



BAHÁ'Í WORLD CENTRE



The Five Year Plan 2011–2016

Summary of Achievements
and Learning

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and Learning

Prepared under the
supervision of the
International Teaching Centre



BAHÁ'Í WORLD CENTRE

Bahá'í World Centre

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Front cover photo:

A children's class in Badulla, Sri Lanka.

Back cover photo:

Back cover photo: Participants of a youth conference in Chişinău, Moldova.

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Introduction

In recent years, the Bahá'í world has experienced the emergence of a culture that “promotes a way of thinking, studying, and acting, in which all consider themselves as treading a common path of service”.¹ This culture has profoundly influenced the activities and development of individuals, communities, and institutions, fostering a deeper spirit of collaboration among the three protagonists of the current series of global Plans. As this Five Year Plan came to a close, the Universal House of Justice noted in its message dated 29 December 2015 that the “considerable distance already travelled” along the path “is evident from the ... Plan’s most striking outcomes”²—among them, the achievement of more than 5,000 programmes of growth worldwide. Further, the cumulative number of individuals who had completed at least the first book in the sequence of institute courses reached half a million; in several clusters, over a thousand inhabitants—sometimes several thousand—engaged in a well-established pattern of activity; and a generation of youth was galvanized into action.

During this third Five Year Plan of the Fifth Epoch of the Formative Age of the Faith, the Bahá'í community witnessed in diverse settings around the world the multiplication of clusters with a programme of growth. Vital to realizing this accomplishment were the friends serving as pioneers on the homefront, who helped to initiate a process of capacity building among the local inhabitants in scores of clusters. More than 5,000 believers arose to diffuse the light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation as homefront pioneers, surpassing the number of international pioneers within a single plan for the first time. Support for the burgeoning activities in emerging clusters also came from the friends in neighbouring clusters

that acted as reservoirs of human resources and experience.

Efforts to strengthen the process of growth across hundreds of clusters moving past the second milestone and beyond were reinforced as learning was shared and applied at an accelerated pace. Some communities began to learn for the first time how to intensify their activity; others, which had previously achieved intensity but had witnessed setbacks, needed to be reinvigorated or further strengthened. As clusters advanced along a continuum, certain essential elements of the framework for action became noticeably enhanced in each: engaging the local population in meaningful conversations, sustaining a flow of individuals through the sequence of courses and assisting them to enter the arena of service, systematizing gatherings for reflection, and maintaining a rhythm of teaching within three-month cycles of activity. The institutions and agencies in these clusters became more adept at managing the complexities at this advanced stage of development, and a growing number of Bahá'ís and friends from the wider society participated in core activities, some focusing their attention on particular neighbourhoods and villages.

By Riqvân 2016, around 200 clusters had developed the capacity to work with large numbers, with some of them having more than 500 core activities. It was in these places that “the interlocking dimensions of community life” greatly advanced and “the society-building power inherent in the Faith”³ became most visible. As the number of activities and participants continued to rise, schemes of coordination became increasingly complex in order to support the growing needs of these communities.

The contribution made by young people worldwide to the achievements of this Plan was a continuation of the services Bahá'í youth had rendered for decades. The special focus given to this generation around the midpoint of the Plan, with the convocation of an “unprecedented series of 114 conferences spanning the globe”,⁴ further spurred into action thousands of youth inspired by the vision of Bahá'u'lláh. In the final two years of the Plan, great strides were made in learning how to channel the energies of young people to serve their communities. This receptive population moved to the vanguard of the work of expansion and consolidation, setting the pace in clusters around the world. The House of Justice noted in 2015: “The marvellous exploits of the youth in the field of service are one of the finest fruits of the present Plan.”⁵

Central among the elements that ensured the victorious conclusion of this Plan was the rise in institutional capacity at the local, regional, and national levels. The role of institutions and agencies in helping to advance the movement of clusters became clearer as they strengthened their ability to foster individual initiative and a dynamic community life. They refined their capacity to read the reality of their communities with greater degrees of acuity, to adopt a posture of learning, to gather and share experiences and insights from the field, and to put in place systems to respond to the demands of growth.

Hand in hand with the growth in thousands of clusters, steady progress was made in places where Houses of Worship were to be erected. Most notable was the construction in Santiago, Chile, of the last Continental House of Worship, which was nearly complete by the end of the Plan. Still in their early stages were the projects in the communities where, as the Universal House of Justice announced in 2012, two national

and five local Houses of Worship were to be built, places where the union of worship and service had found coherent expression through the growing activities of the community. The friends in these countries and clusters began labouring steadily to increase consciousness among the local population of the significance of raising up such an edifice in their midst. As in the past, believers worldwide offered sacrificial contributions for the construction of these seven Houses of Worship.

As initiatives for the spiritual education of all members of the community became further rooted in certain clusters, so too did the awareness of the imperative to address the well-being of society at large through a range of social and economic development activities. “A natural outcome of the rise both in resources and in consciousness of the implications of the Revelation for the life of a population”, the House of Justice noted, “is the stirrings of social action.”⁶ In the five years under review, over 10,000 efforts were undertaken annually in the area of social action, generally addressing through the application of spiritual principles specific challenges facing a population. More than 100 Bahá'í-inspired development organizations now have the capacity to engage in relatively complex areas of activity and foster ties with agencies of government and civil society. The sizeable growth in the scale of development activity at all levels of complexity reflects the increased capabilities of the Bahá'í community that in large part have arisen from executing the global Plans.

The endeavours to contribute in diverse ways to the spiritual, intellectual, social, cultural, and economic development of humanity also enhanced capacity for participation in the discourses of society. Concurrent with this advance was a notable development in the relationships of the Bahá'í community with prominent groups and figures of authority,

providing opportunities to acquaint them with the teachings and principles of the Faith. Such interactions at times attracted media coverage on a range of Bahá'í-related topics and events.

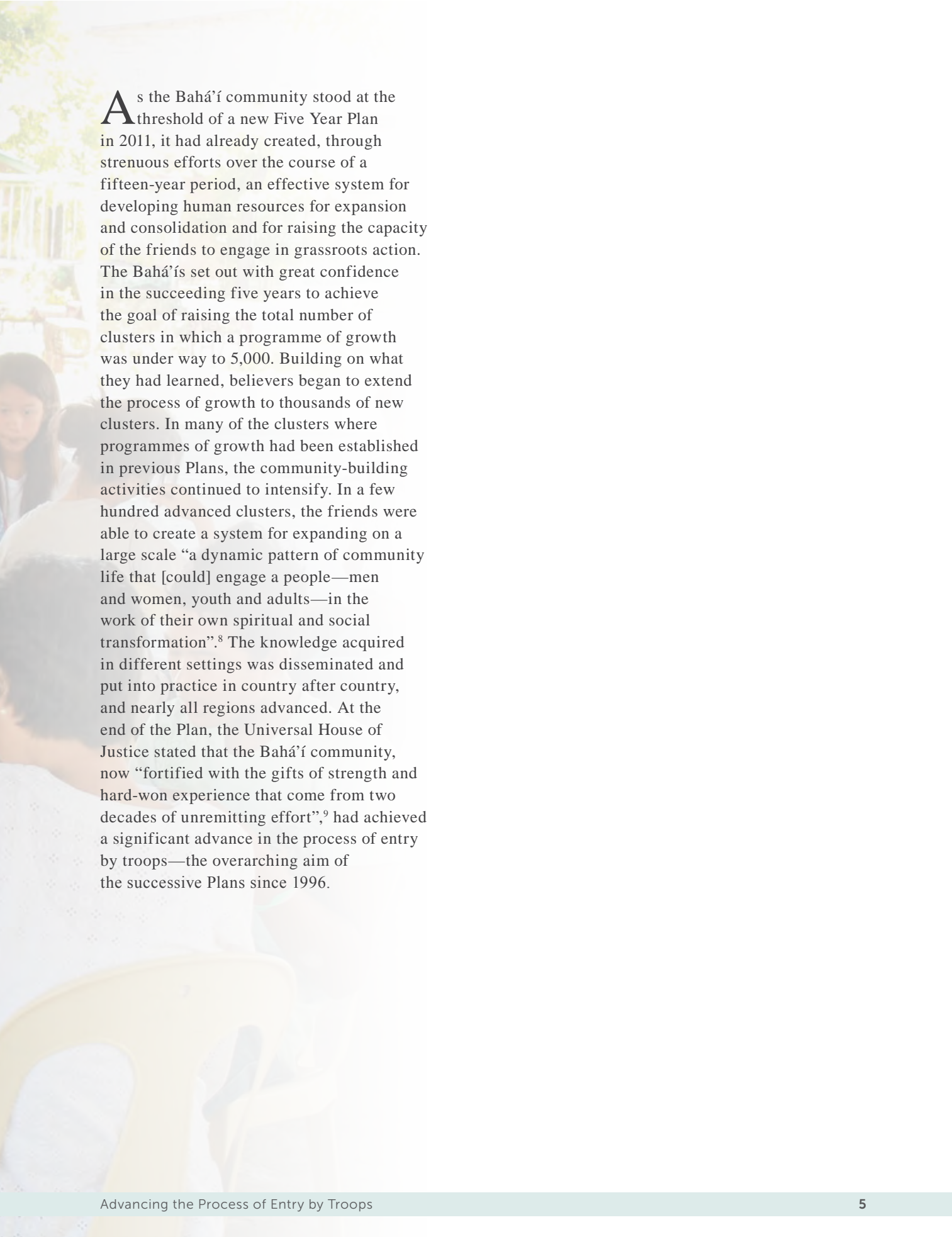
In this period, major developments at the Bahá'í World Centre included: the Eleventh Bahá'í International Convention, which brought together more than 1,000 delegates representing 157 National Spiritual Assemblies; an increase in the number of national communities participating in the group pilgrimage programme; a continuous stream of visitors to the Bahá'í gardens; and steps taken on many fronts to further protect, restore, and preserve the Holy Places for future generations.

The expanded capacity that the friends acquired in the field of service, and the efforts exerted by every institution and community to advance wide areas of endeavour, bore significant fruit. Leading up to the close of the Five Year Plan, the Bahá'í world was well positioned to usher in the next stage in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan. “From the heights to which the community of the Greatest Name has attained”, the House of Justice observed, “bright prospects are visible on the horizon.”⁷

Advancing the Process of Entry by Troops



Participants of a reflection meeting in the Philippines study guidance from the Universal House of Justice.



As the Bahá'í community stood at the threshold of a new Five Year Plan in 2011, it had already created, through strenuous efforts over the course of a fifteen-year period, an effective system for developing human resources for expansion and consolidation and for raising the capacity of the friends to engage in grassroots action. The Bahá'ís set out with great confidence in the succeeding five years to achieve the goal of raising the total number of clusters in which a programme of growth was under way to 5,000. Building on what they had learned, believers began to extend the process of growth to thousands of new clusters. In many of the clusters where programmes of growth had been established in previous Plans, the community-building activities continued to intensify. In a few hundred advanced clusters, the friends were able to create a system for expanding on a large scale “a dynamic pattern of community life that [could] engage a people—men and women, youth and adults—in the work of their own spiritual and social transformation”.⁸ The knowledge acquired in different settings was disseminated and put into practice in country after country, and nearly all regions advanced. At the end of the Plan, the Universal House of Justice stated that the Bahá'í community, now “fortified with the gifts of strength and hard-won experience that come from two decades of unremitting effort”,⁹ had achieved a significant advance in the process of entry by troops—the overarching aim of the successive Plans since 1996.

Initiating and Sustaining a Programme of Growth

In diverse settings across far-flung regions of the globe, the friends have been learning to initiate and sustain new programmes of growth. Among the different ways in which communities reached “the first of several milestones in a process of sustainable growth”,¹⁰ a few simple actions were widely embraced: deploying and supporting homefront pioneers, drawing on the assistance of neighbouring communities, mobilizing youth, and working with resident believers. Often, several approaches were used in combination to attain the dynamics of a programme of growth. By the end of the Five Year Plan, the community of the Greatest Name had added some 3,000 programmes of growth to the 2,000 that were established in previous Plans—an indication of the “systematic, determined,

and selfless action”¹¹ taken by the followers of Bahá’u’lláh to spread the Cause of God among the peoples of the world.

Homefront Pioneers

At the outset of the Five Year Plan, the Universal House of Justice noted that “the successful prosecution of the Plan will require the services of several thousand consecrated souls who, spurred on by their love for the Blessed Beauty, will forsake their homes to settle in villages, towns and cities in order to raise to 5,000 the number of clusters with programmes of growth”.¹² The believers rose to meet the challenge, as some 5,000 friends wholeheartedly responded to this call and settled in clusters on the

homefront, where they initiated efforts that gave rise to organic growth. The House of Justice has described this as an “astonishing achievement”.¹³

This achievement testifies to the capacity that was built among the friends in many regions of the world. Experience gained by committed believers in their home clusters, where a pattern of growth had previously been established, gave them the confidence to assist communities in other clusters. Moreover, familiarity with the local language and culture, a deep understanding of the social conditions of the new localities in which they were serving, and an ability to connect with their inhabitants through existing social ties and new friendships played a key role in the success of their endeavours. These friends were ably supported by individuals from nearby advanced clusters and by those serving on regional and national institutions and agencies. Auxiliary Board members also played a crucial role in encouraging the friends to pioneer and then assisting them in their efforts to establish a programme of growth at their posts. Some of these homefront pioneers served full time, bringing lessons learned in the community-building process to their service as tutors, teachers, animators, or members of cluster agencies. Often, the pioneers served in a specific area of a village or a street in a neighbourhood, concentrating their efforts where there was heightened receptivity.

In many places, it was owing to the efforts of pioneers that national communities were able to fulfil their goals for establishing programmes of growth during the Five Year Plan. In **Papua New Guinea**, during the initial months of the Plan, some 50 pioneers from across the country were identified, oriented in their service, and dispatched to several regions, a deployment

that helped extend the process of growth from a few dozen clusters to nearly 100. Over the course of the Plan in **India**, more than 100 homefront pioneers contributed to establishing a significant portion of the 362 new programmes of growth in that country.

Institutions at the regional and national levels made use of various means to identify, approach, and prepare potential pioneers. In the **Talamanca** cluster of **Costa Rica**, a native believer and a family responded to a call for pioneers at an institute seminar and moved to a cluster in the region with an indigenous population. In the northern and southern regions of **South Africa**, the institute boards identified potential pioneers, who were then visited in their homes. This strategy allowed conversations to take place that helped the friends advance their understanding of the role of homefront pioneers and deepen their commitment to service. Before settling at their posts, the friends attended an orientation programme that helped them achieve clarity about their individual and collective services and strengthened their understanding of the work at hand, specifically how to assist a local population to establish a sound institute process. Later, members of institutions and agencies at the national and regional levels came together with 24 pioneers from 15 clusters throughout the country to learn from their experience. This gathering helped the institutions refine their orientation programme for future pioneers and identify capabilities among the pioneers that needed strengthening.

An important aspect of the work of the institutions was to offer ongoing support to the homefront pioneers, which included organizing gatherings for them to reflect periodically on their service. In the **Man** cluster in **Côte d’Ivoire**, to help alleviate suspicions about a pioneer being a newcomer

Pioneers Supporting an Unfolding Process of Growth

A process of growth begins to unfold in a cluster when the believers there—or at times a single homefront pioneer—“enter into meaningful and distinctive conversation with local residents”¹⁴ and find opportunities to initiate one or more of the core activities. Translating these initial stirrings of interest into a programme for the sustained expansion and consolidation of the Faith follows no predetermined route. As the examples below illustrate, a variety of methods were used to start a process through which residents in a cluster, “prompted by a wish to contribute to the spiritual and material well-being of their communities, [were] enabled to begin offering acts of service”.¹⁵

In the **Highlands** cluster in **Kenya**, a homefront pioneer collaborated with three local Bahá’ís to introduce devotional meetings to their neighbours. The local residents greatly enjoyed attending these gatherings and began to ask what more they could do in their community. After receiving a suggestion that they could start children’s classes, some of the families identified youth who might wish to assist with this activity. Soon after, visiting tutors came from a neighbouring cluster to facilitate the study of Book 3 of the sequence of courses, and a few children’s classes began. These initial activities attracted local

inhabitants, particularly youth and junior youth, who joined the community-building efforts in their area. Before long, a vibrant community life flourished as young people joined hands with adults and dedicated their energies to hosting devotional gatherings in their homes and encouraging the participation of children and junior youth in the educational programmes of the community.

In the **Aragatsotn** cluster in **Armenia**, after a pioneering couple invited their neighbours to participate in core activities, a programme of growth emerged in only four months. Three of these neighbours formally embraced the Faith after study of the first book in the sequence of courses. One of them shared the Bahá’í Teachings with some

30 people in her own circle of acquaintances, and together with her mother planned to reach out to their extended family members residing in nearby localities. The pioneers, together with the new Bahá’í families, continued to widen their circle of friendship. They visited their neighbours on every Bahá’í Holy Day to share the Message of Bahá’u’lláh and invite those who expressed interest to participate in devotional gatherings and the study of institute courses.

In the **Valle del Cauca** Department in **Colombia**, several clusters passed the first milestone through the efforts of homefront pioneers using approaches that had proved successful in other places. They exchanged greetings with their neighbours each day,



Participants of a pioneer orientation in Nuuk, Greenland.

which led to meaningful conversations and new friendships. Their participation in sporting or cultural events, such as football matches organized by youth, also provided opportunities for them to integrate into the life of the local community. Having established ties of friendship, they held several meetings for local residents to converse on topics such as the current conditions of society and how they could contribute to its betterment, the role of youth, and the aims of the training institute's sequence of courses. These conversations led to initiating study circles and service activities with greater participation of local residents.

The work of homefront pioneers in a cluster was often reinforced in the beginning by those who visited regularly, often to facilitate intensive study of the institute courses. In the **Muhuzi** cluster in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, a homefront pioneer, after having several conversations with local friends, found nearly 40 individuals who expressed interest in participating in core activities. As the pioneer struggled to respond to all those who wished to be involved, two friends from a nearby community offered to visit the cluster and serve as tutors. The first of these friends facilitated study circles which raised up 14 children's class teachers. In time, 3 new children's classes were established, with a total of 36 children. The second tutor helped 14 friends study Book 5 and accompanied them as they formed their own junior youth groups—4 groups were established with 21 junior youth. Through the combined support of the pioneer and the visiting tutors, a programme of growth was established in the cluster within a short period.

in the village, the National Spiritual Assembly wrote a letter of introduction to the village chief and other authorities. Soon after, the Auxiliary Board member informed the local population of the purpose of the pioneer's presence. In addition, the Regional Bahá'í Council encouraged a believer who had experience in the institute process to lend continual support to the pioneer and to help train more tutors. This process of accompanying not only strengthened the effectiveness of the pioneer but also enhanced the functioning of the institutions. In the **Cook Islands**, capacity at the national level was increased as institutions and agencies made a concerted effort to work side by side with the pioneers in the country and to regularly reflect with them.

Support from Neighbouring Communities

Much of the support for emerging clusters came from neighbouring areas with intensive programmes of growth. Visitors to these more advanced clusters could learn through first-hand experience how to foster a process of growth; teaching teams or experienced tutors from such clusters would travel to nearby areas to support fledgling activities; and regional reflection gatherings provided an avenue for friends from advanced clusters to share insights on their contributions to the task of establishing new programmes of growth. In this way, advanced clusters became places from which lessons learned through experience flowed widely.

In **India**, clusters where there was experience with an intensive programme of growth served as reservoirs of resources that helped to extend the growth process to neighbouring communities, an approach that contributed to the establishment of hundreds of new programmes of growth by Ridván 2016. As a result of such support,



Youth gather with a group of children in Australia.

activities steadily increased in villages and neighbourhoods, and in several clusters these smaller geographic units became host to more than 100 activities. This concentration of activities heightened among local inhabitants their sense of ownership over the process of community building. In the **Surgana** cluster, the growth process accelerated when a teaching team from a nearby cluster reinforced the efforts of two homefront pioneers through regular visits. Soon, 24 friends, the majority of them young women, formally joined the Faith and advanced rapidly through the sequence of institute courses. The believers in an increasing number of clusters throughout the country helped to raise the capacity of friends in neighbouring clusters to expand activities by involving more and more people in the institute process and accompanying them in their service, and structures to nurture and sustain these activities began to emerge. Regional institutions increased their ability to collaborate with others and to systematize reflection gatherings at both the cluster and regional levels. To support the cluster agencies, coordination schemes were established at the subregional level. At the same time, inter-regional reflection gatherings were held for members of institutions and institute coordinators to share insights and learn from one another's experience.



A junior youth group studies Breezes of Confirmation in Cluj, Romania.

Mobilizing Youth on a Path of Service

In many cases, young people were in the front ranks of those helping to stimulate activity in emerging clusters by meeting local people and inviting them to participate in community-building activities, often lending assistance through teaching campaigns or extended stays in the cluster. In **Liberia**, members of a team visiting the **Ganta** cluster identified local youth interested in serving as junior youth animators and invited them to their own cluster for training. The activities the youth started upon their return to Ganta helped that cluster advance past the first milestone and, in turn, become a reservoir from which others arose to support a neighbouring community.

As large numbers of youth around the world offered their services as pioneers, the institutions and communities began to learn how best to support and empower them at their posts. After two youth were deployed to the **Yucatan Peninsula** in **Mexico**, the Regional Bahá'í Council, in consultation



A children's class in Madagascar.



A junior youth group in Khujand, Tajikistan.

with an Auxiliary Board member, developed a plan for them to receive support from cluster agencies. In addition, the Regional Council identified older believers in each community who could befriend the youth and serve alongside them. The aim of the Regional Council was to provide for the ongoing training of these young souls and to ensure that they felt encouraged and focused in their daily service. In the **Northwestern** region of the **United States**, 77 individuals, of whom 39 were youth, arose as homefront pioneers to meet the goals of the region. After consultation with institutions and agencies and an orientation programme, these friends moved to selected neighbourhoods in goal clusters throughout the region.

In some regions, institutions organized opportunities for young people to offer short-term service over the course of extended holiday periods. During their long summer break, a group of 19 youth from **Sydney, Australia**, embarked on a two-and-a-half-month period of service. As part of their orientation before moving to four goal clusters, they dedicated two weeks to an intensive institute campaign and to teaching trips to neighbourhoods in Sydney. “It is only day 12 of my two-and-a-half-month journey,” one youth commented in the closing days of the orientation, “but I have already learned

so much about what it means to live a life of service, using my capacity to help empower others to change their communities and cultivate a united world.”

Working with Resident Believers

Many programmes of growth emerged when the resident believers in a cluster took opportunities to converse with local inhabitants and invite them to take part in a process of individual and collective transformation. At the beginning of the Five Year Plan, there was one Bahá'í family in the **Ra** cluster in the **Fiji Islands**. Within a short period, a programme of growth was established with the help of a visiting team that met with the resident family to study guidance from the Universal House of Justice and consult about engaging youth from the wider community in conversations on spiritual themes. On subsequent trips, the team reflected with the family on the nature of the interactions they had had and deepened together on the principles involved. The team also regularly visited the newly contacted youth and formed bonds of friendship with them. Through this process, these youth participated in an intensive study of Books 1, 3, and 5. After these developments, a homefront pioneer was deployed to the cluster for three months to help consolidate the efforts of the young people and begin other activities. These initial efforts—forming a nucleus of friends

Building Capacity within a Local Population

Some of the most inspiring stories of the Five Year Plan are the personal accounts of homefront pioneers. The following accounts exemplify the joy that comes, after study and practice, from translating the guidance of the Universal House of Justice into reality, and in witnessing a local population gradually build capacity to serve its own community.

“When I first arrived as a pioneer in **Jamaica**, I had the sincere but inaccurate conception that all that was needed to establish a programme of growth in a cluster was to have four or five of each core activity functioning. Within a number of months, I was animating three junior youth groups, teaching four children’s classes, hosting a devotional gathering, and serving as a tutor for a few Book 1 study circles. Although this was a valuable learning experience and enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of each core activity, in time I dropped the majority of these activities as I realized I could not sustain them and, in fact, they drew time and energy away from the process of capacity building within the local population. Any enthusiastic homefront or international pioneer settling in a new cluster may be impelled to adopt a similar initial approach. However, my experience and that of



other pioneers has helped me to better understand that a more effective approach would be to keep the sustainability of activities in mind when aiming to establish a programme of growth.”

The experience of a homefront pioneer in **Odessa, Ukraine**, demonstrates how one person with a vision of building capacity within a local population can, unaided and in a short period, enable others to arise and serve.

“A few weeks after moving to Odessa, I met a young woman at a conference. We started talking, and I immediately felt we would become friends. During our conversation, I told her that I had come to Odessa as a Bahá’í pioneer. I briefly told her about the purpose of the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh and described the institute process and the devotional meetings held by the community on a weekly basis. She was very

interested, and a few days later she came to a devotional gathering. To my great joy, she felt comfortable and right away started reading Bahá’í prayers. The next step in our friendship was to study Book 1 together, which took us only a few weeks to finish. Soon after, she formally joined the Faith. A few months later, I asked whether she would like to start a devotional gathering in her neighbourhood, which she happily did, inviting some friends and acquaintances to her home. Later, she studied Book 7, as she desired to become a tutor and take her friends through the sequence. It’s a great pleasure to observe her rapid development and her increasing spiritual understanding of life. I hope that soon she will feel so strong that she will be helping others to acquire a spiritual vision and find their path of service.”



Junior youth in the Dominican Republic study and memorize quotes about service before discussing a service project.

and training youth to support the process of community building—ignited growth across the cluster.

In **Navarre**, in the north of **Spain**, change began when a group of friends gathered to study Book 6 with a desire and vision to begin a programme of growth in their cluster. This core group of friends studied the guidance of the House of Justice and devised a plan. With a renewed spirit, they engaged the local population in conversations about the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme, which led to the formation of a junior youth group with 12 participants. Their conversations continued and their bonds grew stronger, so that in time the number of new core activities rose and more friends committed themselves to the community-building process.

After becoming Bahá'ís in a large urban cluster, a couple in **Brazil** returned to their home cluster of **Mogi das Cruzes**

with a strong desire to serve. The couple intensively studied Book 5 in the sequence of courses with the help of a visiting tutor and reflected on how they could initiate a process of growth. They spoke about the Faith with people they met, and after they finished studying Book 5, they looked for youngster to participate in the junior youth programme and for youth who would be interested in being trained to serve as animators. They started study circles with these new acquaintances, persevered through every challenge, and saw every chance to accompany new contacts in their study of the institute courses as an opportunity to gain fresh insights and refine their approach. Through their efforts and the support of the visiting friend, a growing nucleus of friends continued to advance the process of growth, establishing core activities and hosting firesides that became regular teaching opportunities.





Friends teach the Faith at a neighbourhood gathering in Chile.

Increasing Intensity

Even before the Five Year Plan was launched in 2011, the Bahá'í world had gained valuable experience in intensifying activities in those clusters where a programme of growth had been established. The last five years saw a further accumulation of experience and an efflorescence of the many capacities required for the effective implementation of an intensive programme of growth: carrying out meaningful conversations with an ever wider circle of acquaintances and inhabitants in a locality; expanding significantly the pool of human resources through robust institute activities; making effective use of gatherings for reflection; and enhancing the functioning of institutions and agencies serving at the cluster level. Often, the movement

of a cluster from the first to the second milestone was greatly facilitated when the friends developed their capacity to converse with young people, invite them to participate in institute courses, and assist them to initiate core activities, particularly in the villages and neighbourhoods where they lived.

In striving to increase intensity, the challenge in some clusters with fledgling programmes of growth was simply to sustain and extend the healthy pattern of action already established. Elsewhere, the task was to revitalize intensive programmes of growth in clusters where the level of activity and the development of human resources seemed to have reached a plateau. In such communities the friends strove

to create “that spiritually charged arena in which powers are multiplied in unified action”.¹⁶ The account below provides a striking example of how activity was intensified in one such community.

The **Makeni** cluster in **Sierra Leone** had a relatively small Bahá’í community and a few sustained activities when two pioneers—one of whom had substantial experience with the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme—arrived in 2011 as part of a special pioneering initiative. The pioneers began activities and met regularly with a small group of friends to consult as a team about the development of the cluster. One of their first steps was to help two Bahá’í youth establish a children’s class and a junior youth group. Additionally, a number of youth from the wider society were invited to attend an intensive study of Book 5 in **Freetown**, the capital city. Vital to the subsequent progress of the cluster was assisting this group of young people to develop a collective vision for the advancement of their community. During their study, they made plans to extend the process to a widening circle of their acquaintances, to support one another in their efforts, and to continue advancing in their study of institute courses. After returning to Makeni, they were able to establish new junior youth groups, involving about 20 youngsters. Many were attracted to the new groups, and some of the junior youth began organizing children’s activities. To nurture the spiritual development of the growing number of youth who had become engaged in community building, the team of friends supporting activities in the cluster encouraged and supported a few Bahá’í families to host regular devotional gatherings.

As the number of junior youth groups grew, coordinators emerged from among the animators, and the cluster became associated with the learning site for the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme in **Accra-Tema, Ghana**. The service projects of the junior youth groups and the efforts of the animators to mobilize their friends generated further interest in the programme, and dozens of additional youth arose to play a part. In parallel, the number of children’s classes grew to around 20, and a coordinator was appointed to accompany the teachers. The growth in the number of groups and classes increased participation at Nineteen Day Feasts and Holy Days, which in turn encouraged the Local Spiritual Assembly to meet more regularly and consult about how to enhance the quality of these gatherings and serve the needs of those participating in community activities.

The youth conference in Ghana in 2013 lent significant impetus to the process of human resource development in Makeni. A key objective after the conference was to increase the number of tutors in the cluster. After some of the animators completed their study of Book 7, more and more young people were able to study the main sequence of



courses. A study circle coordinator was eventually appointed to accompany the tutors who were learning to facilitate Book 1 study circles with their friends. A national youth gathering also contributed to involving more youth in the community-building activities. By 2014, the number of devotional meetings had grown to 38 with 279 participants, and an Area Teaching Committee had been appointed. At that time, there were 46 classes with 550 children and 92 junior youth groups with over 1,000 participants. The initial team of friends in Makeni had now evolved into a fully fledged scheme of coordination. Its members benefited from the support and encouragement of the institutions and from participation in national reflection gatherings. Within a period of just over four years, the cluster moved from having 8 core activities with 53 participants—none of whom were junior youth—to about 200 core activities in which over 2,000 individuals participated, with a corresponding increase in the number of human resources.

Meaningful Conversations

As the friends at the forefront of activities learned to engage others in conversation about the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and invite them to contribute to the processes of change under way, the receptivity of certain populations, especially in neighbourhoods or villages, became evident. Not surprisingly, young people proved to be the most receptive.

The friends in **Singapore** strengthened their intensive programme of growth by focusing on a few neighbourhoods. One teaching team in the Bishan neighbourhood began by meeting to pray for the

inhabitants of their community and to study passages describing the inherent nobility of man, the oneness of humanity, and the purpose of the community-building activities of the Faith. As a result of conversations with their neighbours, two children's classes were formed. Three sets of parents began studying the sequence of institute courses, and a devotional gathering was established. As the friends continued to reach out to more and more people in the neighbourhood, the number participating in activities rose to 40, and two new families formally embraced the Faith.

In the **Pune** cluster in **India**, the friends focused their efforts in four neighbourhoods. A group of five friends was assigned to each neighbourhood. They conversed with the inhabitants about the importance of spiritual education for children and junior youth and held a series of institute campaigns, which led to a sizeable increase in core activities in these neighbourhoods.

In the **Jamundí** cluster in **Colombia**, where the community was striving to intensify its activities, the friends considered how they could expand the number of people



Local Bahá'ís engage in meaningful conversations with their friends and neighbours in Pune, India.



Friends study the first book in the sequence of institute courses in Bishan, Singapore.

with whom they were conversing on spiritual matters. In collaboration with the coordinator for children's classes, the Local Spiritual Assembly decided to focus on supporting the efforts of young people to serve the community by forming a team of three friends to organize intensive institute campaigns for youth. The team discussed the purpose and vision of the institute process with young people and invited them to study the courses. The first intensive session involved 12 youth who then invited their friends. In the second intensive session, 16 youth attended. An increasing number of people in the community joined the effort by serving as tutors or by providing hospitality and transportation. The friends in the cluster found, in this simple initiative, an essential strategy that was appropriate for the characteristics of the participants. Since youth were attracted to monthly institute campaigns, a new dynamic and rhythm in the institute process took root and contributed to advancing the process of growth in the cluster.

In one neighbourhood in **Vancouver, Canada**, a local Bahá'í began a conversation with a mother about the spiritual education of her child and the possibility of starting a children's class in the area. Through her friendship with this mother, the Bahá'í met several more

families with children and began having regular gatherings at her home. The first time the families visited, the discussion explored the concept of true friendship and the material and spiritual needs of their community. Over time, the gathering became a regular devotional meeting, and a children's class was also held. Later, a study circle was started with the mother and her friends, and the participants began to take more ownership of the activities in the neighbourhood. They made plans to expand the activities, organize a community gathering, and increase participation in the children's class.



A neighbourhood children's class in Vancouver, Canada.

Raising Up Tutors

In the initial stages of developing a programme of growth, communities relied largely on support from more advanced clusters in raising up human resources. In time, a few friends gained sufficient experience and confidence to be able to serve as tutors of the first few courses in the sequence. This marked a new stage in the development of a cluster, and made it possible for more people to study institute courses. Indeed, having a cadre of local tutors was critical to increasing the intensity and dynamism of the community-building process.

At one point during the Plan, the institutions in **Haiti** realized that many of the 10 clusters with programmes of growth in the country—including newly formed ones—had been struggling to advance the community-building process. Those involved in the training institute reflected on how to raise up and accompany tutors and made plans accordingly. Teams of experienced tutors were formed to support the friends in these clusters. They were also encouraged to collaborate with the Auxiliary Board members and the coordinators. By organizing institute campaigns, institute seminars for tutors, and tutor reflection meetings, the teams helped local friends to move through the sequence of courses and to initiate and facilitate new study circles. The number of study circles rose markedly, which resulted in an increase in human resources committed to the community-building process.

Similarly, in **Malawi**, the training institute organized a number of institute campaigns across the country to raise up additional tutors. As the participants advanced from book to book, they developed a sound understanding of the institute process and



An orientation for tutors in South Queensland, Australia.

were able to help many young people study the institute courses and begin to serve.

In the **Dili** cluster of **East Timor**, a group of participants studying Book 7 were prepared to begin serving as tutors. After completing this course, the group discussed how they would help others study the institute courses and enhance their capacity for service. They invited 35 youth who were family members and friends of the participants of existing study circles to an event where they shared what they had learned in the institute process and encouraged them to also begin studying the courses. Seven study circles of Ruhi Book 1 were promptly formed by these newly trained tutors, and within a week the number of study circles doubled to 14, with 170 participants. This remarkable progress, taking place in a short period of time, helped raise the tutors' enthusiasm for the institute process in the cluster.

Educating Children and Empowering Junior Youth

In settings both urban and rural, the friends continued to meet the challenge of promoting programmes for the spiritual education of children and the spiritual empowerment of junior youth. Factors that contributed to progress in these two areas included: an increased capacity to converse with young people from the wider society and invite them to serve as teachers and animators; helping them progress through the courses of the training institute; assisting them as they formed classes and groups; holding gatherings for reflection; and striving to ensure that, whenever possible, children's class materials for multiple grades and the whole range of the texts of the junior youth programme were available in the appropriate languages. The account below shares the experience of one cluster.

At the beginning of the Plan, two friends from the **Gran Canaria** cluster in the **Canary Islands** attended a seminar at the learning site for the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme in **Madrid**,

Spain. At the time, Gran Canaria had four junior youth groups, and the community had gained some experience with a few elements of the programme. The seminar helped the two friends to visualize the potential in Gran Canaria for expanding the programme and to set goals and make plans to achieve them. A list was made of Bahá'ís who may be interested in serving as animators, and each was visited to discuss the programme and study relevant guidance from the Universal House of Justice. The friends making the visits also shared stories about the transformation of junior youth in the cluster who had previously participated in the programme, and this helped to provide the potential animators with a clear vision and sense of purpose. Seven individuals joined a study of Book 5 and, with the help of the junior youth participating in the existing groups and their animators, 6 new groups were formed, bringing the total number to 10. A few months later, a cohort of youth took part in an intensive study of Book 5. The friends developed a pattern of regularly offering the study of



Youth practise public speaking in Burkina Faso.

Special Pioneering Initiatives to Intensify Growth

At the beginning of this Plan, the Universal House of Justice announced that it would “regularly call the attention of selected National Assemblies in different parts of the world to specific urgent pioneer needs”.¹⁷ To advance the process of expansion and consolidation by raising human resources dedicated to community-building endeavours in certain countries or international regions, assistance from outside would be needed for a period to realize the potential for greater growth and development. The primary objective of such initiatives was to foster intensive programmes of growth in each country or territory involved and build the capacity of individuals and institutions to assume responsibility to sustain and extend the work. The initiatives entailed placing in specified clusters pioneers who possessed sound experience of the Plan,

particularly in working with youth and involving them in the institute process and the junior youth programme. In this regard, neighbouring countries and other designated countries were asked to help by providing pioneers from their own national communities.

Drawing on the experience and insights gained from the **Caribbean** initiative, which concluded in 2012, thirteen special initiatives were established around the world in the last five years: five in Africa (**Angola; Burundi; Liberia and Sierra Leone; Mozambique; and Tunisia**); one in the Americas (**Santiago** cluster, **Chile**); four in Asia (**Georgia; Korea; Laos and Thailand; and the Russian Federation**); one in Australasia (the **Pacific**); and two in Europe (the **Balkans** and the **Baltics**). Collectively, these special initiatives involved 40 countries, 83 clusters, and

several hundred pioneers.

Through the dedicated efforts of pioneers and collaborating institutions and agencies, new programmes of growth were established, those already in existence were strengthened, and institutional capacity was enhanced. In **Liberia** and **Mozambique**, advances in the movement of clusters and institutional capacity led to the re-establishment of the National Spiritual Assembly in both countries. By the end of the Plan, the community in Liberia was sustaining well over 200 core activities with about 2,100 participants, and in Mozambique the number of core activities had surpassed 60 with a total of over 600 participants. In eastern **Angola**, there were nearly 150 core activities with more than 1,200 participants by Ridván 2015, progress that led to the formation of the first Regional Bahá'í Council in that country. In the **Balkans**, an Administrative Committee was formed in **Kosovo**.

The main focus of the pioneers was to strengthen the institute process, giving particular attention to the junior youth programme. Within two and a half years, the junior youth programme in **Burundi** advanced from 11 groups with 102 participants to 48 groups with 745 participants. In the **Manica** cluster in **Mozambique**, the programme became well-established in one of the



A junior youth group in the Peñalolén neighbourhood of Santiago, Chile.

neighbourhoods where 9 groups with 85 participants were sustained. Two pioneers settled in the **Ulan-Ude** cluster in the **Russian Federation** and, as they learned the Russian language and established relationships with local believers, they became progressively more effective in their efforts to attract youth. As a result, they assisted a group of youth to progress through the institute courses and supported two junior youth groups that were formed in different neighbourhoods. Collective teaching projects also began to feature regularly as part of the three-month cycles of activity.

In countries that had a special initiative under way, gatherings were regularly convened for pioneers and others involved in the initiative to study guidance, reflect on learning, and plan the next steps. The friends in **Laos** and **Thailand** noted that the reflection meetings for all pioneers serving in these countries helped them to advance, sustain enthusiasm, and develop a collective spirit.

The unfoldment of the institute process in these regions also fostered change at the level of culture. For example, in the **Balkan** region, which in the past had experienced the

horrors of a war that divided the countries and the people, a discourse around peace emerged. The special initiative there contributed to laying a new path of progress and to the elimination of long-standing prejudices among young people. At the youth conference for countries in the Balkans held in **Tirana, Albania**, in 2013, the majority of participants were from the wider society. At the beginning of the conference, the Bosniaks, Serbs, and Kosovars were unaccustomed to spending time with one another. “I had never talked with a Serb”, a Bosniak youth said. However, the more they engaged with the conference materials, the more their fellowship was cultivated. On the last day, these youth went on stage holding hands and said, “For us in the region, this is a new beginning, a new chapter of history that we want to contribute to writing.”



A children's class in Rrashbull, Albania.

A pioneer from the Philippines uses the arts to connect with the community in the Russian Federation.



Dawn prayers on a beach during an intensive institute campaign in the Caroline Islands.



A children's class in a neighbourhood in the United Kingdom.



Book 5, mostly during school holidays. This strengthened the overall process of human resource development in the cluster, which was later given additional impetus by the 2013 youth conference in Madrid.

Soon after the initial surge in the number of groups, junior youth began attending cluster reflection gatherings and sharing with the community the songs they had composed. Witnessing the enthusiasm and capacity of this age group awakened the entire community to the potentialities inherent in junior youth and the value of the programme; many friends were compelled to intensify their teaching efforts to reach larger numbers of youth and junior youth. As more friends participated in the teaching work throughout the cluster, it became inevitable that, whenever a junior youth group was formed, a children's class would also be established in the same area. The two activities came to mutually reinforce each other. For example, by

observing their older peers, the children developed a stronger desire to offer service and became aware of the next step in their spiritual education. In general, lessons learned in the junior youth programme were successfully applied to other lines of action. The devotional character of the cluster was strengthened as the groups initiated devotional meetings for their families and developed the habit of praying together. In neighbourhoods where there was a concentration of junior youth groups, the heightened level of activity opened the doors for collaboration with like-minded organizations in the wider society, including schools, which began to seek the practical help and advice of the Bahá'ís in their efforts to contribute to the well-being of their localities.



Fostering a Spirit of Teaching

Sharing the Word of God and teaching the Faith were part of every effort to reach out to receptive souls and populations. The focus of teaching was, naturally, suited to the capacity and interests of the listeners. At times these conversations centred on ways of contributing to the betterment of society, while on other occasions the friends offered a direct explanation of the fundamental verities of the Faith, which sometimes led to the enrolment of individuals in the Cause of God. The two accounts below provide examples of how institutions and agencies have collaborated in helping individuals to share the Message of Bahá'u'lláh with a growing number of people.

At the start of the Plan, the Local Spiritual Assembly of Kolofo'ou in the **Tongatapu** cluster in **Tonga** studied the 28 December 2010 message from the Universal House of Justice. This study enabled it to assess the community and identify areas that required strengthening. It had become clear that the number of core activities had stopped growing, so the Assembly recognized a need to revitalize the teaching work. Together with the Area Teaching

Committee, it organized a neighbourhood teaching campaign over a period of three days. During this collective effort, as teams of individuals sought to engage contacts in conversation, often teaching the Faith directly, they experienced a profound sense of joy. By the end of the cycle of activity, 10 new core activities had been established in the neighbourhood, and many new relationships had been formed, some of which were reinforced through regular home visits during the consolidation period. The experiences from the campaign were shared with the whole community to convey the enthusiasm and energy generated and to ignite the flame of love for teaching in others. In reflecting on the campaign and its fruits in the weeks that followed, the friends recognized that the close collaboration of the teaching teams—working together to support one another and to collectively achieve the goals—contributed to their success.

In the **Falcão Real** cluster in **Brazil**, a well-planned, 10-day teaching campaign held during an expansion phase greatly influenced the dynamics of growth in the cluster's initial stage of development. Secretaries of Area Teaching Committees

from other clusters in the region came to participate and gain experience, which they then shared in their own clusters. During the campaign, more than 50 friends embraced the Faith, eliciting new levels of energy in the community and propelling the number of core activities past 100.

Gatherings for Reflection

Consultation and reflection on action remained an integral part of the growth process as a programme of growth advanced. With the introduction of cycles of activity—and its phases of expansion, consolidation, and reflection—the meeting at the end of a cycle often constituted the first formal opportunity for reflection among the active participants in the Plan. Such meetings afforded an opportunity for the friends to study the guidance of the House of Justice, learn from one another's experience, assess the progress of their cluster, and determine the next steps to be taken. As the pattern of activity expanded in a cluster, gatherings for reflection and

learning also emerged for teachers of children's classes, animators, and tutors.

In **Hong Kong**, reflection gatherings for tutors provided a place for them to study and deepen on the messages of the House of Justice and to consult on how, in the context of a bustling urban centre, they could improve the quality of their study circles. The visit of an Auxiliary Board member from a neighbouring country proved to be a great source of encouragement. The Board member shared practical insights from lessons learned in a community that faced a reality similar to that of Hong Kong. At follow-up gatherings, tutors were encouraged to invite their friends and family to participate in study circles. After these meetings, a heightened sense of courage, unity of thought, and mutual support began to emerge in the community, which resulted in increased efforts to teach the Faith directly and to initiate more study circles.



Youth and adults consult and plan together at a reflection meeting in Belarus.




| A cluster reflection meeting in the Canary Islands.

Emergence and Strengthening of a Scheme of Coordination

With advances in the process of growth, the small nucleus of friends initially engaged in active service to the community grew in size. Some of these friends with more experience in the educational activities helped others new to the process to take their first steps in an arena of service. Over time, as more people began to serve as children's class teachers, animators, and tutors, such an informal arrangement proved inadequate. In response to this growth, a few friends were called on to serve as coordinators of the educational programmes and were able to offer time and energy to accompany others.

As the consultative process among the coordinators strengthened, the pattern of action, reflection, and consultation seamlessly spread to more pockets of the cluster. The formation of an Area Teaching Committee at this stage helped to facilitate the organization of cluster-wide reflection meetings, foster the devotional character of the community, encourage collective teaching activities, and mobilize individuals and teams to disseminate the pattern of activity to other parts of the cluster.



A photograph showing a group of children in a classroom setting. In the foreground, a young boy in a white shirt is laughing heartily with his mouth wide open. To his right, two girls are smiling and clapping their hands. The girl next to the boy is wearing a blue and white striped shirt, and the girl on the far right is wearing a colorful, patterned dress. The background shows other children, some in white shirts, suggesting a school environment. The overall atmosphere is joyful and energetic.

Children joyfully sing during a children's class in Pakistan.

Embracing Large Numbers

At the beginning of the Five Year Plan, the Universal House of Justice envisioned the path ahead for the movement of populations in clusters to a point where the number of those taking responsibility for expansion and consolidation would grow to one or two hundred who would be facilitating the participation of one or two thousand people. The friends in about 200 clusters across the globe—in a diversity of social and economic circumstances—have worked to fulfil this vision as they learned to expand the growth process to embrace several hundreds or even thousands of people, nurturing a “culture of mutual support, founded on fellowship and humble service”.¹⁸ Building on the strengths of each member of the community, they have learned from and surmounted obstacles, and pressed forward in unified action.

A Sustained Rhythm of Expansion and Consolidation

Over the course of many cycles, the friends' efforts to engage in meaningful conversations brought them into many social settings, allowing a wider array of people to become familiar with the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and consider seriously the contribution they could make to the betterment of society. More and more homes served as venues for community-building activities, each becoming “a point for the diffusion of the light of divine guidance”.¹⁹ Other teaching approaches, such as firesides and campaigns, were also used to suit particular circumstances. In some clusters, parents and siblings of the participants in children's classes and junior youth groups were found to be particularly receptive.

In East Kanchanpur and West Kanchanpur, Nepal, the friends sustained a high degree of participation in the expansion phases, owing partly to well-organized community reflection gatherings. The cluster agencies would meet one week before each reflection meeting to plan and would request some friends in the cluster to organize it. Participants included children, junior youth, youth, and adults. Besides setting aside time for consultation, the gatherings included joyful artistic and cultural presentations. **In San Diego, United States**, over the course of two expansion phases, 90 junior youth were registered in the junior youth programme in one neighbourhood, and 60 in another. Three months later a majority was participating consistently in the groups. “The efforts to increase participation and formalize the junior youth programme”, noted one community member, “have led to other positive developments. For example, animators who work with several groups in one setting are now functioning as teams, meeting before each session to prepare, review lessons in the junior youth texts, and plan complementary activities and service projects. The junior youth coordinators are working closely with the teams of animators, visiting the groups regularly, reflecting with

the animators after each session, and helping them prepare for the next meeting.”

In the Harkesh Nagar neighbourhood of the **Delhi** cluster in **India**, the friends decided to reach out to the families of the children, junior youth, and youth involved in the activities. A few teaching teams began learning how to carry on conversations that would lead to their inviting these families to join the Faith. During home visits to the first few families, the teams shared themes related to the lives of the Central Figures, the principles of the Faith, and its administration and laws. The friends found that families were positively affected by the conversations, even by aspects of the teachings that traditionally had been difficult to discuss in that community. The involvement of the family in community-building activities had clearly removed several obstacles to their embracing the Cause. In a short time, 11 families entered the Faith. The agencies were encouraged to extend the conversations to all families engaged in the activities, and within a few months 12 additional families in the neighbourhood expressed a desire to formally join the Bahá’í community.



A believer in Vanuatu shares the Message of Bahá’u’lláh during an expansion phase.

The Junior Youth Programme Embedded in Community Life in Banthra, India

Hasan Kheda has about 1,300 inhabitants, of whom 150 are junior youth. During the Five Year Plan, the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme grew significantly in both size and quality, and by March 2015, 80% of the junior youth in the locality were participating in 14 groups, most of which were studying their fourth or fifth text. Various elements of the programme were woven together to foster a profound process of spiritually empowering the young people in the village.

The friends serving as animators met on a regular basis to prepare for their groups, advance in their study of the texts of the programme, and consult on the progress of the junior youth groups. They conversed about the groups both in formal settings and informally as friends. As they participated in the institute process, the animators and many other youth in the village pursued a pattern of action that significantly influenced the course of their lives. They discussed together their plans for the future, how to further their studies, earn a living, and contribute meaningfully to their village. For instance, some of the animators, inspired by their study of *Breezes of Confirmation*, trained in trades such as tailoring and auto

mechanics and, in general, had more clarity about the purpose of their education.

The junior youth, in addition to their regular group meetings, participated in camps to help accelerate their pace of study. As they learned to consult on the needs of their community, the junior youth became better able to carry out service projects. For instance, over 100 of them and their animators repaired a badly damaged portion of the road that caused many accidents. This inspired several youth and leaders from other villages to consult on ways to bring about more sustained improvements in infrastructure. On another occasion, the junior youth made posters with images of the harmful effects of using tobacco and alcohol and together with others marched through the village, raising awareness about these social ills. About 10% of the population of the village participated in the project, which significantly raised awareness of the programme in the community. A number of devotional meetings were held in the homes of the junior youth, which neighbours from all denominations and castes attended. Periodic festivals, often featuring cultural and artistic presentations, helped the junior youth share with the

community at large insights they were gaining. The largest festival attracted one-third of the area's inhabitants. Many families contributed to the event by donating food items. At the festival, the head of the village stated that the villagers were now more aware of the capacities of the young people in the community. Although the activities of the Faith were previously hampered by a lack of support and even occasional opposition from community members, thanks to the consistent and dedicated efforts of the friends, perceptions gradually changed and relationships strengthened.

For their part, the leaders of the village were concerned with how to consolidate and extend the transformation occurring among the young people. At one point, the village head shared with the junior youth coordinator his happiness at seeing how the aspirations and conduct of the animators and junior youth were becoming distinguished. He requested advice on how he could go about resolving many of the challenges he perceived in the village. As for the Local Spiritual Assembly, in its efforts to nurture and extend the process of community building, it identified certain issues pertinent to the moral health of the village, such as

alcohol use, and consulted with prominent individuals in the locality about these matters and the principles involved. This, the Assembly hoped, would help create an environment in the village that was more conducive to the flourishing of young people. Noticing that a number of the youth carrying out core activities did not have the means to advance further in their education, the Assembly provided support from the local Fund to enable them to do so.

As the process of community building advanced, changes at the level of

culture gradually occurred. Interactions among the people of the village had been strictly based on caste, and there had been clear discrimination. However, because of the way the community-building work naturally elicited the participation of individuals from diverse backgrounds in unified action for the betterment of the community, much of the segregation that had existed for so long gave way, in a relatively short period of time, to a new culture, particularly among the younger generation. The influence of

the activities in the village was even felt beyond its borders. Inhabitants of surrounding villages remarked on how well-mannered the youth in Hasan Kheda were, how they gave importance to their education, and how they were even advancing materially. Some of these individuals were invited to spend time in Hasan Kheda to learn about the institute process, which they went on to establish in their own villages.



A junior youth group in the Hasan Kheda village of Banthra, India.

An Educational System Rooted in the Cluster

As the friends strove to strengthen the educational process promoted by the training institute, quantitative growth became more evident. The number of those serving capably as tutors grew cycle after cycle. These friends were able to “offer the full sequence of institute courses between them, at times with marked intensity”,²⁰ making it possible for growing numbers of people to study the institute courses and arise to serve. In this way, many clusters were able to establish an “expanding, sustainable system for child education”.²¹

The elements related to children’s education—for example, implementing the different grades, training teachers regularly, and holding periodic gatherings of teachers with the parents—became more systematized. Further, in some advanced clusters, the friends were learning how to transition children into junior youth groups and youngsters from the junior youth groups into study circles. In such clusters, “an educational system with all its component elements, capable of expanding to welcome large numbers”,²² became firmly rooted.

During the Plan, the friends in the **Tiriki West** cluster in **Kenya** sustained 20 to 50 study circles at any given time. Promoting the study of the sequence of courses through to Book 7, assisting the friends to form study circles, and bringing those acting as tutors together in regular gatherings helped the friends achieve such progress. The tutors also learned to work in small teams and to create an environment conducive to learning, supporting one another and consulting on how to facilitate effectively the study of the texts, implement the practical components, and accompany the participants in their initial acts of service.



Participants of a junior youth group in Ghana.

The number of junior youth participating in the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme in **Toronto, Canada**, more than doubled when the cluster agencies focused on engaging receptive populations in certain areas of the city. After thoughtful analysis and consultation, the friends decided to work intensely in five neighbourhoods. Within a year, the number of junior youth grew from 165 in about 23 groups to 317 in 26 groups, lending a great impulse to the overall progress of the cluster.

In the **Upolu** cluster in **Samoa**, which serves as a learning site for the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme, the friends applied what they had learned from implementing the junior youth programme to multiplying other core activities, especially children’s classes. Between 2013 and 2015, the number of classes in the cluster grew from 16 with 100 participants to 127 engaging 1,000 children. The friends achieved such gains by reflecting deeply on their efforts to spiritually educate children and by pursuing a few particular approaches. For instance, in cooperation with the Auxiliary Board member, the children’s class coordinator and another experienced friend visited all the Local Spiritual Assemblies in the cluster to consult about the spiritual education of children. With the

support of the Assemblies, they extended this conversation to families. Further, they organized monthly gatherings to mobilize teachers, veteran and new. Thanks to the encouragement and inspiration generated through these encounters, gradually more friends arose to establish children's classes. Teachers with the experience to accompany others soon emerged, and together with the coordinator, they began to facilitate the study of the Book 3 branch courses for Grades 2 and 3. Participation in the classes grew markedly now that the institute was able to offer three grades. The children themselves also played a part in expanding the classes by inviting their siblings and friends. The parents became more involved, and events such as a prayer campaign contributed to the growth of the number of classes to more than 100.

At the start of the Plan, the **Jinja** cluster in **Uganda** had 23 children's classes with around 370 participants. During the five years that followed, the friends focused on learning how to offer Grades 2 and 3 more systematically. Conversations with potential teachers initially centred on helping them learn to work well together. After completing a study of Book 3, new teachers formed classes, established relationships with parents, and offered the first few classes, with the help of experienced teachers. Over time, the more experienced teachers also

assisted new teachers to study the branch courses of Book 3 for Grades 2 and 3. As the number of children's classes grew, a full-time coordinator was formally named. With the assistance of seven experienced teachers, the coordinator helped teachers maintain their classes from week to week, supported them to strengthen relationships with parents, and encouraged them to continue to study the sequence of courses. Auxiliary Board members and Local Spiritual Assemblies supported the teachers and the coordinator by meeting with them occasionally, and the teachers and the coordinator came together every three months to reflect, share experiences, and study relevant materials. Towards the end of the Plan, children's classes had expanded to 3 sectors and 16 neighbourhoods and villages, reaching more than 2,000 children in 114 classes.



Youth participate in a study circle in Samoa.



Junior youth in Portal da Gloria, Brazil, contribute to the beautification of their neighbourhood.

Movement of Populations towards Bahá'u'lláh's Vision of a New World Order

Around the globe, a great number of ethnic, tribal, and indigenous groups have been attracted to the Message of Bahá'u'lláh, and the believers are growing in their capacity to respond to this receptivity. They have learned that the process of capacity building is most effective “when members of that population are themselves in the vanguard”.²³

In **Latin America**, the Faith has been present in many of its indigenous populations for decades. In one of the Tablets of the Divine Plan, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá called upon

the believers to “attach great importance to the indigenous population of America”, adding that “they will become so illumined as to enlighten the whole world”.²⁴ During the current series of Plans, a number of clusters in indigenous communities in Latin America have experienced significant growth. Among the most notable is the Ngäbe–Buglé, an indigenous group living in the mountainous region of **Ngäbe–Buglé** in western **Panama**. This fully indigenous territory has a total population of around 200,000, of which around 3,000 have declared their faith in Bahá'u'lláh. The community has a Regional Bahá'í Council,

a regional institute board, and 24 Local Spiritual Assemblies. The Ngäbe–Buglé believers are firm and knowledgeable, and have a long history in the Faith. A Bahá'í-inspired radio station and a Bahá'í-inspired university serve the general population, and the Bahá'í community is also promoting programmes in early childhood education.

The process of community building among the Ngäbe–Buglé is particularly advanced in the **Besikó** (Nedrini) cluster. Since an intensive programme of growth was established in 2006, the work of the Faith in Besikó has continued to expand, with the number of core activities reaching some 200 involving



Members of the clusters agencies in Besikó, Panama, visit animators, children's class teachers, participants, and parents.

almost 1,200 participants. The cluster has a robust scheme of coordination that includes dozens of young women and men, some of whom are still in high school. The friends are focused on further strengthening the pattern of community life at the level of neighbourhoods and villages.

In 2012, a gathering was held in the Besikó cluster with representatives of indigenous communities from 13 countries across **Central and South America**. The gathering addressed the role of education in the spiritual, social, and economic development of the community. It also provided an occasion for the friends to consult on which aspects of their culture were in conformity with the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and should be nurtured, and which ones should be set aside. Similar gatherings were later held in **Bolivia and Colombia** to help invigorate the work of the Faith in clusters with indigenous populations.

These gatherings gave much impetus to the work with indigenous communities throughout Latin America. They allowed friends from many communities to learn from the experiences of strong clusters with similar realities and helped the participants to formulate a clear vision of growth based on local circumstances. The



participants strengthened their Bahá'í identity and their sense of ownership of the activities of the Faith, and the processes of expansion and consolidation were extended to a much larger number of clusters in the region.

In **Southern Africa**, the members of the **Lunda**

population, who reside predominantly in north-western **Zambia**, eastern **Angola**, and the southern region of the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, number some 1.5 million. One of the clusters in the region, **Mwinilunga East** in Zambia, has historically had a sizeable Bahá'í community with a strong sense of ownership of the Faith, evident in high levels of participation in the process

of community building. Local Spiritual Assemblies, which collaborate closely with the cluster agencies, encourage and support those striving to implement the provisions of the Plan at the grassroots. In July 2015, a conference was organized for this population in Zambia. Nearly 600 friends gathered to celebrate the history of the Faith among the Lunda and to consider the contributions of this community to the development of their people. Over three days, the participants examined how the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh were being applied in their communities and deliberated on various aspects of their culture.

Community-Building in Villages and Neighbourhoods

Intensive work in villages and neighbourhoods characterized much of the learning about how to embrace large numbers. It allowed “many whose lives are touched in some way by the community’s activities” to experience the “transformative effect of studying the Word of God”.²⁵ In many instances, the very spirit of a village or a neighbourhood was transformed, giving great impetus to progress in a cluster. In each neighbourhood or village, a small group of friends initiated the community-building activities, with the aim of raising capacity among the local inhabitants. As more and more residents in these small settings joined the activities and assumed some responsibility for the efforts under way, the society-building power of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation became apparent.

A study circle that began before the series of youth conferences in 2013 contributed greatly to building capacity in the local population of the Kotebe neighbourhood of **Addis Ababa, Ethiopia**. With the help of a team of three tutors, a group of 20 friends studied various books of the sequence in

a sustained way over the course of several years. Those serving as tutors supported the participants of the study circle until they could carry out their own activities. In time, the participants were holding many of their own core activities and helping others to start their own. The number of study circles, devotional meetings, home visits, children’s classes, and junior youth groups all increased. With around 30 core activities and close to 450 participants, the neighbourhood became a centre of intense activity, and the participants gradually developed a common vision for the betterment of their community.

Young people in the Jinámar neighbourhood of the **Gran Canaria cluster, Canary Islands**, were invited to youth gatherings where they creatively explored the themes of service and friendship. These discussions quickly resulted in tangible changes in the group: the youth began to demonstrate the capacity to consult, listen, and thoughtfully consider one another’s opinions. They then reached out to their peers and met other young people keen to join in community-building efforts. To channel their energies into treading a path of service, the institute team launched an intensive institute campaign, in which some



Participants of a neighbourhood gathering in the Créteil–Nogent cluster in France.

30 youth participated. Through the courses, the youth deepened their understanding of how service and worship could remain at the centre of their lives. During their time together, they organized a service activity in the neighbourhood and planned to invite their friends to join them in the conversation. They then helped one another engage in acts of service and opened junior youth groups, and soon weekly gatherings were being held for them to reflect and plan. A posture of learning and mutual support was at the heart of their relationships. As the youth gained experience in opening and sustaining junior youth groups and supporting one another in the process, they also fostered ongoing meaningful interactions with the families of the children and youth, particularly the mothers. The Area Teaching Committee explored with the animators opportunities to hold devotional gatherings in the homes of some of the participants of the junior youth programme. Institutions of society, particularly the local government, began to acknowledge the contributions of the Bahá'í community to the well-being of the neighbourhood by asking the friends to participate in meetings to identify and respond to the needs of the neighbourhood. The insights generated from the experiences in the Jinámar neighbourhood contributed to the growth of the entire cluster.

In the Mount Druitt neighbourhood of **Sydney, Australia**, which has significant indigenous and Pacific Islander populations, one outcome of the transformative impact of the core activities was that more young people graduated from high school each year. An aboriginal youth with an extended family of over one hundred members commented, "I am the first in my entire extended family to graduate from high school." The bullying that was prevalent in the neighbourhood began to disappear as more and more young people participated in community-building activities. The youth responded eagerly to opportunities for prayer, and a devotional spirit gradually took root. Some women started to consult on how to contribute to the development of their community and to use the opportunities that lay before them. In one meeting, they drew inspiration from exploring the life of ʿĀshirih, the immortal Bahá'í heroine. There were glimpses of social action, too, with junior youth looking after the elderly in the neighbourhood. On one occasion, after an older woman had passed away in the community, members of a junior youth group visited her family, helped to move out her belongings, and cleaned her home. The group also helped to organize aspects of her funeral and prayed for the progress of her soul.



A devotional gathering in the Mount Druitt neighbourhood of Sydney, Australia.

Enhancing the Devotional Character of the Community

Bahá'ís and their friends have achieved substantial progress in learning to “invite others into communion with the Creator and to render service to humanity”.²⁶ Accordingly, there has been a palpable enhancement in the devotional character of Bahá'í communities everywhere. By the close of the previous Five Year Plan, more than 350,000 people had completed at least the first institute course, leading to a growing “capacity to shape a pattern of life distinguished for its devotional character”.²⁷ Over the next five years, more and more families and individuals opened their homes

for devotional meetings, which nearly doubled from around 28,000 with 170,000 participants at Ridván 2011, to 50,000 with 307,000 participants by Ridván 2016. A pattern of communal worship, closely associated with acts of service, was further strengthened.

* * *

The Tawaimare village in the **South Malaita** cluster in the **Solomon Islands** is one such community that has witnessed how a strong devotional character affects all aspects of community life. Every Wednesday and Saturday

morning, the entire village came together at five o'clock for dawn prayers in the Bahá'í Centre. After the devotions, the friends helped clean and maintain the Centre and then continued with other activities for the day. This pattern of collective worship influenced the character of the conversations in the community. Through home visits, the friends shared with others the impact of dawn prayers. Inhabitants of neighbouring localities came to appreciate the value of gathering for communal worship and adopted a similar pattern. Dawn prayers in family homes on the other days of the week were



A devotional gathering in Tajikistan.

also taking root. Community activities such as Nineteen Day Feasts and Holy Days became more vibrant and participation in them increased.

* * *

The activities in the **Kota Kinabalu** cluster in **Sabah** were reinvigorated after the friends serving on cluster agencies decided to focus on fostering a culture of praying and serving together. They began by visiting friends and encouraging them to host regular meetings for prayer. Six new families opened their homes to share prayers and study the Word of God, and the effect of these gatherings was felt instantly throughout the community. Bonds of friendship and unity were strengthened, the spirit of the Nineteen Day Feasts was uplifted, and attendance increased. Each family hosting a devotional meeting selected a book or compilation to study after the prayers. These materials were later shared with other members of the community in creative ways—including group text messages—allowing more friends to benefit from the spiritual atmosphere and creating a collective sense of participation in the devotional life of the community.

The Role of Local Spiritual Assemblies

Local Spiritual Assemblies continued to play a vital role in looking after all aspects of the development of community life within their jurisdictions. Their role became especially challenging in the most advanced clusters. Local Assemblies tried to create a nurturing environment that would inspire and enable increasing numbers of friends, especially young people, to contribute to the process of community building. As the Assemblies supported efforts to extend a range of educational activities to receptive groups, they gained the trust and confidence of both the believers and the wider community, and collaborated closely with cluster agencies and Auxiliary Board members. The dynamic participation of Assembly members in the various facets of community life also contributed greatly to the efficacy of the functioning of the Assembly itself.

In the **Aldai Kaptumo** cluster in **Kenya**, Local Spiritual Assemblies gathered to reflect on their responsibilities to help foster the spiritual and material development of the localities they served. They also met with the parents of the children and junior youth participating in activities and helped them to deepen their understanding of the concepts found in the material their children were studying. Some Assemblies also arranged gatherings of Bahá'í women to encourage them to promote the spiritual education of children by forming children's classes. All these efforts led to increased participation in community activities. At the end of the consolidation phase of a three-month cycle of activity, the Local Assemblies facilitated opportunities for reflection and planning during the Nineteen Day Feasts. Lessons

Clusters at the Frontiers of Learning

Among the two hundred or so clusters in the world where the believers began to experience the joys and challenges of working with large numbers, some had villages and neighbourhoods where a significant percentage of the entire population was involved in community-building activities. In such places, the societal impact of the Faith became more evident, and the Bahá'í community was “afforded higher standing as a distinctive moral voice in the life of a people” and contributed “an informed perspective to the discourses around it”. The individuals, institutions, and communities in each of the two clusters described below demonstrate what it means to “sustain a high degree of participation in all aspects of the capacity-building endeavour and manage the complexity entailed”.²⁸

* * *

Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of the Congo: A Sustained Rhythm of Expansion and Consolidation

Before the Five Year Plan concluded, the friends in **Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of the Congo**, were sustaining about 750 core activities involving some 10,000 participants, more than half of whom were from the wider community. The three-month cycles of activity unfolded uninterrupted, with distinct phases for expansion and consolidation. The Area Teaching Committee planned the cycles in collaboration with other cluster agencies and with Auxiliary Board members and their assistants. Collective teaching campaigns were held regularly. Gatherings for reflection were organized so that all members of the community felt welcome to participate. In these meetings, extracts from recent messages of the Universal House of Justice were studied and detailed plans were made

according to the circumstances of the community. After the reflection meeting, each entity took ownership of the various plans. The Area Teaching Committee, for example, wrote to Local Spiritual Assemblies encouraging them to mobilize friends who could serve as tutors. Likewise, the Local Assemblies did everything they could to encourage participation. There was a clear framework of mutual support, especially in efforts to reach out to the wider community. In every cycle, the friends worked to ensure that the goals were met and that expansion and consolidation moved forward hand in hand. The work of consolidation began even before the expansion phase finished. Whenever there was an opportunity to start a core activity, the friends made certain that it happened as soon as possible.



Children, junior youth, and youth at a community gathering in Lubumbashi.

Daga, Papua New Guinea: Transformation and Cultural Change



Junior youth in Daga learn to weave mats during an ecological camp.

The **Daga** cluster in **Papua New Guinea** has had an intensive programme of growth since 2004, and the community has grown in its ability to take charge of the spiritual and material transformation of its inhabitants. With around 30 Local Spiritual Assemblies and a general population of 8,000 people, by the end of the Plan almost 4,000 friends

were participating in more than 800 core activities. The cluster was divided into 5 sectors, each with between 4 and 11 Local Assemblies. There was a raised level of consciousness among community members about becoming protagonists of their own learning, and through participation in the core activities, the friends saw themselves as active agents of

change. They recognized that the process they were engaged in was not just about studying institute books, but also about developing the capacity to improve the spiritual and material dimensions of their lives. The study of Book 1, for example, profoundly influenced the community's understanding of life after death. While the death of a loved one had traditionally been followed by many weeks of mourning, the passing of a friend or family member became a time of contemplation and prayer. Prayers and passages from the Bahá'í writings on life and death were often read during funerals and other gatherings, which deeply touched the hearts of all present. In addition, glimpses of individual and collective transformation could be seen in the changing dynamics between women and men. In the past, the primary role of women in society was the upkeep of the home, but now they were contributing to decision-making processes in the community and serving as office-bearers of Local Assemblies. The capacity to consult and collaborate during the Nineteen Day Feast also developed over time, with women and children in particular contributing more and offering insights and suggestions.

learned were documented and, together with the plans for the next expansion phase, shared at a meeting organized by the Area Teaching Committee.

Through involvement in the institute process and study of the guidance of the House of Justice, the Local Spiritual Assembly of **Bukavu** in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo** lent significant support to the activities of the community. In particular, it helped organize youth gatherings and systematically followed up to ensure that the participants were able to join the institute process. It also considered all members of its community and encouraged those who were not yet engaged in some kind of service. On one occasion, the Assembly invited a dozen youth, shared with them its plans, and asked them to help reach out to these friends. In addition, when the Local Assembly noticed that an individual or a family had been unable to attend a few Nineteen Day Feasts, members of the Assembly visited them to express love and concern for their well-being.

Increasingly Complex Schemes of Coordination

When the number of those shouldering the work of community building and its corresponding activities grew, increasing demands were placed on the schemes of coordination. The basic structures in place now needed to be extended to support larger and larger numbers of friends. Care was taken, though, to avoid “making cluster administration overly complex or hierarchical as that could reduce the efficacy of the entire scheme and inadvertently impede the flourishing of relationships among the friends that are conducive to continued progress”.²⁹ The agencies found creative ways to accompany the friends in their efforts, making certain to promote

collaboration and mutual support. The work of the cluster coordinators, for instance, came to be reinforced by help from a growing number of experienced individuals. Correspondingly, meetings among these friends for exchanging information and insights became regular and more systematic. And in many clusters, Local Spiritual Assemblies bolstered the efforts of the cluster agencies. Area Teaching Committees drew on the help of community members to continue enhancing the devotional character of the community and to expand meaningful conversations in various social settings, while Auxiliary Board members and their assistants helped bring coherence among the activities and fostered an environment conducive to learning. “Qualities of mutual support, reciprocity, and service to one another” stood out as “features of an emerging, vibrant culture” among all those involved.³⁰

After studying the letter dated 1 August 2014 from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá’ís of the world regarding the construction of Houses of Worship, the Area



A small group study during a national institute seminar in the Fiji Islands.



A seminar for institute coordinators in Maradi, Niger.

Teaching Committee in the **Triangle** cluster in the **Atlantic States** region of the **United States** felt inspired to consider ways to further enhance the devotional spirit in the cluster. The members began to think about an army of friends who could help encourage others to offer devotional gatherings in their localities. They looked at the full membership list of the cluster for the first time, going name by name and identifying those friends who were not serving as children's class teachers, junior youth animators, study circle tutors, or hosts of devotional meetings. From an initial meeting of 25 friends, the Committee identified a smaller group of 8 individuals who were willing and able to serve as devotional meeting assistants—two in each sector of the cluster—and one additional person to serve as a coordinator for the 8 assistants and to help with administrative tasks. Within one cycle, the friends almost doubled the

number of devotional meetings in the cluster, from about 25 gatherings with some 200 participants to nearly 50 gatherings with 322 participants. The assistants worked together as a team, encouraging one another, and sharing insights and approaches. One assistant shared with the Area Teaching Committee how grateful she was to be able to offer her services in this capacity and how supported she felt in the process.





Releasing the Potential of Youth

Participants of the 2013 youth conference in Port Vila, Vanuatu.

As the friends in clusters across the globe laboured to achieve the goal of establishing programmes of growth in at least 5,000 clusters, youth, willing and eager to improve the material and spiritual conditions of their surroundings, played an increasingly significant role in this process. “From the panorama of the Bahá’í world engaged in earnest activity”, wrote the Universal House of Justice, “one phenomenon strikes us especially: the decisive contribution made by youth on every continent.”³¹

In February 2013, the House of Justice announced the convocation of 95 youth conferences to take place around the world that year. So overwhelming was the response of the Bahá’ís and their friends that three

months later the Supreme Body called for an additional 19 conferences to be held. These gatherings helped mobilize thousands upon thousands of youth into the field of service, providing an impetus to greater activity in many clusters. In preparation for the conferences, some 4,400 young people were brought together in orientation seminars to study the materials prepared for the conferences that would help them facilitate group discussions. The conferences demanded from the institutions of the Faith new levels of collaboration to welcome and support hundreds and at times thousands of young people on a path of service. The remarkable result of this wholehearted collective effort was that more than 80,000 youth participated in the conferences worldwide.

An Efflorescence of Youth Gatherings

In the wake of the youth conferences, the Bahá'í community was faced with a burgeoning number of young people receptive to the Message of Bahá'u'lláh and eager to serve their communities. To respond to this need, follow-up youth gatherings were held in countries, regions, clusters, neighbourhoods, and villages, and more friends were raised up to facilitate discussions about issues that affect the lives of youth.

Many young friends who were asked to serve as facilitators for the conferences later served as tutors or supported the institute process in other ways, channelling their enthusiasm into community-building activities. In **Panama**, the national institute board, with the help of five friends who were part of the team of facilitators at the conference in **San José, Costa Rica**, responded to the enthusiasm of those who attended the conference by organizing three tutor gatherings involving more than 50 tutors, a reflection gathering with 15 coordinators of children's classes and junior youth groups, and institute campaigns focused on the first books of the sequence involving more than 80 youth of the wider community from 7 different clusters. An additional 22 youth were identified who could offer ongoing support to the unfolding activities. With the help of the institutions and agencies, they maintained close and regular contact with more than 250 young people across the country. As this team of youth gained more experience in accompanying others in the field of service, the institutions called on some to serve on the institute board or as coordinators.

In the year after the conferences, an additional 100,000 young people took part in numerous encounters to consult about ways in which they could contribute to

the betterment of society. Many youth joined institute courses and participated in community activities. A sizeable portion of them began to carry out acts of service, while others, more experienced with the institute process, accompanied and supported them. In some clusters, such youth gatherings at the cluster, neighbourhood, and village levels became a regular feature of the three-month cycles of activity. After attending subsequent gatherings, some 500 youth from 12 clusters in **Cambodia** returned to their homes to participate in numerous study circles and intensive institute courses.

The follow-up encounters strengthened the bonds of friendship among young people throughout an entire country and helped them develop a vision for service to their communities. In **Japan**, a group of about 30 young people from 5 clusters who attended the 2013 conference in **Macau** came together every three months, and communicated between meetings, to foster mutual support and a common vision for reaching out to their peers. The challenges posed by the climate and transportation infrastructure in **Greenland** made it difficult for young



Participants of a youth gathering in Afghanistan.

people scattered across the country to have a national youth gathering. Nonetheless, the friends were determined. They used creative means to invite and facilitate the participation of youth from many parts of the country by using online communication tools.

A review of youth participation in one geographic region illustrates the scope and complexity of the work under way: Throughout the **Indian Subcontinent**, the youth conferences in 2013 were attended by about 20,000 young people. During 2014 and 2015, a further 153 gatherings were organized with more than 12,000 participants in **India** alone. As a result of these and other gatherings in **Nepal** and **Sri Lanka**, the institutions estimated that an additional 25,000 youth have joined the conversation on how they can contribute to the development of their communities. Of course, not every part of the world experienced this scale of participation, but the accounts that follow show how holding such gatherings, in a wide variety of circumstances, generated a constructive discourse on the nature of spiritual and social transformation to which young people can actively contribute.



A gathering for youth in the Kharkhorin neighbourhood of Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.

Inviting Youth to Walk a Path of Service

As interactions and conversations with young people gained momentum and awareness of their role in building a new civilization increased, the youth were encouraged to take their first steps on a path of service. Communities, institutions, and agencies everywhere faced the challenge of strengthening their own capabilities and finding creative ways to accompany the youth and respond adequately to their enthusiastic expectations. Training institutes, in particular, intensified their efforts to learn how to help groups of young people enter the sequence of courses and arise to serve, a process which the Universal House of Justice referred to as “a sacred charge”³² of the institutes. The examples that follow highlight the focused efforts of training institutes in preparing newly found youth for active service.

- Communities in various settings tried to learn what constitutes an effective rhythm of study, considering both regular weekly gatherings and periods of intensive study. In the **Central Mahalapye** and **Greater Gaborone** clusters in **Botswana**, after having several meetings with newly met youth and gaining the support of their parents, the friends committed to quickly mobilize tutors who could hold both regular study sessions and occasional intensive institute campaigns.
- In the Bellas Vistas neighbourhood in **Madrid, Spain**, some youth who were studying Book 2 invited their friends each week, so naturally a Book 1 study circle was formed at the same time and place. Although the study circles met weekly, a level of intensity was maintained in the interim as participants met one another four or five times a week

for devotionals, firesides, and youth gatherings.

- The institute board in **Venezuela** strove to increase its pool of tutors so there would be adequate support for dozens of youth who were interested in studying institute courses and carrying out acts of service. Some 150 friends who had been identified as possible tutors attended a training programme, during which 51 of them pledged to facilitate a new study circle. Steps were taken to systematically accompany these tutors as they planned their first meeting, identified and visited the participants, and participated in periodic reflection meetings to help foster steady progress.
- Homefront pioneers in **Majuro, Marshall Islands**, met with a number of young people regularly—at first daily—to study messages from the House of Justice and themes from the sequence of institute courses. About 20 of these youth entered the institute process and, while studying Book 1, participated in a nine-day teaching campaign, during which 12 people enrolled in the Faith.

As the 20 youth continued their study of the books in the sequence, they reflected and planned regularly, and eventually 10 junior youth groups were formed and sustained in the neighbourhood.

- In the Peñalolén neighbourhood in **Santiago, Chile**, the area where the House of Worship is located, tutors held regular social gatherings in high schools and worked to develop a spirit of friendship and trust among the young people. Many of the youth studied Book 1 and after participating in the institute process were able to initiate 24 core activities.
- Shortly after a national youth gathering in **Italy**, a group of youth from the **Napoli-Portici** and **Caserta** clusters who had recently completed a study of Book 1 joined an intensive Book 5 training, during which three junior youth groups were formed. After this training, some of the youth embraced the Faith and, with the support of the friends in the community, started a weekly devotional gathering.



A junior youth group in Nigeria.



114 Youth Conferences

The convocation of the 114 youth conferences that took place over several months in 2013 marked a unique period in the Five Year Plan. Typified by an outpouring of energy and motivation among young people from all walks of life “to make a contribution to the fortunes of humanity”,³³ the conferences unlocked a surge of creativity and commitment in large numbers of youth, who were “brought within the widening embrace of a conversation and pattern of action of far-reaching consequence regarding how to live a coherent life and be an agent of spiritual and social transformation”.³⁴ Conferences were held in 66 countries on 5 continents, with more than 80,000 participants, many of whom were from the wider community. Attendance at each conference ranged from about 200 to over 4,000, and all the conferences followed a similar format: brief plenary sessions, study of specially prepared materials in larger groups of 80 and smaller groups of 20, and evening arts presentations.

During this intensive period of the worldwide conferences, lessons learned on these occasions were distilled and shared with the Bahá’í community through accounts of each conference published on the Bahá’í World News Service and through a series of short films entitled *To Serve Humanity*, which captured the participants’ insights as they discussed themes central to the process of community building.

When the conferences concluded, participants took to heart the call of the House of Justice to “steel themselves for a life of service from which blessing will flow in abundance”.³⁵ They set off to their communities with renewed energy, profound resolve, and keen vision, eager to face the tasks ahead and play their part. The enthusiasm of the youth from around the world was reflected in the words of one participant: “We are coming to the conference with the firm intention to act after it finishes. This conference is the first step on the path of service for many.”







“The most difficult thing when you talk about the idea of the betterment of the world is that people do not believe that it can happen. It helps when we explain that if we are united, this hope can be realized.”

Almaty, Kazakhstan

“This conference is a symbol of the oneness of humanity because it brings together people from different backgrounds, a rare thing in our polarized environment.”

Nundu, Democratic Republic of the Congo

“At home, every day of my life I experience prejudice, but this is the first gathering where I have felt no prejudice at all.”

Tirana, Albania

“To help someone, you have to overcome selfishness. We need unity. We need to wish for the welfare of the other person. Because everything we do has to be done with love.”

Port-au-Prince, Haiti

“When I am back from the conference, I would like to continue what I have been learning with my friends about how to help younger youth refine their characters.”

Antananarivo, Madagascar

“Listening to how much people want to make a change in the world has inspired me to do my part and start my journey towards serving younger youth in my neighbourhood.”

Auckland, New Zealand





“I am anxious to go back to my community, since the process has not started there yet. I am eager to put in practice everything I’ve learned. I feel assured that I will receive the necessary support and encouragement.”

Lima, Peru

“We are learning about principles that are helpful in our lives and about how to positively influence the younger ones in our community when we return.”

Nairobi, Kenya

“The day-to-day activities we carry out are to assist others. For example, when we take care of our rivers, we are supporting others who rely on that ecosystem.”

San José, Costa Rica

“I feel more confident now, because I see that I am not alone on this path. I see that there are many other young people like me, who have the same sense of purpose in life.”

Istanbul, Turkey

“We have powers, but when we come together the powers become immense. A drop can become an ocean.”

Yaoundé, Cameroon

“I see that there are two kinds of education: material and spiritual. Without spiritual education, we may not think of the importance of serving others.”

Daidanaw, Myanmar





“One might think that study and service are two separate things. But I do not study for myself; I study because I want to make a contribution to the betterment of the world.”

Frankfurt, Germany

“All people are meant to bring the world to its noble destiny, which is to be united. I really want more people to be part of this conversation.”

Seberang Perai (Sungai Siput), Malaysia

“When people think they have to be the same to be united, they are missing the point. We are all different, but we work together.”

Macau, Macau

“At this conference, I have learned that no matter how small and young I am, I still have something to offer to the world.”

Thyolo (Blantyre), Malawi

“We need to return and share our experiences with other youth, so that they too can be aware of the importance of this period and the need to walk on a path of service.”

Georgetown, Guyana

“We can leave here and just say that we attended the conference. But that is not enough. We have to go out with plans and put them into practice.”

Aguascalientes, Mexico

“We should engage in service without seeking or expecting reward in return, but out of a strong desire from deep in our hearts.”

Biratnagar, Nepal





“We youth have a responsibility that is God-given; it is like a spiritual duty. In working together to serve our communities, we must always remain positive and always depend on God for His assistance.”

Port Vila, Vanuatu

“Deep and meaningful relationships are necessary between individuals to help each other build a community.”

Dhaka, Bangladesh

“The concept of mutual support has been especially interesting for me. It is only when we are humble that we can learn from others.”

Sapele, Nigeria

“The joy at this conference is a testament ... that community building is actually under way.”

Montreal, Canada

“I used to be shy and quiet. But here I experienced that we all share the same vision of Bahá’u’lláh. We have risen to give our life to serving the community, by being role models for the younger ones, being spearheads of learning.”

Helsinki, Finland

“We are in a decisive stage in our lives, and our contribution to a more just society depends on what we are doing now and the vision we have for the future.”

Cochabamba, Bolivia

“I have realized that everyone here is like me—we want to help and change the world. I’m returning home to bring about unity, knowing that I don’t have to do it alone.”

Perth, Australia



- In **Taiwan**, a national animators' gathering was attended by 44 youth who were eager to serve. To help them advance on their path of service, regular intensive institute campaigns were organized during school holidays, enabling about 40 youth to serve at the forefront of the community-building process.
- In the **South Tarawa** cluster of **Kiribati**, the number of core activities grew from 80 to 118 over the course of one cycle, with more than half being facilitated by youth. After a few more cycles, during which several hundred more young people joined community-building activities, the number of core activities surpassed 200. The friends began to observe a change in the atmosphere of the reflection meetings. Children, who were used to playing outside during consultations, now actively began to contribute. Similarly, youth who had previously filled the back rows at meetings were given the opportunity to share their insights and experiences.
- In the **Occidente Sur** cluster in **El Salvador**, an Auxiliary Board member and the national institute coordinator were asked to focus on strengthening the participation and capacity of the local youth as a way to counter the increasing gang violence in the area. With the support of a Local Spiritual Assembly, a group of young friends began contributing to the growth process in the cluster, including working with some 200 youngsters participating in junior youth groups.
- The believers in **Utrecht, Netherlands**, dedicated expansion periods to engaging young people in conversation and inviting them to gatherings aimed at introducing the training institute. In the days after the initial encounter, plans were made with

each participant to begin an intensive study of the courses of the institute. They were accompanied almost daily for a few weeks as they carried out the practical elements of the courses. As these efforts unfolded, the cluster agencies realized that creating a culture of intensive training that combined study and practice was instrumental in generating a movement of youth committed to working for the transformation of society.

As more and more young people arose to participate in activities and carry out acts of service in their communities, especially as animators or children's class teachers, their transformation became increasingly apparent. Many are the accounts of young people who, after an intense period of study and service, reshaped their ideas about how they would like to lead their lives.

- In **Tajikistan**, four youth from the **Khujand** cluster attended a month-long institute campaign in the summer and then dedicated an additional month to serving full time in their home community. Among them was a young woman who, after completing a study of Book 6, was aflame with a desire to teach every person whose path she crossed. Upon her return home, she shared what she had learned about the Faith with her aunt, who later also became a Bahá'í. This was the first of many conversations she had with the residents of her small village.
- In **Gyumri, Armenia**, a group of university students completed a study of Book 1. One participant was moved to tears during the devotional part of the study circle, and later shared the following reflections on what she had gained:

The book gave me a lot of ideas;

now I must think better before doing something. I am impatiently waiting for the next book. After studying Book 1, I understood that there are many things I should improve in my behaviour, for example, to be more truthful. Before I thought it was okay to say little lies, but now I understand that it is not acceptable; I will work on this.

Inspired by the friendships nurtured during the youth conferences and in other spaces, groups of young people, living within close geographic proximity, were naturally drawn to supporting one another's efforts while treading a path of service together.

- In **Mongolia**, where 750 youth participated in the 2013 conference in **Ulaanbaatar**, about 42 groups of youth emerged who served together mostly at the level of neighbourhoods and villages.
- In different localities across the **Fiji Islands**, young facilitators gathered groups of youth to participate in one of three weekend youth gatherings. In the plans shared by each group, the youth expressed their commitment to expanding their circle of friends, involving their families, advancing in the educational process, and increasing the quality and number of core activities in their communities.

Influencing the Life of the Community

Reinforced by the encouragement and support of their communities and institutions, youth felt empowered to shoulder responsibilities that contributed to the advancement of neighbourhoods, villages, clusters, and regions in many corners of the world. “The infusion of



Youth in New Zealand plan activities for an expansion phase.

energy from a vibrant band of youth”, the House of Justice asserted, “allows the tempo of the work within the cluster to be accelerated.”³⁶ Below are a few examples of how this has occurred.

- In **St. Thomas, Jamaica**, a youth who had studied Book 5 initiated conversations with other young people in the community. This led to 30 youth participating in 4 study circles and subsequently the formation of 6 junior youth groups. To expand the programme further, two youth and the coordinator for the junior youth programme in the cluster held consultations over the course of a year with the principal, teachers, and parents' association of a local school. Initially, the teachers agreed to come 15 minutes early twice a week to accommodate the junior youth programme. Over the course of a few months, the teachers who had initially objected to the programme gave animators extra time for the group's sessions and started participating themselves. Eventually, six junior youth groups were formed at the school with the participation of 75 students.

- In efforts to nurture the development of the **Mgambo** cluster in **Tanzania**, the regional agencies sent a visiting team to mobilize youth who could serve as animators and children’s class teachers. Fourteen youth started Book 5 after the teaching team visited their parents to build a common vision and gain their support. Within one month, 10 junior youth groups were formed, and the cluster crossed the first milestone. As more young people began engaging in the cluster’s educational activities, it became clear that establishing bonds with families was a critical factor in strengthening the participation of youth and opening the doors to a flourishing process of community building. In the **Shinyanga** cluster, 30 youth, of whom 10 formally joined the Faith, shouldered the responsibilities of community building by sustaining 16 children’s classes with 160 participants, 23 junior youth groups with

252 participants, and 4 study circles with 26 participants.

- In the **Centre** cluster of **Belgium**, the cluster agencies applied lessons learned from working with young people to the progress of the entire cluster. The friends held meetings, modelled after the gatherings organized for youth, for the whole community to plan and mutually support one another in a campaign to multiply devotional meetings. Likewise, witnessing the effect of home visits on youth and their families, the friends organized home visits to believers. Such visits inspired more believers to support and participate in the community-building process. With the youth as a driving force, groups in different parts of the cluster started exploring the dynamics of growth in their own neighbourhoods. It became apparent that the efforts spearheaded by the youth had kindled a



Members of a junior youth group in the Democratic Republic of the Congo visit an orphanage.

spark in the life of the cluster as a whole, inspiring universal participation and even exerting an influence on the neighbouring clusters. As a result of these efforts, the number of devotional gatherings being sustained in the cluster grew from an average of 4 to 23 in less than a year. New children's classes were also formed, while existing ones grew in participation.

As the institutions in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo** reflected on how to accompany youth on their path of service, they noted some moving personal accounts. Below is the story of a youth who helped advance the community-building process in her village.

A twenty-year-old woman from a village in the **Murhula** cluster who had studied Book 1 attended the youth conference in **Bukavu** in August 2013. Galvanized by the enthusiasm and unity of other

youth, upon her return home she raised awareness among the youth in her village and formed a group of nine of her peers from the wider community to study the conference material. She also had conversations with some parents of children and junior youth in her village and realized that she needed a plan to build her own capacity to meet the needs of spiritual education in her home community. She walked over 20 kilometres to consult with the coordinator, who immediately put aside three days to go through Book 2 and parts of Book 3 with her, including the 24 lessons and the elements of a children's class. They then devoted a day to consulting on how to start a junior youth group and to studying *Breezes of Confirmation*. Accompanied by the coordinator, she initiated a children's class and a junior youth group. The leader of the village, the members of the Local Spiritual Assembly, and the nine young friends of this woman were invited to participate in a gathering to open these activities in the village. While she served as an animator and a children's class teacher, she continued her study of the sequence of courses.

In several regions, communities recognized that youth can serve not only on an equal footing with the older generation but also at the forefront of activities and influence social and cultural norms. In certain neighbourhoods and villages in the **Lusaka, Mwinilunga East, and Zambezi** clusters in **Zambia**, the friends observed that as the youth committed themselves to supporting the spiritual and social development of junior youth and children, the adult members of the community learned to appreciate their services and encouraged them more. The culture of consultation at various levels in the cluster evolved, and youth



Youth-Period-of-Service Programme

The ready response of individuals who “in the heyday of life and their prime of youth”³⁷ arise in service to the Cause was evident in the numerous offers of friends to dedicate a period of full-time service to the Faith, often by moving to nearby clusters to serve as homefront pioneers. While the primary focus of these youth was to help advance the processes of growth in the clusters where they were deployed, a profound process of personal transformation was a natural outcome of their efforts. The account below illustrates the transformative effect of a period of full-time service on a youth in the **Northwestern** region of the **United States**.

Within a week of the youth conference, a young lady

whose participation in the institute process had been limited joined the ‘Youth Service Programme’ and immediately participated in institute campaigns in **Tacoma** and **Redmond** for one month. As a result of this experience, she was inspired to move to a new cluster where, ten months later, she had become a pillar of the institute process, serving as an animator of a junior youth group, teaching a children’s class, and dedicating her efforts to accompanying and building capacity in those around her.

In some regions, national communities developed programmes for youth to prepare them for an intensive period of

full-time service. In **Colombia**, a youth-period-of-service programme helped raise the capacity of a number of young people to participate in building a pattern of community life in some emerging clusters in the northern part of the **Valle del Cauca** Department. The programme had specific goals, such as helping to nurture capacity in the youth to sustain a study circle until local tutors could arise, to initiate and sustain a junior youth group, and to strengthen their own Bahá’í identity. Its overall aim was to assist young people to develop an awareness of what it means to live a Bahá’í life rooted in service to the Cause and to humanity.



Participants of an intensive institute campaign for youth in Tacoma, United States.



A devotional gathering in Thames Valley, United Kingdom.

and adults began to engage in substantive discussions about the development of their neighbourhoods. A change in the relationship between youth and their parents became evident—the youth felt empowered, and the parents had more confidence in them and their abilities. In Mwinilunga East, there was also a notable increase in the participation of young women, who shouldered responsibilities in the community and served as animators and children’s class teachers.

In **Badulla, Sri Lanka**, a young homefront pioneer began conversations with 11 youth and their families and soon established bonds of friendship. Polarized by the caste system, these youth initially insisted on having two separate youth groups along caste lines. After completing Book 1,

however, all the participants gathered in the same home for a devotional meeting, breaking social norms. Building on the strength and unity of this initial experience, the young friends, whose numbers continued to grow, carried out service projects for the entire village. After attending the youth conference in **Kadugannawa**, they noticed that their relationships were no longer determined by caste but imbued with a spirit of mutual support. They consulted, planned, prayed, and served together with the help of the young pioneer, and their efforts led to the opening of 6 devotional meetings, a Book 2 study circle with 5 participants, 2 children’s classes with 9 children, and 5 junior youth groups with 37 participants.



Enhancing Institutional Capacity

A regional institutional meeting in the north of Italy.

The process of establishing new programmes of growth and strengthening existing ones during the Five Year Plan demanded a “feat of strength and coordination”³⁸ on the part of institutions and agencies, and “a shared spirit of collaboration among the Plan’s three protagonists—the individual, the community, and the institutions”³⁹. By encouraging individual initiative within the framework of the Plan and fostering a dynamic pattern of community life, institutions and agencies at the local, cluster, regional, and national levels demonstrated increasingly higher degrees of capacity and maturity. Many became adept at helping the friends to understand conditions in their localities and to apply the guidance of the Universal House of Justice. Through systematically reflecting on experience and documenting

and disseminating relevant knowledge and approaches, the institutions were able to analyse insights in light of what was being learned worldwide and refine existing arrangements to welcome the contributions of a rising number of individuals. The overwhelming need to respond to the energy released through the youth conferences and the process of accompanying young people in large numbers also challenged institutions to press forward in a spirit of learning.

Development of Local Spiritual Assemblies

In many cities and villages where the community-building process advanced, Local Spiritual Assemblies learned to work closely with cluster agencies to facilitate the

spiritual education of children and junior youth, foster opportunities for communal worship, and encourage believers to take part in teaching activities to diffuse the Word of God. Whether guiding and supporting the youth to serve enthusiastically, or interacting with the wider society, now more cognizant of the activities of the Bahá'í community, these Spiritual Assemblies won the affection and respect of both members of the community and other local inhabitants. In some instances, Regional Bahá'í Councils organized gatherings for all Assemblies in a cluster or region to help Assembly members gain a clearer vision of the Plan and their role in establishing a healthy pattern of community life.

Another key development at the local level was the further decentralization of the Nineteen Day Feast, especially in areas with large Bahá'í populations or with limited transportation infrastructure. The occasion of the Feast continued to serve as an intimate gathering, where community members came together to pray, socialize, and consult and reflect on the activities in the locality. Recognizing the importance of participation in the Feast, Local Assemblies in some clusters mobilized teams to visit believers who could not attend and to share with them what was discussed.

Enhancing Capacity at the Cluster Level

As clusters moved along a developmental path, effective approaches and formal mechanisms for supporting all areas of action emerged or were further strengthened. In instances where large-scale growth was within reach, schemes of coordination evolved to respond to a diversity of circumstances. In clusters that might have had one coordinator for each educational programme and an Area Teaching Committee with only a few members, a growing number of experienced individuals reinforced the work of these agencies. At the same time, meetings to reflect on experience and exchange information became more systematic in approach. In clusters with a large number of core activities, teams of coordinators regularly met to discuss the strength of the entire educational process and worked to disseminate the knowledge and insights gained from the field in gatherings of tutors, teachers, and animators. Area Teaching Committees, too, rose to a new level of functioning, gaining experience in mobilizing the believers in collective teaching efforts, promoting the multiplication of devotional gatherings, and encouraging home visits across the cluster.



A cluster agencies' meeting in East Kanchanpur, Nepal.

Evolution of a Scheme of Coordination in Delhi, India

At the start of the Plan, the **Delhi** cluster in **India** had over 150 core activities with about 1,250 participants. Through earnest effort and systematic reflection, the community was able to sustain by the end of the Plan over 1,000 core activities with some 7,000 participants. Much of the progress in raising up a steady flow of human resources to support the growth process came from youth residing in small pockets of the city, who were invited to contribute to the community-building process. By introducing from the outset the concept of being a collaborator who would assist other friends to arise and serve, the cluster agencies motivated youth, once they became animators or children's class teachers, to help others in their area to tread a path of service.

Through institute campaigns, weekly meetings, and regular youth gatherings, the number of those studying Book 7 and facilitating new study circles in neighbourhoods grew significantly. This growth led the friends to start thinking about a system for accompanying large numbers. The substantial progress in the community

called for an adjustment in the scheme of coordination. A system was put in place whereby a small number of coordinators for each of the programmes for the spiritual empowerment of junior youth and the spiritual education of children, together with a team of collaborators, worked with groups of friends serving at the grassroots.



Poster depicting the scheme of coordination for devotional gatherings in Delhi, India.

Thus, a growing network of collaborators supported an expanding number of activities. Notably, individuals serving in this capacity continued to facilitate their own particular core activity, enabling them to stay directly connected to the unfolding learning process. This organic system relied heavily on ties of friendship. It also took into account practical matters, such as the time available to

those serving, their capabilities, and the proximity of their homes to the activities they were supporting.

As each stage of the educational process took root and flourished in the cluster, over time the friends were able to sustain some 200 junior youth groups and 250 children's classes. A similar arrangement was put in place to strengthen human resource development and

to support hosts of devotional meetings. Through the organization of regular meetings for reflection and the sharing of resources, the experience gained in Delhi was disseminated throughout India. Many of the 36 clusters in the country that reached

over 100 core activities during this Plan—including a dozen that had over 200 core activities—directly benefited from the lessons learned in Delhi.

Growing Capacities of Local Spiritual Assemblies in Advanced Clusters

When the growth process became well established in a locality—with a sizeable percentage of the population becoming involved in core activities and many inhabitants formally joining the Faith—the Teachings began to penetrate and transform the life of that locality. Local Spiritual Assemblies actively reflected on the well-being of the community, sometimes alongside local leaders. In such a community, the understanding of a Local Spiritual Assembly as an institution with moral authority could be increasingly discerned among both the Bahá'ís and the society at large. A few examples are provided in the accounts below.

The **Daga** cluster in **Papua New Guinea** has just over 30 Local Spiritual Assemblies serving a total population of 8,000, of whom nearly half are Bahá'ís. “The Assemblies in the cluster”, noted one Auxiliary Board member, “consider the Five Year Plan not on a small scale, but rather on a large scale. They understand that the Plan needs to be deeply rooted within an ongoing process.” During Assembly meetings, ample time was devoted to consulting about Bahá'u'lláh and His Teachings. Friends serving on the Assemblies saw

their function as an act of loving service to Him and noted the significance of an Assembly's role in the development of the educational process in the community. For example, if parents were unable to educate a child, the Assembly viewed itself as being responsible before God to ensure this need was met. If an Assembly noted that a children's class was not taking place, it would meet with the teachers and parents to reflect on the value of spiritual education and to consult on how to resume the class. Local Assemblies also helped prepare for smaller reflection meetings that led up to the cluster-wide reflection gatherings.

The Local Assemblies in Daga were aware of the importance of the institute

process for every individual in the community and saw to it that all members had an opportunity to participate in at least one study circle. To infuse a devotional spirit into community life, the Assemblies encouraged the believers and their friends to deepen on themes in the prayers of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, such as forgiveness, detachment, and assistance.

By the time the Five Year Plan had concluded, there were over 250 core activities with nearly 3,000 participants in the **Alouli** cluster in **India**. The pattern of community life was particularly vibrant in the Hatwan village, a community of some 12,000 inhabitants,



Community members consult about how to contribute to the betterment of their community in Daga, Papua New Guinea.

which alone had more than 100 core activities with over 1,000 participants. The Local Spiritual Assembly of Hatwan supported the coordinators in sustaining the educational activities in the village, especially the children's classes. Since those serving as children's class teachers and animators of junior youth groups were mostly young people, a team of Local Assembly members met with their parents to help them better understand the critical role their sons and daughters were playing in contributing to the betterment of the community. When necessary, this team also met with the parents of the children and junior youth participating in the activities.

For the community members—both Bahá'ís and their friends—the Local Spiritual Assembly of Hatwan was an institution to turn to for help in organizing Bahá'í weddings and large devotional gatherings for the sick and the recently departed. The Local Assembly was also perceived as a promoter of unity and was called on to help resolve occasional disputes.

Over the course of the Plan, the Local Spiritual Assembly of **Toronto, Canada**, took steps to develop its understanding and institutional capacity to facilitate growth in the cluster. Instrumental to this process was close collaboration with the Auxiliary Board members.

The personal involvement of the members of the Local Assembly in the activities of the Plan—from serving as study circle tutors and children's class teachers to participating in teaching campaigns—helped to advance both the institution and the community. During each cycle, the Assembly collaborated with cluster agencies to help growing numbers of youth and adults to become involved in the community-building process and to form groups that could serve together in

neighbourhoods. The Assembly also nurtured the devotional character of the community, encouraged participation in the cluster reflection meetings and teaching activities, shared information about the institute process through Nineteen Day Feast letters, and ensured that the younger members of the community participated in children's classes and junior youth groups and that their parents were involved as well.

A neighbourhood reflection meeting in Toronto, Canada.



A gathering for junior youth animators and children's class teachers in the Hatwan village of the Alouli cluster in India.

Enhancing Capacity at the Regional Level

The critical role a Regional Bahá'í Council can play in the advancement of the growth process in a country prompted an increase in the number of these institutions worldwide, from 170 at the outset of the Plan to 203, in nearly 60 countries, at its conclusion. In some parts of the world, such as **Romania** and **Ukraine**, nascent entities at the regional level emerged through the creation of regional institute teams, regional growth teams, or regional teams focused on the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme. Although not formal structures, these teams helped disseminate information and experience, and paved the way for the eventual formation of a Regional Bahá'í Council. Where Regional Councils had already been established, similar teams prepared the ground for the formation of regional training institutes, as was the case in **Myanmar**.

Training institutes and Regional Councils continued to collaborate in guiding and supporting clusters and providing resources, as necessary. Together they held gatherings at the regional level where institutions and friends serving in clusters consulted on lessons learned in order to advance their understanding of key concepts of the Plan, read the reality of the region, and devise strategies. The training institutes worked with teams of coordinators to achieve the movement of a “steady, ever-widening stream of individuals through the courses of the institute”, while Regional Councils, in collaboration with Area Teaching Committees, gave impetus to the “collective capacity to manifest a pattern of life in conformity with the teachings of the Faith”.⁴⁰ In some regions of the **United Kingdom**, the Regional Council and training institute board, in collaboration with the Auxiliary

Board members and regional coordinators, organized gatherings with institute coordinators, cluster growth facilitators, members of Area Teaching Committees, and others serving in the clusters. The topics of consultation included assisting individuals to study the sequence of courses and begin a core activity, devising measures for accompanying these friends in their field of service, and carrying out ongoing activities for training and capacity building.

In over 40 countries, there was at least one Regional Bahá'í Council that was working



with 10 or more programmes of growth. In addition, some 14 Regional Councils at the forefront of learning had programmes of growth in 50 or more clusters by the end of the Plan. Supporting a wide spectrum of clusters compelled these Councils to be rigorous and creative in their work to “refine mechanisms that serve to further the pattern of growth unfolding at the cluster level”.⁴¹ To more effectively follow the movement of clusters in such regions, several clusters would be organized into a group according to their proximity, culture, language, and socio-economic circumstances. The regional institutions then provided for the timely emergence of sub-regional structures and the provision of resources that helped to create the necessary environment for growth to

Members of a regional growth team study and plan together in Vietnam.

flourish. These were referred to, variously, as sub-regions, zones, or units of clusters. They were generally organized around a strong cluster, which was able to offer support to neighbouring communities.

In the **Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Delhi** region in north-eastern **India**, a goal was set to achieve 70 programmes of growth by *Riḍván* 2016, up from 22 at the beginning of the Plan. The region has a land area of almost 300,000 square kilometres and a population of over 200 million. During the Five Year Plan ending in 2011, the Regional Bahá'í Council and other institutions realized through consultation that to sustain growth in all the clusters, the friends in this vast area would require closer accompanying. Therefore, the Council formed three sub-regions to allow for greater support to each goal cluster, and after further growth in subsequent years, the Council readjusted the boundaries to form seven sub-regions, each with an advanced cluster that was a reservoir of human resources and experience. In time, each sub-region had a team of coordinators and a sub-regional development facilitator. The resource persons for two learning sites for the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme located in the region offered support to the programme in each area, and at least one cluster in each sub-region was associated to one of the learning sites. Friends from neighbouring clusters were also invited to visit and learn from the experience in the learning sites.

In the most advanced of the seven sub-regions, the regional institute board appointed training institute teams whose tasks were to ensure the effective flow of funds, maintain financial accounts, and appoint cluster coordinators. Reflection meetings were frequently organized at the sub-regional level, and twice a year the Regional Council, the training institute

board, and the Auxiliary Board members gathered all the sub-regional coordinators for consultation and reflection. This warm, ongoing collaboration led to a rise in the capacity of the friends to advance the work of expansion and consolidation in the clusters and enabled the friends to surpass their goal of 70 programmes of growth, achieving 105 by the conclusion of the Plan.

In the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, the **South Kivu** region experienced outstanding growth during this Plan, advancing from 29 programmes of growth to 106. In the first few years of this period, the Regional Bahá'í Council recognized the potential for rapid progress and divided the region into five sub-regions of about 20 clusters each. Teams of coordinators were formed in some of the sub-regions, and by *Riḍván* 2016 plans were made to put in place such coordinating teams in all five areas. These new structures made the task of the Council to follow the progress of the clusters more manageable and enabled it to provide closer support. By the final two years of the Plan, around 20 clusters had over 100 core activities. A number of common elements contributed to the increase in clusters embracing large numbers: regular cycles of activity, which strengthened the capabilities of cluster agencies; study of guidance from the Universal House of Justice by many believers; the presence of a strong institute with dozens of capable tutors; a focus on fostering the community-building process in villages and neighbourhoods; a strong devotional character; and a heightened awareness of the need for coherence among all the activities.

Enhancing Capacity at the National Level

National Spiritual Assemblies increasingly developed their capacity to direct, unify, coordinate, and stimulate the activities of individuals and institutions within their jurisdictions. As they continued to reflect on the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, they demonstrated greater ability to analyse the conditions and opportunities in their countries and to formulate national strategies within the framework of the Plan. They were supported in these efforts through their collaboration with the Continental Counsellors, who assisted them in identifying areas of learning and shared relevant insights from around the Bahá'í world. Institutional meetings and other reflection gatherings at the national level—either newly established or ongoing from previous years—further helped National Assemblies to grasp more fully what was taking place at the grassroots of the community and to determine how they could encourage and refine the unfolding process of expansion and consolidation.

National Spiritual Assemblies throughout the world operated in a broad variety of circumstances. In countries where Regional Bahá'í Councils were yet to be established, National Assemblies considered the entire territory under their jurisdiction when creating structures to assist the work of the institute, to facilitate efforts in emerging clusters, and to strengthen Area Teaching Committees. Among the steps taken was the appointment of teams of believers who were asked to bolster the training of human resources and facilitate the movement of friends from stronger clusters to emerging ones to help establish new programmes of growth or strengthen existing ones. As mentioned in the previous section, in some places these teams were a precursor to



the eventual formation of formal regional structures. In small countries without Regional Councils, similar tasks were carried out by a working group, at times referred to as a national growth team.

A meeting in Cotonou, Benin, between cluster agencies and members of the National Spiritual Assembly.

In this Plan, 11 National Assemblies were each working with 6 or more Regional Bahá'í Councils. To respond to the demands and complexity of the growth process in these large countries—for example, the **Democratic Republic of the Congo, India,** and the **United States**, each of which had more than 500 programmes of growth by the end of the Plan—the institutions established mechanisms to follow the process of human resource development and organized periodic meetings for institutions and individuals from several regions to learn from one another's experiences.

The community in the **United States**, which has a total of close to 900 clusters, set a goal to more than double the number of programmes of growth during the Plan, operating at whatever level of intensity, from around 250 to 619. At the midpoint of the Plan, the National Spiritual Assembly reflected on how to synthesize the lessons being learned in all regions, the number of which had recently increased from 6 to 10. By October 2013, the National Assembly decided to establish a Learning



Desk served by one staff member. The Learning Desk helped the Assembly become fully acquainted with developments at the grassroots and ensured that insights and experiences gained could flow between the local and national levels and across the many regions. In the first few months, the Desk was primarily concerned with obtaining an initial sense of the progress of the Plan throughout the country; the individual serving the Desk attended various meetings to become familiar with the work of the Auxiliary Board members, the Regional Bahá'í Councils, the regional training institutes, and the learning sites for the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme. The Desk's first report was prepared in collaboration with Secretaries of Regional Councils and with regional institute coordinators, and described efforts under way in each region along a few lines of action. This report helped the National Assembly attain a broad picture of the progress of the Plan across the country and enlightened its consultations on how to foster institutional capacity and advance the clusters. To build unity of

vision and facilitate the sharing of insights, the Assembly began hosting an annual national gathering for regional institutions and coordinators.

As the Learning Desk was expanded to include a second person, its work evolved. The staff joined reflection gatherings with friends serving on cluster agencies in a given region. They visited clusters and regions to better understand the conditions in the communities, to have one-on-one conversations with friends serving on institutions and agencies, and to bring together small groups of friends from across a few regions to explore certain topics in depth. The Desk helped the National Assembly stay abreast of developments by preparing descriptions of particular experiences and approaches being pursued in different regions; analysed reports of trends and patterns unfolding in the country; and drafted compilations of guidance, discussion questions, case studies, and agendas for national meetings hosted by the Assembly. This process involved close collaboration with the Secretary of the National Assembly,

A national institutional meeting in Sri Lanka.

the Counsellors, other agencies of the National Assembly such as the National Statistics Office, and institutions at the regional and local levels. At the conclusion of the Plan, the goal of having 619 clusters with programmes of growth was surpassed to reach 625 such clusters across the regions.

Although the National Spiritual Assembly of **Canada** had made efforts to systematize what was being learned in the community-building process and to respond to the diverse needs of growth, it realized that it needed to be closer connected to the regions to remain current with the developments across the country. The National Assembly decided to have the National Secretary, sometimes accompanied by other Assembly members, regularly visit the various regions and participate in regional meetings. The Secretary shared these experiences with the National Assembly and maintained regular contact with the Secretaries of the Regional Bahá'í Councils. As its knowledge of the progress of the Faith across the regions grew, the Assembly began to see how useful it was to have a set of questions to guide the members' participation in regional meetings and interactions with Regional Councils. After a year of functioning in this way, the National Assembly reflected on the insights gained and consulted on how to further strengthen the system for learning at the national level. It felt that an initial step would be to collect and disseminate narratives sharing lessons, experiences, and statistics from clusters that were making good progress and to create opportunities for the friends serving these clusters to learn from one another. To this end, at the close of the Plan, the Assembly identified individuals from a few clusters who could prepare case studies for analysis at a national gathering. National Assemblies continued to build their administrative capacity in relation to the stewardship of their resources and

the operations of their National Offices. The need to systematize the body of knowledge accumulating in these areas led to the creation at the Bahá'í World Centre of the Office for the Development of Administrative Systems. This Office oversees the work of resource persons assigned by the Universal House of Justice to specific National Assemblies in order to assist them and their agencies as they strive to learn how sound administrative systems—including those related to the flow of guidance, information, and funds, and to the management of properties—enabled them to respond to the demands of growth and carry out their work with greater efficiency and vigour. At the end of the Plan, 83 resource persons for administrative, financial, and property-related matters were serving 65 National Spiritual Assemblies. In some countries, resource persons were asked to give special attention to building the capacity of Regional Bahá'í Councils to manage their administrative and financial operations. In addition, for some National Assemblies not assisted by resource persons, seminars about matters related to the properties of the Faith were organized in various regions of the world for selected individuals.

In **India**, the National Spiritual Assembly adopted a strategic approach to the development of properties which placed property needs within the overall context of the Plan, taking into account the future growth of the Faith and available resources. In preparing a plan for properties, the National Assembly, in collaboration with the Counsellors, analysed its needs generally within the following categories: the seats of the institutions, the training institute at the national or regional level, and cluster-level demands. As part of its strategy for property development, the Assembly decided to construct, over a decade, appropriate facilities in 50 clusters where a large number

Strengthening the Financial System of a National Community

The National Spiritual Assembly of **Italy** formed a working group to prepare a document regarding the development of its system of financial administration. This document captured the vision of the future structure of the national and regional treasury offices and the operation of the system, and included a concrete plan of action that was put in place after the National Assembly approved the document.

As a starting point, the National Assembly focused on strengthening its budgeting process. In the past, the National Treasurer had been asked to prepare the national budget for the review of the Assembly. However, through consultation, the Assembly realized that an effective and financially sound budget needed to be based on a well-conceived plan. In particular, if the national budget was to provide adequate resources for the prosecution of the teaching work, the budgeting process had to respond to the complex nature of planning for expansion and consolidation current within the Bahá'í community. The Assembly felt that this planning had to go beyond the mere enumeration of goals to include an analysis of approaches to be adopted and lines of action to be followed.

The National Assembly established a budgeting process that began in the clusters, in which agencies at that level

determined their financial needs in accord with the plans and activities in the cluster. Three of the most advanced clusters were assisted to prepare their budgets in light of their plan. These budgets were then submitted to the Regional Bahá'í Council and included in the budget for the entire region. The National Assembly then invited all institutions and agencies at the regional level to participate in an annual planning and budgeting meeting that took place over two days. Subsequently, the budgets of the Regional Councils and other agencies were incorporated into the national budget. Thus, the national budget that was prepared reflected the actual needs of the Councils and cluster agencies, rather than being based on the application of a fixed formula.

If it was to effectively carry out its many responsibilities mentioned above, the Assembly realized that appropriate structures at the national level needed to be strengthened. In addition to the cashier and accountant who were supporting the National Treasurer, the Assembly recognized the need to have a coordinator for the Treasury Office.

After preparing a document regarding its system of financial administration, the National Spiritual Assembly of **Tanzania**

set out to implement the provisions. The most pressing concern of the Assembly was that the system would be able to facilitate the flow of funds within the community, particularly to support activities at the grassroots. The Assembly gave attention to a number of processes: educating the believers about the significance of giving to the Fund; preparing budgets in light of plans; approving, disbursing, and reporting on funds; and carrying out audits. After many aspects of the system were strengthened at the national level, the Assembly focused on improving the system at the regional level and took steps to establish regional treasury offices.

Although much had been done, the National Assembly was aware that as the community grew and became more complex, the processes and structures would also become more sophisticated to satisfy the demands of growth. In addition, the Assembly learned that although strengthening the system included a number of very practical steps, refining it in a way that supports the work at the grassroots would involve a long-term process of capacity building.



A gathering for assistants to Auxiliary Board members in Colombia.

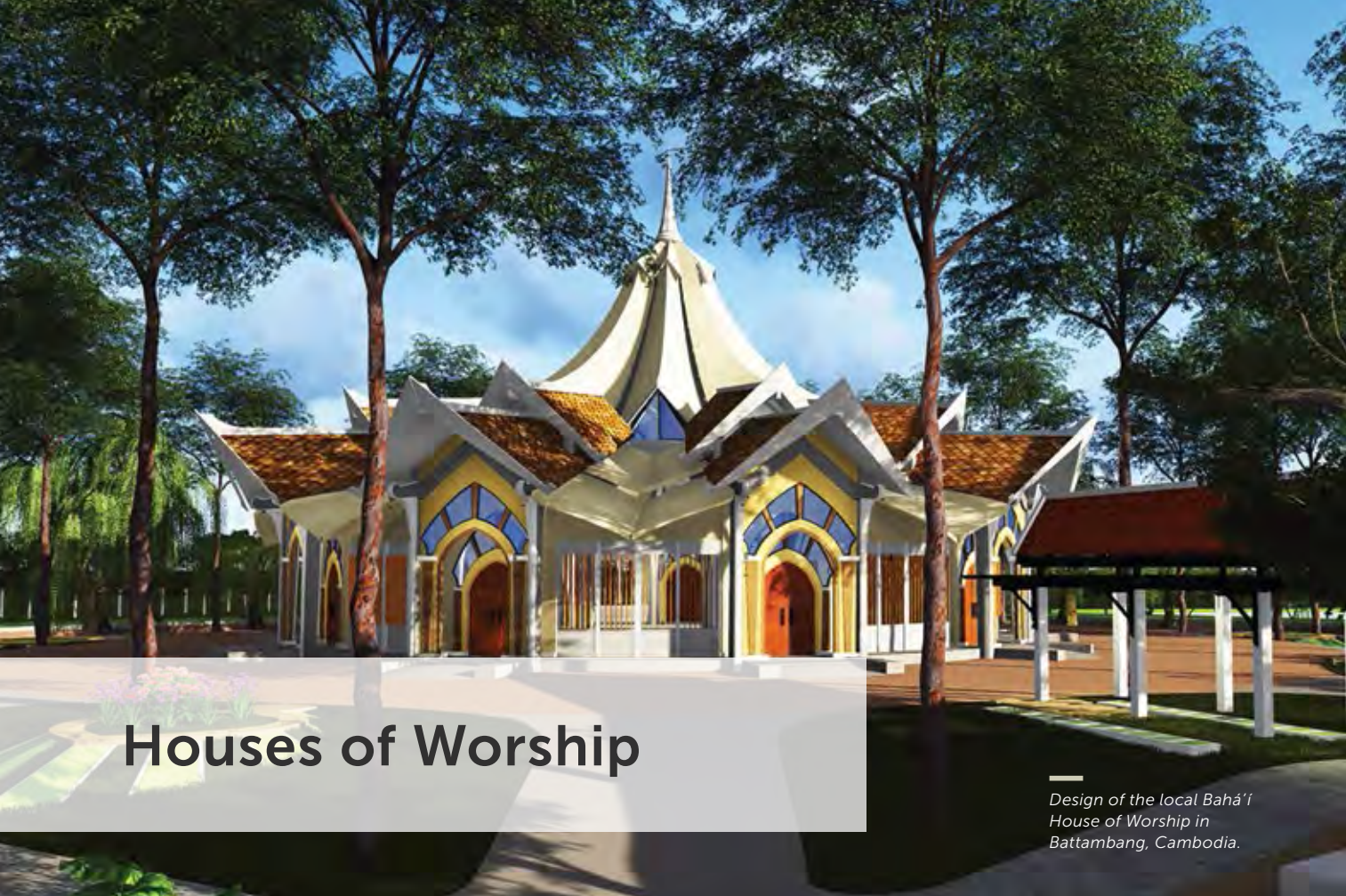
of people participated in activities, with priority given to buildings in rural areas. The function of each facility would define its location, size, and layout. The Assembly started by consulting with the Regional Bahá'í Councils, and the Councils identified teams who could oversee these projects.

In **Sahar**, India, where construction was set to begin, a building task force comprising five Bahá'ís was formed. In addition, the agencies serving the cluster, along with two Auxiliary Board members, were heavily involved in determining needs and mobilizing the friends to support this endeavour in whatever way they could. A list of 1,000 households in the cluster was prepared, and every home was visited. The families visited were asked to consider how they could contribute to the development of the property. The response to these visits was wholehearted. Many families contributed by offering labour, materials, meals for the workers, and funds. For example, the brother of one of the Bahá'ís offered a plot of land at one-third of its market value. The sense of ownership and resourcefulness among the Bahá'ís in the community was strong, as was evident in the central role they played in the construction of the property.

The Institution of the Counsellors

In the institution of the Counsellors, the Universal House of Justice has explained, “the Bahá'í community has a system through which the lessons learned in the remotest parts of the planet can benefit the worldwide process of learning in which every follower of Bahá'u'lláh can take part”.⁴² As this Plan unfolded, the Continental Counsellors and Auxiliary Board members encouraged a heightened spirit of collaboration and mutual support among individuals, institutions, and communities. They also raised awareness about the provisions of the Plan, promoted the spiritual health of Bahá'í communities, and encouraged individual initiative. Their dedicated efforts helped to ensure coherence among the elements of the Plan and to safeguard the integrity of the unfolding processes.

In the past five years, Auxiliary Board members in particular worked tirelessly to understand how best to encourage and accompany the friends from a wide range of clusters. In doing so, they worked with some 8,000 believers who served as assistants to Auxiliary Board members. Identifying, training, and accompanying a growing number of assistants continued to be approached in a mode of learning. In many regions, the Auxiliary Board members held regular gatherings for their assistants to consult, reflect, and plan together.



Houses of Worship

Design of the local Bahá'í House of Worship in Battambang, Cambodia.

The previous sections of this chapter have demonstrated how clusters with programmes of growth, at varying levels of intensity, are moving along a dynamic continuum and together represent a single forward movement towards building a better world. This collective movement reflects the achievement of the friends in all parts of the globe to combine the spiritual and social elements of the Plan in a coordinated, unified effort. Nowhere is the union of worship and service, the “two essential, inseparable aspects of Bahá'í life”,⁴³ more evident than in those countries and clusters which the Universal House of Justice designated at Ridván 2012 as having met the criteria for establishing Houses of Worship. Before describing the inspiring progress of the development of the Houses of Worship and the advances in community building in these

communities, it is worth recounting a brief history of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár*, referred to by Shoghi Effendi as the “crowning institution in every Bahá'í community”.⁴⁴

Over one hundred years ago in **'Ishqábád, Turkistán**, the Bahá'ís raised up, under the close and loving guidance of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the first *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* in the world. The opportunity to establish a House of Worship in **Wilmette, United States**, also arose during the Ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and the dedication of the Mother Temple of the West took place in 1953. It was followed by the establishment of other continental Temples in **Kampala, Uganda** (1961); **Sydney, Australia** (1961); **Frankfurt, Germany** (1964); **Panama City, Panama** (1972); **Apia, Samoa** (1984); and **Delhi, India** (1986). This process came

close to completion during this Five Year Plan, as construction proceeded on the last of the continental Houses of Worship, the Mother Temple of South America, located in **Santiago, Chile**, on the foothills of the Andes. The friends in Santiago and the surrounding region laboured to intensify community-building endeavours and prepare the local population for the erection of the Temple, a sacred place where souls could gather for communal worship “harmoniously attuned one to another”⁴⁵ and from which “the voice of praisings may rise to the Kingdom”.⁴⁶ Parallel to the flourishing activities within communities in both the immediate region and across the continent, stunning progress was made on the construction itself, given the complex design, budgetary limitations, and severe seismic conditions. The Universal House of Justice announced that the dedication of the House of Worship in Santiago would be held in October 2016.

Soon after the Fifth Epoch of the Formative Age of the Faith was inaugurated in 2001, the Universal House of Justice announced in its *Riḍván* message that one of the new epoch’s features would be “the enrichment of the devotional life of the community through the raising up of national Houses of Worship”.⁴⁷ Then at *Riḍván* 2012 the entire Bahá’í world rejoiced at learning that two National Houses of Worship would be built—one in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo** and the other in **Papua New Guinea**, countries where “the response of their peoples to the possibilities created by the current series of Plans has been nothing short of remarkable”.⁴⁸ The message created further excitement with the news that five local Houses of Worship would be established in advanced clusters in **Cambodia, Colombia, India, Kenya, and Vanuatu**. In all these communities one finds a correlation of worship and service that has given rise to

a rich tapestry of community life, growth in size and vitality, and engagement in social action. “In every case,” the House of Justice described the Temple locations, “these dawning places of His remembrance represent the rising influence of the Faith of God in society.”⁴⁹

Since the announcement in 2012, the friends in each of the designated communities have demonstrated “their immediate and heartfelt commitment to lend their share in carrying out the critical work at hand”.⁵⁰ The tasks included finding a suitable piece of land, preparing a design for the Temple edifice, forming a committee in each country, and opening a construction office—steps bolstered by the sacrificial contributions of believers everywhere. No less important were the efforts taken to raise



Construction advances on the Continental House of Worship for South America, in Santiago, Chile.

Local authorities review the design of the House of Worship in Battambang, Cambodia.



the consciousness of the local population of the significance of such an edifice being raised up in their midst, which is above all a spiritual enterprise. In 2012, the Office of Temples and Sites was created at the Bahá'í World Centre to offer support to each community preparing for the erection of a House of Worship. The accounts below provide a glimpse of the steady progress being made in diverse settings around the world in the development of these Temples and the surrounding communities.

During this Five Year Plan, the **Democratic Republic of the Congo** made great strides in extending the process of expansion and consolidation throughout the country, reaching 541 clusters, in some 60 of which large numbers were participating in the activities. The committee tasked with preparing the community for the construction of the National House of Worship in **Kinshasa** organized a country-wide prayer campaign and called on the assistance of the entire national community to help lay the necessary material and

spiritual groundwork to bring it to fruition. To promote the spiritual conditions befitting the presence of such an institution in the country, the committee followed the efforts of the friends to multiply devotional gatherings—in both number and participation—while sharing what had been learned about improving the quality of these gatherings. In addition, the committee promoted a deepening programme designed to advance understanding of the nature and influence of a House of Worship and to stimulate reflection on the attitude to adopt when one enters the Temple. It also encouraged choirs in the country to compose songs on the purpose of the House of Worship, an effort which resulted in the release of a compact disc with six original songs.

In response to the bounty of their country being selected as a site for a national House of Worship, the believers throughout **Papua New Guinea** translated their enthusiasm and spirit into action in this Plan by expanding the number of clusters with a programme of

growth from 27 to 99. The friends in **Port Moresby**, where the Temple will be built, intensified their community-building efforts, which led to some 150 core activities being sustained by the end of 2015. Elsewhere in Papua New Guinea, the activity in some 15 clusters attained similar levels of intensity, and the friends advanced well in their capacity to embrace large numbers, particularly in the **Daga** cluster, where nearly 4,000 participants are engaged in core activities. Against this backdrop of a flourishing pattern of community life, the National Spiritual Assembly set a goal of extending the conversation on the purpose and significance of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* to some 10,000 souls throughout the country. In addition to the special occasions organized to raise awareness of the construction of the National House of Worship, those teaching children's classes, facilitating junior youth groups, hosting devotional gatherings, and facilitating study circles learned to weave the topic naturally into their interactions with others. In the course of these conversations, many among the local population connected with the concept of a House of Worship as an institution that welcomes people of all backgrounds within its warm embrace. They came to understand the act of worship as wedded to practical service to one's community.

In **Battambang, Cambodia**, a celebration in July 2015 to unveil the design for the



Community members study guidance on the institution of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* in Papua New Guinea.

local House of Worship opened with prayers at dawn. The events of the day involved dignitaries as well as inhabitants of the surrounding communities, with attendance reaching over 300. In the evening, a reception was held for local and regional authorities, including the governor of the Battambang region and the Chairman of the Battambang Provincial Council. In November of that year, some 200 people from the region participated in a groundbreaking ceremony that also opened with a programme of dawn prayers. This was the first ever ground-breaking event for a local House of Worship, and it coincided with the first time the entire Bahá'í world celebrated the Twin Anniversaries of the Birth of the Báb and the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh according to the Badí' calendar. Before the end of the Plan, the earthworks of the Temple property were completed, construction of the central edifices was scheduled to begin shortly after, and service projects took place on site. Several hundred friends participated in at least four major activities as part of an effort to involve and connect the local population with the institution of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár*, including creating a plant nursery, contributing to the raising up of a fence using locally sourced materials, and planting trees to beautify the gardens and provide shade.



Musicians prepare to share songs at community-wide devotional gatherings in Bihar Sharif, India.

A Stream of Joyous Souls

The following is a story of a participant at the groundbreaking ceremony for the local House of Worship in **Norte del Cauca, Colombia**.

At midday, a young man residing in a rural community in the Norte del Cauca cluster got ready to leave his house in the municipality of Mingo. This day was to be one of the most special days in his life. He had grown up learning from his parents to work and value the land. From his grandparents, he had inherited a deep love for the traditional *finca*, or small farmer holding. He spent most of his time in the *finca* and thanks to it was able to provide for his family. On this day, he was going to represent his community at a special celebration for the laying of the cornerstone of the local House of Worship. On his bicycle he began his journey to Agua Azul to attend this historic occasion. After arriving, his eyes were drawn to a hand-made clay vase that had been set on a table in front of a stage decorated with flowers and plants typical of the region. He fondly remembered his grandmothers kneading the clay to make such vases. A stream of joyous souls made their way into the tents on the site of the future Temple.

As the young man reflected on the inspiring words shared in the opening remarks, he was moved by how closely the House of Worship was related

to his people's history and their journey to freedom. He was reminded of the small farmers of the region and their suffering; his eyes filled with tears and his chest heaved with pain. When the name of the first community to deposit its soil sample in the big clay vase was mentioned—Primavera—his heart pulsed with great emotion. It was soon going to be his turn to stand up. He held the small bag with the soil from his community. And then the speaker of the ceremony called out, "The Mingo community will now deposit its sample!" The young man eagerly got up and advanced towards the vase to empty the soil in it. Many other friends then followed. Women, children, youth, and the elderly proceeded in reverence to fulfil this special

privilege that their communities had bestowed on them. With this symbolic act, 60 communities sealed their solemn promise to always maintain their connection with this spiritual centre in their midst.

When the celebration came to its close at sunset, the young man from Mingo glanced one last time at the clay vase full of soil and started his journey home. On the way, many images and words from the event came to his mind. He realized that his participation in the ceremony for laying the cornerstone of the local House of Worship in Norte del Cauca would remain in his heart as one of the most precious moments of his life, one that would assuredly be called to mind by his grandchildren and great-grandchildren.



A community member offers a soil sample at the groundbreaking of the local House of Worship in Norte Del Cauca, Colombia.

The friends in several regions in **India**, with the aid of the institutions, set out to deepen their awareness of what the edifice of the *Mashriq’l-Adhkár* represents and how their actions today, however humble, foreshadow the appearance, in the fullness of time, of a House of Worship in every locality. With these thoughts in mind, the friends studied the 1 August 2014 message of the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá’ís of the world about the significance of the institution of the *Mashriq’l-Adhkár*, along with other messages of the Supreme Body. They pledged to contribute to the Temples Fund, hold devotional gatherings, and assist with the construction of the local House of Worship in **Bihar Sharif**. In Bihar Sharif itself, regular community gatherings were held to raise the consciousness of the local community of the significance of the Temple to be built. As appreciation for the purpose of the sacred edifice grew, so too did the number of devotional gatherings held at dawn throughout the community. In addition, a team was formed at the cluster level to organize community-wide devotional meetings that incorporated songs and dances expressing love for God and His creation.

The participation of over 3,300 youth at the 2013 youth conference in the **Matunda Soy** cluster in **Kenya**, together with the follow-up efforts by the youth and the institutions, gave great impetus to the community-building process throughout the country. Naturally, the enthusiasm of the friends also increased as preparations for the construction of a House of Worship unfolded. With the help of the Temple committee and regional and local institutions, a gathering was held in the cluster with nearly 1,000 participants to offer supplications to the Almighty for such a bounty. The occasion was also used to increase awareness of the spiritual significance of establishing this divinely ordained institution in their community. As a first step in raising up the facilities that will be erected in the vicinity of the House of Worship, the friends constructed modest facilities on the Temple site to serve the needs of the training institute and the local community.

In its 2014 *Riḍván* message, the Universal House of Justice described the community of **Tanna, Vanuatu**, in great detail, noting it as an example of “a collective movement



Community members consult about the layout of a simple facility on the Temple site in Matunda Soy, Kenya.

towards the vision of material and spiritual prosperity set forth by Him Who is the Lifegiver of the World”:

The friends who reside on the island of Tanna have made a supreme effort to raise consciousness of the planned House of Worship, and have already engaged no less than a third of the island’s 30,000 inhabitants in an expanding conversation about its significance in a variety of ways. The ability to sustain an elevated conversation among so many people has been refined through years of experience sharing the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh and extending the reach of a vibrant training institute.... There is much here to indicate that, when the elements of the Plan’s framework for action are combined into a coherent whole, the impact on a population can be profound. And it is against the



background of ongoing expansion and consolidation—the thirtieth cycle of the intensive programme of growth has recently concluded—that the friends are actively exploring, with the rest of the island’s inhabitants, what it means for a *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár*, a “collective centre for men’s souls”, to be raised up



Youth contribute to the construction of benches near the land of the House of Worship in Norte Del Cauca, Colombia.

in their midst. With the active support of traditional leaders, Tanna islanders have offered no less than a hundred design ideas for the Temple, demonstrating the extent to which the House of Worship has captured imaginations, and opening up enthralling prospects for the influence it is set to exert on the lives lived beneath its shade.⁵¹

In **Norte del Cauca, Colombia**, the design of the central edifice of the local House of Worship was unveiled at a gathering in September 2014, where one of the architects said that over the course of several months his team had visited communities and groups in Norte del Cauca, listening to their ideas, thoughts, and aspirations and had participated in their community-building activities. At the ground-breaking ceremony several months later, an inhabitant of a nearby community, and a direct descendant of the first generation of believers there, said

Community members study guidance on the institution of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.




that since learning about the Bahá'í Faith as a junior youth she had been motivated by a deep concern for the development of her people and an eagerness to know how best to serve the communities of the region. With deep emotion, she stated, “The event today has a backstage story, the history of a people, our North Cauca people! ... We are here because it is the destiny of our people. We are here because this destiny was one day illumined by the light emanating from the presence of a Prisoner [Bahá'u'lláh].” Communities from the surrounding region brought soil samples for the long-awaited moment when the cornerstone was laid, which symbolized how the communities are connected with this institution. A native forest on the Temple grounds will display the beauty and rich diversity of the indigenous trees in the region and serve as a place of learning, research, and training for children, youth, and adults. It will nurture among the local inhabitants a heightened consciousness of their responsibility to cultivate and protect their natural environment and its relationship to the spiritual and social well-being of the population. The forest will also become an uplifting, verdant setting for the enjoyment of the entire community.



Social Action



Community members in Papua
New Guinea planting crops.



The significant advances made in the area of expansion and consolidation during the Five Year Plan have drawn the worldwide Bahá'í community further into the life of society. Inspired by the words of Bahá'u'lláh that “all men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization”,⁵² Bahá'ís from all walks of life, and in regions with many differing social and economic circumstances, have continued to work alongside others to contribute to the creation of a materially and spiritually prosperous society. In one sense, Bahá'í social and economic development encompasses all those efforts of the believers, including the ones in which they participate in activities, projects, and organizations of the wider society, whether as volunteers or professionals, on occasion or full time. More particularly, as addressed here, it is concerned with those efforts of the friends acting within the wide scope of the Bahá'í communities' endeavours, individually and collectively, ranging from small-scale initiatives at the grassroots to large Bahá'í-inspired organizations operating at a national level, which address challenges in a variety of fields, including health, sanitation, education, agriculture, language, gender equality, arts and media, peace, and environmental protection. Such endeavours have contributed to a global process of learning within the community about applying the Teachings, along with knowledge drawn from diverse fields of human inquiry, for the betterment of local communities and the wider society.

In the last five years, the vast majority of efforts in the area of social action has been small-scale activities undertaken by individuals or groups of people at the local level. Numbering well over 10,000 annually, they generally begin by addressing specific challenges facing a population through the application of

spiritual principles. As with all Bahá'í efforts in the area of development, these modest initiatives are animated by the desire to serve and to achieve individual and collective progress. For instance, a group of junior youth decide to beautify a public space in which they meet, a few friends offer tutorial assistance to children, or a number of neighbours decide to establish a community garden. As activities of this type, tied together in a common framework, multiply in a locality, their collective influence on the life of a population can be increasingly perceived. This is especially apparent in a growing number of neighbourhoods and villages which have become centres of intense activity. Some of these grassroots initiatives grow organically and are sustained over time in the form of one type of project or another, for instance, a community school providing education to the youngest inhabitants in a locality, a local health clinic aiming to offer basic health and educational services to the surrounding population, or an organization creating media content to raise social consciousness about certain topics such as the equality of women and men. Over 1,000 activities of this kind are being carried out in at least 130 countries across all continents. And of these, more than 100 are well-developed Bahá'í-inspired organizations that have built the capacity to engage in relatively complex areas of activity and to create working relations with agencies of government and civil society. This Plan has seen a significant increase in the scale of Bahá'í development activity worldwide at all levels of complexity, a reflection of the rising capacity of the Bahá'í community as it focuses its energies on executing the global Plans.

On several occasions, the Universal House of Justice has stated that various areas of

activity in which the Bahá'í community is engaged need to become increasingly complementary, integrated, and mutually reinforcing. It has also indicated that our growing involvement in the life of society will contribute to the advancement of civilization to the degree that it employs elements of the conceptual framework which governs the current series of global Plans. The Rídván 2010 and 28 December 2010 messages of the Universal House of Justice enabled the global Bahá'í community to better appreciate the place its efforts for social action have in relation to the current activity unfolding at the level of the cluster. Discussions on this theme were enriched by the publication on 26 November 2012 of a paper on the subject of social action by the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá'í World Centre, which distilled 30 years of global experience in this area and outlined the elements of the conceptual framework that speak to the nature, methodology, and guiding principles of Bahá'í social and economic development. Thus, beyond the numerical advances in development activities that have been achieved in these past few years, perhaps the most notable accomplishment in the sphere of social action has been the extent to which the friends involved, at any level of complexity, have been able to grasp these elements and bring them to bear in their work. The coherence achieved among various areas of activity, and the implications this had on the progress of a community, was especially apparent in those clusters at the frontiers of learning.

The following pages provide an overview of areas of endeavour in which there has been marked progress over the course of the Five Year Plan. The first section offers a glimpse as to how efforts for social action have emerged and been woven into

the pattern of activity taking place in advanced clusters. Significant progress has also been achieved in the spread and strengthening of the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme and of other educational endeavours. These include the establishment and strengthening of Bahá'í and Bahá'í-inspired schools and the propagation of two initiatives of proven effectiveness, the community schools and Preparation for Social Action (PSA) programmes. Although smaller in scale, there was also clear progress in learning about the use of media for social transformation in advanced clusters and in the efforts of a number of Bahá'í-inspired organizations to carry out action research in agriculture. Major advances similarly occurred in the development of institutional capacity for social action, including among Bahá'í-inspired organizations as well as institutions and agencies of the Faith at various levels.

Learning about Social Action in Advanced Clusters

In referring to clusters where the friends have passed the third milestone, the Universal House of Justice has explained that “a natural outcome of the rise both in resources and in consciousness of the implications of the Revelation for the life of a population is the stirrings of social action.”⁵³ The experience gained in a growing number of clusters in this Plan has offered valuable insights into how, in localities where the activities of the training institute are firmly established and a pattern of life characterized by devotion and service is beginning to take root, gradual advances in various aspects of the social and economic life of a community can occur.

Even from the early stages of activity in a village or neighbourhood, the changes

occurring in the spiritual well-being of a number of inhabitants can naturally have implications on the social and material dimensions of life. Daily activities, for instance, become infused with a spirit of service. Individual choices such as those pertaining to education and work are placed in a context of collective progress. Interactions between people and within families become elevated, and an ability to consult and learn collectively is gradually built. Within such an environment, a growing social consciousness is often expressed in the emergence of an increasing number of small-scale development activities of fixed duration. Over time, some of these initiatives grow organically and begin to function as sustained social and economic development projects. While they may at times be similar in form to other efforts that are commonplace in these communities, they are generally distinguished by the manner in which their goals and methods are influenced by the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. Further, those involved often demonstrate an enhanced capacity for learning and sustained action, acquired through their involvement in the institute process. As stated by the House of Justice, “However humble an instance of social action might be at the beginning, it is an indication of a people cultivating within themselves a critical capacity, one that holds infinite potential and significance for the centuries ahead: learning how to apply the Revelation to the manifold dimensions of social existence.”⁵⁴

A few examples may help further illustrate how social action can emerge in a locality in a way that is coherent with the process of change already under way. In many clusters, the acts of service that the members of junior youth groups undertake have contributed to more sustained efforts of social action. The box regarding the emergence of an environment conservation project in **Tanna**,

Vanuatu, provides an example of this. The box about the Colibri Learning Foundation in **Vancouver, Canada**, offers an example of how efforts to engage meaningfully with new immigrants, initially in the context of expansion and consolidation, led to the establishment of a sustained development project in the area of language and immigration. Over the last few years, especially after the international youth conferences held in 2013, many clusters have seen a surge in the number of youth eager to pursue further education and select a profession that enables them to more ably live a life of service. The box titled “Inspiring Youth to Commit to a Life of Service” offers a few examples of steps taken to address this challenge in different contexts. In several clusters, capacity for social action has been significantly enhanced as the friends carried out certain programmes of proven effectiveness being offered by a Bahá'í-inspired organization operating in the region. The boxes titled “A Maasai Community Learning to Take Charge of the Spiritual and Intellectual Development of its Young Children” and “Developing Capacity for Sustained Social Action in Eastern Cameroon” demonstrate how two such programmes—community schools and Preparation for Social Action—have been introduced in these regions. The implementation of these programmes became a natural part of the respective clusters’ endeavours and gave impetus to the process of community building. In many places, growing capacity to engage in social action has been accompanied by the creation of spaces for reflection and consultation among friends working to enhance similar aspects of community life. Such steps helped nurture, in a natural way, the emerging processes of learning. Existing spaces such as Nineteen Day Feasts and cluster-wide reflection meetings were enriched by the incorporation of insights being gained in

Inspiring Youth to Commit to a Life of Service

In its message dated 29 December 2015, the Universal House of Justice explained that as growing numbers of youth involved in the community-building work develop towards maturity, “their horizons broaden” and “other dimensions of a coherent life, equally demanding and highly meritorious, begin to make stronger claims on their attention.” These include further education—academic or vocational—according to the possibilities before them and pursuing crafts or professions that will assist them in contributing to the progress of civilization. During the Plan, as many youth became inspired to pursue a twofold moral purpose in the context of a life of service, a growing number of individuals, institutions, and agencies of the Faith, as well as Bahá’í-inspired organizations, initiated systematic efforts to learn about supporting youth in taking critical steps in relation to their career paths.

In **Toronto, Canada**, an Auxiliary Board member who had worked for some years in the field of human resources observed that many young people had a desire to engage in work that they would find meaningful, but did not know how to go about pursuing this aspiration. At the encouragement of the Counsellor, together with a few friends, she decided to take some steps to learn about

this. In 2012, they began holding workshops for youth in which they would study *Breezes of Confirmation* and reflect on themes such as confirmation, the development and use of talents in the context of the twofold moral purpose, and true wealth. Organized around the concept of advancing along a path of service, the workshops helped the participants to describe how they envisioned themselves engaging in service to humanity through their work, to identify what skills, education, and experience they required, and then to create a practical plan. After the workshops, the core group of friends helped the participants take action. They also strove to foster a collective spirit among a group of young people, enabling them to support one another in putting service at the centre of their lives as they advance from one stage to the next. So far more than 200 youth have benefitted from participating in these workshops and the follow-up offered.

In a cluster in **India**, as a result of ongoing conversations with increasing numbers of youth whose families were participating in core activities, the Bahá’í community became more familiar with the range of issues these friends were facing. One significant challenge was that the cost of tertiary education was too high for some families to be able to cover tuition fees for their children. The agencies

and institutions in the cluster, including the Local Spiritual Assembly, therefore began engaging in conversations with certain families about the career aspirations of their younger members. The families were assisted to consider ways in which they could make available funds to pay for tuition, and, in certain cases, the institutions of the Faith covered a portion. The youth also received help to identify and apply for appropriate tertiary programmes through which they could gain capacities required to advance on their path of service to humanity.

Since 2013, **Fundación para la Aplicación y Enseñanza de las Ciencias (FUNDAEC)** in **Colombia** has been carrying out the “Supporting Community Leaders” programme with the aim of orienting young people in trades or professions that foster the prosperity of their communities. The programme specifically serves youth who are at the stage of choosing a career path, and includes elements of study, service, and professional orientation. The materials used, which are continually being refined, are designed to complement the specialized training that students receive in universities or technical colleges, and are studied either on a weekly basis or in the form of intensive seminars throughout the year. The participants are accompanied in carrying out service activities that contribute

Participant of a coffee project in the "Supporting Community Leaders" programme in Colombia.



to the well-being of their communities and are oriented in a trade or profession that is in line with their talents and the needs of their communities. For instance, one participant from the **Occidente** region applied what she learned through her participation in the programme and her university studies to provide a local laboratory clinic and hardware store with accounting services, together with a vision and plan for how their enterprises could grow. Opportunities were also provided for the participants to acquire relevant work experience. For those students who required additional funds to pursue a higher education, some were assisted through a solidarity fund created by the organization, while others were helped to identify alternative sources of financing. As the organization took steps to become more familiar with existing educational opportunities and to foster relationships with a growing number of institutions, it became increasingly well placed to assist the youth in pursuing the most suitable training. By December 2015, the first group of 16 participants had graduated from the programme. At that time, 11 groups were meeting regularly, with a total of 157 students. Some of these participants were receiving financial support, either to pursue technical or professional studies, or to initiate small production projects.

social action and by updates on the progress being made in that area of endeavour.

A growing consciousness about certain fundamental principles of the Faith was also observed in many centres of intense activity, which often resulted in profound changes at the level of culture. The importance of universal education and the equality of women and men, for instance, were appreciated to greater degrees as more individuals in a community participated in the educational activities of the training institute. To offer an example, in **Battambang, Cambodia**, preference for education has been traditionally given to boys. As the understanding of the community about education grew over the years, more girls have begun to receive higher levels of education. In one community, about a decade ago only one girl attended school and members of the community criticized her family for educating their daughter, whereas now it is common practice for all girls in the village to receive formal education. Increased education for girls over many years also led to women taking on a more prominent role within society. In certain places, advances in the community-building process have accelerated the breaking down of other barriers. In some villages in **India**, the caste system has been dismantled, in large part owing to the efforts of Bahá'ís and other friends in demonstrating in both deeds and words their belief in the oneness of humanity. The process of overcoming divisions based on caste accelerated in the last three or four years as the institute became more established. Increasingly in these clusters, institutions in the wider society turned to the Bahá'í community and sought to draw insights from the Teachings of the Faith, a point that is illustrated in a few of the accounts provided.

Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Programme

A number of the developments that occurred worldwide in relation to implementing the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme have been highlighted in the previous chapter of this document. These rapid advances required that the arrangements in place to systematize the associated learning evolve commensurately. In this regard, in the course of the Five Year Plan some 15 additional sites for the dissemination of learning about the junior youth programme were established in different parts of the world. As of April 2016, around 45 learning sites were functioning, serving over 400 clusters with particular potential for the growth of the programme. Nine offices are also in place at the continental or sub-continental levels to support the work of these sites and to assist in organizing a growing body of knowledge and experience.

One dimension of the efforts of these sites involved offering training and ongoing support to coordinators from associated clusters. By coming together on a regular basis to study, reflect on experience, and incorporate insights gained into plans of action, friends from a network of clusters associated with a site contributed to a growing body of knowledge about various aspects of the programme's implementation. As endeavours within these clusters advanced, the nature of the questions that are the subject of collective learning evolved. In a number of the sites, the friends were learning about how to engage some 300 junior youth in the programme. The number of clusters that reached this stage of growth nearly doubled between 2011 and 2016, with a few sustaining over 1,000 participants in the programme.

A second aspect of the work of the sites involved collaboration with training institutes to facilitate the dissemination of the knowledge gained to all clusters. Much has been learned in the past few years about the evolving relationship between sites and training institutes. Significant progress has been made in many regions of the world as resource persons; coordinators serving at cluster, regional, and national levels; training institute boards; and other institutions and agencies closely collaborated to extend the programme to cluster after cluster. The box titled “Embracing Large Numbers in the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Programme in Bukavu, Democratic Republic of the Congo” is an example of how the clusters associated with a site have moved from strength to strength and where the purposeful interaction between the training institute and learning site has helped rapidly accelerate the advancement of the programme, in both size and quality, across a region.

In its Riḍván 2010 message, the Universal House of Justice explained: “That the major component of the programme explores themes from a Bahá'í perspective, but not in the mode of religious instruction, has opened the way for its extension to



Junior youth carry out a service project in India.

Service Projects of Junior Youth Groups

In **Tanna, Vanuatu**, the animator of a junior youth group regularly helped the participants reflect on the local conditions of the village in order to inform their consultation on the ways in which they could be of service to their community. Over a number of years, as the youngsters developed the capacity to plan and implement small-scale service projects, their level of reflection and consultation deepened and matured. In one meeting, the junior youth noted the effects of excessive consumption of the ocean's resources and the implications it would have for future generations were this practice to continue. After consulting at length, the junior youth decided to embark on a project to protect the marine life along the coastal reefs. As a first step, the animator helped the junior youth prepare for and carry out a meeting with the chief, who welcomed their ideas and agreed to allocate a part of his property for the marine resource conservation project. He also shared with the junior youth that, in the past, a portion of land along the ocean was set aside for the same purpose, but the people had since forgotten to follow this tradition. With support from community members and other village leaders, the junior youth posted signs and markers along the shore to inform others

about the conservation project, and held a series of meetings in neighbouring villages to raise awareness about the preservation of marine life. As others learned of the project, they started assisting the junior youth with the various tasks. The project has been sustained for several years now with the support of the community and the Ministry of Fisheries,

and similar initiatives have been started in other parts of the island. Marine life is flourishing in these areas, and a number of the young people from the group continue to monitor the progress and the diversity of marine life that is returning to the reefs.



Marine resource conservation service project by junior youth in Tanna, Vanuatu.

Embracing Large Numbers in the Junior Youth Programme in Bukavu

The site for learning for the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme in **Bukavu, Democratic Republic of the Congo**, made significant progress during the Five Year Plan in advancing the frontiers of learning about the growth of the programme in a network of 10 clusters and in contributing to the efforts of training institutes in the region to establish the programme and foster its development in many more.

By the end of the Plan, all but one of these 10 clusters were each engaging over 500 junior youth in the programme, totalling some 6,100 participants, representing a twofold increase in numbers since 2011. In addition to this numerical achievement, many insights were gained into the qualitative dimensions of the programme's advancement. For instance, inspired by the concept of mutual support and assistance they explored during the youth conference in 2013, animators in the **Goma** cluster organized themselves into six "networks". A vibrant pattern of action among the animators emerged in which they reflected together on their groups, assisted with the expansion of the programme, and helped one another to overcome obstacles faced in their service and in their personal lives. The arrangement lent strength to the

system of coordination, allowing each animator and each group to benefit from ample support and a steady flow of insights. These developments within Goma cluster were observed by the resource person for the learning site. He then made it an object of analysis and discussion during a seminar for the coordinators of clusters associated with the learning site, encouraging them to consider ways in which to foster a similar culture of mutual support among animators in their respective clusters.

Another advance during the Plan was the rise of capacity in the network of clusters to generate insights into common objects of learning. At a certain time, most groups would not

be sustained for more than a year, and junior youth were on average studying one or two texts. Assisted by the resource person, the coordinators decided together to start tracking certain indicators related to these questions. Over the period of a number of seminars, they compiled and analysed the information gathered, which allowed them to identify key factors in sustaining groups and moving junior youth through available texts. Recognizing the importance of animators themselves advancing through the texts of the junior youth programme and those of the main sequence, the resource person assisted coordinators to study all of the available texts.



Junior youth in Bukavu visit and deliver food to a man whose wife passed away.

This then enabled them to do the same with the animators in their clusters. On average, groups in associated clusters are completing more texts than at the beginning of the Plan and, in 2015, almost half of the groups in these same clusters were on their second or third year of the programme.

While the resource person dedicated much of his time to the work in the 10 clusters associated with the learning site, he sought to disseminate insights he had gained across the region. For instance, upon his return from a continental gathering for resource persons in 2014, he consulted with the Counsellor about organizing a meeting for the institutions and agencies of **South Kivu** to discuss the development of the programme in the region in light of what he had learned at the gathering. The meeting proved to be fruitful, and the regional agencies decided to convene such gatherings every three months. This helped further strengthen collaboration between the resource person and the agencies in South Kivu, particularly the training institute board and the regional coordinators. In 2015, the training institute drew on the support of the learning site to work towards establishing the programme in all the 110 clusters in the region. They called on the resource person to organize a regional training to raise some 20 Book 5 tutors, who in turn facilitated 14 intensive Book 5 campaigns across the region. Within 10 days, over 200 animators were raised up from some 40 clusters. As of early 2016, all but 20 of South Kivu's clusters had at least one junior youth group, and about a third had more than 50 junior youth in the programme.

junior youth in a variety of settings and circumstances. In many such instances, then, those who implement the programme enter confidently into the area of social action, encountering a range of questions and possibilities, which are being followed and organized in a global process of learning by the Office of Social and Economic Development in the Holy Land.” Bahá'í communities in all parts of the world, especially in clusters connected to sites, grew their capacity to respond to opportunities that exist in the context of schools in the wider society. In addition to the efforts of training institutes, a number of Bahá'í and Bahá'í-inspired schools around the world are offering the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme to students. It is estimated that well over 10,000 junior youth are participating in the programme in these locations. Several of these schools are, in turn, beginning to extend the programme to others in their respective clusters.



A junior youth group in Corozal, Honduras.

The Junior Youth Programme in Schools in the Island Nation of Kiribati

For over 10 years, through the encouragement of the Office of Social and Economic Development, the Ootan Marawa Educational Institute (OMEI) has been learning about the implementation of the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme in schools in Kiribati. It began to implement the programme in schools in 2005, in response to a request of the President of the island nation for the organization to help address the challenges faced by youth in the country.

In 2006, with the approval of the principal of a school in the capital city, two animators, trained by OMEI, began offering the texts during the period of religious education. Although the number attending was small, the programme's effect on the academic performance and behaviour of the participating junior youth were soon noticed, and the principal asked that three other groups be formed. After hearing about the impact of the programme, the principal of another school requested that it be offered to all his students the following year. Over the next three years, OMEI learned about implementing the programme in a few schools on the main island, reaching 600 students. In 2009, with the support of Auxiliary Board members, the organization was able to bring the programme to junior secondary schools in

outer islands. The growth in size and spread of the programme called for more attention to be paid to the system for raising up and supporting animators. By the end of the Plan, over 3,000 junior youth were participating in the programme—50% of the junior youth population in Kiribati—with the help of 37 animators, all giving substantial time to this path of service.

The effects of the programme became increasingly visible in the ability of junior youth to express themselves, in improvements in their academic performance, and in the refinement of their conduct. In 2010, the country's Minister of Education made certain observations regarding the positive influence of the programme on the behaviour of students—namely, that it contributed to a decline in the rate of expulsions. Changes were also apparent in the school

environment; for instance, there was a decline in the instances of students publicly engaging in harmful activities, such as drinking alcohol. Teachers started looking at their students in a different light, recognizing their potential and changing their way of interacting with them. The selflessness and perseverance of the animators also inspired other school community members to develop such attitudes towards their work.

Beyond the effects of the programme on the junior youth, youth serving as animators saw their own capacities raised through the service they were rendering. While their initial efforts were primarily to study the texts of the programme with the participants, over time they gave more attention to the programme's other elements, like camps and service projects. They also started to learn about



A junior youth group in a school in Kiribati.

carrying out visits to the parents of the junior youth to explain to them the aims of the programme and gain their support. These efforts assisted the animators not only to further develop their capacity but also to strengthen their bonds of friendship and trust with teachers, principals, and parents. While initially efforts had to be made by OMEI itself to identify youth to serve in this capacity, as the influence of the programme on animators became increasingly perceptible, many young people themselves began to approach the organization to offer service, sometimes at the encouragement of parents and teachers.

As OMEI has gained experience with the implementation of the programme in schools, it has increasingly been able to share with government, educational, and religious entities its insights about the period of adolescence and the impact of moral empowerment on youngsters. In 2014, at a gathering organized by the Ministry of Education to reflect on the achievements of the previous year, the organization was invited to speak about the importance of creating environments for students that foster mutual support and that can reinforce academic progress and behavioural transformation.

Education

As a natural response to the emphasis placed in the Writings on education, which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has described as “the primary, the most urgent requirement”⁵⁵ for achieving the prosperity of nations, educational initiatives continued to make up a large percentage of the activities of the Bahá’í community in the field of social and economic development. These included countless informal efforts, such as additional tutorial classes offered by animators and children’s class teachers or assistance arranged by institutions and agencies of the Faith for youth to pursue tertiary education. Currently, well over 1,000 sustained Bahá’í social action endeavours are of an educational nature. Of this number, approximately 80% are schools, while the remaining represent a range of endeavours that include institutions offering post-secondary education, developing curriculum, or providing teacher training. Altogether these efforts have aimed at contributing towards the gradual formulation of an educational system that will help generation after generation to progressively acquire the traits of a new race of men. The largest of these, the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme, was described in the section above. The following subsections highlight notable progress made in Bahá’í and Bahá’í-inspired schools, community schools, and the Preparation for Social Action programme.

Strengthening Bahá’í and Bahá’í-Inspired Schools

A number of the schools currently in operation have become well-established over some 20 to 30 years and have contributed to the intellectual and moral development of tens of thousands of young people. Almost half of the schools worldwide have been

established in recent years, in consonance with rising capacity in many clusters and as a result of progress made in the implementation of the programme for the promotion of community schools described in the next section. These schools range from local preschools to large academic institutions offering education through high school. They exist in a variety of settings and on every continent, although the vast majority are in **Africa** and **Asia**. In total, they are offering education to more than 200,000 young people.

A particularly significant development during the course of the Five Year Plan concerned the growing ability of the schools to learn about offering an education that increasingly reflects the vision contained in the Bahá'í Writings. In this regard, in the process of further elaborating their vision, adopting appropriate pedagogical and administrative approaches, identifying goals, selecting and developing their curricular materials, building the capacity of their teachers, and strengthening

relationships with the community, many schools drew insights from the community-building work under way and applied methods and approaches coherent with the processes of the Plan. For instance, many made use of books in the sequence of institute courses in teacher training, assisting their teachers to study Books 3 and 5 and to gain insight into how the concepts could be manifested in practice. A large number of schools incorporated the materials associated with the programmes of the training institute into the moral education component of their curriculum. Such developments have had a profound effect not only on the individuals involved, but on the school environment and even the institution's relationship with the broader community. In a number of cases, schools have extended the reach of these programmes further as staff and senior students held children's classes and junior youth groups in the community or nearby schools.



Community-Based Pre-primary and Primary Schools



A class under way in one of the community-based schools in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Over the course of the Plan, a number of Bahá'í-inspired organizations in **Africa**, **Asia**, and **Australasia** systematically supported the multiplication of schools in villages and towns by assisting an increasing number of young people to gain experience in providing pre-primary and primary academic instruction to children in their communities, especially in places where access to formal education was limited. The most successful schools arose out of a growing consciousness among the local population—particularly in areas where the processes of expansion and consolidation were well advanced—about the importance of providing the younger generation with an education that gives due attention to both their spiritual and intellectual development. Drawing primarily on locally available resources, such schools expanded at a rate commensurate with their growing capacity and the emerging spirit of collective endeavour that characterized their functioning. By the close of the Plan, there were 26 established or

emerging organizations that were assisting communities in about 180 clusters in 20 countries to develop capacity to respond to the educational needs of children. In Africa, 14 of these agencies were offering support to nearly 1,000 teachers, providing education to over 23,500 children in 300 schools. Ten established or emerging organizations in Asia were supporting a total of around 190 teachers in some 70 community schools with over 2,600 students. In Australasia, two organizations were supporting 180 teachers, serving some 50 community schools with over 1,800 students.

The efforts of these organizations focused on identifying Bahá'í-inspired curricular elements, developing programmes for the training of teachers, and providing the support local communities needed to take ownership of the education of their children. As additional experience was gained by organizations worldwide in the course of the Five Year Plan, their teacher training programmes continued to evolve and be

A Maasai Community Learning to Take Charge of the Spiritual and Intellectual Development of its Young Children

The **Monduli** cluster, in the **Arusha** region of **Tanzania**, is composed of some 14 villages spread over a vast area. The Maasai people that live here are mainly nomadic, and most have not received a primary education. Among this population, parents have been reluctant to send young children to the schools in the district owing to their distance from the villages and to concerns that their sons and daughters would lose the Maasai way of life.

In 2008, a pioneer family in the region, wanting to contribute to raising literacy levels among the young, identified two youth and assisted them to offer spiritual education as well as reading and writing lessons to the children in their villages. At the request of the pioneers, the Ruaha Mwongozo Foundation, which promotes community schools in the country, invited these youth to attend its teacher training seminar. After their return, the youth held conversations with elders in the community to help raise awareness about the education they had been equipped to offer, resulting in the enrolment of some 40 children in two schools. Over time, those in neighbouring villages heard about the existence of these schools and expressed the desire to establish their own. In these villages, consultations took place—at

times with the help of friends serving at existing schools—to identify individuals who could serve as teachers. As children are seen as the responsibility of the whole community in Maasai culture, all were eager to support the teachers and to provide basic materials for the schools. Initially, most classes took place under trees; however, over a few years, simple structures were built from local materials to provide a better environment for study. All the schools began by offering only pre-primary education, and some now offer a few additional grades. By 2011, 8 schools had been established; by the end of the Plan, there were 17 schools serving more than 400 Maasai children in 6 villages.

Over the years, the transformation seen in the children as well as the conversations initiated by teachers in the villages began to influence aspects of community life. Mothers, for instance, seeing the influence of literacy on the intellectual development of their children, enquired about the possibility of receiving some instruction themselves. In consultation with the Foundation, the coordinator of the community schools effort in the cluster—who had been among the first teachers trained—thought about ways in which the materials employed in the classroom could be used

to offer literacy classes to the mothers. Attitudes towards women also started to change in some of these communities. For example, while it was a common practice to marry off young girls, as increasing numbers began to study, community members were encouraged to allow them to continue their education and marry at a later age. Further, sustained conversations about the negative effects of female genital mutilation led to a reduction in the percentage of female community school students being subjected to this practice. Changes also occurred in how young people were perceived in the community. While in the past elders were the only ones to have a say in the way communities were run, teachers of community schools, most of whom were young in age, began to be well respected and their contributions started to receive due consideration during village gatherings.

The activities of the community schools programme in Monduli also lent impetus to the work of expansion and consolidation. A primary component of the training offered by the Foundation is the study of institute materials. When a youth from the cluster attended the training seminar, he was touched by the content of these books and became a Bahá'í. Upon his return, beyond

attending to the education of children, he was inspired to teach the Faith. His efforts led to a number of enrolments. Further, many individuals who were trained by the Foundation began to offer children's classes in their villages. The regional coordinator collaborated with the teachers to extend conversations about community building to many others within the cluster, and, over time, a group of youth who could serve as animators were identified. The first junior youth groups in the cluster started in 2013. In a region where expansion and consolidation efforts had historically obtained very modest results, by the end of the Plan, Monduli cluster had 13 Bahá'í children's classes serving over 120 children, 19 junior youth groups with more than 200 participants, and 5 study circles with 16 participants.



A community school held under a tree in the Arusha region in Tanzania.

refined. In many instances, the community schools programme reinforced community-building activities. As the influence of the education offered at community schools on the spiritual and moral development of children became increasingly visible, the number of participants in core activities in these regions naturally increased, although this is not an objective of the programme itself. Parents became interested in studying Book 3 of the institute in order to better understand the principles that underlie the education received by their children. Some of these parents established their own Bahá'í children's classes, while others encouraged their children to participate in the educational processes of the Bahá'í community. Further, school facilities were often used as spaces to hold core activities.

Another significant advance has been a more profound understanding at local and national levels of the role of a teacher in society and of the identity of a school as a centre of learning for a population. Beyond recognizing the important responsibility teachers have as the providers of education to the younger generation in a classroom setting, communities became increasingly conscious of the central role teachers can play in contributing to the spiritual and material advancement of a locality. Progressively, schools were viewed as social spaces belonging to all, in which knowledge about various processes of community life—such as agriculture and health—could be generated, applied, and disseminated. Teachers, alongside many others, were seen as protagonists in this process.

This heightened consciousness about the role of the teacher in society in a growing number of communities also enabled teachers to contribute more meaningfully to the discourse on education in their communities. As they increasingly came into contact with government representatives and organizations of civil society, they

discussed with them some of the elements of the framework that guide their efforts and certain educational concepts informed by both the Writings and their own experience. In a number of countries in French-speaking **West Africa**, as well as in **Myanmar**, school inspectors disseminated the insights gained from these conversations to other schools in their respective regions. The organizations implementing the community schools programme developed their own capacity to participate in the discourse on education at the national level, on the basis of years of experience in the field of education. For instance, in **Papua New Guinea**, the perspective provided by Rays of Light Foundation on character building and integral human development as part of a national conference held at the University of Goroka in September 2015—during which the performance of the education sector over 40 years was reviewed and prospects for the future were considered—won the confidence of the Department of Education, thus initiating a process for the schools supported by the Foundation to gain “permitted status” in the country.

Preparation for Social Action

For more than three decades, Fundación para la Aplicación y Enseñanza de las Ciencias (FUNDAEC) in **Colombia** has explored an approach to social and economic development that addresses both the material and spiritual dimensions of human existence. The Preparation for Social Action programme draws on some of the textbooks developed by FUNDAEC in Colombia through its years of action research in addressing the educational needs of young people in rural areas. The programme aims at assisting youth to understand certain concepts, learn a range of relevant facts, and acquire certain qualities, attitudes, and skills that will

enable them to promote the well-being of their people in fields as diverse as health, education, the environment, secondary production, and community organization.

At the beginning of the Plan, the Preparation for Social Action programme was being implemented in nine countries, including **Cameroon, Colombia, Costa Rica, India, Kenya, Papua New Guinea, Uganda, and Zambia**. The programme was subsequently introduced in seven new countries—**Cambodia, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ecuador, Panama, the Philippines, and Vanuatu**. In eleven of these countries, Bahá’í-inspired development organizations advanced a process of learning about the implementation of the programme. Over the course of the Plan, the number of participants in the programme doubled from 1,500 to 3,000. By the end of the Plan, over 10,000 individuals had benefitted from participating in at least part of the



PSA students in Cambodia learn to make compost.

programme. From among these, more than 1,800 studied all of the available texts. Many of the young people who participated in the programme supported the work of expansion and consolidation while also engaging in initiatives aimed at fostering the social and economic advancement of local populations. Significant changes in the life of a community were observed in those places in which a large number of people have participated in the programme. The box discussing the experience in eastern Cameroon provides an apt illustration of the ways in which the programme can contribute to transformation within a population.

In addition to the significant progress achieved in relation to the Preparation for Social Action programme itself, nearly 1,700 people serving institutions and agencies of the Faith in 25 countries have studied a selection of the materials in a seminar setting. The concepts explored helped the participants gain a deeper appreciation for the coherence between the spiritual and material dimensions of the civilization-building enterprise in which the Bahá'í community is engaged. This helped them to refine their reading of the social reality of the clusters and regions in which they were contributing to the advancement of the community-building process.



Means of Communication and the Social Environment

In clusters where the community-building work advanced significantly, learning to use various means of communication to contribute to the gradual transformation of the culture of populations became increasingly more pressing. While sizeable numbers of people benefited directly from access to the Revelation, particularly through the core activities, the vast majority remained bereft of the gems contained within it. The powerful influence exerted on culture by forces operating in the social and political community—an influence which often contradicts the Bahá'í Teachings—could not be ignored. Within this context, media played a significant role in enhancing the processes already set in motion to transform the inner life of individuals and their social environment.

During the Plan, particularly in clusters serving as learning sites for the junior youth programme, possibilities emerged for those with particular interests in the area of media to learn about extending the influence of the training institute more broadly across their clusters by creating and sharing transformative media content, addressing themes relevant to the social reality. Although still modest in scale, noteworthy experience was gained in this sphere of learning. By the end of the Plan, the number of clusters where projects employing one or another type of media—such as community radio, theatre, blogs, and posters—were initiated had grown to 14, a handful of which were able to sustain a continuous process of learning. In addition to the initiatives taking place at the level of the cluster, in **Latin America** music writing workshops gathered friends from around the region to create relevant

Using Music to Create and Share Transformative Content

Organized annually since 2012, songwriting workshops held in **Chongón, Ecuador**, emerged out of a need to create music that is uplifting for junior youth and that can accompany the films developed by a media project that has been advancing in the cluster for about eight years. The gatherings bring together individuals from different parts of **Latin America** who over the course of one to two weeks explore the process of writing songs that can serve to extend and reinforce the influence of the junior youth programme on the lives of young people.

These workshops have sought to build in a growing number of friends the capacity to translate principles and concepts from the Bahá'í Teachings into themes, lyrics, and melodies for the songs. Themes for songs are identified through study of the Writings and guidance on the arts and social action, exploration of the texts of the junior youth programme, and group discussions based on the experience of the participants. The junior youth who are part of groups in Chongón and their families contribute to the process, for instance, by giving feedback on the music or sharing their thoughts and experience on various themes explored in the songs. Throughout the course of the workshop, those participating are helped to develop capacity in the technical aspects of music production.

A significant outcome of these gatherings is a growing collection of songs with lyrics that are simple yet profound, with melodies that evoke noble and praiseworthy sentiments in those who hear them. Friends across Latin America are able to freely draw on this music in their own personal efforts, for example, as a means of stimulating conversations with junior youth. The compositions are also used to enhance existing spaces that are created by the Bahá'í community, such as youth



Youth in Latin America share with the community music inspired by the junior youth programme.

Youth from Latin America in a workshop to create music inspired by concepts in the junior youth programme.



gatherings. In Chongón, the foundation laid by expansion and consolidation efforts as well as the media project working with film has enabled songs to be naturally woven into an existing pattern of community life. In this setting, they are shared on a large scale through concerts, weekly sessions with high school students, among families, and within junior youth groups. The regularity of workshops in the cluster has allowed those involved to observe, year after year, the growing influence the songs can have on the population.

songs for junior youth, helping to build capacity in a growing pool of individuals to create and disseminate meaningful content for the wider society. Collectively, these efforts offered glimpses of the potential that exists in employing communications media in the context of efforts to contribute to constructive change. In many cases, a keen receptivity was discerned on the part of the wider society to media content that explored themes of spiritual import. Various social spaces opened up to individuals involved to share their programming—including films, plays, and songs—and this was enthusiastically received.

The themes and messages the friends shared through various means of communication helped raise consciousness and stimulate reflection among a broader audience on certain ideas and concepts explored in the Writings and assisted in reinforcing the high moral standards fostered by the core activities. These initiatives also provided an avenue through which those passionate about the arts were able to channel their interests in service to their communities within the framework of the Plan.

Action Research in Agriculture

“The fundamental basis of the community”, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states, “is agriculture, tillage of the soil.”⁵⁶ It is the backbone of most rural economies and occupies over one-third of the world population on a full- or part-time basis. In **Africa**, large parts of which have faced critical food security issues for decades, a few Bahá’í-inspired organizations have engaged in action research efforts in the area of agriculture. Although relatively modest in size at present, the long-term aim of these efforts is to help build the capacity of local communities and institutions

Developing Capacity for Sustained Social Action in Eastern Cameroon

In 2008, the Emergence Foundation for Education and Development introduced the Preparation for Social Action programme in the eastern region of **Cameroon**—a part of the country where educational opportunities are sparse and government services as well as infrastructural development is limited. By the beginning of 2011, over 125 people in the region had studied all of the available materials of the programme, most of them in the clusters of **Batouri-Kette** and **Garoua-Mboulai-Ndokayo**. Many of these individuals drew on the capacities they developed through the programme to improve their own conditions and those of their families. In recent years, as the Foundation focused on assisting all who went through the programme to participate in the courses of the training institute, the participants' spirit of service was further strengthened, and they increasingly initiated longer-term projects aimed at contributing to the progress of their families and their entire communities.

By the end of the Plan, over 570 people in the region had studied all of the available materials of the programme, 180 of whom were from one sector in the Batouri-Kette cluster. The friends in the community of Bengue Tiko began to regularly

meet to discuss projects they could carry out to serve their community. They first decided to start a community forestry project to improve the environment in the area and to contribute to strengthening the local economy. They collaborated with the forestry officer and the local government to get the initiative started. As they continued to learn about the needs of their region, they came to understand that many illnesses in the area were being caused by malnutrition. With this knowledge, they refined their approach to the forestry project so that it would not only address environmental and economic concerns but also respond to the health needs of the population. They planted palm trees from which oil rich in vitamin A could be produced. In this way, the production of oil would provide economic opportunities, but also contribute to enriching the diet of the people of the region. In another case, during meetings that the Preparation for Social Action participants were regularly holding in the community of Kette, concerns about the education of children were repeatedly raised. The friends who had studied the Preparation for Social Action materials had learned about the education of young children through their engagement in the

programme, and they decided to start a primary school. They worked with the community and local leaders to establish the school and to overcome obstacles that arose in the process. In addition to these two initiatives, other groups of people who have participated in the Preparation for Social Action programme have initiated farming, agroforestry, pisciculture, and animal husbandry projects. To facilitate collaboration with government agencies, the friends involved in these activities have formed an association for all the promoters of community well-being in the region. This association supports their initiatives and helps them benefit from government resources.

The individuals who have participated in the programme, have contributed to changes at the level of culture. For example, they have fostered cooperation and unity among the various groups that inhabit the region and have helped the community put in place a pattern of consulting about its affairs and identify ways in which it can overcome challenges. In the community of Timangolo, there had been a long-standing conflict between farmers and cattle herders, as the cattle would roam through fields and damage crops planted by the farmers. During the community

meetings that were being organized by the Preparation for Social Action participants, the two groups were able to consult about the challenges they were facing and found a solution that was suitable for both. Now the cattle herders and farmers meet monthly to consult about common challenges and to find ways to contribute to the betterment of their community. Further, the study of the materials related to the education of children coupled with the study of Book 3 of the sequence of institute courses has raised consciousness about how members of a community can help tend to the spiritual and intellectual education of children. In addition to the

establishment of community-based schools mentioned above, such consciousness is being manifested in adjustments in family choices. For instance, it is now becoming less common for fathers to leave their children for extended periods of time to engage in work in the forest. They are instead finding ways to remain in the village so that they can be with their children and nurture their development. Another example of the community-building efforts of those who have participated in the programme can be seen in the response to the influx of refugees that entered the eastern region of Cameroon from the **Central African Republic** during the conflict in

that country in 2013 and 2014. They arose to assist in efforts to help the refugees. Many of the refugees have faced hunger and discrimination, and the participants of the Preparation for Social Action programme helped the refugees settle in their communities. One friend contributed to the settlement efforts by providing a group of 17 women in the refugee camp with a piece of land and teaching them the agricultural techniques that she had learned through the Preparation for Social Action programme. She then helped them set up a small-scale trading business and a savings system to improve their economic conditions.



PSA participants use locally made tools to cultivate their plots in Cameroon.

to participate effectively in a process of structured, scientific learning that can contribute to advancing the scientific and technological culture of farming populations and enabling farmers to sustain their families at a relative degree of prosperity.

In the **Central African Republic** and **Malawi**, this process of agricultural action research has revolved around Bahá'í-inspired community schools. Engaging in agricultural activities has helped the schools address some of the nutritional needs of their students with the harvest. In 8 clusters, core groups of people from select school communities studied materials of the Preparation for Social Action programme about food production on small farms and began experimental agricultural plots, located on school properties or in their vicinity. Those involved in the plots strove to identify production systems that were diverse, environmentally sustainable, and economically viable, and could be managed with local resources. The plots also served as a space in which certain social issues that influence production, such as competition promoted by the market, dependency on outside help, and gender roles, could be explored. In the two countries, nearly 200 people studied the materials on food production, and some 350 people became involved in the experimental plots. The influence of the plots on the production

systems of the villages was soon visible as farmers gradually adopted some of the methods being used on the experimental plots.

Select organizations engaged in the implementation of the Preparation for Social Action programme throughout Africa have also begun to systematize their efforts to follow the agricultural initiatives undertaken by the current and past participants of the programme. In **Uganda**, for example, a group of tutors of the Preparation for Social Action programme decided to consider itself as a typical Ugandan family, exploring questions that included obtaining higher yields while conserving soil fertility levels, addressing nutritional needs of the family, and learning to work together in unity and solidarity. In **Zambia**, a Preparation for Social Action group carried out a project with 26 families to establish backyard vegetable gardens in an urban setting. The project demonstrated how, by growing its own vegetables, a family could save enough money to cover the children's school fees.

In addition to such efforts at the local level, the organizations themselves in **Cameroon**, the **Central African Republic**, **Malawi**, and **Uganda** have been examining questions that affect the field of agriculture in the country as a whole. Through the establishment of national research plots, they began looking at



Agriculture research plot at a community school in Malawi.

questions such as water usage, preservation of genetic resources, soil conservation and fertility, community seed banks, associations of cash and food crops, and reviving crops that are traditional to the continent. In doing so, they are tapping into two main sources of knowledge: the field of modern science and the traditional knowledge systems of the farmers in each country.

The Development of Institutional Capacity

Every effort pursued in the sphere of social action, regardless of the level of complexity, must consider the question of institutional capacity. Even the smallest group of individuals, for example, needs to develop the ability to read reality, consult, devise plans, and carry out activities in a mode of learning. Gradually, some of these initiatives grow in complexity, which requires a corresponding increase in institutional capacity. Indeed, over the years, certain organizations have emerged that demonstrate capacity to implement multiple and relatively complex lines of action in an integrated way and to establish working relations with the agencies of the government and civil society. Generally referred to as “Bahá’í-inspired organizations”, such agencies strive to carry out their activities within the broad framework of the current series of Plans, receiving guidance from Bahá’í institutions and agencies, including the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá’í World Centre, and advancing their efforts in concert with other endeavours concerned with the spiritual and material progress of a population. This section primarily discusses this type of endeavour. Of course, there are many other development organizations with which individual Bahá’ís are associated, for instance in their professional work, that are not carrying out their activities in the context

of the work of the Bahá’í community. These are nevertheless influenced to some extent by the principles of the Faith and are playing their own important part in contributing to the betterment of society.

Overall, each of the past several Plans has seen a steady increase in the number of Bahá’í-inspired organizations at different stages of evolution. There is a wide range of these organizations operating in diverse areas of endeavour. A few examples include universities in **Bolivia**; health projects in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo** and **Uganda**; organizations working towards the empowerment of women in the **United States** and **India**; agencies in the area of microfinance in **El Salvador, Malawi, Nicaragua, and Nepal**; literacy endeavours in **Ghana**; efforts aimed at improving agricultural research and practice in **Chile** and various parts of **Africa**; radio stations in the **Philippines** and **Panama**; projects focused on using media for social transformation in **Canada** and **Ecuador**; agencies offering distance high school education on a wide scale in **Colombia** and **Honduras**; a teacher training college in **India**; organizations promoting the establishment of community schools throughout **Africa** and **Asia**; and organizations in **North America** and **Europe** that are making available the financial means needed by development agencies throughout the world. Some of these organizations, including the Colibri Learning Foundation in **Canada**, started operating during the previous Plan and have advanced significantly in their capacity to implement and refine a programme for community development. Other agencies had been established in earlier years and over the course of the last five years strengthened their pattern of functioning, reaching higher levels of complexity.

The Emergence of a Bahá'í-Inspired Organization at the Cluster Level in Canada

In **Vancouver, Canada**, the efforts of a group of friends to learn about building strong friendships with individuals from receptive populations, many of whom were newcomers to the country, generated many insights and questions. One obstacle that was identified was language. Inspired by similar initiatives carried out elsewhere, the friends started offering English classes for immigrants to help them develop the language skills needed to have conversations with people in their new home. These classes were called “English Corners”. It quickly became apparent, however, that mastering the basics of the language itself was not the main question that needed to be addressed. Rather, it was found that when participants engaged in discussions that were meaningful and uplifting, they were drawn together in bonds of friendship. Thus, the materials developed were organized around weekly themes related to some aspect of community life and included quotes and discussion questions. They were designed to be simple and adaptable enough that any willing facilitator could easily establish an “English Corner” in his or her particular context. As experience was gained, the friends involved came to recognize that these

conversations were connected to the evolution of culture. To address the social challenges faced by new immigrants, conversations needed to respond to questions related to systems of thought and knowledge, social relationships, world views, and attitudes towards the individual and the community. The focus of the core group of friends who had initiated the “English Corners”, then, became learning about how the participants in the groups could contribute to social transformation in their new country, overcoming both the pull of cultural isolation and the push to assimilate into mainstream culture.

In the initial stages, the process of learning about

“English Corners” was advanced through the dedicated efforts of volunteers. There was a broad network of facilitators and a small group of friends who were coordinating the initiative. By the end of 2012, there were 12 “English Corners” with 200 participants and 22 facilitators. The following year, it was deemed timely to put in place a more formal structure to foster the continued development of the “English Corners”. One of the individuals who had been involved from the beginning started to serve as the executive director of Colibri Learning Foundation. Although he had already been dedicating a substantial amount of time to supporting the



Participants of an “English Corner” organized by Colibri Learning Foundation in Canada.

Participants of an “English Corner” organized by Colibri Learning Foundation in Canada.



effort, assuming a more formal position allowed him to give his full attention to fostering its ongoing advancement. A board of directors comprising three individuals, including the executive director, was also formed. This board meets on a regular basis to clarify ideas and follow the learning process. The majority of the work of the Foundation continues to be carried out by a network of 90 committed volunteers who offer their time to facilitate the “English Corners”. A particular focus of the organization is learning about raising up facilitators from among the participants of the “English Corners”. Of the current facilitators, more than

60 of them were once “English Corner” participants themselves. The organization accompanies them and helps systematize the insights being generated through their experience. Since formalizing its efforts, Colibri Learning Foundation has been able to sustain at least 20 groups at a time, and at the end of 2015 there were some 340 people participating in the “English Corners”. The Foundation is continuing to refine the content of the programme based on the learning that is being gained.

Throughout the evolution of this process of learning, the relationship between the “English Corner” effort and the processes of expansion and consolidation has remained

strong. From the beginning, the friends focused their energies in a cluster in which a vibrant pattern of community life was already being established. At each stage in the development of the endeavour, those involved consulted closely with the institutions of the Faith to ensure that their activities served to reinforce and never to detract from the overall direction of the community-building process under way. At different points, it became necessary for them to clarify their understanding about the connection between social action and expansion and consolidation. Even though the initiative originally came about as a result of teaching efforts, those involved came to see that it had great social value in and of itself and could be pursued as a way of contributing to the social development of the community, engaging a wider segment of the population beyond the Bahá’ís and those interested in the Bahá’í Faith. At the same time, they recognized that it would be natural for some of the participants in the “English Corners” to become attracted to the Faith and to want to learn more about it. While offering this service to the community, the facilitators were ever ready to respond to opportunities to teach.

The Efforts of the Unity Foundation to Channel Financial Resources

The material means needed to sustain the majority of Bahá'í and Bahá'í-inspired social and economic development initiatives are generally elicited at the grassroots. As particular efforts continue to grow in complexity, they may eventually require financial resources from sources outside the local community. In this light, the Bahá'í community has been learning about making financial resources available to those Bahá'í-inspired organizations that have reached a certain level of growth and have demonstrated the capacity to manage finances effectively. During the Five Year Plan, about 10 funding agencies provided support to some 25 projects in around 20 different countries.

A noteworthy advance in recent years has been the increase in capacity of such agencies to describe the work of the recipient organizations in light of the conceptual underpinnings of their efforts in such a way as to secure needed funds as well as to contribute meaningfully to the discourse on development taking place in their own countries. Unity Foundation in **Luxembourg** serves as one such example.

Over the past five years, Unity Foundation has facilitated the flow of more than €3 million for some 10 Bahá'í-inspired projects in **Africa, Latin**

America, and Southeast Asia.

The particularly collaborative relationship that Unity Foundation has fostered with the government of Luxembourg over the years has allowed it to increase the amount of funding it can access through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the process of helping organizations prepare and submit proposals, the Foundation has taken steps to ensure that the integrity of each project is maintained and that the exigencies of donors do not unduly constrain the recipients' endeavours.

In recent years, Unity Foundation has organized

workshops in schools and universities, as well as film presentations and round table discussions in private and public locations in Luxembourg, to systematically learn about how it can raise awareness of concepts inspired by the teachings related to social and economic development. The Foundation is conscious that the conversations it is having with individuals and institutions can be seen as meaningful participation in the discourses on development in Luxembourg, and opportunities to learn from others' experiences and to help reorient perspectives.

An event to raise funds for projects supported by Unity Foundation.



The progress that occurred with respect to institutional capacity for social and economic development was not limited to an increase in the number of Bahá'í-inspired organizations. The ability of many Bahá'í-inspired organizations to participate in a process of society building was significantly enhanced as they strove to better understand and apply elements of the conceptual framework which guides the current series of global Plans and gained insights from a growing global body of knowledge about Bahá'í social and economic development. Spaces created at various levels for organizations engaged in similar areas of activity to reflect on their collective experience and to study relevant materials contributed significantly in this regard. In certain cases, networks of organizations were formed under the guidance of the Office of Social and Economic Development, which put in place regional or continental arrangements to support the systematization of learning and the development of institutional capacity. One such arrangement was the establishment of a secretariat for the network of organizations promoting community schools in **Africa** during the Five Year Plan that ended in 2011. Over the course of this Plan, the secretariat became increasingly familiar with the work of each organization that is a member of the network, and gradually began to take steps to assist them in strengthening various aspects of their operations.

The rapid progress made in the area of expansion and consolidation and the corresponding rise in instances of social action at the grassroots also had implications for the work of Bahá'í institutions. In several instances it impelled National Spiritual Assemblies to increase their familiarity with the learning process unfolding in their countries and to foster increasing levels of coherence among areas of activity. At

Riḍván 2013, National Spiritual Assemblies were invited by the Universal House of Justice to consider, in consultation with the Counsellors, how the concepts explored in the 2012 statement prepared by the Office of Social and Economic Development on the theme of social action could “help to enhance existing efforts of social action pursued under their auspices and raise consciousness of this significant dimension of Bahá'í endeavour”.⁵⁷ Several National Assemblies took steps in the last five years to keep abreast of the initiatives of Bahá'ís in this area and to raise consciousness about social action. For instance, in 2016, the National Spiritual Assembly of **Chile** hosted a gathering for several individuals and agencies involved in development efforts in the **Mapuche** region of the country to study the aforementioned document. In the **United States** and **India**, the National Assemblies have established desks, which operate under their supervision to assist them in following the learning that is occurring about social action in their respective countries.


The continued advances in the worldwide Bahá'í community's efforts in the area of development have called for the evolution of structures at the global level. In response to the vast opportunities emerging in this field, the Universal House of Justice established, during the Plan, a seven-member International Advisory Board to the Office of Social and Economic Development, which served to strengthen the capacity of the Office to facilitate and systematize a global process of learning about development.



Participating in the Discourses of Society



Individuals and groups from around the world participating in prevalent discourses at various levels.



The period from 2011 to 2016 witnessed significant developments in the Bahá'í community's participation in the prevalent discourses of society. This area of activity came to form the centrepiece of the work of external affairs on national and international stages, opening a range of new opportunities for the Bahá'í community to collaborate with others towards the progress of those discourses concerned with the betterment of society.

In its Ríḍván 2008 message, the Universal House of Justice observed that the Bahá'í community would “be drawn further and further into the life of the society” and that it would “be challenged to extend the process of systematic learning ... to encompass a growing range of human endeavours”. Two years later it wrote: “At this crucial point in the unfoldment of the Plan ... it seems appropriate that the friends everywhere would reflect on the nature of the contributions which their growing, vibrant communities will make to the material and spiritual progress of society. In this regard, it will prove fruitful to think in terms of two interconnected, mutually reinforcing areas of activity: involvement in social action and participation in the prevalent discourses of society.”⁵⁸ Since that time, the guidance of the House of Justice has gradually opened the way for the Bahá'í community to see the coherence between its own growth and evolution and its involvement in the life of the wider society.

The capacity of the Bahá'í community to participate effectively in prevalent discourses strengthened markedly during the Five Year Plan. The House of Justice noted in its Ríḍván 2013 message that “an especially notable feature of the last twelve months has been the frequency with which the Bahá'í community is being identified, in a wide variety of contexts,

with efforts to bring about the betterment of society in collaboration with like-minded people.” It went on to explain that “from the international arena to the grassroots of village life, leaders of thought in all kinds of settings have expressed their awareness that not only do Bahá'ís have the welfare of humanity at heart, but they possess a cogent conception of what needs to be accomplished and effective means for realizing their aspirations.”

Efforts to contribute to discourses occurred at many levels of society. Individual Bahá'ís, for instance, continued to offer relevant insights from the Teachings in the course of the practice of their professions and in the diverse social settings in which they were naturally present. Those engaged in community-building activities in neighbourhoods and villages found themselves drawn into discussions of issues relevant to the lives of their fellow inhabitants. Furthermore, some Bahá'í-inspired agencies participated in discourses relevant to their fields, at times bringing them into contact with civil society organizations and government institutions. This overview, however, concerns itself with the Bahá'í community's efforts at the national and international levels, which are pursued respectively by National Spiritual Assemblies' Offices of External Affairs and the Bahá'í International Community (BIC).

During the past five years, the House of Justice encouraged National Assemblies to view external affairs endeavours as a way to contribute to critical discourses in society. At the national level, a number of external affairs offices energetically pursued their work with this heightened consciousness, and new experience started to accumulate. In 2013, the House of Justice announced the establishment of the Office of Public Discourse at the Bahá'í World Centre,

The Bahá'í World News Service

Since the early twentieth century, a number of Bahá'í publications have provided news at the national and international levels, *Star of the West*, *Bahá'í News*, *The Bahá'í World*, and the *Bahá'í International News Service* being notable examples. The Bahá'í World News Service was established in 2000 as an official, online source of newsworthy developments in the international Bahá'í community.

Over the past several years, the News Service has covered a number of themes aligned with discourses in which national and international external affairs agencies, as well as Bahá'í-inspired organizations and academic chairs, have been participating. Themes explored in news stories include: the role of religion in society, the role of youth in society, migration and integration, the environment, development, gender equality,

governance, processes leading towards peace, and Houses of Worship. In addition, the Bahá'í World News Service published stories related to

the arts, media, and culture; the persecution of Bahá'ís in **Iran** and other countries; and major developments in the Bahá'í community.



charged with assisting national communities to build capacity for the external affairs work and systematizing the growing body of experience in this area.

In addition to participation in the discourses of society, several interrelated areas of action constituting the work of external affairs came into sharper focus and were refined in recent years. These include relationships with civil society and government, such as the specialized work of defence of the Bahá'í community from persecution, relations with the media, and strengthening the official Bahá'í presence on the Web. A new framework governing external affairs activities gradually crystallized and was articulated in a document dated 20 October 2014. Referring to that document, the House of Justice wrote in its Ríḍván 2015 message: “External affairs work at the national level has gained markedly in effectiveness and become increasingly systematic, further stimulated by the release of a document, sent to National Spiritual Assemblies six months ago, which draws on the considerable experience generated over the last two decades and provides an expanded framework for developing these endeavours in the future.”

In that same Ríḍván message, the House of Justice announced the establishment of two new Offices of the Bahá'í International Community, in **Addis Ababa, Ethiopia**, and **Jakarta, Indonesia**. It wrote that this major development served to broaden “the opportunities for the perspectives of the Cause to be offered at the international level in Africa and Southeast Asia”.

Participation in Discourses at the National and International Levels

As participation of the Bahá'í community in the prevalent discourses of society came to form the principal work of external affairs, a global process of systematic learning was set in motion that was further enhanced with the establishment of the Office of Public Discourse. Throughout the history of the Cause, individual Bahá'ís as well as the institutions and agencies of the Faith had participated in discourses, at times having a palpable effect. Yet in many respects, recent efforts reflected new patterns of thought and action that had emerged out of the Bahá'í community's endeavours in the current series of global Plans.

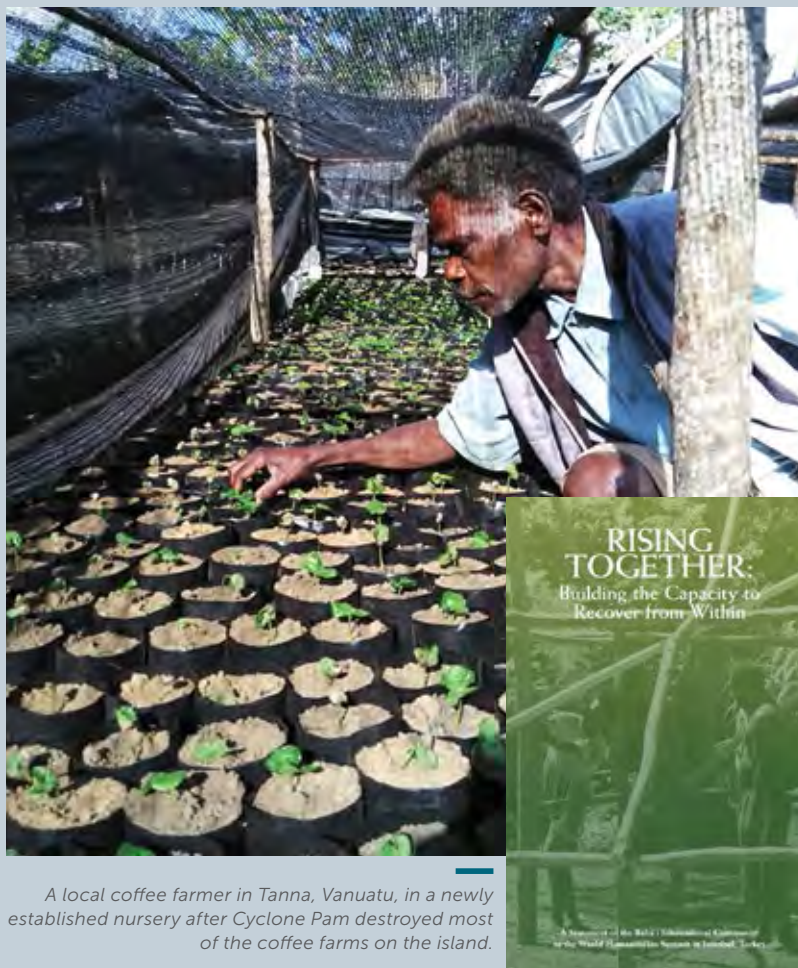
While the steps taken to advance participation in discourses were for the most part nascent and modest in the past five years, initial stirrings were nonetheless promising. Offices of the Bahá'í International Community and national external affairs agencies increasingly operated in a methodical and systematic fashion. A mode of learning came to characterize the efforts of more and more Offices, informed by an appreciation of the organic nature of the work. Attention was given to the ability of national communities to understand and analyse the forces and processes shaping their societies. This capacity proved especially important in the context of a rapidly shifting social, political, and economic landscape. Some Offices began to familiarize themselves with the arenas in which public opinion and policy are shaped as well as with the various actors influencing the evolution of thought. Furthermore, Offices refined their ability to introduce the Faith in a wide range of settings and describe the community and its activities in an accessible manner and with ever greater clarity. While the

Rising Together: Building the Capacity to Recover from Within

A statement by the Bahá'í International Community, titled “Rising Together: Building the Capacity to Recover from Within”, was published for the United Nations’ first World Humanitarian Summit held on 23 and 24 May 2016 in **Istanbul, Turkey**. This publication represented a substantial development in the Bahá'í community’s efforts to offer contributions that articulate the growing insights from decades of work in its distinctive community-building activities unfolding around the world.

The document highlights how Bahá'í endeavours at the grassroots aimed at raising capacity within populations to take charge of their own development have endowed communities with greater resilience in the face of natural disasters. This rising capacity has allowed them to recover from crises and continue to contribute to the collective progress of their people.

The statement introduced relevant Bahá'í principles, drew on various national communities’ experiences recovering from natural disasters—among which were **Haiti, India, Myanmar, Nepal, the Philippines, and Togo**—and integrated specialized knowledge of Bahá'ís involved in international relief work. It highlighted lessons learned and key capacities that can enhance



A local coffee farmer in Tanna, Vanuatu, in a newly established nursery after Cyclone Pam destroyed most of the coffee farms on the island.

a community’s resilience in times of natural disaster, which include:

- Bahá'í communities around the globe are seeing growing numbers of people taking charge of their own spiritual, social, and material development, building new patterns of collective life, and viewing themselves as protagonists in the development of society.

And when natural disasters strike, communities such as these are more capable of taking meaningful and effective steps to respond and recover. Indeed, experience has shown that people can exhibit remarkable resilience, selflessness, resourcefulness, and creativity in such times.

- Taking steps in this direction requires the development of capacities in a range of

areas. Some will pertain primarily to intellectual, technical, and scientific pursuits. Others will be more social in nature, focused on strengthening and refining patterns of interaction, association, and relationship among inhabitants. Still others will focus on the moral and normative aspects of collective life, drawing on the religious heritage of humankind to address foundational issues of meaning, higher motivation, and moral purpose. Due attention must be given to the development of all these capacities, if progress is to continue apace and pitfalls such as narrow materialism, social fragmentation, selfishness, and passivity are to be avoided.

- Although the above efforts are not focused on response or recovery per se, the abilities they strengthen and patterns of behaviour they foster have a profound impact in times of natural disaster. The capacity to organize large numbers into coordinated action provides one clear example. As community-building efforts grow to the point where hundreds of inhabitants are supporting the participation of thousands of their fellow residents, increasingly sophisticated systems of support and communication emerge to manage the growing complexity. Such structures greatly enhance

a community's ability to undertake large-scale response and reconstruction efforts. Organizational skills such as the ability to maintain basic statistics, to plan based on resources, and to operate in a mode of learning—characterized by regular and ongoing reflection on efforts undertaken, results seen, and adjustments needed—similarly allow efforts to expand as needed in scale and scope. And experience collaborating with institutions of government—which arises naturally as community-building efforts exert growing influence in an area—can be invaluable in deploying external resources efficiently and effectively.

- Around the world, individuals are also working to strengthen the devotional character of their communities. Reaching out to neighbours of all backgrounds, they are creating, in the intimate setting of the home, spaces for shared worship, exploration of the deeper meaning of life, and purposeful discussion of issues of common concern. Such explicitly spiritual objectives might seem tangential to traditional humanitarian concerns. Yet in times of natural disaster, people the world over grapple with existential questions at the most fundamental levels. And communities where people worship together in

a variety of settings, make a habit of visiting one another in their homes, and regularly engage in conversations of significance are far better equipped to remain hopeful, to see meaning, and to persevere and recover when disasters occur. In short, communities in which social ties are strong and spiritual roots run deep are more resilient in the face of disaster.

- A growing body of experience demonstrates that the qualities and capacities that make a community resilient in times of disaster also make it strong and vibrant in times of calm. This is critically important to the international community, as it seeks to “transcend the humanitarian-development divide” and “set aside such artificial institutional labels as ‘development’ or ‘humanitarian’”.⁵⁹ Being of tangible service to others, working in collaboration towards worthy ends, exercising personal abilities in pursuit of the common good—factors such as these are intrinsic sources of human upliftment and satisfaction.

Bahá'í International Community Office at the United Nations and some national communities had been participating in discourses for decades, other Bahá'í International Community Offices and national external affairs agencies also found themselves ready to engage in one or more discourses.

The guidance of the Universal House of Justice and the accumulating experience at the national and international levels enhanced the understanding of those involved about the nature and purpose of participation in discourses. It became clear that these efforts should not be regarded as opportunities to teach the Faith nor as public relations or academic exercises. Another lesson was to avoid transient issues and discussions that are so polarized and divisive as to preclude the possibility of consensus. Instead, emphasis was placed on seeking out those broad themes which have a profound bearing on human well-being. Energies were directed towards engaging in genuine conversations in a widening range of social arenas and working shoulder to shoulder with like-minded organizations and individuals. Where possible, the friends sought to stimulate consultative processes and to draw out underlying principles around which agreement and mutual understanding could be built. Especially promising were initiatives by the Bahá'í community to create new social spaces characterized by substantive conversations and a cooperative, collaborative spirit.

The Office of Public Discourse closely followed some thirty national communities as they systematically engaged in the discourses of their societies. These efforts often began with external affairs offices surveying the landscape of their respective countries and learning to enter the various forums on the national stage where important

issues were being discussed. Simultaneously, attention was given to nurturing relationships with a range of social actors, from civil servants to representatives of non-governmental and faith-based organizations. Over the course of several years, a body of knowledge began to accrue across the Bahá'í world about a number of critical themes: migration and integration in **Germany**, religious co-existence in **Tunisia**, peace and justice in societies in transition in **Colombia**, the environment and climate change in the **United States**, governance in **Spain**, the equality of women and men in **Australia** and **Kazakhstan**, the role of religion in the public sphere in **Canada**, social and economic development in **Brazil**, and youth in **Malaysia**, among many others. As efforts advanced, the Bahá'í World News Service proved a valuable instrument for sharing developments with the world and capturing some of the emerging contributions of the Bahá'í community to contemporary thought.

At the international level, the Bahá'í International Community witnessed significant strides in its efforts to contribute to discourses within the UN system and forums associated with the African Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the European Union, the Council of Europe, and other supranational groupings. The Bahá'í International Community participated in a wide range of important discourses, among which were the equality of women and men, peace and security, migration, humanitarian relief, the role of religion in society, development, and global citizenship education. Notably, its contributions were both at the level of ideas and in terms of process. With respect to the latter, the Bahá'í International Community, through the various meetings and seminars it convened and facilitated, was able to consolidate its reputation as an organization that creates environments and promotes attitudes

The Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity

Students from Kazakhstan (left) and Azerbaijan (right) at university seminars offered by the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity.



Seminars for Undergraduate Students, Graduate Students, and Young Professionals

The seminars for undergraduate students offered by the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity aim to prepare and accompany young Bahá'ís to assume ownership of their education and acquire the kind of knowledge that will help them live fruitful and productive lives of service. During the period in review, the annual number of seminars rose from 21 in 2011 to 39 in 2016, serving youth from more than 60 countries. Over 4,000 young adults have participated in at least the first year of the seminars, where they have had an opportunity to review together the efforts being undertaken by the Bahá'í community, explore the fundamental concepts and principles that sustain its work, and reflect on ways to

raise their own capacity to contribute to the advancement of civilization.

The seminar for university graduates and young professionals, first offered in **North America** in 2008, has been extended over the past five years to **Australasia, Europe, Latin America, and South and Southeast Asia**. To date, over 700 individuals have taken part. The seminar allows for a profound exploration of the Bahá'í community's approach to participating in the discourses of society and of the core concepts that inform its efforts to make a constructive contribution in a range of areas.

Areas of Inquiry

Parallel to its efforts to build capacity in younger generations

to participate effectively in the discourses of society, and as a continuation of its earlier work to explore how to contribute to contemporary discourses, in 2013 the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity initiated a line of action conceived of as 'areas of inquiry'. Through this initiative, the Institute aims to develop capacity to describe and examine—in the light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation—social phenomena that are pressing and crucial to the life of humanity. It has been working with small groups of collaborators over the past several years to begin to analyse the evolution of thought around themes relevant to the global movement of populations and peace and justice in societies in transition. In areas where the work has advanced, the Institute has sought to collaborate with like-minded individuals and institutions in the exploration of themes such as the role of religion in migration.

and approaches that are conducive to constructive dialogue.

The endeavours of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity resulted in still other noteworthy advancements. The Institute is dedicated to learning about enhancing the capacity of individuals and groups to contribute to discourses in society concerned with the betterment of humanity. It offers undergraduate and graduate seminars in a growing number of countries around the world and seeks to learn about methods, approaches, and instruments which can best be employed to contribute to a range of contemporary discourses.

The seminars of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity had a notable impact on the young people who participated in them. The rise in understanding about the profound aims of the Faith among these youth and young adults found expression in their commitment to the community-building activities unfolding at the grassroots as well as efforts to participate in the discourses they encountered in various settings.



A BIC representative at a panel on community resilience in the face of climate-driven extreme events.

Strengthening the Official Bahá'í Presence on the Web

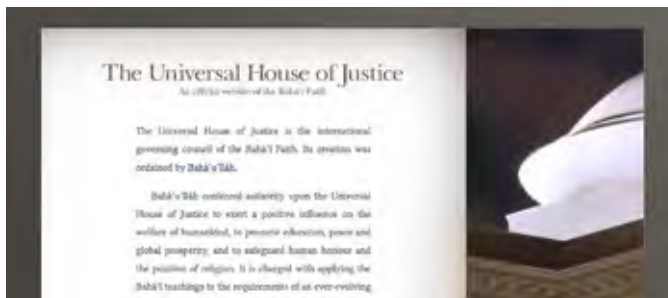
From the launch of a number of international websites to the efflorescence across the globe of national websites, the Bahá'í community witnessed a leap forward in its capacity to articulate its identity, aims, and purpose to the public. Perhaps even more significant than the launching of new official websites, however, was the advance in understanding that they reflected.

At the international level, the development of a new version of the Bahai.org website provided the world with a greatly expanded authoritative presentation of the Faith in English. The website strives to convey the breadth and vision of the Cause, its nature and aims, and the growing range of endeavours of the Bahá'í community across the planet, allowing for a profound exploration of Bahá'í concepts. Subsequently, the new site was made available in several other major languages covering a substantial portion of the world's population, namely Arabic, Chinese, French, Persian, Russian, and Spanish, and work also began on Hindi and Portuguese translations.

A significantly revised presentation of the Bahá'í Reference Library—the authoritative online source of Bahá'í writings—was launched, including a new section containing messages of the Universal House of Justice. Further, the website universalhouseofjustice.bahai.org was launched in 2014 as the official source of information regarding the House of Justice for the public. With the establishment of the additional Offices in **Ethiopia** and **Indonesia**, the Bahá'í International Community also released a new website that captures the scope of its presence on the international and continental stages as well as the range of its contributions to some of the most critical themes with which humanity is grappling.

Developments at the international level were complemented by efforts by many national communities to strengthen their official presence on the Web, resulting in over 40 new national websites. At the heart of these efforts was a desire to establish an online presence coherent with the broad endeavours unfolding in the Bahá'í world. The increasing number of sites, drawing on and complementing Bahai.org, allowed for the united, purposeful, and diverse nature of Bahá'í communities around the world to be reflected through the medium of the Web. In some areas of the world, such as the **Arab** region, the establishment of national websites marked the first public presentation of the Cause.

The development of national websites came to be regarded as an ongoing endeavour and an important step in the Bahá'í community's evolving conversation with its fellow citizens about the betterment of the world. These efforts also strengthened the capacity in national communities to undertake the work of external affairs by enhancing the ability to read society and explain to the general public, in accessible and dignified language, relevant global concepts from the Teachings.



Relationships with Civil Society, Government, and the Media

A fundamental principle of the Faith is for Bahá'ís to “obey and be the well-wishers of the governments of the land”.⁶⁰ Building relationships with governments and with prominent groups and individuals in society has been an important area of action to which the Head of the Faith has historically given particular attention. This work has also allowed for the light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation to be cast into those settings where decisions about the well-being of whole populations are made. It has furthermore enabled the Bahá'í community to familiarize authorities at different levels with the nature and purpose of the Cause, dispel possible misperceptions and, when circumstances have demanded it, to defend the community from persecution.

The past five years witnessed a continuation of efforts to establish and strengthen relationships with civil society and government. Such exertions in diverse settings contributed to and benefited from the growing experience with participation in the discourses of society. An increasing number of external affairs agencies, therefore, began to cultivate relationships not only to make known the identity and noble aims of the Faith but also to better position the community to lend impetus to the constructive processes unfolding in their societies. The relationships that were forged through collaborative endeavours also

assisted Bahá'í communities to gain a richer and more accurate reading of their respective societies, learning from those with whom they interacted and engaging in dialogue with them.

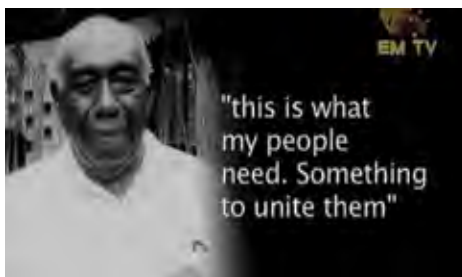
The continuing persecution of the Bahá'ís in **Iran**—where state-sponsored, systematic repression aimed at eradicating the Bahá'í community as a viable entity in that country has persisted as an official policy of the government for nearly four decades—called for systematic action in their defence principally on the part of the Bahá'í International Community and external affairs agencies of selected National Assemblies. This work was focused on bringing their ongoing plight, in its manifold dimensions, to the attention of the international community, national governments, a broad range of organizations of civil society, and the media. In the course of the period under review, despite the sustained and at times intensified persecution of the Bahá'í community, a remarkable shift became discernible in the attitudes and understanding of a number of prominent Iranian figures, including intellectuals, journalists, activists, filmmakers, artists, and even a few clerics. Increasing numbers came to appreciate that the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran represents a litmus test of the condition of that society and its ability to safeguard the rights of every citizen. Some among these



Panelists at an event near Frankfurt, Germany, titled “Exclusion in Germany: What Role Does Media Play.”

individuals produced documentary films, made public statements, wrote articles, or created works of art in support of the Bahá'ís in their country and in solidarity with their extraordinary courage.

With respect to interactions with journalists and the media, the activities of the Faith continued to have widespread coverage on a range of themes, such as celebrations, the construction of Houses of Worship, and the persecution of the Bahá'í community in Iran. Noteworthy was the process of learning set in motion in some national communities to identify sections of the media which share a common concern for the well-being of humanity. In **Tunisia**, for example, representatives of the Bahá'í community participated, on more than one occasion, in a major national television programme on the future of Tunisian society. Indeed, a number of Offices of External Affairs, such as in **Germany** and the **United Kingdom**, began to gain insights about cultivating relations with journalists and others in the media landscape through an ongoing exploration of themes of mutual interest. Especially promising were initial efforts to explore with some journalists how communications media



A national television channel in Papua New Guinea airing a special episode on the Bahá'í Faith, its arrival to the country, and the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran.

can contribute to the enrichment of human understanding and the betterment of society.



A representative of the Tunisian Bahá'í community on a panel discussing the future of the country in a national television show.

* * *

In its 2 March 2013 letter to the Bahá'ís of **Iran**, the Universal House of Justice wrote that “Bahá'ís do not believe the transformation ... envisioned will come about exclusively through their own efforts.” It went on to state that “every nation and every group—indeed, every individual—will, to a greater or lesser degree, contribute to the emergence of the world civilization towards which humanity is irresistibly moving.” Conscious of this reality, the Bahá'í International Community and National Assemblies' Offices of External Affairs conceptualized their work principally in terms of participation in the prevalent discourses of society to lend impetus to constructive processes in the world and the movement towards peace.

From this viewpoint, the period between 2011 and 2016 was marked by substantial developments in the external affairs work: a framework for external affairs endeavours was crystallized, new organizational arrangements emerged, and a rich body of experience continued to accrue. The capacity developed as a result better equips the Bahá'í community for the increasing complexity and growing challenges that confront humanity in the years ahead.



Developments at the Bahá'í World Centre

Visitors enjoying their walk down the terraces during open day.



The progress that has been made by Bahá'ís in their community-building efforts throughout the world has been paralleled by developments at the Bahá'í World Centre and by the deepening of the bonds that connect the hearts of all believers to the spiritual and administrative centre of their Faith. Pilgrims from a widening array of backgrounds made their way to the Holy Land to visit the Holy Shrines as an act of worship; delegates representing the diversity of the Bahá'í world came to participate in the Eleventh International Bahá'í Convention; the Sacred Texts became more widely accessible; and an increasing number of friends were invited to share their experience, thoughts, and insights in specific fields in response to the growing complexity of the administrative activity of the Bahá'í World Centre.

Eleventh International Bahá'í Convention

The Eleventh International Bahá'í Convention marked the fiftieth anniversary of the inaugural Convention in 1963 at which the first Universal House of Justice was elected. On the first day of the Convention, which took place from 29 April to 2 May 2013 in Haifa, Israel, delegates from around the world cast their ballots to elect the nine members of the Supreme Body of the Bahá'í Faith.

Nearly 1,100 delegates from 157 National Spiritual Assemblies came in person to the Convention, while those unable to be present voted by absentee ballot. Of the potential 1,539 ballots, 1,537 were cast, or 99.9%, a remarkable achievement considering the diversity of means and circumstances of the electors. Coming from Bahá'í communities as varied as urban centres or remote island villages, the delegates ranged in age from 22 to 86; 41.3% of them were women. The absence of the representatives of the Bahá'í community of **Iran**—where the Bahá'í

community faces intense persecution and its administration has been dissolved—was again keenly felt. Similar to previous International Conventions, a bouquet of red roses was placed at the front of the stage for the duration of the Convention, a visible reminder throughout the proceedings of the courage and sacrifice of these dear friends.

After the reading of the 2013 Ridván message of the Universal House of Justice, the delegates focused their deliberations on the work before the Bahá'í community as it strives to contribute to the spiritual and material advancement of civilization. They also gained valuable insights from the documentary film, *Frontiers of Learning*, which portrayed the experience being gained in the process of community building in four clusters around the world; a document entitled *Insights from the Frontiers of Learning* prepared by the International Teaching Centre was also distributed at the Convention. Those in attendance drew from all these sources when sharing their thoughts, experiences, and insights as part of a global learning process. As the delegates returned to their respective countries, all took heart from the words of the Universal House of Justice which observed that the Bahá'í community was “moving steadily forward, advancing in understanding, eager to acquire insights from experience, ready to take on new tasks ... wholly dedicated to the fulfilment of its mission”.⁶¹



A delegate casts her vote in the election of the Universal House of Justice.

Protection, Conservation, and Development of the Bahá'í Holy Places

The development of Bahjí and the protection of the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, the Most Holy Shrine in the Bahá'í world, was further enhanced through the construction of extensive boundary walls around the north-western and south-eastern perimeters, securing the Sacred Spot and clearly marking the boundaries of the land.

In November 2014, the Universal House of Justice announced that a major property adjacent to the main terrace of the Shrine of the Báb had been purchased, marking the culmination of a process that began over sixty years ago at the direction of Shoghi Effendi. Renovations to the building that stands on the land are under way to create a facility that will serve the needs of pilgrims.

In 2011, Junayn Garden, a site north of Bahjí that Bahá'u'lláh visited on occasion, was opened to visitors, after the meticulous

restoration of the small farmhouse located there and the development of its gardens and orchards. Boundary walls with decorative metal panels and gates at this site, and at the Riḍván Garden, now embellish these Holy Sites and provide additional security.

In Haifa, the House of the Master underwent full restoration—the first comprehensive renovation since the construction of the House in 1908. Some of the features of the building that had been modified over the decades were restored to their original condition, and rooms were furnished to reflect their original appearance and use. In addition, the car and carriage occasionally used by the Master during His Ministry were professionally restored and put on display in befitting climate-controlled areas—the car at the House of the Master and the carriage at the House of 'Abdu'lláh Páshá.

Some thirty years after its inauguration, the Seat of the Universal House of Justice underwent a major renovation of its interior. Spaces frequented by pilgrims and visitors and used for administrative functions were



The House of the Master.

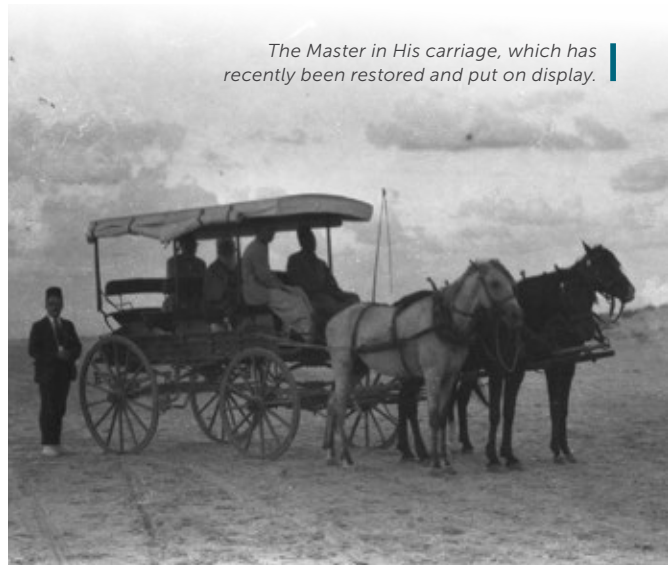
refreshed and beautified, and technical and other modifications, including increasing its energy efficiency, were made to ensure that the building meets both current and future needs. In addition, the project included major repairs to the retaining wall on the south side of the building.

Finally, a new facility was constructed on the south-east portion of the property at Bahjí to serve the administrative and maintenance needs of that Holy Place and its environs, and to provide space for community activities for the staff serving in ‘Akká.

Sacred Texts

During the period under review, much emphasis was placed on further systematizing the work to index and catalogue the content of the Sacred Texts of the Central Figures as well as the letters written by and on behalf of Shoghi Effendi. To this end, the Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh and the Báb, the Writings and utterances of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and the letters of Shoghi Effendi have, for the most part, been digitized and rendered electronically searchable. A sizeable group of highly dedicated volunteers were mobilized to provide short abstracts of these Writings, utterances, and letters to ensure that over the coming years the essential content and unique themes of the entire Revelation are, to the extent possible, accessible in English.

A complementary line of action was to increase substantially the number of provisional translations of the Writings in English which, while valuable in themselves, also serve as a key resource for accelerating the production of new authorized translations. Efforts in this regard gained momentum over the past few years, which in turn generated much experience in how to enhance the quality of translations produced



The Master in His carriage, which has recently been restored and put on display.

by a widening pool of contributors devoted to this service. The developments in both the abstracting and translation work, moreover, were major factors in enabling the Universal House of Justice to improve the pace at which volumes of the Writings are published by the Bahá’í World Centre. Mindful of Shoghi Effendi’s observation that the content of *Some Answered Questions* is “essential for grasping the significance and implications of the Bahá’í Revelation”,⁶² it was republished with a new translation in 2014. Another book prepared for publication was *Days of Remembrance: Selections from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh for Bahá’í Holy Days*. It is anticipated, moreover, that additional volumes of the Writings of the Central Figures will be published over the course of the Five Year Plan commencing in 2016. Finally, significant steps were taken that should result in increasing the rate at which Tablets are made available on the Bahá’í Reference Library, both in the original languages and in English translation.

Unveiling of a road sign in Arabic, English, and Hebrew for the UNESCO Square for Tolerance and Peace in Haifa, Israel, on 29 May 2011, in the presence of prominent guests including the Archbishop of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church for the North of Israel, the Director-General of UNESCO, and the Mayor of Haifa.



Inauguration of the UNESCO Square for Tolerance and Peace

In recent years, Haifa has more firmly established its reputation as one of the region's most ethnically and religiously diverse cities, including among its residents Jews, Christians, Muslims, Druze, and Bahá'ís. In this spirit, on 29 May 2011, a special ceremony was held in the Bahá'í gardens to inaugurate the UNESCO Square for Tolerance and Peace, situated at the point where Haifa's historic German Templer Colony meets the terraced gardens of the Shrine of the Báb. This followed the inscription, in July 2008, of the Shrines of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb, together with the surrounding buildings and gardens, on the UNESCO World Heritage List as sites of

“outstanding universal value”. At the ceremony, Ms. Irina Bokova, the Director-General of UNESCO, said, “I am more than convinced that the only ways to build a more peaceful and equitable world are through education and dialogue—to deepen understanding, to strengthen mutual respect, and to prepare the ground for reconciliation.”

Over the next year, the Square was developed through the addition of upgraded stonework and decorative floral plantings in the centre of its traffic circle. In 2012, at an event to mark the completion of this work, hosted by the Bahá'í World Centre in collaboration with the Haifa Municipality and the Beit Hagefen Arab-

Jewish Cultural Center, some 250 students from various high schools around Haifa came together at Beit Hagefen to explore the concept of co-existence and the theme of Haifa as a shared city. The young people then participated in a march towards the UNESCO Square for Tolerance and Peace, led by the Mayor of Haifa, a representative from Beit Hagefen, and a representative from the Bahá'í World Centre. The march ended with the symbolic release of doves representing Haifa's international stature as the City of Peace.

Bahá'í Pilgrimage

Bahá'í pilgrimage is simple yet profound; its ultimate aim is to provide the believers with the opportunity to pay homage to the Manifestations of God for this age, and to supplicate at Their Shrines. As the pilgrims meditate in the precincts hallowed by the footsteps, tribulations, and triumphs of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and the Guardian, each heart, moved with tenderness and love, recognizes its spiritual home. They undertake this journey with Bahá'ís from many cultures and countries around the world and enjoy precious moments of joyful fellowship together. Shoghi Effendi often pointed out that pilgrims are the stream of life-blood flowing in and out of the heart of the Faith. They



Pilgrims from Puerto Rico who came as part of a country group.



A group of pilgrims from India.

bring with them news of their activities and return home, after their short but intensive sojourn in the Holy Land, reinvigorated by the experience, keen to rededicate themselves to service to humanity, and eager to share with family and friends the joy that has filled their hearts.

For many, pilgrimage to the Holy Land is a once in a lifetime journey. To reinforce this unforgettable experience, enhancements continue to be made to the programme of pilgrimage. In the House of the Master, pilgrims now visit the tea room of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the *bírúní* reception area, and the room occupied by Shoghi Effendi as a youth; a recording of the voice of the Master has been restored and is played during their visit; and they view the car occasionally used by the Master that is displayed there. At the House of ‘Abdu’lláh Páshá, they also have the opportunity to see the carriage He sometimes used. In the International Archives Building, where the pilgrims view with reverence the sacred relics so carefully collected and preserved by the Guardian, significant modifications have been made to the displays and to the design of decorative objects, augmenting the beauty and dignity of the setting in which these precious artefacts are presented.

During the Five Year Plan, over 15,000 individuals were lovingly invited by the Universal House of Justice to come for pilgrimage. Changes continue to be made

to facilitate the application process so that ever more Bahá’ís, from all walks of life, benefit from the bounties of pilgrimage to the Holy Shrines. As of 2011, there is no longer a waiting list for pilgrimage; currently believers who submit a request may receive pilgrimage dates within a few months. The group pilgrimage programme, established in 2007 by the Universal House of Justice to facilitate pilgrimage for those who may find it difficult to come on their own, was expanded from 30 countries in 2010 to more than 60 in 2016. As part of such a group, believers may take advantage of reduced travel and accommodation costs, receive assistance in obtaining visas and travel documents, and be accompanied by one or two experienced friends from their country.



Friends from Macau on pilgrimage as a group.

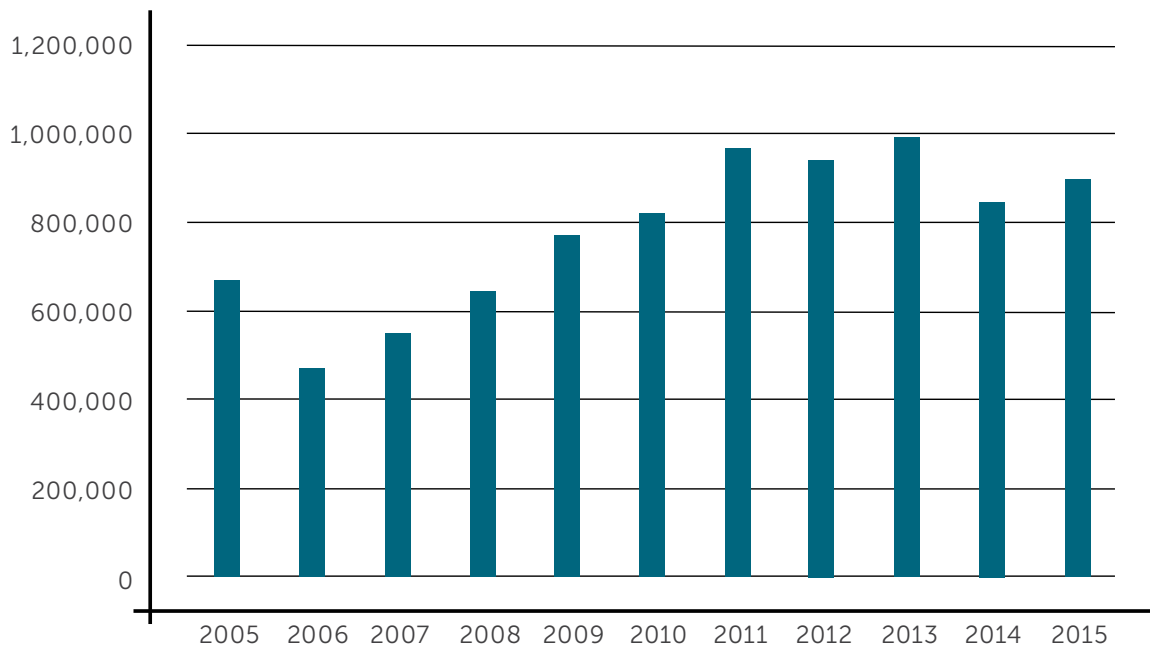
The Flow of Visitors to the Gardens

The Holy Places and their surrounding gardens belong to all of humanity. Bahá'ís view themselves as the trustees of these sites, and efforts are made to continue to learn how to welcome increasing numbers of visitors. The terraced gardens in Haifa are already one of the most visited sites in Israel, having welcomed more than 10 million people since their inauguration in the summer of 2001. These visitors come from a wide range of backgrounds: from ministers of governments, diplomats, and Supreme Court judges, to special interest groups, university students, and school children. Over the past five years, almost half a million people participated in more than 10,000 guided tours that have been offered at the Bahá'í World Centre.



Visitors enjoying the view of the Shrine of the Báb on Mount Carmel.

Annual Number of Visitors to the Bahá'í Gardens in Haifa and 'Akká



Open Day



Visitors enjoying the view of the Shrine of the Báb on Mount Carmel.

Special open days have been organized since 2009 with the overall aim of making the Shrines and surrounding gardens available to an increasing number of visitors. While the first open days were organized to mark specific milestones, since 2013 open days have been scheduled to occur when expected attendance is highest, such as holiday periods, an arrangement that allows large numbers to circulate easily throughout the gardens and take in their peaceful atmosphere. On these occasions, which generally take place twice a year, the upper terraces are opened to the public, and visitors are allowed to walk about freely without taking part in a guided tour. The guests are warmly welcomed, and local guides who speak Arabic, Hebrew, and Russian, as well as volunteers from the Bahá'í World Centre, are available at various points on the terraces to answer questions and provide



Volunteers serving water to the visitors.

general information. Visitors also have the opportunity to watch an informational film on the Bahá'í Faith. The success of these occasions is evident in the radiant and happy faces of all those who come to enjoy the tranquillity of the Shrines and the beauty of the gardens.



Notes

- ¹ Riḍván 2010 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.
- ² Message dated 29 December 2015 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.
- ³ Message dated 29 December 2015.
- ⁴ Message dated 29 January 2014 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'í youth in the Cradle of the Faith.
- ⁵ Message dated 29 December 2015.
- ⁶ Message dated 29 December 2015.
- ⁷ Riḍván 2015 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.
- ⁸ Message dated 29 December 2015.
- ⁹ Message dated 29 December 2015.
- ¹⁰ Message dated 28 December 2010 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.
- ¹¹ Riḍván 2015 message.
- ¹² Message dated 23 May 2011 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.
- ¹³ Message dated 29 December 2015.
- ¹⁴ Message dated 28 December 2010.
- ¹⁵ Message dated 29 December 2015.
- ¹⁶ Message dated 28 December 2010.
- ¹⁷ Message dated 23 May 2011.
- ¹⁸ Riḍván 2015 message.
- ¹⁹ Message dated 29 December 2015.
- ²⁰ Message dated 29 December 2015.
- ²¹ Message dated 12 December 2011 written by the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies.
- ²² Message dated 29 December 2015.
- ²³ Message dated 29 December 2015.
- ²⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of the Divine Plan* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1993, 2006 printing), p.33.
- ²⁵ Message dated 29 December 2015.
- ²⁶ Riḍván 2012 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.
- ²⁷ Message dated 28 December 2010.
- ²⁸ Message dated 29 December 2015.
- ²⁹ Letter dated 24 December 2014 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.
- ³⁰ Message dated 29 December 2015.
- ³¹ Message dated 8 February 2013 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.
- ³² Message dated 29 December 2015.

- ³³ Message dated 8 February 2013.
- ³⁴ Message dated 5 December 2013 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.
- ³⁵ Message dated 8 February 2013.
- ³⁶ Message dated 29 December 2015.
- ³⁷ Message dated 29 January 2014.
- ³⁸ Message dated 29 December 2015.
- ³⁹ Message dated 29 December 2015.
- ⁴⁰ Message dated 12 December 2011.
- ⁴¹ Message dated 28 December 2010.
- ⁴² Message dated 29 December 2015.
- ⁴³ Riḍván 2012 message.
- ⁴⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974, reprint 1998), p. 108.
- ⁴⁵ *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing, 2014), section 58.1., p. 101.
- ⁴⁶ *Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá Abbas volume I* (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1930), p. 17.
- ⁴⁷ Riḍván 2001 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.
- ⁴⁸ Riḍván 2012 message.
- ⁴⁹ Message dated 18 December 2014 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís in Iran.
- ⁵⁰ Message dated 1 August 2014 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.
- ⁵¹ Riḍván 2014 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.
- ⁵² *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, (Bundoora, Vic.: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 2011), section CIX, par. 2.
- ⁵³ Message dated 29 December 2015.
- ⁵⁴ Message dated 29 December 2015.
- ⁵⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2015), par. 193.
- ⁵⁶ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace, Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2012), from a talk in New York, 1 July 1912, at 309 West Seventy-eighth Street, notes by Howard MacNutt, par. 3.
- ⁵⁷ Riḍván 2013 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.
- ⁵⁸ Riḍván 2010 message.
- ⁵⁹ United Nations, *One Humanity: Shared Responsibility*, Report of the Secretary-General for the World Humanitarian Summit, A/70/709.
- ⁶⁰ *Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1944 (2013 printing)), p. 13.
- ⁶¹ Riḍván 2013 message.
- ⁶² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 2014), Foreword, p. xvi.

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