more complex, a National Spiritual Assembly may find it useful to give its institute an administrative structure that enjoys more continuity and autonomy by creating a board of directors to be in charge of it. The National Assembly formulates the vision, articulates the needs, establishes general parameters of action, and then allows the board to have a degree of independence to plan and to see that the work of the institute is carried out. The National Assembly provides support; the institute keeps the Assembly regularly informed of its activities. In this way, the Assembly and its committees do not become overburdened with the planning and monitoring of the institute's programs.
- 3.6 This structure of the permanent institute increases capacity to engage in social and economic development projects of reasonable size and complexity. The heart of the institute's programs continues to be the development of human resources. Yet in order for human resource development not to be isolated from the

practice of community development, the institute itself may be required to become involved in the management of actual projects. For the institute to have relevance to the Bahá'í community, it must, in all cases, carry out its projects in collaboration with the responsible administrative institutions.

- 3.7 The same organizational arrangement has emerged in national communities when a school for the formal education of children is established. In order to move beyond rudimentary forms of schools, institutional capacity is needed to deal with the development of specific curricula, the acquisition and maintenance of adequate facilities, the management of qualified staff, and the administration of educational processes. Again, the National Assembly may appoint a board to oversee the affairs of the school with a reasonable degree of independence.
- 3.8 A second type of organizational arrangement emerging for the enhancement of institutional capacity relates to the creation of Bahá'í-inspired agencies by groups of believers who share a common vision of service. Such an agency can be established as a non-governmental, non-profit organization for social and economic development. Regarding initiatives of this kind, a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice states:
- 3.9 As a national community grows, the activities undertaken by its members also increase in number and diversity. Some of these activities will be initiated and administered by the Bahá'í institutions. Others will fall in the realm of private initiative. When an initiative is in the form of a private business venture undertaken by an individual or a group, the institutions of the Faith have little reason to interfere with its daily affairs. In general, only if difficulties arise among the friends involved in such an enterprise, if their activities could damage the good name of the Faith, or if they misrepresent their relationship to the Faith, would a Local or National Spiritual Assembly intervene. Bahá'í institutions should, of course, welcome any effort by such private ventures to apply the Teachings to their operations and to use their position in society to further the interests of the Faith. Spiritual Assemblies would do well to offer them guidance as requested or as circumstances require, and to help them develop their potential for the advancement of the Cause....
- 3.10 The private initiatives of believers need not, however, be limited to business ventures. The laws of most societies allow for the establishment of non-profit organizations which, while private, are subject to special regulations and enjoy certain privileges. Customarily a board of trustees is responsible for all the affairs of such an organization and must ensure that its income is spent for the purpose stipulated in its by-laws. This board also oversees the functioning of the projects of the organization and the work of those who are in charge of them. An increasing number of believers around the world are taking advantage of this possibility and creating organizations dedicated to the application of Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings to the analysis and resolution of important social and economic issues. The House of Justice looks with keen interest on this growing phenomenon in the Bahá'í world. It only cautions the friends that in establishing such organizations they should exercise care not to become a burden on the institutions or unduly divert the contributions of the believers from the essential and primary tasks of supporting the Funds of the Faith and the activities of the institutions. It also expects them to conduct their affairs according to Bahá'í moral and ethical principles.
- 3.11 A question that often arises in relation to private organizations dedicated to social and economic development is whether they are "Bahá'í" or not. Such a question cannot be answered by a simple "yes" or "no". Clearly, the fact that they have their own management structures puts them in a different category from projects and organizations administered by Bahá'í institutions. In that sense they are not "Bahá'í" enterprises. In another sense, to the extent that they are owned and directed by Bahá'ís and strive to apply the Teachings and serve the purposes of the Cause, they may indeed be regarded as "Bahá'í". It is important to avoid the impression that participating in the projects of these organizations does not constitute legitimate service to the Cause. Otherwise sincere and devoted believers will be discouraged from engaging in activities that are "Bahá'í" in nature.
- 3.12 In creating agencies dedicated to social and economic development administered independently as Bahá'í-inspired organizations, the friends need to be concerned with the preparation of at least two types of documents.
- 3.13 One document, the by-laws, establishes the legal status of the organization. While suited to the specific legal requirements of a country, by-laws generally contain a statement of basic principles, the purpose or aims of the organization, the general methods by which the organization will accomplish its purpose, and the means to perpetuate the governing body. Since by-laws are basically created to achieve legal recognition, they may or may not directly associate the organization with the Bahá'í Faith and its Teachings, depending on existing circumstances.

- 3.14 In the case of organizations under the aegis of a National Spiritual Assembly, if it is found necessary for them to have a separate legal status, a similar document is needed. In these cases, it would be desirable for an agreement to be made between the National Assembly and the board stating that, while having the legal right to replace its own members according to its by-laws, the board will present its candidates to the Assembly for approval before doing so.
- 3.15 The second document with which the friends need to be concerned in both cases is a statement of purpose and philosophy, one that describes the principles and mission of the organization. Such a document needs to be written in the early stages of an organization's establishment. The statement of purpose and philosophy, which is specifically for sharing with the public or with other institutions, makes explicit references to the Bahá'í principles on which the organization is founded. Examples of such documents are attached, representing the Badi Foundation from Macau, *Health for Humanity* from the United States, and the Ruhi Institute from Colombia.

The Badi Foundation

GENERAL PURPOSE

- 3.16 Humanity is in a state of ferment as it advances towards a new and higher order of social evolution in a rapidly uniting world. In order to attain the goal of a new social order which guarantees justice and well-being for all, it will be necessary to develop new institutions, procedures, and relationships, and to acquire new concepts and attitudes. The Badi Foundation has been created to contribute, however modestly, to this evolution. It hopes to increase awareness of processes of change, to discover effective and appropriate strategies that will facilitate transition to a new society, and to participate in activities which promote the well-being of peoples. Special emphasis is being placed on service to the Chinese people.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

- 3.17 The founders of the Badi Foundation have been inspired by their conviction that the principles, concepts, and counsels contained in the writings of the Bahá'í Faith provide humanity with an invaluable source of wisdom in its search for a true path of development. Accordingly, they have adopted a set of basic premises which may be summarized as follows.
- 3.18 The purpose of development is the well-being of the people. The concept of well-being is understood in its broadest sense to refer to material, intellectual, social, and spiritual fulfillment. It is clear that man, while possessing certain characteristics in common with animals, also has a higher, or spiritual, nature. This higher nature encompasses such human qualities as the capacity for selflessness, compassion, sacrifice, dedication, loyalty, and service to others. It distinguishes man from animals, and it must be fully developed in order for man to dominate and control his lower tendencies toward self-centeredness, individualism, greed, overindulgence, violence, and falsity. Man's true wealth resides in those qualities, capabilities, and actions that emanate from his spiritual nature and that represent the sources of social and cultural progress.
- 3.19 It is clear that all facets of human well-being are interrelated. As important as material well-being may be, it cannot be achieved while such negative qualities as self-centeredness and individualism are dominant. On the other hand, positive qualities cannot be fully developed unless due consideration is also given to the material welfare of the society. Moreover, man's individual development cannot be fostered in isolation from the institutions and structures of the social environment. In fact, it is solely through commitment to the enrichment and progress of society and the welfare of other human beings that an individual can achieve personal development. Effective social and individual progress requires, in addition to commitment, a unified vision of the individual and the society, as well as knowledge of their relationships and governing principles. With such commitment, vision and knowledge, people can set in motion social processes that address the material and spiritual aspects of life in an integral way. Together, such processes impel development. Development, therefore, can never be a product that is created outside of a region or a people and then delivered to them. It is a process that can only be envisioned in the context of the participation of people and their institutions, who must consciously tread their own path of individual and social progress.
- 3.20 The definition of participation in social and economic development has evolved through the years from the mere voicing of needs by beneficiaries to include other aspects such as the contribution of labor in economic production, and involvement in planning and evaluation. A more complete approach to participation must also include measures to enable people to sustain and direct their own process of change. This enabling process, for the Badi Foundation, is linked to the strong conviction that every human being possesses infinite potentialities. The challenge is to find paths of action that will translate this potential into reality and create possibilities for people to contribute to viable plans of development. While recognizing the vast potentials of man, it is necessary to avoid falling into idyllic romanticization or an uncritical faith in man's intuition and unschooled opinions. A candle cannot express its potential unaided; alone, it cannot light itself. Only an appropriate educational process, which integrates the intellectual, spiritual, and social aspects of human culture, can develop and direct man's potentialities for service to the family, the community, and society at large. As these potentialities are liberated, institutions and instruments must be perfected or created to provide channels and means by which each individual contribution can be received and combined with the total collective effort of carrying forward an ever-advancing civilization.
- 3.21 In light of these considerations, it becomes clear that development cannot be a process of imitating the so-called "developed countries". Indeed, in these countries, the excessive emphasis placed on the material aspects of life has led to the accelerated disintegration of moral values, and to the decline of such cherished legacies as respect for authority, strong family structures and the integrity of human bonds in general. Such

development, which has proven to be possible for only a minority of the world's people, is undesirable and unworthy of emulation.

- 3.22 The Badi Foundation, then, aspires to participate in programs that try to follow new paths of development. These programs, it is hoped, will evolve in the context of a search for a scientifically and technologically advanced society in which educational, economic, administrative, and cultural structures are centered on the integral nature of man and not merely on his material aspirations. Development will therefore be assessed in terms of the increasing capacities of both the people and their institutions to address the spiritual and material needs and aspirations of the populations they serve.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES

- 3.23 The Badi Foundation is a small institution; its effectiveness must come from its adherence to the principles and concepts that are appropriate for the stage of social evolution in which mankind now finds itself. Its efforts are greatly enriched by the experiences of similar organizations in other parts of the world with which it has contact, especially South America, India, and Africa. It believes it can make useful contributions by focusing on the creation and application of strategies for the development of human resources, as well as the accompanying methods and contents for appropriate educational programs. Enlightened, motivated, dedicated, and well-trained individuals are precisely the resources that are most needed by communities and institutions in their efforts to create a society which guarantees the well-being of all its citizens.
- 3.24 Although the development of human resources implies both research and practical involvement in the actual processes of social and economic development, the Badi Foundation will be careful not to assume responsibility for the implementation of large-scale development projects that are the domain of larger institutions, nor will it devote its energies to research as a purely intellectual pursuit; rather, it will utilize the resources it generates in efforts that will enhance the capacities of individuals and institutions having the knowledge and attitudes necessary for the continual advancement of society.
- 3.25 While restricting itself to actions which emphasize the development of human resources necessary for social progress, the Badi Foundation will not limit its activities to a few specialized fields, but will consider projects which address many aspects of life, society and culture. This decision stems from the conviction that the needs and aspirations of any group of people are interrelated and must be addressed in an integral way.
- 3.26 The Badi Foundation has profound faith in the nobility of the human being and the vastness of human potential. This faith implies for the foundation that programs should not be limited to training people in a few skills or transmitting mere information; beyond these they should be centered in the development of attitudes and capabilities. By attitudes is meant the underlying values and moral concerns that direct the manner and methods with which the individual responds to specific situations. Capabilities transcend skills. They include the mastery of principles and concepts that permit the creative application of talents for the enhancement of culture and society.
- 3.27 The individual is not an isolated element, but rather an integral part of the institutions and organizations which surround him and form his social environment. His capabilities, attitudes, skills, and knowledge must be acquired and formed in the context of his participation in and contribution to the continuing development of the social structures that conduce to the well-being of all. This development of the individual is enhanced when the responsibilities of establishing goals, strategies, and methods are shared with participating populations and their institutions. This emphasis on the sharing of responsibility implies that the Badi Foundation can only determine the goals and methods of a project through a process of interaction with people from among the populations and institutions with which it cooperates. At the outset of a project the foundation will not enter with blueprints or predetermined goals. Projects will be developed through a consultative procedure which involves a profound and continuous exchange of ideas and opinions. Frequently a project will take the form of assisting groups and institutions to develop, express, and realize their own initiatives.
- 3.28 The implementation of a development project is an organic process which depends upon existing capabilities and talents; the process, itself, should be designed in such a way as to carry institutions and individuals to new levels of achievement. The imposition of projects that interfere with such an organic process always has a demoralizing effect on the participants. Therefore, the Badi Foundation will bear in mind that, generally, projects which arise from the consciousness and the will of the people, and which enhance their capabilities, will proceed according to their own rhythm which can be enhanced and fostered but not accelerated beyond natural limits.

- 3.29 The Badi Foundation considers all forms of contention, destructive criticism, violence, and conflict as additional afflictions heaped upon an already overburdened and tormented humanity. Approaches that emphasize conflict are counterproductive to the goal of achieving increasing levels of well-being, tranquillity, and unity that are prerequisites for the flowering of a new civilization. Therefore, all activities will be carefully and conscientiously examined to ensure that they do not contribute either to conflict or disunity.
- 3.30 In light of the foregoing considerations, it is possible to establish certain criteria for the identification and development of projects consistent with the goals and aims of the Badi Foundation. Such projects will be chosen according to the extent to which:
- 3.31 • they are in accord with the principles of the Bahá'í Faith and with the unity of the human race as the principal requirement for the creation of a new world civilization
 - 3.32 • spring from the aspirations of the participating populations and institutions
 - 3.33 • consider the existing capacities of the participating populations and institutions, and assist them to increase their capabilities
 - 3.34 • concentrate primarily on the liberation of human potential through educational processes
 - 3.35 • seek greater degrees of self-reliance and interdependency, and avoid relations of dependency
 - 3.36 • provide for the permanent and systematic exchange of ideas and opinions among all participants
 - 3.37 • consider not only the material aspect of life but also the social and spiritual components
 - 3.38 • recognize the interrelation of social structures and the individual, and work simultaneously for the development of the individual and the improvement of the social environment
 - 3.39 • utilize the fruits of advanced science and technology, and operate in accordance with the highest standards of human and cultural values and wisdom
 - 3.40 • are conducive to the best interests of society, and not to the vested interests of a few individuals or groups
 - 3.41 • do not entail responsibility for the implementation of large-scale development plans, but do enhance the capability of peoples and institutions to participate in such plans
 - 3.42 • contribute to the strengthening of unity and harmony and avoid any relationship with divisive forces or movements
 - 3.43 • promote cooperation and mutual assistance, and do not engender a competitive spirit

Health for Humanity

Statement of Philosophy

3.44 *Health for Humanity* is a not-for-profit charitable corporation, created to enable all interested professionals to offer their services for the promotion of community health throughout the world. Through this organization they can assist, albeit in a small way, the emergence of health for all humanity and thereby promote the oneness of mankind and world-encompassing peace.

3.45 The founders of *Health for Humanity* are inspired by the vision of the organic oneness of humankind presented in the Bahá'í Faith. It is evident that the problems confronting humankind are no longer merely regional. The crises people encounter in this age, whether economic, environmental, political, social, or spiritual, are global in nature and require a vision and solutions that are world-embracing in scope. As humanity adopts the organic unity toward which it is inevitably struggling, new perspectives, attitudes, and institutions will emerge—the principles of which are in harmony with this evolutionary process. As nations and peoples develop new relationships of interdependence, institutions with global consciousness, which also value the unique contribution of each individual, can make possible a peaceful passage through this tumultuous time. Emerging global unity occurs amid two simultaneous processes: the disintegration of obsolete institutions which have supported a fragmented world view, and the growth of new institutions in harmony with mankind's social evolution toward a new unified stage of maturity.

3.46 Since *Health for Humanity* seeks to be at the forefront of this unifying process, it has embraced four central principles which guide its internal organization and the projects it undertakes:

NOBILITY OF HUMANITY

3.47 Humankind has the capacity for great feats of heroism and self-sacrifice. At the same time, it has baser tendencies toward materialism, greed, and violence. For humanity's nobility to emerge, its qualities of trustworthiness, compassion, selflessness, dedication, loyalty, sacrifice, and service need to be nurtured and gain ascendancy over its selfish, baser impulses.

3.48 Every individual and every culture has the capacity for manifesting this inherent nobility. It is crucial, therefore, to facilitate the unique contribution each part can make to the whole—in particular, the development and empowerment of women. The rich diversity of humankind is precisely what gives the emerging unity its spectacular beauty and power.

GROUP CONSULTATION

3.49 The realization of one's nobility is an empowering experience. It leads to the recognition that answers to the problems confronting humanity are available within each individual. One vehicle through which those answers are discovered is group consultation, a process of frank and open discussion, conducted within a supportive atmosphere of common, agreed-upon goals.

3.50 Given the diversity of cultures and their unique circumstances, it is clear that addressing health problems requires a tailored approach in each locale. No single solution can be applied to all situations. It is essential that the identification of needs and the development of programs to address those needs be derived from group consultation at the local level. The most appropriate decisions will be the result of diverse participants analyzing the situation in an atmosphere of receptivity and mutual respect, then ardently searching for a meeting of minds regarding a solution. In such an atmosphere, differing—even conflicting—points of view can be harmonized.

3.51 The role of *Health for Humanity* is not to impose preconceived ideas of health development on local communities. Rather, it is to facilitate problem solving, to organize resources and expertise, to assist the local emergence of capability, and to advise on the introduction of technology appropriate to the culture and economy of the region. In this way, a relationship characterized by interdependence and dignity develops. Such intense involvement of local professionals in decision making encourages their development, commitment, and participation in ongoing programs.

3.52 The spirit of true consultation requires the same cooperative approach with other aid agencies and government offices. As a result, *Health for Humanity* will avoid any activities that are divisive or politically partisan in nature.

UNIFIED SERVICE

3.53 Humanity's inherent noble nature emerges with actions taken in service to humanity. Once the particular needs of a locality have been identified and solutions devised, *Health for Humanity* may provide the

services of its members in direct health care delivery, education and training, health administration, and the application of appropriate technology. The organization serves as a resource for services delivered in accordance with locally determined objectives. These actions, which arise as a result of consultation and are carried out in a spirit of service, are, by themselves, creative processes that can lead to dramatic progress. They permit both the local community and *Health for Humanity* volunteers to derive lasting benefit from this dynamic exchange.

COMPREHENSIVE HEALTH

- 3.54 True health extends beyond physical well-being. For an individual and a community to be healthy, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and physical well-being are all required. For this reason, the projects sponsored by *Health for Humanity* will tend to be multidisciplinary in approach. The participation of a wide variety of professionals who can assist in the development of the general health of the community is essential.
- 3.55 Together, these four fundamental principles—affirming the inherent nobility of humankind, solving problems through group consultation, taking unified action in a spirit of service, and nurturing comprehensive health (which, in turn, affirms humankind’s nobility)—constitute a dynamic continuum, each step reinforcing the next. As understanding of these fundamental principles evolves, we will grow in our ability to address developmental challenges facing our global family. It is ultimately this growth for all involved that is the lasting benefit of this undertaking.

The Ruhi Institute
Statement of Purpose and Methods

3.56 The Ruhi Institute is an educational institution, operating under the guidance of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Colombia, which dedicates its efforts to the development of human resources for the spiritual, social, and cultural development of the Colombian people. Although its centre is in the town of Puerto Tejada in the department of Cauca, its area of influence includes the majority of the rural areas of Colombia and is being gradually extended to several other countries in Latin America.

3.57 Like any other institution involved in the process of education for development, the Ruhi Institute has formulated its strategies within a special framework and a philosophy of social change, development and education. In this case, that understanding has emerged from a consistent effort to apply Bahá'í principles to the analysis of social conditions.

• • •

3.58 The Bahá'í Faith sees the present state of human affairs as a natural stage in an organic process which will finally lead to the unity of the human race within one social order. Humanity as a whole has gone through evolutionary stages similar to those experienced by an individual; having passed through infancy and childhood, it is now experiencing the difficult culminating moments of a turbulent adolescence. The present state of confusion, doubt, and belligerence is simply to be understood as the condition of an adolescent who strongly desires growth and maturity, but is still attached to childish attitudes and customs. Yet the moment is ripe for this adolescent to take a final step and enter the constructive and dynamic but balanced state of maturity and adulthood.

• • •

3.59 In analyzing the rapid changes occurring in the world today, Bahá'ís identify two parallel processes operating at all levels—village, town, nation, and global society. On the one hand, it is clear that human society is suffering from a process of disintegration that manifests itself in wars, terrorism, chaos, physical and psychological insecurity, and a widespread condition of material poverty. On the other hand, forces of integration are moving individuals and groups toward the adoption of new values, new forms of organization, and appropriate structures that can lay the foundation for the establishment of a new social order. The Ruhi Institute defines its basic aim as that of becoming a channel for the spiritual forces of our time to be applied to the lives of the masses of humanity, empowering them to contribute to the establishment of a new world civilization.

• • •

3.60 In its efforts to understand and contribute to a process of social change, the Ruhi Institute tries to avoid two sets of theories that have dominated the discourse on development and change for too many decades. On the one hand, it disagrees with concepts of social change that are entirely individualistic in their outlook, which analyze society only in terms of the psychological make-up, the skills, and the behavior of the individual, and which assume that social structures somehow will change by themselves once the individual is saved or correctly trained through religious conversion or secular education. On the other hand, it also rejects theories that consider the human being entirely as a product of society, and claim that no improvement is possible unless social structures, especially those related to political and economic power, are changed first. There are too many examples of participation by the “righteous” and the “highly trained” in the structures of oppression to allow any objective observer of social processes to accept proposals of change based entirely on the redemption of the individual without direct attention to social forces and structures. At the same time, history has already shown the evils of systems that deny individual freedom and derive their moral and social codes from a perception of the necessity of change in the structures of power, a change their proponents believe should be achieved at any cost.

3.61 The Ruhi Institute tries to understand the process of the transformation of human society in terms of a far more complex set of interactions between two parallel developments: the transformation of the individual, and the deliberate creation of the structures of a new society. Moreover, just as it does not view the human being as a mere product of interactions with nature and society, it does not identify structural change only with political and economic processes. Rather, it sees the necessity of change in all structures—mental, cultural, scientific and technological, educational, economic and social—including a complete change in the very concepts of political leadership and power. It is understood that individuals, all of whom possess a more or less developed spiritual nature, may be illumined by divine teachings, even under the influence of

the most oppressive social forces. These individuals, then, by no means perfected, try to walk the path of social transformation, a path which, nevertheless, is not one of individual salvation but one which implies a constant effort to create and strengthen the institutions of a new social order. These new institutions, even when designed perfectly, may not function perfectly at first, but they do make it possible for an increasing number of human beings to walk further along the path of spiritual growth and transformation. This continuous interaction, between the parallel processes of the spiritualization of the individual and the establishment of new social structures, describes the only dependable path of social change, one that avoids both complacency and violence and does not perpetuate the cycles of oppression and illusory freedom that humanity has experienced in the past. According to this vision of social change, the Ruhi Institute directs its present efforts to develop human resources within a set of activities that conduce to spiritual and intellectual growth, but are carried out in the context of each individual's contribution to the establishment of new structures—for now, mostly, in villages and rural regions.

• • •

3.62 Yet another important element of the conceptual framework of the Ruhi Institute is the concept of participation. Although by now most programs concerned with development and change accept the importance of participation by the local community in its own path of development and most try to avoid imposing their own projects and ideas, there usually is little clarity and agreement as to the nature, the form, and the extent of this participation. The Ruhi Institute, following the ideas presented in the previous paragraphs, asserts that effective participation which will not easily degenerate into political manipulation requires a systematic learning process within each community and region so that the community itself experiments with new ideas, new methods, and new technologies and procedures, rather than being the object of the social experimentation of others. Thus, one of the first steps in establishing participatory development processes in a region is to promote intensive participation by an increasing number of individuals in learning, in a constant effort to apply knowledge to improve the conditions of community life and to create and strengthen the institutions of a new world order.

• • •

3.63 Guided by universal participation, both as a principle and as a goal, the Ruhi Institute tries to design and carry out educational activities that combine classroom learning and personal study with acts of service in the community. Each educational activity is to be, in itself, an enabling experience which helps participants develop further the qualities, attitudes, capabilities, and skills of a new type of social actor whose energies are entirely directed towards promoting the well-being of the community, and whose actions are inspired by the vision of a new world civilization which will embody in all its structures and processes the fundamental principle of the unity of the human race.

• • •

3.64 At the Ruhi Institute, the design and implementation of educational activities are always guided by a profound conviction in the basic nobility of the human being. The Bahá'í Writings state:

3.65 Man is the Supreme Talisman. Lack of a proper education hath, however, deprived him of that which he doth inherently possess. Through a word proceeding out of the mouth of God he was called into being; by one word more he was guided to recognize the Source of his education; by yet another word his station and destiny were safeguarded. The Great Being saith: Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom.

3.66 Education, then, is not simply seen as the acquisition of knowledge and the development of skills, but also in terms of the development of vast and powerful potentialities inherent in the very nature of every human being. Again, the development of these potentialities and talents, which is considered a God-given right and responsibility of the individual, attains fruition when it is pursued in the spirit of service to humanity and in the context of creating a new world civilization.

3.67 Each participant in the programs of the Ruhi Institute acts as a student in certain educational activities, and as a tutor in others. The institute, then, uses the term “collaborator” to refer to all who take part in its programs. Based on the conditions and the needs of the population served by the institute, courses are designed along a series of “paths of service” which a collaborator follows according to personal interests and capacities. At the beginning of each path of service collaborators mostly learn and develop new concepts and skills. Later on, they participate in courses that prepare them to act as tutors of the earlier courses, thus creating a unique and dynamic environment for the development of human resources.

The Prosperity of Humankind

prepared by the Bahá'í International Community's Office of Public Information; with an introductory message dated January 23, 1995 by the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assemblies of the Bahá'ís throughout the World

Dear Friends,

- 4a As the twentieth century rapidly approaches its end, there is a marked acceleration in the efforts of governments and peoples to reach common understandings on issues affecting the future of humankind. The 1992 Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro, the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, the forthcoming March 1995 World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, to be followed in September by the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, are conspicuous indications of this acceleration. These events are as capstones to the myriad activities taking place in different parts of the world involving a wide range of non-governmental organizations and networks in an urgent search for values, ideas and practical measures that can advance prospects for the peaceful development of all peoples. In this endeavor can be discerned the gathering momentum of an emerging unity of thought in world undertakings, the realization of which our sacred scriptures describe as one of the lights of unity that will illumine the path to peace. The Bahá'ís around the world are, of course, heartened by such hopeful trends and will continue increasingly to lend moral and practical support to them as opportunities allow.
- 4b In view of the intensive attention being given to the issues of social and economic development since the Earth Summit in Brazil, we requested the Bahá'í International Community's Office of Public Information to prepare a statement on the concept of global prosperity in the context of the Bahá'í Teachings. This statement is now ready for distribution. We are therefore very pleased to send each of you herewith a copy of "The Prosperity of Humankind" and to commend it to your use as you pursue activities that enable you to interact with governments, organizations, and people everywhere. Our confident hope is that the statement will assist you to foster understanding of this important topic among the members of your communities and thus vitalize their contribution to the constructive social processes at work throughout the planet.

With loving Bahá'í greetings

The Universal House of Justice

The Prosperity of Humankind

- 4.1 To an extent unimaginable a decade ago, the ideal of world peace is taking on form and substance. Obstacles that long seemed immovable have collapsed in humanity's path; apparently irreconcilable conflicts have begun to surrender to processes of consultation and resolution; a willingness to counter military aggression through unified international action is emerging. The effect has been to awaken in both the masses of humanity and many world leaders a degree of hopefulness about the future of our planet that had been nearly extinguished.
- 4.2 Throughout the world, immense intellectual and spiritual energies are seeking expression, energies whose gathering pressure is in direct proportion to the frustrations of recent decades. Everywhere the signs multiply that the earth's peoples yearn for an end to conflict and to the suffering and ruin from which no land is any longer immune. These rising impulses for change must be seized upon and channeled into overcoming the remaining barriers that block realization of the age-old dream of global peace. The effort of will required for such a task cannot be summoned up merely by appeals for action against the countless ills afflicting society. It must be galvanized by a vision of human prosperity in the fullest sense of the term—an awakening to the possibilities of the spiritual and material well-being now brought within grasp. Its beneficiaries must be all of the planet's inhabitants, without distinction, without the imposition of conditions unrelated to the fundamental goals of such a reorganization of human affairs.
- 4.3 History has thus far recorded principally the experience of tribes, cultures, classes, and nations. With the physical unification of the planet in this century and acknowledgement of the interdependence of all who live on it, the history of humanity as one people is now beginning. The long, slow civilizing of human character has been a sporadic development, uneven and admittedly inequitable in the material advantages it has conferred. Nevertheless, endowed with the wealth of all the genetic and cultural diversity that has evolved through past ages, the earth's inhabitants are now challenged to draw on their collective inheritance to take up, consciously and systematically, the responsibility for the design of their future.
- 4.4 It is unrealistic to imagine that the vision of the next stage in the advancement of civilization can be formulated without a searching reexamination of the attitudes and assumptions that currently underlie approaches to social and economic development. At the most obvious level, such rethinking will have to address practical matters of policy, resource utilization, planning procedures, implementation methodologies, and organization. As it proceeds, however, fundamental issues will quickly emerge, related to the long-term goals to be pursued, the social structures required, the implications for development of principles of social justice, and the nature and role of knowledge in effecting enduring change. Indeed, such a reexamination will be driven to seek a broad consensus of understanding about human nature itself.
- 4.5 Two avenues of discussion open directly onto all of these issues, whether conceptual or practical, and it is along these two avenues that we wish to explore, in the pages that follow, the subject of a strategy of global development. The first is prevailing beliefs about the nature and purpose of the development process; the second is the roles assigned in it to the various protagonists.
- 4.6 The assumptions directing most of current development planning are essentially materialistic. That is to say, the purpose of development is defined in terms of the successful cultivation in all societies of those means for the achievement of material prosperity that have, through trial and error, already come to characterize certain regions of the world. Modifications in development discourse do indeed occur, accommodating differences of culture and political system and responding to the alarming dangers posed by environmental degradation. Yet the underlying materialistic assumptions remain essentially unchallenged.
- 4.7 As the twentieth century draws to a close, it is no longer possible to maintain the belief that the approach to social and economic development to which the materialistic conception of life has given rise is capable of meeting humanity's needs. Optimistic forecasts about the changes it would generate have vanished into the ever-widening abyss that separates the living standards of a small and relatively diminishing minority of the world's inhabitants from the poverty experienced by the vast majority of the globe's population.
- 4.8 This unprecedented economic crisis, together with the social breakdown it has helped to engender, reflects a profound error of conception about human nature itself. For the levels of response elicited from human beings by the incentives of the prevailing order are not only inadequate, but seem almost irrelevant in the face of world events. We are being shown that, unless the development of society finds a purpose beyond the mere amelioration of material conditions, it will fail of attaining even these goals. That purpose must

be sought in spiritual dimensions of life and motivation that transcend a constantly changing economic landscape and an artificially imposed division of human societies into “developed” and “developing”.

- 4.9 As the purpose of development is being redefined, it will become necessary also to look again at assumptions about the appropriate roles to be played by the protagonists in the process. The crucial role of government, at whatever level, requires no elaboration. Future generations, however, will find almost incomprehensible the circumstance that, in an age paying tribute to an egalitarian philosophy and related democratic principles, development planning should view the masses of humanity as essentially recipients of benefits from aid and training. Despite acknowledgement of participation as a principle, the scope of the decision making left to most of the world’s population is at best secondary, limited to a range of choices formulated by agencies inaccessible to them and determined by goals that are often irreconcilable with their perceptions of reality.
- 4.10 This approach is even endorsed, implicitly if not explicitly, by established religion. Burdened by traditions of paternalism, prevailing religious thought seems incapable of translating an expressed faith in the spiritual dimensions of human nature into confidence in humanity’s collective capacity to transcend material conditions.
- 4.11 Such an attitude misses the significance of what is likely the most important social phenomenon of our time. If it is true that the governments of the world are striving through the medium of the United Nations system to construct a new global order, it is equally true that the peoples of the world are galvanized by this same vision. Their response has taken the form of a sudden efflorescence of countless movements and organizations of social change at local, regional, and international levels. Human rights, the advance of women, the social requirements of sustainable economic development, the overcoming of prejudices, the moral education of children, literacy, primary health care, and a host of other vital concerns each commands the urgent advocacy of organizations supported by growing numbers in every part of the globe.
- 4.12 This response of the world’s people themselves to the crying needs of the age echoes the call that Bahá’u’lláh raised over a hundred years ago: “Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.” The transformation in the way that great numbers of ordinary people are coming to see themselves—a change that is dramatically abrupt in the perspective of the history of civilization—raises fundamental questions about the role assigned to the general body of humanity in the planning of our planet’s future.

PART I

- 4.13 The bedrock of a strategy that can engage the world’s population in assuming responsibility for its collective destiny must be the consciousness of the oneness of humankind. Deceptively simple in popular discourse, the concept that humanity constitutes a single people presents fundamental challenges to the way that most of the institutions of contemporary society carry out their functions. Whether in the form of the adversarial structure of civil government, the advocacy principle informing most of civil law, a glorification of the struggle between classes and other social groups, or the competitive spirit dominating so much of modern life, conflict is accepted as the mainspring of human interaction.
- 4.14 It represents yet another expression in social organization of the materialistic interpretation of life that has progressively consolidated itself over the past two centuries.
- 4.15 In a letter addressed to Queen Victoria over a century ago, and employing an analogy that points to the one model holding convincing promise for the organization of a planetary society, Bahá’u’lláh compared the world to the human body. There is, indeed, no other model in phenomenal existence to which we can reasonably look. Human society is composed not of a mass of merely differentiated cells but of associations of individuals, each one of whom is endowed with intelligence and will; nevertheless, the modes of operation that characterize man’s biological nature illustrate fundamental principles of existence. Chief among these is that of unity in diversity. Paradoxically, it is precisely the wholeness and complexity of the order constituting the human body—and the perfect integration into it of the body’s cells—that permit the full realization of the distinctive capacities inherent in each of these component elements. No cell lives apart from the body, whether in contributing to its functioning or in deriving its share from the well-being of the whole. The physical well-being thus achieved finds its purpose in making possible the expression of human consciousness; that is to say, the purpose of biological development transcends the mere existence of the body and its parts.
- 4.16 What is true of the life of the individual has its parallels in human society. The human species is an organic whole, the leading edge of the evolutionary process. That human consciousness necessarily operates through an infinite diversity of individual minds and motivations detracts in no way from its essential unity. Indeed, it is precisely an inhering diversity that distinguishes unity from homogeneity or uniformity.

What the peoples of the world are today experiencing, Bahá'u'lláh said, is their collective coming-of-age, and it is through this emerging maturity of the race that the principle of unity in diversity will find full expression. From its earliest beginnings in the consolidation of family life, the process of social organization has successively moved from the simple structures of clan and tribe, through multitudinous forms of urban society, to the eventual emergence of the nation-state, each stage opening up a wealth of new opportunities for the exercise of human capacity.

- 4.17 Clearly, the advancement of the race has not occurred at the expense of human individuality. As social organization has increased, the scope for the expression of the capacities latent in each human being has correspondingly expanded. Because the relationship between the individual and society is a reciprocal one, the transformation now required must occur simultaneously within human consciousness and the structure of social institutions. It is in the opportunities afforded by this twofold process of change that a strategy of global development will find its purpose. At this crucial stage of history, that purpose must be to establish enduring foundations on which planetary civilization can gradually take shape.
- 4.18 Laying the groundwork for global civilization calls for the creation of laws and institutions that are universal in both character and authority. The effort can begin only when the concept of the oneness of humanity has been wholeheartedly embraced by those in whose hands the responsibility for decision making rests, and when the related principles are propagated through both educational systems and the media of mass communication. Once this threshold is crossed, a process will have been set in motion through which the peoples of the world can be drawn into the task of formulating common goals and committing themselves to their attainment. Only so fundamental a reorientation can protect them, too, from the age-old demons of ethnic and religious strife. Only through the dawning consciousness that they constitute a single people will the inhabitants of the planet be enabled to turn away from the patterns of conflict that have dominated social organization in the past and begin to learn the ways of collaboration and conciliation. "The well-being of mankind," Bahá'u'lláh writes, "its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established."

PART II

- 4.19 Justice is the one power that can translate the dawning consciousness of humanity's oneness into a collective will through which the necessary structures of global community life can be confidently erected. An age that sees the people of the world increasingly gaining access to information of every kind and to a diversity of ideas will find justice asserting itself as the ruling principle of successful social organization. With ever greater frequency, proposals aiming at the development of the planet will have to submit to the candid light of the standards it requires.
- 4.20 At the individual level, justice is that faculty of the human soul that enables each person to distinguish truth from falsehood. In the sight of God, Bahá'u'lláh avers, justice is "the best beloved of all things" since it permits each individual to see with his own eyes rather than the eyes of others, to know through his own knowledge rather than the knowledge of his neighbor or his group. It calls for fair-mindedness in one's judgments, for equity in one's treatment of others, and is thus a constant if demanding companion in the daily occasions of life.
- 4.21 At the group level, a concern for justice is the indispensable compass in collective decision making, because it is the only means by which unity of thought and action can be achieved. Far from encouraging the punitive spirit that has often masqueraded under its name in past ages, justice is the practical expression of awareness that, in the achievement of human progress, the interests of the individual and those of society are inextricably linked. To the extent that justice becomes a guiding concern of human interaction, a consultative climate is encouraged that permits options to be examined dispassionately and appropriate courses of action selected. In such a climate the perennial tendencies toward manipulation and partisanship are far less likely to deflect the decision-making process.
- 4.22 The implications for social and economic development are profound. Concern for justice protects the task of defining progress from the temptation to sacrifice the well-being of the generality of humankind—and even of the planet itself—to the advantages which technological breakthroughs can make available to privileged minorities. In design and planning, it ensures that limited resources are not diverted to the pursuit of projects extraneous to a community's essential social or economic priorities. Above all, only development programs that are perceived as meeting their needs and as being just and equitable in objective can hope to engage the commitment of the masses of humanity, upon whom implementation depends. The relevant human qualities such as honesty, a willingness to work, and a spirit of cooperation are successfully harnessed to the accomplishment of enormously demanding collective goals when every member of society—indeed every component group within society—can trust that they are protected by standards and assured of benefits that apply equally to all.

- 4.23 At the heart of the discussion of a strategy of social and economic development, therefore, lies the issue of human rights. The shaping of such a strategy calls for the promotion of human rights to be freed from the grip of the false dichotomies that have for so long held it hostage. Concern that each human being should enjoy the freedom of thought and action conducive to his or her personal growth does not justify devotion to the cult of individualism that so deeply corrupts many areas of contemporary life. Nor does concern to ensure the welfare of society as a whole require a deification of the state as the supposed source of humanity's well-being. Far otherwise: the history of the present century shows all too clearly that such ideologies and the partisan agendas to which they give rise have been themselves the principal enemies of the interests they purport to serve. Only in a consultative framework made possible by the consciousness of the organic unity of humankind can all aspects of the concern for human rights find legitimate and creative expression.
- 4.24 Today, the agency on whom has devolved the task of creating this framework and of liberating the promotion of human rights from those who would exploit it is the system of international institutions born out of the tragedies of two ruinous world wars and the experience of worldwide economic breakdown. Significantly, the term "human rights" has come into general use only since the promulgation of the United Nations Charter in 1945 and the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights three years later. In these history-making documents, formal recognition has been given to respect for social justice as a correlative of the establishment of world peace. The fact that the Declaration passed without a dissenting vote in the General Assembly conferred on it from the outset an authority that has grown steadily in the intervening years.
- 4.25 The activity most intimately linked to the consciousness that distinguishes human nature is the individual's exploration of reality for himself or herself. The freedom to investigate the purpose of existence and to develop the endowments of human nature that make it achievable requires protection. Human beings must be free to know. That such freedom is often abused and such abuse grossly encouraged by features of contemporary society does not detract in any degree from the validity of the impulse itself.
- 4.26 It is this distinguishing impulse of human consciousness that provides the moral imperative for the enunciation of many of the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration and the related Covenants. Universal education, freedom of movement, access to information, and the opportunity to participate in political life are all aspects of its operation that require explicit guarantee by the international community. The same is true of freedom of thought and belief, including religious liberty, along with the right to hold opinions and express these opinions appropriately.
- 4.27 Since the body of humankind is one and indivisible, each member of the race is born into the world as a trust of the whole. This trusteeship constitutes the moral foundation of most of the other rights—principally economic and social—which the instruments of the United Nations are attempting similarly to define. The security of the family and the home, the ownership of property, and the right to privacy are all implied in such a trusteeship. The obligations on the part of the community extend to the provision of employment, mental and physical health care, social security, fair wages, rest and recreation, and a host of other reasonable expectations on the part of the individual members of society.
- 4.28 The principle of collective trusteeship creates also the right of every person to expect that those cultural conditions essential to his or her identity enjoy the protection of national and international law. Much like the role played by the gene pool in the biological life of humankind and its environment, the immense wealth of cultural diversity achieved over thousands of years is vital to the social and economic development of a human race experiencing its collective coming-of-age. It represents a heritage that must be permitted to bear its fruit in a global civilization. On the one hand, cultural expressions need to be protected from suffocation by the materialistic influences currently holding sway. On the other, cultures must be enabled to interact with one another in ever-changing patterns of civilization, free of manipulation for partisan political ends.
- 4.29 "The light of men", Bahá'u'lláh says, "is Justice. Quench it not with the contrary winds of oppression and tyranny. The purpose of justice is the appearance of unity among men. The ocean of divine wisdom surgeth within this exalted word, while the books of the world cannot contain its inner significance."

PART III

- 4.30 In order for the standard of human rights now in the process of formulation by the community of nations to be promoted and established as prevailing international norms, a fundamental redefinition of human relationships is called for. Present-day conceptions of what is natural and appropriate in relationships—among human beings themselves, between human beings and nature, between the individual and society, and between the members of society and its institutions—reflect levels of understanding arrived at by the human race during earlier and less mature stages in its development. If humanity is indeed coming of age,

if all the inhabitants of the planet constitute a single people, if justice is to be the ruling principle of social organization—then existing conceptions that were born out of ignorance of these emerging realities have to be recast.

- 4.31 Movement in this direction has barely begun. It will lead, as it unfolds, to a new understanding of the nature of the family and of the rights and responsibilities of each of its members. It will entirely transform the role of women at every level of society. Its effect in reordering people's relation to the work they do and their understanding of the place of economic activity in their lives will be sweeping. It will bring about far-reaching changes in the governance of human affairs and in the institutions created to carry it out. Through its influence, the work of society's rapidly proliferating non-governmental organizations will be increasingly rationalized. It will ensure the creation of binding legislation that will protect both the environment and the development needs of all peoples. Ultimately, the restructuring or transformation of the United Nations system that this movement is already bringing about will no doubt lead to the establishment of a world federation of nations with its own legislative, judicial, and executive bodies.
- 4.32 Central to the task of reconceptualising the system of human relationships is the process that Bahá'u'lláh refers to as consultation. "In all things it is necessary to consult," is His advice. "The maturity of the gift of understanding is made manifest through consultation."
- 4.33 The standard of truth seeking this process demands is far beyond the patterns of negotiation and compromise that tend to characterize the present-day discussion of human affairs. It cannot be achieved—indeed, its attainment is severely handicapped—by the culture of protest that is another widely prevailing feature of contemporary society. Debate, propaganda, the adversarial method, the entire apparatus of partisanship that have long been such familiar features of collective action are all fundamentally harmful to its purpose: that is, arriving at a consensus about the truth of a given situation and the wisest choice of action among the options open at any given moment.
- 4.34 What Bahá'u'lláh is calling for is a consultative process in which the individual participants strive to transcend their respective points of view, in order to function as members of a body with its own interests and goals. In such an atmosphere, characterized by both candor and courtesy, ideas belong not to the individual to whom they occur during the discussion but to the group as a whole, to take up, discard, or revise as seems to best serve the goal pursued. Consultation succeeds to the extent that all participants support the decisions arrived at, regardless of the individual opinions with which they entered the discussion. Under such circumstances an earlier decision can be readily reconsidered if experience exposes any shortcomings.
- 4.35 Viewed in such a light, 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. Indeed, the participation of the people on whose commitment and efforts the success of such a strategy depends becomes effective only as consultation is made the organizing principle of every project. "No man can attain his true station", is Bahá'u'lláh's counsel, "except through his justice. No power can exist except through unity. No welfare and no well-being can be attained except through consultation."

PART IV

- 4.36 The tasks entailed in the development of a global society call for levels of capacity far beyond anything the human race has so far been able to muster. Reaching these levels will require an enormous expansion in access to knowledge, on the part of individuals and social organizations alike. Universal education will be an indispensable contributor to this process of capacity building, but the effort will succeed only as human affairs are so reorganized as to enable both individuals and groups in every sector of society to acquire knowledge and apply it to the shaping of human affairs.
- 4.37 Throughout recorded history, human consciousness has depended upon two basic knowledge systems through which its potentialities have progressively been expressed: science and religion. Through these two agencies, the race's experience has been organized, its environment interpreted, its latent powers explored, and its moral and intellectual life disciplined. They have acted as the real progenitors of civilization. With the benefit of hindsight, it is evident, moreover, that the effectiveness of this dual structure has been greatest during those periods when, each in its own sphere, religion and science were able to work in concert.
- 4.38 Given the almost universal respect in which science is currently held, its credentials need no elaboration. In the context of a strategy of social and economic development, the issue rather is how scientific and technological activity is to be organized. If the work involved is viewed chiefly as the preserve of established elites living in a small number of nations, it is obvious that the enormous gap which such an

arrangement has already created between the world's rich and poor will only continue to widen, with the disastrous consequences for the world's economy already noted. Indeed, if most of humankind continue to be regarded mainly as users of products of science and technology created elsewhere, then programs ostensibly designed to serve their needs cannot properly be termed "development".

- 4.39 A central challenge, therefore—and an enormous one—is the expansion of scientific and technological activity. Instruments of social and economic change so powerful must cease to be the patrimony of advantaged segments of society, and must be so organized as to permit people everywhere to participate in such activity on the basis of capacity. Apart from the creation of programs that make the required education available to all who are able to benefit from it, such reorganization will require the establishment of viable centers of learning throughout the world, institutions that will enhance the capability of the world's peoples to participate in the generation and application of knowledge. Development strategy, while acknowledging the wide differences of individual capacity, must take as a major goal the task of making it possible for all of the earth's inhabitants to approach on an equal basis the processes of science and technology which are their common birthright. Familiar arguments for maintaining the status quo grow daily less compelling as the accelerating revolution in communication technologies now brings information and training within reach of vast numbers of people around the globe, wherever they may be, whatever their cultural backgrounds.
- 4.40 The challenges facing humanity in its religious life, if different in character, are equally daunting. For the vast majority of the world's population, the idea that human nature has a spiritual dimension—indeed that its fundamental identity is spiritual—is a truth requiring no demonstration. It is a perception of reality that can be discovered in the earliest records of civilization and that has been cultivated for several millennia by every one of the great religious traditions of humanity's past. Its enduring achievements in law, the fine arts, and the civilizing of human intercourse are what give substance and meaning to history. In one form or another its promptings are a daily influence in the lives of most people on earth and, as events around the world today dramatically show, the longings it awakens are both inextinguishable and incalculably potent.
- 4.41 It would seem obvious, therefore, that efforts of any kind to promote human progress must seek to tap capacities so universal and so immensely creative. Why, then, have spiritual issues facing humanity not been central to the development discourse? Why have most of the priorities—indeed most of the underlying assumptions—of the international development agenda been determined so far by materialistic world views to which only small minorities of the earth's population subscribe? How much weight can be placed on a professed devotion to the principle of universal participation that denies the validity of the participants' defining cultural experience?
- 4.42 It may be argued that, since spiritual and moral issues have historically been bound up with contending theological doctrines which are not susceptible of objective proof, these issues lie outside the framework of the international community's development concerns. To accord them any significant role would be to open the door to precisely those dogmatic influences that have nurtured social conflict and blocked human progress. There is doubtless a measure of truth in such an argument. Exponents of the world's various theological systems bear a heavy responsibility not only for the disrepute into which faith itself has fallen among many progressive thinkers, but for the inhibitions and distortions produced in humanity's continuing discourse on spiritual meaning. To conclude, however, that the answer lies in discouraging the investigation of spiritual reality and ignoring the deepest roots of human motivation is a self-evident delusion. The sole effect, to the degree that such censorship has been achieved in recent history, has been to deliver the shaping of humanity's future into the hands of a new orthodoxy, one which argues that truth is amoral and facts are independent of values.
- 4.43 So far as earthly existence is concerned, many of the greatest achievements of religion have been moral in character. Through its teachings and through the examples of human lives illumined by these teachings, masses of people in all ages and lands have developed the capacity to love. They have learned to discipline the animal side of their natures, to make great sacrifices for the common good, to practice forgiveness, generosity, and trust, to use wealth and other resources in ways that serve the advancement of civilization. Institutional systems have been devised to translate these moral advances into the norms of social life on a vast scale. However obscured by dogmatic accretions and diverted by sectarian conflict, the spiritual impulses set in motion by such transcendent figures as Krishna, Moses, Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus, and Muhammad have been the chief influence in the civilizing of human character.
- 4.44 Since, then, the challenge is the empowerment of humankind through a vast increase in access to knowledge, the strategy that can make this possible must be constructed around an ongoing and intensifying dialogue between science and religion. It is—or by now should be—a truism that, in every sphere of human activity and at every level, the insights and skills that represent scientific accomplishment must look to the force of

spiritual commitment and moral principle to ensure their appropriate application. People need, for example, to learn how to separate fact from conjecture—indeed to distinguish between subjective views and objective reality; the extent to which individuals and institutions so equipped can contribute to human progress, however, will be determined by their devotion to truth and their detachment from the promptings of their own interests and passions. Another capacity that science must cultivate in all people is that of thinking in terms of process, including historical process; however, if this intellectual advancement is to contribute ultimately to promoting development, its perspective must be unclouded by prejudices of race, culture, sex, or sectarian belief. Similarly, the training that can make it possible for the earth's inhabitants to participate in the production of wealth will advance the aims of development only to the extent that such an impulse is illumined by the spiritual insight that service to humankind is the purpose of both individual life and social organization.

PART V

4.45 It is in the context of raising the level of human capacity through the expansion of knowledge at all levels that the economic issues facing humankind need to be addressed. As the experience of recent decades has demonstrated, material benefits and endeavors cannot be regarded as ends in themselves. Their value consists not only in providing for humanity's basic needs in housing, food, health care, and the like, but in extending the reach of human abilities. The most important role that economic efforts must play in development lies, therefore, in equipping people and institutions with the means through which they can achieve the real purpose of development: that is, laying foundations for a new social order that can cultivate the limitless potentialities latent in human consciousness.

4.46 The challenge to economic thinking is to accept unambiguously this purpose of development—and its own role in fostering creation of the means to achieve it. Only in this way can economics and the related sciences free themselves from the undertow of the materialistic preoccupations that now distract them, and fulfill their potential as tools vital to achieving human well-being in the full sense of the term. Nowhere is the need for a rigorous dialogue between the work of science and the insights of religion more apparent.

4.47 The problem of poverty is a case in point. Proposals aimed at addressing it are predicated on the conviction that material resources exist, or can be created by scientific and technological endeavor, which will alleviate and eventually entirely eradicate this age-old condition as a feature of human life. A major reason why such relief is not achieved is that the necessary scientific and technological advances respond to a set of priorities only tangentially related to the real interests of the generality of humankind. A radical reordering of these priorities will be required if the burden of poverty is finally to be lifted from the world. Such an achievement demands a determined quest for appropriate values, a quest that will test profoundly both the spiritual and scientific resources of humankind. Religion will be severely hampered in contributing to this joint undertaking so long as it is held prisoner by sectarian doctrines which cannot distinguish between contentment and mere passivity and which teach that poverty is an inherent feature of earthly life, escape from which lies only in the world beyond. To participate effectively in the struggle to bring material well-being to humanity, the religious spirit must find—in the Source of inspiration from which it flows—new spiritual concepts and principles relevant to an age that seeks to establish unity and justice in human affairs.

4.48 Unemployment raises similar issues. In most of contemporary thinking, the concept of work has been largely reduced to that of gainful employment aimed at acquiring the means for the consumption of available goods. The system is circular: acquisition and consumption resulting in the maintenance and expansion of the production of goods and, in consequence, in supporting paid employment. Taken individually, all of these activities are essential to the well-being of society. The inadequacy of the overall conception, however, can be read in both the apathy that social commentators discern among large numbers of the employed in every land and the demoralization of the growing armies of the unemployed.

4.49 Not surprisingly, therefore, there is increasing recognition that the world is in urgent need of a new “work ethic”. Here again, nothing less than insights generated by the creative interaction of the scientific and religious systems of knowledge can produce so fundamental a reorientation of habits and attitudes. Unlike animals, which depend for their sustenance on whatever the environment readily affords, human beings are impelled to express the immense capacities latent within them through productive work designed to meet their own needs and those of others. In acting thus they become participants, at however modest a level, in the processes of the advancement of civilization. They fulfill purposes that unite them with others. To the extent that work is consciously undertaken in a spirit of service to humanity, Bahá'u'lláh says, it is a form of prayer, a means of worshipping God. Every individual has the capacity to see himself or herself in this light, and it is to this inalienable capacity of the self that development strategy must appeal, whatever the nature of the plans being pursued, whatever the rewards they promise. No narrower a perspective will ever

call up from the people of the world the magnitude of effort and commitment that the economic tasks ahead will require.

- 4.50 A challenge of similar nature faces economic thinking as a result of the environmental crisis. The fallacies in theories based on the belief that there is no limit to nature's capacity to fulfill any demand made on it by human beings have now been coldly exposed. A culture which attaches absolute value to expansion, to acquisition, and to the satisfaction of people's wants is being compelled to recognize that such goals are not, by themselves, realistic guides to policy. Inadequate, too, are approaches to economic issues whose decision-making tools cannot deal with the fact that most of the major challenges are global rather than particular in scope.
- 4.51 The earnest hope that this moral crisis can somehow be met by deifying nature itself is an evidence of the spiritual and intellectual desperation that the crisis has engendered. Recognition that creation is an organic whole and that humanity has the responsibility to care for this whole, welcome as it is, does not represent an influence which can by itself establish in the consciousness of people a new system of values. Only a breakthrough in understanding that is scientific and spiritual in the fullest sense of the terms will empower the human race to assume the trusteeship toward which history impels it.
- 4.52 All people will have sooner or later to recover, for example, the capacity for contentment, the welcoming of moral discipline, and the devotion to duty that, until relatively recently, were considered essential aspects of being human. Repeatedly throughout history, the teachings of the Founders of the great religions have been able to instill these qualities of character in the mass of people who responded to them. The qualities themselves are even more vital today, but their expression must now take a form consistent with humanity's coming-of-age. Here again, religion's challenge is to free itself from the obsessions of the past: contentment is not fatalism; morality has nothing in common with the life-denying Puritanism that has so often presumed to speak in its name; and a genuine devotion to duty brings feelings not of self-righteousness but of self-worth.
- 4.53 The effect of the persistent denial to women of full equality with men sharpens still further the challenge to science and religion in the economic life of humankind. To any objective observer the principle of the equality of the sexes is fundamental to all realistic thinking about the future well-being of the earth and its people. It represents a truth about human nature that has waited largely unrecognized throughout the long ages of the race's childhood and adolescence. "Women and men", is Bahá'u'lláh's emphatic assertion, "have been and will always be equal in the sight of God." The rational soul has no sex, and whatever social inequities may have been dictated by the survival requirements of the past, they clearly cannot be justified at a time when humanity stands at the threshold of maturity. A commitment to the establishment of full equality between men and women, in all departments of life and at every level of society, will be central to the success of efforts to conceive and implement a strategy of global development.
- 4.54 Indeed, in an important sense, progress in this area will itself be a measure of the success of any development program. Given the vital role of economic activity in the advancement of civilization, visible evidence of the pace at which development is progressing will be the extent to which women gain access to all avenues of economic endeavor. The challenge goes beyond ensuring an equitable distribution of opportunity, important as that is. It calls for a fundamental rethinking of economic issues in a manner that will invite the full participation of a range of human experience and insight hitherto largely excluded from the discourse. The classical economic models of impersonal markets in which human beings act as autonomous makers of self-regarding choices will not serve the needs of a world motivated by ideals of unity and justice. Society will find itself increasingly challenged to develop new economic models shaped by insights that arise from a sympathetic understanding of shared experience, from viewing human beings in relation to others, and from a recognition of the centrality to social well-being of the role of the family and the community. Such an intellectual breakthrough—strongly altruistic rather than self-centered in focus—must draw heavily on both the spiritual and scientific sensibilities of the race, and millennia of experience have prepared women to make crucial contributions to the common effort.

PART VI

- 4.55 To contemplate a transformation of society on this scale is to raise both the question of the power that can be harnessed to accomplish it and the issue inextricably linked to it, the authority to exercise that power. As with all other implications of the accelerating integration of the planet and its people, both of these familiar terms stand in urgent need of redefinition.
- 4.56 Throughout history—and despite theologically or ideologically inspired assurances to the contrary—power has been largely interpreted as advantage enjoyed by persons or groups. Often, indeed, it has been expressed simply in terms of means to be used against others. This interpretation of power has become an inherent feature of the culture of division and conflict that has characterized the human race during the past several

millennia, regardless of the social, religious, or political orientations that have enjoyed ascendancy in given ages, in given parts of the world. In general, power has been an attribute of individuals, factions, peoples, classes, and nations. It has been an attribute especially associated with men rather than women. Its chief effect has been to confer on its beneficiaries the ability to acquire, to surpass, to dominate, to resist, to win.

- 4.57 The resulting historical processes have been responsible for both ruinous setbacks in human well-being and extraordinary advances in civilization. To appreciate the benefits is to acknowledge also the setbacks, as well as the clear limitations of the behavioral patterns that have produced both. Habits and attitudes related to the use of power which emerged during the long ages of humanity's infancy and adolescence have reached the outer limits of their effectiveness. Today, in an era most of whose pressing problems are global in nature, persistence in the idea that power means advantage for various segments of the human family is profoundly mistaken in theory and of no practical service to the social and economic development of the planet. Those who still adhere to it—and who could in earlier eras have felt confident in such adherence—now find their plans enmeshed in inexplicable frustrations and hindrances. In its traditional, competitive expression, power is as irrelevant to the needs of humanity's future as would be the technologies of railway locomotion to the task of lifting space satellites into orbits around the earth.
- 4.58 The analogy is more than a little apt. The human race is being urged by the requirements of its own maturation to free itself from its inherited understanding and use of power. That it can do so is demonstrated by the fact that, although dominated by the traditional conception, humanity has always been able to conceive of power in other forms critical to its hopes. History provides ample evidence that, however intermittently and ineptly, people of every background, throughout the ages, have tapped a wide range of creative resources within themselves. The most obvious example, perhaps, has been the power of truth itself, an agent of change associated with some of the greatest advances in the philosophical, religious, artistic, and scientific experience of the race. Force of character represents yet another means of mobilizing immense human response, as does the influence of example, whether in the lives of individual human beings or in human societies. Almost wholly unappreciated is the magnitude of the force that will be generated by the achievement of unity, an influence “so powerful”, in Bahá'u'lláh's words, “that it can illuminate the whole Earth.”
- 4.59 The institutions of society will succeed in eliciting and directing the potentialities latent in the consciousness of the world's peoples to the extent that the exercise of authority is governed by principles that are in harmony with the evolving interests of a rapidly maturing human race. Such principles include the obligation of those in authority to win the confidence, respect, and genuine support of those whose actions they seek to govern; to consult openly and to the fullest extent possible with all whose interests are affected by decisions being arrived at; to assess in an objective manner both the real needs and the aspirations of the communities they serve; to benefit from scientific and moral advancement in order to make appropriate use of the community's resources, including the energies of its members. No single principle of effective authority is so important as giving priority to building and maintaining unity among the members of a society and the members of its administrative institutions. Reference has already been made to the intimately associated issue of commitment to the search for justice in all matters.
- 4.60 Clearly, such principles can operate only within a culture that is essentially democratic in spirit and method. To say this, however, is not to endorse the ideology of partisanship that has everywhere boldly assumed democracy's name and which, despite impressive contributions to human progress in the past, today finds itself mired in the cynicism, apathy, and corruption to which it has given rise. In selecting those who are to take collective decisions on its behalf, society does not need and is not well served by the political theater of nominations, candidature, electioneering, and solicitation. It lies within the capacity of all people, as they become progressively educated and convinced that their real development interests are being served by programs proposed to them, to adopt electoral procedures that will gradually refine the selection of their decision-making bodies.
- 4.61 As the integration of humanity gains momentum, those who are thus selected will increasingly have to see all their efforts in a global perspective. Not only at the national, but also at the local level, the elected governors of human affairs should, in Bahá'u'lláh's view, consider themselves responsible for the welfare of all of humankind.

PART VII

- 4.62 The task of creating a global development strategy that will accelerate humanity's coming-of-age constitutes a challenge to reshape fundamentally all the institutions of society. The protagonists to whom the challenge addresses itself are all of the inhabitants of the planet: the generality of humankind, members of governing institutions at all levels, persons serving in agencies of international coordination, scientists and social

thinkers, all those endowed with artistic talents or with access to the media of communication, and leaders of non-governmental organizations. The response called for must base itself on an unconditioned recognition of the oneness of humankind, a commitment to the establishment of justice as the organizing principle of society, and a determination to exploit to their utmost the possibilities that a systematic dialogue between the scientific and religious genius of the race can bring to the building of human capacity. The enterprise requires a radical rethinking of most of the concepts and assumptions currently governing social and economic life. It must be wedded, as well, to a conviction that, however long the process and whatever setbacks may be encountered, the governance of human affairs can be conducted along lines that serve humanity's real needs.

- 4.63 Only if humanity's collective childhood has indeed come to an end and the age of its adulthood is dawning does such a prospect represent more than another utopian mirage. To imagine that an effort of the magnitude envisioned here can be summoned up by despondent and mutually antagonistic peoples and nations runs counter to the whole of received wisdom. Only if, as Bahá'u'lláh asserts to be the case, the course of social evolution has arrived at one of those decisive turning points through which all of the phenomena of existence are impelled suddenly forward into new stages of their development, can such a possibility be conceived. A profound conviction that just so great a transformation in human consciousness is underway has inspired the views set forth in this statement. To all who recognize in it familiar promptings from within their own hearts, Bahá'u'lláh's words bring assurance that God has, in this matchless day, endowed humanity with spiritual resources fully equal to the challenge:
- 4.64 O ye that inhabit the heavens and the earth! There hath appeared what hath never previously appeared.
- 4.65 This is the Day in which God's most excellent favors have been poured out upon men, the Day in which His most mighty grace hath been infused into all created things.
- 4.66 The turmoil now convulsing human affairs is unprecedented, and many of its consequences enormously destructive. Dangers unimagined in all history gather around a distracted humanity. The greatest error that the world's leadership could make at this juncture, however, would be to allow the crisis to cast doubt on the ultimate outcome of the process that is occurring. A world is passing away and a new one is struggling to be born. The habits, attitudes, and institutions that have accumulated over the centuries are being subjected to tests that are as necessary to human development as they are inescapable. What is required of the peoples of the world is a measure of faith and resolve to match the enormous energies with which the Creator of all things has endowed this spiritual springtime of the race. 'Be united in counsel,' is Bahá'u'lláh's appeal, be one in thought. May each morn be better than its eve and each morrow richer than its yesterday. Man's merit lieth in service and virtue and not in the pageantry of wealth and riches. Take heed that your words be purged from idle fancies and worldly desires and your deeds be cleansed from craftiness and suspicion.
- 4.67 Dissipate not the wealth of your precious lives in the pursuit of evil and corrupt affection, nor let your endeavors be spent in promoting your personal interest. Be generous in your days of plenty, and be patient in the hour of loss. Adversity is followed by success and rejoicings follow woe. Guard against idleness and sloth, and cling unto that which profiteth mankind, whether young or old, whether high or low. Beware lest ye sow tares of dissension among men or plant thorns of doubt in pure and radiant hearts.

***A Clarification of Some Issues
Concerning Social and Economic Development
in Local and National Communities***

November 1999

*prepared by the Office of Social and Economic Development
at the Bahá'í World Centre*

- 5.1 In September 1993, the statement “Bahá'í Social and Economic Development: Prospects for the Future” was prepared at the Bahá'í World Centre and approved by the Universal House of Justice. It contained an analysis of past experience and delineated a course for future action. It also specified that the work of the Office of Social and Economic Development should be organized around its “primary purpose” to “facilitate learning about development by fostering and supporting action, reflection on action, study, consultation, the gathering and systematization of experience, conceptualization, and training—all carried out in light of the Teachings of the Faith.”
- 5.2 The following year, in 1994, our Office prepared the document “The Evolution of Institutional Capacity for Social and Economic Development”, which describes two noteworthy types of organizational structures that have emerged in the Bahá'í world for advancing the development process in a country or region. Of particular interest in that document is the guidance quoted from the Universal House of Justice which clarifies the nature of Bahá'í and Bahá'í-inspired endeavors. Since then a number of questions have arisen, and this document briefly addresses the issues raised.

DEGREES OF COMPLEXITY OF BAHÁ'Í DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

- 5.3 One of the principles discussed in the document “Prospects for the Future” is related to the degrees of complexity of Bahá'í endeavors in social and economic development. There it is explained that projects at the grassroots are most effective when they begin with a relatively simple set of actions and are allowed to grow in size and complexity over time. This is indeed the pattern that can be observed in most communities in the Bahá'í world today. While it is difficult to categorize the very diverse actions currently undertaken by Bahá'ís in the area of development, at least three broad levels of activity can be identified:
- 5.4 *Activities of Fixed Duration:* Most Bahá'í social and economic development efforts are fairly simple activities of fixed duration in which Bahá'ís in villages and towns around the world address the problems and challenges faced by their localities through the application of spiritual principles. These activities either originate in the Bahá'í communities themselves or represent responses to invitations from other organizations. It is estimated that in 1998-99 there were some 1,500 endeavors of this kind, including tree-planting and clean-up projects, health camps, workshops and seminars on such themes as race unity and the advancement of women, and short-term training courses.
- 5.5 *Sustained Projects:* A second category of Bahá'í social and economic development efforts consists of approximately 290 ongoing projects. The vast majority are academic schools, while others focus on areas such as literacy, basic health care, immunization, substance abuse, child care, agriculture, the environment, or microenterprise. Some of these projects are administered by nascent development organizations which have the potential to grow in complexity and in their range of influence.
- 5.6 *Organizations with Capacity to Undertake Complex Action:* Certain Bahá'í development efforts have achieved the stature of development organizations with relatively complex programmatic structures and significant spheres of influence. They systematically train human resources and manage a number of lines of action to address problems of local communities and regions in a coordinated, interdisciplinary manner. Also included in this category are several institutions—especially large schools—which, although focusing only on one field, have the potential to make a significant impact. In this category there are currently 43 such organizations, located in all continents of the globe.
- 5.7 Through the general encouragement of National Assemblies and their committees, on the one hand, and the Counsellors and the Auxiliary Board members, on the other, the number of grassroots activities of fixed duration increases, providing communities with valuable experience commensurate with their needs and resources. Some of the activities in this first category may be one-day events, while others may last weeks or months.

- 5.8 Sustained projects may either emerge from activities in the first category or be initiated as such by Assemblies, groups, or individual believers. The agencies administering these projects receive guidance from the National Spiritual Assemblies in whose jurisdiction they operate. The Counsellors frequently single out projects in this second category for special attention as part of their overall strategy to promote the organic growth of the community in a country or region.
- 5.9 Some of the entities that sustain projects over an extended period of time evolve in complexity as they learn from experience, develop human resources, and integrate into their work activities from various fields of endeavor. As they do so, they begin to take on the characteristics of nongovernmental development organizations, and their capacity to contribute to the advancement of the populations they serve increases. The existence of such an organization in a country fosters the growth and multiplication of efforts in the other two categories. As mentioned in the document “The Evolution of Institutional Capacity for Social and Economic Development”, these organizations usually take one of two forms: either a training institute, established by the National Spiritual Assembly, or a Bahá’í-inspired agency. Every national community, if it is to play its part in building a global civilization, needs to gradually acquire the capacity for complex action in the development field.

TRAINING INSTITUTES AND SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- 5.10 In the messages delineating the provisions of the Four Year Plan, launched at Ridván 1996, the Universal House of Justice described the role of the institute in developing the human resources needed for the expansion and consolidation of the Faith. Although these messages did not address the relationship between training institutes and social and economic development, communications to specific National Assemblies contain explicit guidance on this matter. For example, a letter dated 19 August 1997 written on behalf of the House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Zambia regarding its national institute reads:
- 5.11 The House of Justice finds highly desirable the present structure in Zambia in which the various aspects of human resource development, related both to the expansion and consolidation of the Faith and to projects of social and economic development in areas such as education, health and literacy, are all under one organization, namely, the William Masetlha Foundation.
- 5.12 And in a letter dated 24 September 1996 written on its behalf to the National Spiritual Assembly of Zaire the following is found:
- 5.13 It is understood that the institute will be an agency for the development of human resources for activities of expansion and consolidation, as well as for projects of social and economic development, in both North and South Kivu. In this latter context, it could also gradually take on the administration of the development projects in both areas. The institute can establish a clear-cut organizational structure that has various departments and sections, each of which is dedicated to one of its programs—a health program, a literacy program, and so on—as well as those for training human resources for expansion and consolidation.
- 5.14 By broadening the scope of its operations to include development, the training institute is able to undertake complex action within a region and exert meaningful influence on its entire population. In this process it assesses the needs of the people of the region it serves and becomes well familiar with the conditions of the population in areas such as literacy, health and education. In response to the needs identified, it gradually designs courses, for example, to train literacy facilitators, primary health care workers, or primary school teachers. In time it may go further to mobilize these human resources through systematic projects to tackle specific problems, for instance, a literacy project in a cluster of villages.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEACHING THE FAITH AND SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- 5.15 Some of the questions that have been repeatedly asked have to do with the relationship between teaching and social and economic development: Are social and economic development efforts distracting us from the primary work of advancing the process of entry by troops? Is development simply another word for indirect teaching, carried out for the sole purpose of attracting people to the Cause? Are activities for the consolidation of local communities—such as Bahá’í children’s classes—to be considered development endeavors?
- 5.16 In its October 1983 message, the Universal House of Justice referred to Bahá’í social and economic development as an “enlarged dimension of the consolidation process.” The 1993 document “Prospects for the Future” describes the relationship between development and certain activities related to the consolidation of Bahá’í communities:

- 5.17 In our zeal to pursue social and economic development in the context of expansion and consolidation we should avoid a pitfall that leads to the dissipation of energy and confusion: impressed by the interconnectedness of all the factors that lead to community development, one may be tempted to define social and economic development as a synonym for the development of the Bahá'í community. According to such a definition, all efforts to develop the community, including the establishment of the Nineteen Day Feast, the holding of classes for the spiritual education of children, and the strengthening of Local and National Assemblies and their agencies, would have to be regarded as social and economic development projects. Such a broad definition overlooks the fact that the growth of the Bahá'í community is the result of a number of interacting processes, each directed by various institutions of the Administrative Order and their agencies in collaboration with one another. Social and economic development is only one component and must play a particular role in the growth process.
- 5.18 The general relationship between teaching and social and economic development has been clarified in a memorandum dated 27 April 1998 to our Office from the Universal House of Justice:
- 5.19 The relationship between teaching and social and economic development needs to be considered both in terms of certain fundamental principles and in the context of the processes which characterize the growth of the Bahá'í community. You are well aware of the relevant principles, which include the following: Bahá'ís should give the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh liberally and unconditionally to humanity so that people may apply them to pressing social issues and uplift themselves materially and spiritually; in their dealings with society at large, the friends should be upright and avoid any trace of deception; social and economic development projects should not be used as an inducement to conversion; and funds from non-Bahá'ís should not be utilized for strictly Bahá'í purposes. None of these diminishes the importance of the sacred obligation to teach the Cause. Teaching should remain the dominating passion of the life of every individual believer, and growth a major concern of the Bahá'í community.
- 5.20 As the Bahá'í community has moved from one stage to the next, the range of activities that it has been able to undertake has increased. Its growth has been organic in nature and has implied gradual differentiation in functions. When the Bahá'í community was small in size, all of its interactions with society at large easily fitted together under the designation of direct and indirect teaching. But, over time, new dimensions of work appeared—involvement in civil society, highly organized diplomatic work, social action, and so on—each with its own aims, methods and resources. In a certain sense, it is possible to refer to all of these activities as teaching, since their ultimate purpose is the diffusion of the divine fragrances, the offering of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation to humankind, and service to society. But, in practice, it seems more fruitful to treat them as distinct but complementary lines of action. For example, simply designating certain social and economic development endeavors indirect teaching may cause confusion in at least two ways: On the one hand, it may give the impression that development activities should have as their primary and immediate objective the recruitment of new believers, which is, of course, not the case. On the other, it may suggest to some friends that they are fulfilling their obligation to teach merely by participating in social action.
- 5.21 Social and economic development is an important area of activity in and of itself. Its justification should not be sought in its ability to produce enrollments; it complements teaching and also contributes to it. Naturally, when endeavors in the development field are successful, they increase the public's interest in the Faith and create new teaching opportunities for the Bahá'í community, opportunities which the friends should seize upon through their expansion and consolidation activities.

PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS

- 5.22 As the Bahá'í community becomes more involved in the affairs of society, enthusiasm is generated for Bahá'í social and economic development activities. Particularly, believers with some background in development-related fields often express their desire to assist projects as volunteers or consultants. Unfortunately, given the embryonic nature of current efforts, the capacity of projects to take advantage of such offers of service is limited. In a memorandum dated 11 March 1997 to our Office, the Universal House of Justice has written:
- 5.23 The worldwide Bahá'í community, as an organic whole, transcends divisions prevalent in society today, such as “North” and “South”, “developed” and “underdeveloped”. Social and economic development efforts are undertaken by Bahá'ís, irrespective of the degree of material prosperity achieved by their nations, as they strive to apply the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh to the gradual process of building a new civilization. Every follower of Bahá'u'lláh is a member of this worldwide community and can rightfully offer to contribute to a specific endeavor in any country. As the friends gain experience in social and economic development, and as they advance in their studies of various branches of learning or in their professional fields, individuals arise in every continent who have expertise in some aspect of

development work and who wish to offer their services to projects at home or abroad. If their energies are not channelled effectively, and they are not given a realistic picture of Bahá'í development efforts, these friends will later become frustrated when they realize that the capacity of Bahá'í projects overseas to utilize their talents and services is limited.

- 5.24 For this reason, it is important that conferences, seminars and promotional materials not reinforce an image of “development projects” as understood by society at large. Bahá'í efforts in this field generally take the form of grassroots initiatives carried out by small groups of believers in the towns and villages where they reside. As these initiatives are nurtured, some grow into more substantial programs with permanent administrative structures. Yet very few can be compared with the kind of complex projects promoted and funded by government agencies and large nongovernmental organizations.
- 5.25 The effective use of the talents of individuals with particular expertise also demands vigilance in ensuring that the initiative of some, usually those with access to more resources, does not end up suffocating the initiatives of others. The Administrative Order is structured in a way that fosters initiative and safeguards the right of people to be meaningfully involved in the development of their own communities. Accordingly the activities of the friends in each country fall under the guidance of the institutions of the Faith in that country....
- 5.26 In general, the determining factor in matching offers of service and assistance to projects should be the capacity of the projects to receive help and not the amount of resources available. It is quite possible that the talents of the friends, especially those in North America, exceed the capacity of the development projects elsewhere to receive assistance at this stage in the growth of the Faith. In this connection, the two-pronged approach you are pursuing seems most appropriate. While striving to help increase the capacity of projects worldwide, you are at the same time encouraging individual believers from more materially prosperous countries to become involved in Bahá'í projects at home. You should also continue encouraging them to participate in worthy endeavors outside the Faith in order to influence their professional fields and infuse them with the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. They should be assured that this is, in and of itself, a tremendous service to the Cause and not feel that they are serving the Faith only if they dedicate themselves directly to Bahá'í projects.

ROLE OF THE OFFICE OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- 5.27 From the above discussion, it should be clear that Bahá'í social and economic development is not centrally organized and controlled. Projects belong to the believers and their communities on national and local levels, whether organized under the aegis of Bahá'í institutions or by Bahá'í-inspired agencies. These efforts emerge from the organic evolution of communities and are subject to the opportunities and limitations imposed by their current needs, resources and capacities.
- 5.28 The role of the Office of Social and Economic Development is, the Universal House of Justice explains, to provide “support and guidance” to Bahá'ís engaged in development activity by “coordinating the flow of human and financial resources to projects” and to nurture them by “providing general advice, technical and otherwise, in response to the questions that naturally arise in carrying out such endeavors.” More importantly, the Office acts “as a channel for learning about development, facilitating the exchange of information and materials and the sharing of lessons learned among those working under similar conditions.”