



## Inside:



2

Perspective: Understanding the importance of spiritual values in the microfinance movement.



4

In Honduras, a humanitarian hospital that also works to empower its rural clients.



8

In London, a rising comic talent ponders the relationship between entertainment and service.



16

Review: *The Eco Principle* — Arthur Lyon Dahl examines the symbiosis between economics and ecology.

## World Food Summit aims to halve the number of hungry

Meeting in Rome, nations seek to build on the new international framework set by other recent UN conferences. The decision-making process, however, left some in the cold.

ROME — Building on the international framework of integration and cooperation that has been established at recent United Nations world conferences and summits, governments at the World Food Summit here endorsed a broad-based program to halve the number of hungry people in the world by the year 2015.

Saying that it is "intolerable" that more than 800 million people "do not have enough food to meet their basic nutritional needs," delegations from the some 187 national governments agreed to a seven-point "Plan of Action" that embraces concepts of sustainable development, the importance of women's advancement, and participatory governance in an effort to apply new international thinking to the arena of food production and distribution.

"We reaffirm that a peaceful, stable and enabling political, social and economic environment is the essential foundation which will enable States to give adequate priority to food security and poverty eradication," says the 11-point "Rome Declaration on World Food Security" that precedes the 33-page Plan of Action. "Democracy, promotion and protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to development, and the full and equal participation of men and women are essential for achieving sustainable food security for all."

*(Continued on page 12)*



Food and Agriculture Organization headquarters in Rome, site of the Summit.



## ONE COUNTRY

is published quarterly by the Office of Public Information of the Bahá'í International Community, an international non-governmental organization which encompasses and represents the worldwide membership of the Bahá'í Faith.

For more information on the stories in this newsletter, or any aspect of the Bahá'í International Community and its work, please contact:

ONE COUNTRY  
Bahá'í International  
Community – Suite 120  
866 United Nations Plaza  
New York, New York 10017  
U.S.A.

E-mail: [1country@bic.org](mailto:1country@bic.org)

Executive Editor:  
Ann Boyles

Editor:  
Brad Pokorny

Associate Editors:  
Nancy Ackerman (Moscow)  
Christine Samandari-Hakim  
(Paris)  
Kong Siew Huat (Macau)  
Guilda Walker (London)

Production Assistant:  
Veronica Shoffstall

Subscription inquiries should be directed to the above address. All material is copyrighted by the Bahá'í International Community and subject to all applicable international copyright laws. Stories from this newsletter may be republished by any organization provided that they are attributed as follows: "Reprinted from ONE COUNTRY, the newsletter of the Bahá'í International Community."

© 1996 by The Bahá'í  
International Community

ISSN 1018-9300

Printed on recycled paper ♻️

# Microfinance: a powerful tool for social transformation

In the search for practical measures to alleviate poverty and its debilitating impact on humanity and the planet, the microfinance movement offers a set of powerful tools in the service of social and economic development.

Whether in terms of addressing the problems of malnutrition and disease, flight from rural to urban areas in search of work, environmental degradation or the breakdown of families and communities, programs that provide small-scale loans and economic training to resource-poor people are one of the brightest spots in the new development paradigm.

Over the past twenty years, programs that include microcredit, savings, skills training and other related services

have increased income and economic empowerment for some eight million people around the world.

In February, the Microcredit Summit will convene in Washington, D.C. The culmination of a 20-month preparatory process, the Summit aims to bring together the institutions, financial resources, and global commitment so that by the year 2005, one hundred million of the world's most resource-poor families — and particularly the women of those families — will have access to credit and other financial services.

Although it still meets with skepticism in some quarters, the notion of making small-scale loans to the poor — and expecting that they will pay them back — has proven to be an eminently sound idea. The success rate for loan repayment in many microfinance programs matches or exceeds loan programs to big business.

The underlying success of microfinance programs stems, in part, from the fact that the principles are based not only on sound economics but also the practical application of spiritual principles.

The founding principle of the movement is a belief in the inherent nobility of

humankind — of the integrity, innate capacities, and commitment of the resource-poor to work hard, take responsibility for their own lives, and to repay credit. From that principle, and from other essentially spiritual values like trust and self-reliance, the methodologies of successful microfinance programs worldwide have emerged.

The spiritual principle of cooperation, for example, motivates high loan repayment and supports cost-efficiency in lending — especially within solidarity groups of peers who know and trust one another. Group members collaborate to ensure one another's success and to guarantee loan repayment without physical collateral. Rather, it is the moral collateral provided by the entire group's commitment to cover an individual's loan that undergirds microfinance programs. Cost-efficiency is realized since solidarity groups self-select membership, review and approve members' enterprises, keep financial records, and even disburse and collect members' individual loans.

Thus have spiritual principles facilitated the discovery and implementation of practical measures that have made microfinance programs work.

At this juncture, then, as the world seeks to expand the reach of microfinance, development specialists and program participants alike must recognize and systematically apply the lessons learned thus far about the power of spiritual principles to induce economic and social transformation.

More than any other factor, the degree to which programs of development harmonize with the essential elements of human nature, which are inherently spiritual, they will promote the empowerment of people, the discovery of new aspirations, and the release of new levels of will.

For example, it should become understood and acknowledged that the equality of women — a key element in the success of microfinance programs — is itself a spiritual principle. Throughout the world, women have proven their acumen for investment and repayment of credit, for accumulation of savings, and in their primary use of earn-

## Perspective



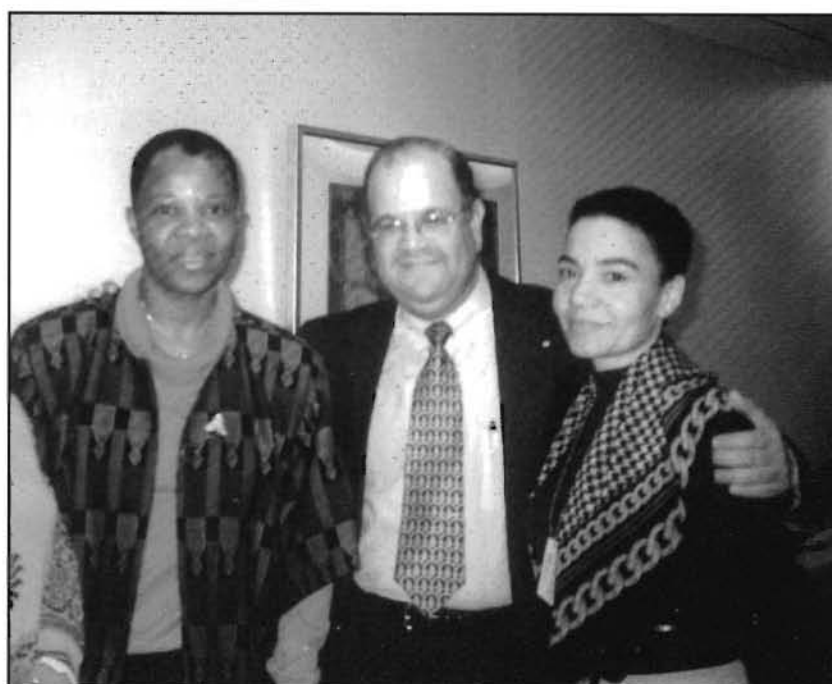
ings to provide food, medical care, better housing, and education for their children. By so doing, they have grown in stature, in the eyes of the world, their families, and themselves, thus moving humanity closer to realizing the true equality of women with men. Acknowledging the spiritual foundation of this principle will serve to take this trend to new heights.

The full power of spiritual principles in microfinance likewise has yet to be realized with respect to its role in creating a greater sense of community.

A number of credit agencies have begun to recognize the importance of creating people's organizations — self-sustaining local groups that continue to function even if the outside agency disappears. Yet success in such efforts still requires that the people themselves be motivated, that they have the will to work through conflicts, to evaluate and seek solutions for their own problems, and that they build and sustain a sense of community. Whether in rural or urban areas of the world, it is in this environment of community, where people know and trust one another, where they learn to love, respect and cooperate with one another, that people find connection and can gradually bring about a more just, equitable, and peaceful society.

Currently, however, even in programs that work through solidarity groups, the primary focus of most implementing agencies remains on the progress of the individual rather than community. They laud the success of each woman, each borrower, rather than seeing the individual within the context of community. With all good intent, these agencies may not only perpetuate a very Western obsession with individualism, but may inadvertently undermine the foundation of community.

One institution that has made pioneering efforts to promote a wider sense of community is FUNDAEC (the Foundation for the Application and Teaching of the Sciences), a Bahá'í-inspired development agency in Colombia. FUNDAEC developed training modules that teach unity, solidarity, responsibility, honesty, conflict resolution and an attitude of service to family and community as integral to true development. When the modules were required as pre-credit training for agricultural loans,



repayment rates improved significantly. Moreover, villagers consistently say that the greater feeling of unity engendered by the program and their concurrent ability to transcend petty self-interest in service to the common good is perhaps the most important way that the credit program has affected their lives.

A sense of community motivates action for the common good rather than individualistic self-interest — and can result in greater protection of the environment and the promotion of material sufficiency rather than rampant consumerism. It can also create greater opportunities for local economic self-sufficiency, thus helping to stem the out-migration from rural to urban areas. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá said: "When the village is reconstructed, then the cities will be also."

Globally, what is more important than simply providing credit to half the world's severely poor to increase their income, is that we also do it in a manner which truly empowers and uplifts those who get such help.

Microfinance programs, when done well, demonstrate the dynamic coherence between the practical and spiritual requirements of life. In so doing, microfinance can become a powerful tool to promote not only the full potential of the individual, but the force of unity reflected in the concept of community. ☉

In New York, three organizations — African Action on AIDS, the Albert Schweitzer Institute for the Humanities, and the Bahá'í International Community — celebrated Human Rights Day on 10 December by launching a fund-raising project to support schools for African children who have been orphaned by AIDS. Dr. Harold Robles, founder and president of the Schweitzer Institute, was the keynote speaker. Shown, left to right, are Ruth Bamela Engo, senior expert for the UN's Office of the Special Coordinator for Africa and the Least-developed Countries; Dr. Robles; and Deolinda Leitao-Green, of UN Conference Services. Money will be raised by the selling of a newly published perpetual diary, entitled "The Africa to Come," which also contains poems, pictures and essays by African youth. The event was held at the Bahá'í International Community offices in New York.

Isolated from the rest of Honduras, the main means of travel in the "Zone," as the region around Palacios is called by locals, is by boat. Here an injured man is brought to Hospital Bayan.



## In Honduras, a rural hospital suffers from success

**"From the start, our philosophy has been to make Hospital Bayan a springboard for the general social and economic development of the region. So that the hospital moves from being strictly a service provider to a testing ground for development."**

**— Dr. Barry Smith,  
Hospital Bayan  
cofounder**

PALACIOS, Honduras—Almost anywhere in the world, the economics of running a small rural hospital are not good. To operate a hospital of any sophistication requires a certain critical mass of paying patients—and such a critical mass is rarely to be found in rural areas.

The problem is especially acute here, in and around this remote village of some 700 people on Honduras' isolated northeast coast. Populated mostly by people of Black Carib (Garifuna) descent and by indigenous Miskito Indians, the main occupations are subsistence fishing and subsistence farming—although some men here crew for the hundreds of commercial fishing boats that ply the waters surrounding the nearby Bay Islands.

Further, the population in the zone around Palacios is widely dispersed. The 7,000 to 10,000 people who inhabit the "Zone," as it is called here, live along inland waterways that cut through the jungle-like coastal marshland. And the Zone is quite isolated. There is no road from the rest of Honduras to this region; access is possible only by boat or airplane. And there are no telephone lines into the region.

Yet precisely because of the lack of income and the sense of isolation here, the

medical needs of the region are great. In 1985, a pair of Bahá'í doctors and their wives established Hospital Bayan. Their goal, inspired by the spiritual principles to which they adhere, was simply to serve the people of the area—and to provide a starting point for other forms of social and economic development.

Today, more than ten years later, Hospital Bayan has succeeded—perhaps too well. With a small operating suite, an examining room, an X-ray facility, a pharmacy, a laboratory, four adult beds, two pediatric beds, and a waiting room, the hospital offers low-cost and around-the-clock medical services—including periodic visits from specialists in cardiology, gynecology, dentistry, ophthalmology and major surgery.

The problem is that, like so many small hospitals around the world, it loses money on each patient. "We recently sat down and looked at our income and our costs and discovered that we were actually losing \$3 on every patient who came through the door," said Dr. Barry Smith, one of Bayan's founders. "I suppose the easiest thing would have been for us to just close down."

But as is the case at many humanitarian projects and institutions, those who operate Hospital Bayan found taking such



a step unthinkable. Bayan had been founded to serve the underserved, and its directors were unwilling to walk away.

Unlike at many humanitarian hospitals and clinics supported by charitable institutions and organizations, however, the organizational — and philosophical — framework under-girding Hospital Bayan will not support a continued loss. Bayan operates without a permanent subsidy from the outside. And the hospital's founding principles stand against such an ongoing subsidy, on the principle that it encourages dependence and is not sustainable.

"One of the differences between our concept of 'charity' and the concept that is practiced at most other humanitarian hospitals is one of paternalism," said Dr. Smith. "Bayan is not and never has been paternalistic. And one of our difficulties has been that the paternalistic model was one that the people anticipated.

"From the start, our philosophy has been to make Hospital Bayan a springboard for the general social and economic development of the region," said Dr. Smith. "So that the hospital moves from being strictly a service provider to a testing ground for development."

Indeed, it is within this framework that the story of Hospital Bayan is taking a new turn, demonstrating its distinctive approach to providing humanitarian assistance.

#### **The Vision of Two Doctors**

Bayan's physician cofounders, Dr.

Smith and Dr. Houshang Sabripour, came to Honduras out of a desire to become involved in the social and economic development of the country. Dr. Sabripour arrived from Iran with his wife in 1976; Dr. Smith and his wife Marilyn, who are from the United States, arrived in 1980.

In assessing the needs of the country, the pair decided that this remote region, which at the time had no regular medical clinic or hospital, was in dire need of services which they could provide. Working with the Bahá'í community of Honduras, they founded the Association Bayan and began to build a hospital.

"The project began in a very classic, almost missionary style, through the efforts of the two families," said William Gitchell, an anesthesiologist from the United States who has traveled to Bayan offering volunteer medical services six times. "It was incubated with that kind of intense personal involvement."

In the early stages, the two doctors and their families were involved in almost every aspect of the project. Both doctors worked nearly full-time at the hospital as physicians. But they also undertook other tasks. Dr. Sabripour helped to lay bricks for the hospital building and was largely responsible for its design. Mrs. Smith, a teacher, was the project's administrator. And Mrs. Sabripour worked as a nurse.

Working with a network of Bahá'í doctors and medical specialists in North



## **Honduras**



The staff of Hospital Bayan poses for a group photo.

**“In our minds, the hospital was always part of a larger project, to help the people learn how to think about their problems and how they can find the solutions for themselves.”**

**— Dr. Houshang Sabripour**

America, the Smiths and the Sabripours solicited donations of building materials and equipment. At one point, in the late 1980s, with the help of a Bahá'í community in Minnesota, thousands of dollars of surplus medical equipment from the United States was flown into Palacios with the assistance of some US National Guard military units who incorporated the airlift into a training exercise.

The project also succeeded in attracting a stream of professional and youth volunteers over the years. Medical teams composed of physicians from various faiths have provided specialist and surgical services during five- to ten-day visits on several occasions. These visits attracted large numbers of patients and helped to spread Bayan's reputation.

As the hospital became established, it was possible for the founders to step back and to think about how to establish the kind of community participation and involvement that they felt was essential to Bayan's long-term sustainability.

“In our minds, the hospital was always part of a larger project, to help the people learn how to think about their problems and how they can find the solutions for themselves,” said Dr. Sabripour. “It was just that the medical situation was so bad, the people were in such need of health services, that had to come before other aspects of the project.”

In 1992, Bayan's directors prepared

a document depicting a long-term vision for the project's evolution which embraced several interrelated areas — the hospital, the outreach programs, and the development of the capacity of the people in the region. Then they broadened the board itself, bringing in individuals from other faiths.

As a next step, they initiated a number of subsidiary development efforts aimed at building capacity in the people. These efforts ranged from a high school-level tutorial education project to the establishment of a community-based water, sanitation and health education plan.

“The hospital is a very needed service, but for the hospital to survive long term, the directors of Bayan have recognized that there has to be an education and capacity-building element,” said Roy Steiner, an international development specialist who has visited the project several times.

“The founders have believed this all along. Bayan very much started as the project of two families. And now it really does provide excellent medical services. It has saved countless lives. But underneath that is a commitment to helping people make their own decisions, helping them take responsibility for their own well-being,” said Dr. Steiner.

The adoption of the high school tutorial education project, in particular, said Dr. Steiner and others, is a crucial element in empowering local people. The

The waiting room at Hospital Bayan is busy at all hours of the day and night.







A group of SAT students, studying in Cocobila, a Miskito community near Palacios. The SAT (System for Tutorial Learning) model presents a secondary school curriculum formulated especially for rural students through a series of highly interactive workbooks, making it possible for specially trained tutors to provide underserved rural students a top quality education that is also relevant to their situation and lifestyle.

project is based on the SAT (System for Tutorial Learning) model developed by FUNDAEC in Colombia (see *ONE COUNTRY* 7.4). It presents a secondary school curriculum formulated especially for rural students through a series of highly interactive workbooks, making it possible for specially trained tutors, who themselves come from the Zone, to provide underserved rural students with a top quality education that is also relevant to their situation and lifestyle.

The curriculum is organized around the concept of service to the community and it emphasizes basic moral values like honesty, trustworthiness and trusteeship, as well as essential ecological principles. The net result is a powerful curriculum for community empowerment.

"The Association Bayan has already established the SAT program in 23 of the villages in the area, and at least 300 students will receive high school education through the program over the next two years," said Dr. Steiner. "This program really offers one of the keys in the transition from merely providing service to one of empowerment."

#### Recent Community Meetings

The next step for Bayan is to make the transition from a project started by outsiders to a truly sustainable entity supported by the community itself. And these steps have gained impetus from a remarkable series of community meetings late last summer. They also showed just how strongly the community felt about the hospital.

The twin gatherings on Saturday, 31 August, and Sunday, 1 September, drew a total of more than 60 representatives from the eight communities that Bayan serves. Presented with the dire financial difficulties facing the hospital, community leaders and representatives indicated that they would strive to find new ways for Bayan to achieve its goal of self-sufficiency.

"No one knows what they have until they lose it," said Zulma Norales of Batalla, a Garifuna community leader and businesswoman. "We will follow up on these meetings in order to save Bayan because it is ours."

Hilaria Martinez, a nurse representing the Ministry of Health, praised the work of the hospital, saying it plays a key role in the community. "Bayan is the only hospital in the Zone," she said. "I consider that it is inexpensive. If we did not have this hospital, we would have to go to a hospital in the city by airplane and the sick person would have to go with someone."

Since those meetings, the municipal authorities have begun to work more closely with Bayan in an effort to widen the base of support. Recently, talks have been started with the Ministry of Health, as well. No one who is involved with the project anticipates any outcome but success.

The president of Batalla's community council, Natividad Figueroa, said his municipality would work with other communities to develop a proposal to ensure Bayan gets the support it needs. "It is not a good idea to close the hospital," he said. "But now we are in time to help it recuperate." ☉

**"No one knows what they have until they lose it, We will follow up on these meetings in order to save Bayan because it is ours."**

**— Zulma Norales a Garifuna community leader**



Omid Djalili performing at the prestigious Bearcat Comedy Club in London's West End.



## A distinctive comedic partnership: Omid Djalili and Annabel Knight

**One of the freshest new faces to hit British comedy in years, Omid Djalili was recently chosen as the "Best Comic" of 1996 on London Weekend TV. That, after a string of good reviews for a series of one- and two-man shows, is evidence that his distinctive approach to multicultural humor is winning over British audiences.**

LONDON — Driving back home to Hounslow after a recent 20-minute stand-up performance at the Bearcat Comedy Club here, Omid Djalili was rather hard on himself.

"It didn't take the roof off," he said with disappointment in his voice over the reaction to his first major appearance at the Bearcat, one of London's better venues for up-and-coming comedians. "I misjudged the audience. The first time I was here, the crowd was more middle class, and so I used longer jokes again tonight. But this audience was not up for it. Actually, I have gaggy stuff I could have used."

In fact, the 31-year-old comedian's act generated many good laughs. His skillful and provocative portrayal of the colliding multicultural identities of British society, combined with the witty telling of a few long shaggy dog stories, produced quite a few sustained outbreaks — not to mention a fair number of explosive guffaws from some club regulars in the back of the 160-seat hall.

More importantly, the club's managers were well pleased, saying afterwards that they would invite him back on a regular basis — a sign of success in London's hardscrabble comedy world.

"He's very good," said James Dunnett, the Bearcat's director. "He's

got good control of the crowd. And in his genre, he's on his own. He's definitely moving in the right direction."

Things look very bright for Mr. Djalili, one of the freshest new faces to hit British comedy in years. In July, he was chosen as the "Best Comic" of 1996 on "The Big, Big Talent Show," a popular television program on the national channel ITV that offers a showcase for new stars. That award came after a string of good reviews for a series of one- and two-man shows starring Mr. Djalili

### Profile

on London's "fringe" stage and at the prestigious Edinburgh "Fringe" Festival.

One of the shows, in fact, which has received some of the best reviews is a one-man play created by Mr. Djalili's wife, Ms. Annabel Knight, herself an actress. That show, entitled "A Strange Bit of History," won the "Most Outstanding New Work" award at Edinburgh in 1994 and has gone on to a superb reception in London.

"A Strange Bit of History" is experimental in style, with Mr. Djalili playing more than a dozen different characters, ranging from a nineteenth century Egyptian camel driver to a modern-day dead-beat poet from Liverpool. The story dra-



matizes some of the events surrounding the early days of the Bahá'í Faith, when some 20,000 early followers were put to death in the mid-1800s by religious authorities in an effort to destroy the new faith.

Last January, "What's On" magazine reviewer Douglas McPherson described a production of the play at the Riverside Studios this way: "In a performance of amazing energy and skill, Djalili builds up a picture of these events by jumping quickly from skin to skin of those on the ground at the time... That the result is both enthralling and sidesplittingly funny is due to the pace of Djalili's acting and his knack for accents and facial expressions. He portrays all nationalities and both sexes with complete ease, and is never less than watchable."

The successes of Mr. Djalili are as much about the talents of Ms. Knight and the distinctive partnership they have formed both at home and in the theater as about his own talent. It was Ms. Knight, for example, who urged him to switch from straight acting to comedy. And she continues to be the main director of his comic material, even as she stays home to raise their two young children.

"Omid is a very good actor, no doubt about it," said Ms. Knight. "But I think his talent actually lies with comedy. And it took a while for him to acknowledge that. He somehow at first felt it had less status."

#### **A Distinctive Comic Approach**

Today, Mr. Djalili works very hard at being funny. His self-critique of his performance at the Bearcat reveals how high his standards are — and just how much effort he puts into being funny, a task he now takes more as a mission in life than a mere mode of employment.

"For me, comedy is not just about making people laugh," said Mr. Djalili. "My agenda is to educate and elevate. And that's the most difficult thing to do. Because it is easy to make people laugh by swearing or telling off-color jokes."

Indeed, one of the things that sets his comic act apart is that he uses no sexual references or foul language in his act — two staples of the current comedy regime in much of the Western world.

Instead, Mr. Djalili relies on his training as an actor and his own experiences

growing up as the son of Iranian immigrants — not to mention the material written by Ms. Knight, which has its own distinctively offbeat genius.

"When you are really crying with laughter, that is almost a spiritual experience," he said. "You are taken outside yourself. You are released and uplifted by it and you are made happy, and that is comedy at the highest level."

Mr. Djalili believes he got his comic sensibility from his father, Ahmad Djalili, a journalist and photographer from Iran who settled in London in 1957 and never left. His father worked at various times as a foreign correspondent for *Kayhan*, one of Iran's top newspapers, and also as a photographer and translator for the Iranian embassy. Then, after the 1979 Iranian revolution, because of the official campaign of persecution against the Bahá'í community by Iranian authorities, the elder Mr. Djalili could no longer work for the Iranian government and so he began to operate a medical hostel for Iranians staying in England for treatment. And as a Persian host, the father revealed his talents as a born performer.

"We had an endless series of guests in our home as I was growing up," said Mr. Djalili, who was born and raised in London. "My father was always telling jokes, always entertaining. And so I grew up in this atmosphere, in a household that, though based in London, was a microcosm of Iran, with all sorts of characters from all classes of society coming through our house."

**"For me, comedy is not just about making people laugh. My agenda is to educate and elevate. And that's the most difficult thing to do. Because it is easy to make people laugh by swearing or telling off-color jokes."**

**— Omid Djalili**

Mr. Djalili at home with his wife, playwright Annabel Knight, and their two children, Louis, in his lap, and Isabella, on the right.







A publicity shot of Mr. Djalili

**One of the shows which has received some of the best reviews is a one-man play created by Mr. Djalili's wife, Ms. Annabel Knight. "A Strange Bit of History" won the "Most Outstanding New Work" award at the Edinburgh Festival in 1994 and it showcases their distinctive partnership.**

Another early influence was secondary school. Mr. Djalili attended Holland Park, a unique, experimental multicultural school in the heart of London. "There were people from 44 different countries at the school when I attended," he said, explaining that he probably developed his faculty for imitating various accents there — a talent that he has since honed into a cornerstone of his act.

He studied English and theater at the University of Ulster, graduating in 1988. Returning to London, he applied to 16 different drama schools — and was rejected by all of

them. "I think they felt I was too individualistic in my approach," he said.

Typical for a struggling actor, Mr. Djalili supported himself with odd jobs such as selling sandwiches, delivering typewriters and hawking cookbooks door-to-door until he began to win parts in London's "fringe" theater district. Gradually, he became known for his ability to portray any number of ethnic characters, from Italian to Latin American, and he even won a few small movie roles.

In 1989, he met Ms. Knight at the wedding of a mutual friend. Both Bahá'ís, they found many points of common interest and attraction and were married in 1992. And it was shortly after they married, while working together in a number of experimental productions in the Czech Republic, that the seeds for Ms. Knight's award-winning play, "A Strange Bit of History," were sown.

The pair had gone to Eastern Europe as part of a cross-cultural exchange effort, taking advantage of the new openness after the fall of Communism there. They became involved with the Brno-based Center for Experimental Theater, where some of Vaclav Havel's first plays were produced, and then began touring the country, giving performances and doing drama workshops.

By late 1993, they had become quite well-known in the Czech Republic — and Ms. Knight had become pregnant. They were invited to travel to Scotland, to perform at the Edinburgh Festival. They de-

cided that they needed something fresh for Edinburgh, which offers a singular chance for hundreds of theater companies from all over the world to showcase new work and talent, and Ms. Knight, knowing she would be unable to perform because of her pregnancy, decided to write a one-man play for her husband.

The award-winning result is unique for its down-to-earth approach to a rather lofty theme: the pursuit of truth in the face of intense religious persecution. Through an odd combination of characters — including a surprisingly introspective Iranian executioner whose duty it was to kill early Bahá'ís — the play both entertains and inspires. Since its debut in Edinburgh, the play has won rave reviews and sellout crowds on London's fringe circuit.

### **An On-going Partnership**

The couple now have two children, three-year-old Isabella and one-year-old Louis, and Mr. Djalili and Ms. Knight both feel strongly that it is important for at least one parent to raise the children in their early years, when basic moral character is formed. Because it is his career that is now taking off, she currently spends most of her time with the children.

Yet theirs is nevertheless a true partnership, inasmuch as Ms. Knight continues to write and give direction and shape to much of Mr. Djalili's material.

"In the early days, when we were working out *Strange Bit of History*, we worked from midnight to five a.m. every night, because that was the only time we could be sure the baby would sleep," said Mr. Djalili. "And during that time, we built a kind of wavelength. It is pure communication. We can be absolutely honest with each other. It is almost the perfect working relationship," he said.

"We developed a real shorthand in our language," added Ms. Knight. "I think maybe you don't realize you have that until you start to work with other people, which can seem quite laborious because of there is so much explaining to do. But with Omid, we can communicate quite quickly."

Today, Ms. Knight helps Mr. Djalili give shape and focus to his material. "If a gag gets a laugh but it lowers my status as a comic or is crude," he said, "Annabel will let me know. And I have absolute trust that she is right."



Their day-to-day life together, also, is a key source of material. "Things that are truly funny seem to come from very ordinary events," said Ms. Knight. "Anytime anything funny happens, we say, 'Oh, that would be a good bit for a sketch.' And then we work to develop it."

### From Clubs to Schools

Having a stable home life is certainly another thing that sets Mr. Djalili apart from many of the hundreds of young comedians who are currently competing on the club circuit. The lifestyle is one that is much more accommodating for single men who relish a late-night atmosphere spiked with single women and single-malt liquors.

But it is his ethnicity — and his willingness to make jokes relating to it — that remains his most distinctive point at present. While ethnic comedy has long had a crossover following in the United States, it has not yet reached a universal audience in the United Kingdom.

"He's a rare commodity," said Nigel Klarfeld, head of Bound and Gagged, a comedy management agency, and Mr. Djalili's agent on the club circuit. "There are no other Iranian comedians — full stop — here or anywhere. And there are really no other Middle Easterners or even Greeks working as comedians in London.

"Yet his humor is completely accessible — it doesn't matter what country you are coming from," said Klarfeld, who is an agent for some 110 comedians in all. "His strength is that he is both an actor and a comedian. It means he can be a bit more diverse in his approach."

The day after his appearance at the Bearcat, Mr. Djalili learned he was being sought by the producers of a new television show to do several original comedy sketches for a pilot. If the pilot show is successful, his agents said, it could turn into a regular venue for him.

Despite these and other signs of success, Mr. Djalili is intent on keeping his feet on the ground. One way he approaches this is by doing such things as speaking to school children about his work and about multiculturalism.

The morning after his appearance at the Bearcat, for example, he addressed a class of 12- and 13-year-olds at Walford High School in a predominantly Asian area of West London. Facing a diverse group of



rather sophisticated students, Mr. Djalili handled them as well or better than the group of middle-class office workers he'd confronted the night before.

He started by telling a story — a true one that he also frequently tells in his comedy routines — about how his mother once tried to haggle over an order of hamburgers at McDonald's restaurant, using the story to comically illustrate the funny things that can happen when different cultures clash.

"How much will that be?" he mimics his mother as saying, speaking in a strong Iranian accent

"Two pounds," he says, as the clerk.

"I give you one pound," he blurts, again in his mother's accent, comically conveying her expectation to bargain over the price of the burgers.

The joke received much laughter, setting the stage for Mr. Djalili to raise a broader issue. "The point I try to make with my comedy," he said, "is that whatever culture you are — whether West Indian, Pakistani, Indian, Irish, or British — you should try to share that and help people understand it. One should always respect another person's culture and help them be themselves."

"A lot of people feel good about themselves only if they put someone else down," he continued. "But what you probably don't realize is how powerful you are. Each one of you is like a 'mine rich in gems.' You need to encourage each other and you need to share your culture with each other." ☺

At the Walford High School, in a predominantly Asian area of West London, Mr. Djalili jokes with a class of 12- and 13-year-olds, talking not only about comedy but also about the importance of tolerance and respect for all cultures.

**"Each one of you is like a 'mine rich in gems.' You need to encourage each other and you need to share your culture with each other."**

**— Omid Djalili to high school students**



# Food Summit takes practical steps

(Continued from page one)

**"Hunger has always been with mankind. The difference today is we have all the resources we need and we have the knowledge to put agriculture on a sustainable basis."**

**— Anders Wijkman,  
United Nations  
Development  
Programme (UNDP)**

Sponsored by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and held from 13 to 17 November at its headquarters here, the World Food Summit sought first and foremost to refocus international concern on the issue of hunger by bringing as many heads of state and government as possible to its conclave.

Some 82 top leaders came, somewhat fewer than have attended recent United Nations summit meetings. Yet government statements were generally optimistic about the Summit's Declaration and Plan of action.

"Finding a solution to the question of food security is a prolonged and arduous mission before mankind," said Li Peng of China, Premier of the State Council. "Viewed as a whole, however, the opportunities outweigh the challenges... We believe that so long as countries around the world join their efforts and work in close cooperation, the goal of world food security is entirely achievable."

UN development specialists, too, said they believed that the Plan of Action is largely workable — providing that national governments follow through on the commitments made in the plan.

"Hunger has always been with mankind," said Anders Wijkman, director of the Bureau for Policy and Program Support at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). "The difference today is we have all the resources we need and we have the knowledge to put agriculture on a sustainable basis."

## A Different Process

Unlike other recent UN world conferences and summits, no negotiations took place during the final gathering. Instead, government delegations were asked to talk about the commitments that they would make to the plan, which had been agreed to in preparatory negotiations some two weeks before the Summit itself.

Many NGO representatives have become accustomed to an increasing degree of involvement and consultation in the final negotiations at such conferences.

For example, at both the Fourth World Conference on Women, held September 1995 in Beijing, and the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II), held last June in Istanbul, NGO representatives were allowed high level access to government negotiations in the final rounds and were given license to submit specific comments on the language used in the final documents.

Although the FAO did solicit comments from NGOs in a series of six regional NGO consultations held in March,

For many at the Summit, especially for members of the news media and non-governmental organizations, the only way to watch the proceedings was on television. Because of the limited space in the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) headquarters building and the security concerns of Italian police, access to the plenary session was extremely limited.







The Bahá'í International Community sent three representatives to the World Food Summit and its parallel NGO Forum. Shown left to right are: Giovanni Ballerio, Betty Mosley, and Beth Bowen. Although facilities for participation by NGOs were limited at the Summit, the three worked as much as possible behind the scenes to present Bahá'í perspectives on agriculture and sustainable development.

April and June, as well as a final NGO consultation held here in September, many NGO representatives present at the Summit said that they nevertheless felt cut off from the Summit action and the decision-making process.

Part of this sense of isolation, it should be noted, stemmed from heavy security procedures instituted by the Italian government, whose security services instituted a color-coded pass system that kept government delegations, NGOs, and the media in separate sections of the FAO headquarters building, extensively limiting interaction among all parties.

Still, many NGO representatives questioned why they had been invited if the Summit negotiations were finished and they had no chance to influence the outcome.

"We are a bit dissatisfied because we feel we have not been given time to give our views," said Venus B. Kimei, secretary general of the Tanzanian Association of NGOs, which is based in Dar-es-Salaam. "Therefore, we don't feel it was worth all our effort traveling all this way."

And NGO participation at the Summit was indeed substantially reduced in relation to recent UN Conferences. In all, some 629 NGO representatives were accredited to the Summit — and another 1,200 attended a parallel NGO Forum held a few kilometers away at a temporarily refurbished train terminal. By comparison, more than 30,000 people participated in the NGO Forum in China at the

Fourth World Conference on Women, some 20,000 at the Global Forum in Rio and more than 5,500 at the NGO Forum for the Social Summit in Copenhagen.

FAO officials defended the process by which documents were fully negotiated in advance. "The advantage you have in coming here is you know what is the basis for action," said Jacques Vercueil, who, as the FAO's Officer-in-Charge of its Agriculture and Economic Development Analysis Division, followed the government negotiations throughout the Summit process. "The disagreements are all behind. So the summit is a point of departure, not the point of arrival."

#### **Call for NGO Partnership**

Mr. Vercueil pointed out that each of the seven commitments in the Plan of Action specifically states that governments should act to implement them "in partnership, as appropriate, with all actors of civil society." Indeed, the word partnership appears in the main document more than 20 times.

"So everything is understood that nothing successful and durable can happen without the involvement of all of the actors," said Mr. Vercueil. "The NGO Forum is likewise the point of departure and implementation for NGOs."

"Clearly this is a document built on previous conferences," said Mr. Vercueil. "There is no doubt that what happened in Rio and Cairo and Copenhagen and Beijing is very relevant to food security.

**"We are a bit dissatisfied because we feel we have not been given time to give our views. Therefore, we don't feel it was worth all our effort traveling all this way."**

**— Venus B. Kimei,  
secretary general of  
the Tanzanian  
Association of NGOs**



But this Summit and its document is all about food security — it gives a focus on it. It affirms that food security is a priority problem. And that there is a dimension to sustainable development, which is primarily agricultural in nature.”

Many of the NGO representatives present in Rome did praise the final document itself for its efforts to promote the concept of partnership and for its specific efforts to include women and indigenous peoples as important groups in carrying out the Plan of Action. That the Plan of Action stresses the importance of sustainability, biodiversity and land reform were also seen as positive steps in the NGO community.

An NGO declaration produced by the 1,200 representatives at the NGO Forum, however, diverged on questions of whether free market and liberalized trade policies hurt or help food security and over the degree to which industrialized agriculture should be promoted.

“Industrialized agriculture, intensive animal husbandry methods, and over-

fishing are destroying traditional farming, poisoning the planet and all living beings,” said the NGO statement, which was titled “Profit for Few or Food for All,” and was read to government leaders on the Summit’s final day. “Subsidized exports, artificially low prices, constant dumping, and even some food aid programs are increasing food insecurity and making people dependent on food they are unable to produce.”

The NGO statement then proposed a six-point “new model” for food security, “based on decentralization,” which would seek to: 1) strengthen the capacity of family farmers, “including indigenous peoples, women and youth”; 2) reverse the effects of “the concentration of wealth and power”; 3) promote systems based on “agro-ecological principles”; 4) emphasize that national and local governments have “the prime responsibility to ensure food security”; 5) deepen the participation of “people’s organizations and NGOs”; and 6) establish an international law that guarantees the “right to food.” ☉

## Review: *The Eco Principle*

(Continued from back page)

factor in the operation of an eco is not its resource base or energy utilization but its information content. From this notion unfolds an approach that might help humanity better understand and manage the problems it faces in the transition from the industrial to the information age.

“It is the information content that is the most critical characteristic of an eco,” he writes, adding that the “information on the organization and integration of the eco is the critical factor determining its value or ‘wealth,’ a wealth that has been largely missed in economics.”

Dr. Dahl explains this concept by giving several examples of the way in which information is the key element in any eco. A watch, for example, has all of the characteristics of an eco, with boundaries, content, energy flow and so on. Yet, he argues, it is the information content about how the parts mesh together, and especially their tolerances, which produces something of

value: an accurate timepiece.

Likewise, he writes, the most critical element in all living things — which also qualify as ecos — is the information content that determines how biochemical components interact and communicate with each other to sustain life. At the most basic level, this information is stored in the DNA. At higher levels, information gained from the senses about an organism’s environment, supplies of food, nearby predators, etc., is also critical to its survival.

The information in an eco can be communicated to other ecos, and it can be used to build connections with other ecos. Accordingly, ecos may be nested within other ecos. To recall the example above, the cells of a human body are ecos that operate within the ecos of organs, which operate within the overall eco of the body itself.

Dr. Dahl develops this idea by discussing the coral reef as an information system, explaining that it is the “high information content and interconnection” of relationships among reef organisms that allow them to survive in an environment of scarcity.

Many reef animals have tiny symbiotic plants living inside them, he notes, and

**“With the eco as a unifying concept, we can also redefine ecology as the study or knowledge of the ecos and economics as the management of ecos. Both then take on a larger sense than in their traditional usage, and their complementarity becomes evident.”**

**— Arthur Dahl in  
The Eco Principle**



they provide the host with food in exchange for lodging and the fertilizer. A paired species of small shrimp and fish share a burrow in the sand; the shrimp digs the burrow and the fish, which has better eyes, stands watch. Cleaner fish keep highly visible stations and predators come not to eat them but to have parasites picked off.

### Principles of the Eco

From examples like this, Dr. Dahl draws out certain basic principles for the sustainable functioning of an eco. Based largely on his study of organic, natural systems, he concludes that the "balance" of imports and exports is critical to the functioning of an eco, that such "balance" is achieved principally by the "accumulation, transmission and perpetuation of information" within the ecos, and that the "nesting of ecos within ecos" is one way that complex systems can be kept "decentralized and manageable."

"With the eco as a unifying concept, we can also redefine ecology as the study or knowledge of the ecos and economics as the management of ecos," he writes. "Both then take on a larger sense than in their traditional usage, and their complementarity becomes evident."

He proposes first that we must come to see economics in more organic terms by understanding that "the concept of endless or unlimited growth" is a "biological impossibility and an economic fantasy." A better path, he suggests, is something more akin to the coral reef, where higher levels of efficiency are achieved by a better use of information.

Whether enhanced by the better training of workers, improved laws and rules to guide economic activity, more sophisticated knowledge of markets or the scientific advances that undergird new technologies, it is such information that is the real wealth of society — not money and/or capital assets, he writes.

He argues that building "human capital," principally through better education, is the best investment as the world seeks to build a sustainable society. "A society re-oriented from money to knowledge as the central focus of development will be able to build on the enormous progress our civilization has made," he writes.

Likewise, the proper management of the new economic systems that are dic-

tated by the principles of the eco will require new forms of leadership. Handling the increasingly complex flows of information and resources between multiple nested ecos will require less bureaucracy and more consultation.

### Global Values

Ultimately, the principles of the eco necessitate new values. "The essential concept that must become central to our worldview is the fact that this planet is, at its largest scale, a single eco, a global human community linked to and dependent on the earth's natural systems," he writes. "At this level, the oneness of humanity and the oneness of nature come together." Many of humanity's problems, he writes, come because we have ignored the existence of a planetary eco and not worried about balances at the global level.

Dr. Dahl, who is a Bahá'í, says he has been inspired greatly by the Bahá'í writings. He suggests, further, that the values and administrative structures of the worldwide Bahá'í community might provide an important model as scientists and thinkers consider what the principles of ecos mean for our global future.

The Bahá'í community, he writes, "is highly decentralized and adapted to the many cultures, nations and peoples of the world, yet links them into a global system that corresponds to the increasing levels of international economic, social and cultural exchange. It is fundamentally organic and evolutionary in operation, building on the strengths of democratic systems, while compensating for their most common flaws. Its strong resemblance to natural systems suggests its adaptability to the kind of decentralized, multilevel structure needed for an evolving world society, and capable of balancing human pressures with environmental requirements for sustainable development."

Time will tell whether the theories set out in *The Eco Principle* will have the kind of paradigm-shifting effect on economics that Dr. Dahl foresees. Yet the sheer scale and scope of what Dr. Dahl suggests demands that his theories be given a careful consideration. If nothing else, they will contribute much to the ongoing discussion about the values of our present day society and the degree to which those values must shift if we are to survive. ☺

**As defined by Dr. Arthur Dahl in *The Eco Principle*, an "eco" is "any natural or man-made functional system" with the following major characteristics:**

- **Limits:** The eco must have boundaries, such as a skin, a market, or the borders of a country, that define its form, size and limits.
- **Content:** It must have capital or a resource base. "For a corporation, its content is its physical assets and employees; for a farm, its land, buildings, implements, water supply and work force."
- **Energy:** For any system to function, there must be an input of energy, which can be generated from within or imported from without.
- **Material flux:** Materials enter or are lost to an eco across its boundaries, adding or subtracting from its resource base.
- **Dynamics:** An eco exists over time and is subject to change.
- **Information:** The processes and dynamics of an eco are driven by its information content, which is its most critical characteristic. "This information on the organization and integration of the eco is the critical factor determining its value or 'wealth,' a wealth that has been largely missed in economics."



# From the coral reef, lessons on managing scarcity

## *The Eco Principle: Ecology and Economics in Symbiosis*

By Arthur Lyon Dahl

George Ronald / Zed Books Ltd.

Oxford / London

Although coral reefs exist in tropical waters that are low in nutrients and plankton, that basic food of the sea, they support a tremendous density and diversity of life. In this fact, says marine biologist Arthur Lyon Dahl, is a lesson of critical importance to humanity's long-term survival.

At the heart of a reef's complex and finely balanced ecosystem, he explains, is a highly developed regime of information content and exchange. More than anything else, he argues, this regime allows the reef to survive and even prosper in an environment of scarcity.

Dr. Dahl draws on the example of the reef throughout his new book, *The Eco Principle: Ecology and Economics in Symbiosis*, which is about much more than marine biology. Indeed, the book ultimately sets out the frame-

## Review

work for a bold new theory that integrates concepts from a wide range of fields — ecology, biology, economics, systems theory, sociology and even religion — and then elaborates a set of universal principles based on this integration.

According to Dr. Dahl, these principles offer a method by which humanity might reevaluate its direction and reorganize to create a truly sustainable global civilization. Although his stated aim is to bring together ecology and economics, Dr. Dahl discusses a wide range of topics, covering everything from the need for better education to the types of leadership required for long-term survival.

Dr. Dahl, currently a Deputy Assistant Executive Director for the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), begins by noting that the words "ecology" and "economy" share the same Greek root, *oikos*, meaning "house" or "habitat."

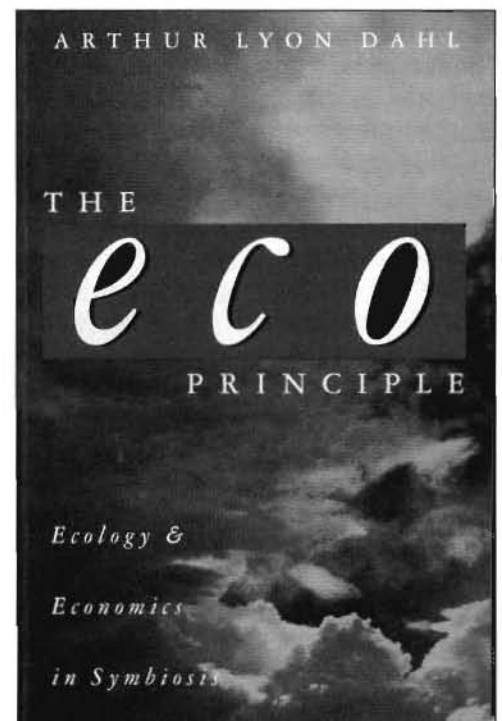
"Economy refers to how to manage our house, and ecology how to know or understand it," he writes. "This unity of word roots also reflects an underlying unity of purpose and function that should link ecology and economy. In practice, however, each discipline lives largely in a separate world, speaking a different language, applying different principles — and reflecting often conflicting paradigms. The chasm between economics and ecology is a symp-

tom of the malfunctioning of modern society which threatens our very future."

He then summarizes some of the shortcomings in our global economic system and its impact on the environment, arguing that the emphasis on profits over people promotes a great disparity in wealth and poverty, that the externalization of environmental costs allows for great waste and pollution, and that the short term focus on growth and development comes too often at the expense of long-term sustainability.

Where Dr. Dahl breaks new ground is in his theory of "ecos" — and its application to a wide range of economic constructs and social organizations that lie far beyond the confines of what is traditionally thought of as an ecological system.

Dr. Dahl defines an "eco" as "any natural or man-made functional system with internal integrity and distinct features and behavior enclosed within clear boundaries." This general definition, he says, can apply equally to an organism,



an ecosystem, a machine, a town, a nation, the earth or even a star, as well as to such forms of social organization as a corporation or a national economy.

In some respects, his work is an extension of systems theory. What is new and distinctive is his suggestion that the key  
(Continued on page 14)