

Reviews/Critiques/Reseñas

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT A BAHÁ'Í APPROACH

Author: Holly Hanson Vick

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Beginning with the discussion of the Universal House of Justice's message of 1983, Holly Vick's book serves as a good introduction to social and economic development in the Bahá'í context. It will be particularly welcomed by those individuals and Assemblies trying to initiate development activities in their communities without neglecting their other activities. We are reminded that the first step in this new direction must begin with a deeper understanding of the nature of social and economic development as an extension of teaching and as concrete demonstration of "faith in action." By giving attention to the social and economic aspects of growing Bahá'í communities, especially in Third World countries where most of the Bahá'í population lives, we can provide examples for all to see.

This book might better be titled "Social and Economic Development in the Bahá'í Community" since it is addressed to the Bahá'í world. The author assumes a Bahá'í orientation, a knowledge of Bahá'í principles and procedures, a commitment to the Covenant, and an attachment to the administrative order. Because the book is directed to the Bahá'í community, it may be of less interest to other development agencies who do not necessarily share the same assumptions.

This raises a larger question, which for many Bahá'ís has become a dilemma: Can social and economic development, as outlined in the Writings, be applied only in a Bahá'í context, where it has the benefit of common principles and procedures, the protection of the administrative order, and the support of its institutions; or can this "Bahá'í approach" be used in part by others, with some success? How can we avoid the charge of being exclusive and self-centered, while emphasizing the necessity for recognition of the full scope of Bahá'í teachings? What principles and practices can be shared, in and of themselves, whether or not the source is immediately acknowledged? As we move into more ambitious social and economic development activities, sometimes involving other agencies and organizations, we will need more guidance and better understanding of this current "dilemma."

Special mention should be made of the chapter on consultation because it indicates how, through the unique Bahá'í practice of consultation, participation in the development process can be maximized, achieving what the Universal House of Justice identifies as "natural stirrings at the grass roots." It is precisely this element that is so frequently missing in many development projects around the world which, despite their intention, tend to be top down, imposed, and even oppressive.

It is important that Bahá'ís do not give the impression we are the only group advocating such principles as unity, selflessness, trustworthiness, equality, and tolerance. Other groups have similar convictions, and we can learn from them, just as they can learn from us. It may put the case too simply, but it could be said that many United Nations and international aid agencies are strong on the technical side of development but weak on principle and vision; we, as Bahá'ís, conversely, have a clear vision but could do much better in the application of those principles and goals.

The main message in Holly Vick's book, based on her reading of the message of the Universal House of Justice and other relevant extracts from the Bahá'í writings, is that social and economic development—indeed, all human development—has a spiritual base that must precede and inform the material aspects of development. Her second message is that if development is to be balanced and vital, it must maximize the involvement of those for whom it is intended, who through such participation come to recognize their potential and their essential human dignity.

A bonus is the book's appendix, which includes extracts from the Bahá'í writings on social and economic development processes. These extracts, in themselves, would make an excellent basis for a workshop.

Let us hope that this book will stimulate others to add to the Bahá'í literature on social and economic development. Much more is needed to help us keep abreast of this expanding field of activity. We look forward to studies on such subjects as *The Secret of Divine Civilization* as a "charter" for social and economic development; the role of the Continental Board of Counsellors, the Auxiliary Board Members and their assistants in the development of the Bahá'í community; and social and economic development in the Western world, urban and rural.

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