

# For the Betterment of the World

The Worldwide  
Bahá'í Community's  
Approach to  
Social and Economic  
Development

Prepared by the  
Office of Social and  
Economic Development

BAHÁ'Í INTERNATIONAL  
COMMUNITY





# Introduction

**T**HE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY'S COMMITMENT to social and economic development is rooted in its sacred scriptures, which state that all human beings “have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.” Bahá'u'lláh wrote, “Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.” Fundamental to Bahá'í belief is the conviction that every person, every people, every nation has a part to play in building a peaceful and prosperous global society.

*And the honor and distinction of the individual consist in this, that he among all the world's multitudes should become a source of social good. Is any larger bounty conceivable than this, that an individual, looking within himself, should find that by the confirming grace of God he has become the cause of peace and well-being, of happiness and advantage to his fellow men? No, by the one true God, there is no greater bliss, no more complete delight....*

*How excellent, how honorable is man if he arises to fulfill his responsibilities; how wretched and contemptible, if he shuts his eyes to the welfare of society and wastes his precious life in pursuing his own selfish interests and personal advantages. Supreme happiness is man's, and he beholds the signs of God in the world and in the human soul, if he urges on the steed of high endeavor in the arena of civilization and justice.*

In traditional thinking about development, the role of religion in contributing to the betterment of the world has long been marginalized. “Religion,” a celebrated book from the early 1970s asserts, “should be studied for what it really is among the people: a ritualized and stratified complex of highly emotional beliefs and valuations that give the sanction of sacredness, taboo, and

immutability to inherited institutional arrangements, modes of living, and attitudes. Understood in this realistic and comprehensive sense, religion usually acts as a tremendous force for social inertia.”

Yet as we enter a new century, thinking in the field of development has been sobered by realistic assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the prevailing approach. Despite decades of rigorous effort and an enormous outlay of funds, no clear strategy has emerged. There is a pervasive sense of failure and despair of achieving development's high aims, even, indeed, of making progress beyond a few scattered and limited results. Social and economic development, it is now widely recognized, is a complex process, unresponsive to simple formulae that are based on raising income or the propagation of technological packages. Under intense pressure to find solutions, development thought has focused increasingly on people—their cultures, values, and worldviews. In such an expanded perspective, it has become abundantly clear that materialistic approaches alone will never succeed in building the capacity of individuals and communities to take action and in releasing their power. Rather the opposite: their tendency is to produce a debilitating

effect. Interest has thus grown markedly in recent years in the potential contribution that spirituality and religion can make to development discourse. The aim is to bring religious insights to bear on the search for ways to harness the scientific, technical, and economic creativity of the modern world so as to improve the human condition and foster prosperity among the diverse inhabitants of the planet.

Bahá'í experience in the field of development stretches back to the beginnings of the Faith in Iran during the nineteenth century. In that country, the community of adherents were able, in just a few generations, to advance from a population consisting largely of illiterate villagers to one whose members were in the forefront of many areas of endeavor. By 1973, for example, Iranian Bahá'ís had achieved a 100 percent literacy rate among women followers under the age of 40, in contrast to a national literacy rate among women of less than 20 percent.

Widespread involvement in social and economic development, however, is a relatively new thrust for the Bahá'í world community; it rose in significance in the early 1980s, chiefly as a result of a substantial increase in the Bahá'í populations of many nations. The ensuing decade constituted a period of experimentation, characterized simultaneously by enthusiasm and trepidation, thoughtful planning and haphazard action, achievements and setbacks. While most projects found it difficult to escape the patterns of development practice prevalent in the world, some offered glimpses of promising paradigms of action. From this initial stage of diverse activity, the commu-

nity emerged with the social and economic development work firmly established as a feature of its organic life and with enhanced capacity to gradually shape a distinctly Bahá'í approach. This booklet describes the ongoing process of learning about development from the local to the global level, which is facilitated by fostering and supporting action, reflection on action, study, consultation, the systematization of experience, and training. We hope the booklet provides a vivid illustration of how Bahá'í social and economic development is being carried out in practice.

Office of Social and  
Economic Development



# Concept

**B**AHÁ'ÍS VIEW DEVELOPMENT as a global enterprise whose purpose is to bring prosperity to all peoples, an enterprise that must pursue its aim in the context of an emerging world civilization. Humanity, the Bahá'í writings explain, is experiencing an age of transition best described as a passage from collective childhood to collective maturity. The revolutionary changes that are occurring with bewildering swiftness in every department of life assume their real meaning in this light. During this period, the barriers raised by the thoughts, attitudes, and habits of the childhood of humankind are gradually being uprooted, and the structures of a new civilization that can reflect the powers of adulthood are taking shape.

The hallmark of the age of maturity will be the unification of the human race, which, in turn, requires the establishment of the principles of justice. The current disparity between rich and poor cannot be permitted to persist. All of the earth's inhabitants should be able to enjoy the fruits of a materially and spiritually prosperous global society. To create such a society, it is essential that people everywhere be empowered to participate in the constructive processes that will give rise to it. Building the capacity in individuals, communities, and institutions to contribute effectively to these processes is the primary task of development.

For the individual, this implies developing a number of interrelated capabilities—scientific, artistic, technical, social, moral, and spiritual. Individuals must be endowed with an understanding of concepts, knowledge of facts, and mastery of methods, as well as the skills, attitudes, and qualities required to lead a productive life. In terms of the community, capacity building entails fostering its development so that it can act as an environment conducive to the enrichment of culture. On the community rests

the challenge of providing the milieu in which individual wills blend, in which powers are multiplied and manifest themselves in collective action, in which higher expressions of the human spirit can appear.

Beyond the training of individuals and the cultivation of community life, development strategies have to pay attention to the strengthening of organizational structures. Institutions are needed at every level of society that can act as channels through which the talents and energies of individuals and groups can be expressed in service to humanity. One of the accomplishments in which the Bahá'í community takes particular pride is the erection over its 160 years of existence—sometimes under the most adverse circumstances—of a structure of elected bodies that operate at the local, regional, national, and international levels. This collective hierarchy devolves decision making to the lowest level practicable—providing thereby a unique vehicle for grassroots action—while at the same time conferring a level of coordination and authority that makes possible cooperation on a global scale. Bahá'í development efforts



throughout the world benefit from the guidance and support supplied by this administrative order.

Building the capacity of the world's peoples and their institutions to participate effectively in weaving the fabric of a prosperous civilization requires a vast increase in their access to knowledge. Given that such a civilization will have to be cognizant of both the material and spiritual dimensions of existence, development theory and practice must draw on the two basic knowledge systems that have propelled humanity's progress over the centuries: science and religion. Through these two agencies, the race's experience has been organized, its environment interpreted, its latent powers explored, and its moral and intellectual life disciplined. Together, they have acted as the real progenitors of civilization.

Bahá'ís reject the notion that there is an inherent conflict between science and religion, a notion that became prevalent in intellectual discourse at a time when the very conception of each system was far from adequate. The harmony of science and religion is one of the fundamental principles of the Bahá'í Faith, which teaches that religion, without science, soon degenerates into superstition and fanaticism, while science without religion becomes merely the instrument of crude materialism. "Religion," according to the Faith's writings, "is the outer expression of the divine reality. Therefore, it must be living, vitalized, moving, and progressive." "Science is the first emanation from God toward man. All created beings embody the potentiality of material perfection, but the power of intellectual

investigation and scientific acquisition is a higher virtue specialized to man alone. Other beings and organisms are deprived of this potentiality and attainment."

A cursory survey of the historical forces that are shaping the structure of society should convince even the most avid defenders of today's global policies that unchecked material progress will never lead to true prosperity. From the heart of the great masses of humanity a dual cry can be heard. While it calls for the extension of the fruits of material progress to all peoples, its appeal for the values of spiritual civilization is no less urgent. For material civilization is "like a lamp-glass. Divine civilization is the lamp itself and the glass without the light is dark. Material civilization is like the body. No matter how infinitely graceful, elegant, and beautiful it may be, it is dead. Divine civilization is like the spirit, and the body gets its life from the spirit..."

# Approach

**B**AHÁ'Í DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES are governed by certain underlying principles. In the Bahá'í Faith, proselytizing is prohibited, and development projects are not conducted for the purpose of public relations or as a means of converting people. In the appropriate context, funding for projects of a humanitarian nature can be accepted from government and donor agencies, but Bahá'ís do not accept or use funds from outside sources for the progress of their internal community affairs. As a religion it, of course, affords opportunities for people to learn about the precepts of the Faith and to join it; so too, there are a range of community activities, including those for worship and for education, in which all are welcome to take part. Development activities are, however, intended to involve Bahá'í communities in disinterested service to humanity.

Endeavors of social and economic development play a distinct function in the life of the Bahá'í community. They represent the efforts of individuals, groups, and Bahá'í governing councils to apply their religious principles to the achievement of material and social progress. They are intended not to serve Bahá'ís alone but people of all beliefs, and they strive to elicit the widest possible participation. Often projects are undertaken in collaboration with government agencies and organizations of civil society that share similar aims.

Because the Bahá'í community is global in scope, it transcends divisions prevalent in society today such as urban and rural, “North” and “South,” “developed” and “underdeveloped.” The process of capacity building that defines development has to be carried forward in every part of the world. In whatever country Bahá'ís reside, whether in their native lands or elsewhere, they are morally bound to participate in this process and contribute their talents to its advancement as members of that national

community. Bonds of collaboration, however, extend across national boundaries, and resources flow from the more materially prosperous countries to those with less. Bahá'ís believe that it is the right of every people to trace its own path of development and direct its own affairs. The Bahá'í global administrative structure safeguards this right. Thus, while outside support and resources may be readily available to a project, it is left to those directing it to determine whether the capacity exists to utilize such support constructively.

Progress in the development field, from a Bahá'í perspective, depends largely on natural stirrings at the grassroots of the community, and it is from such stirrings that it should derive its motivating force. In general, then, Bahá'í efforts in social and economic development begin with a relatively simple set of actions that can be managed by the local community itself. Complexity emerges naturally and in an organic fashion, as the participants achieve success, gain experience, and increase their capacity to make



decisions about their spiritual and material progress and implement them. Local action gives rise to projects of a more sustained nature with more ambitious goals. Invariably, organizational structures are created to support such projects, and some of these nascent agencies possess the potential to evolve into fully fledged development organizations with the ability to undertake programs in a wide field of action.

The existence of such an organization in a region or microregion is imperative if significant progress is to be achieved. For while an isolated project can yield tangible results, experience worldwide amply demonstrates that fragmented activities in health, education, agriculture, and so on do not lead to sustainable development. No one discipline can offer solutions to all the problems besetting humanity. Effective development calls unequivocally for coordinated, interdisciplinary and multi-sectorial action. Organizational structures capable of dealing with increasing degrees of theoretical and administrative complexity are needed to integrate efforts across various fields and to provide the coherence required for consistent advance. The growing network of such organizations in the Bahá'í world community allows, too, for well-conceived methods and approaches that have emerged in one country or region to be shared with others, providing a natural channel for the flow of knowledge.

At whatever level they operate, the central theme of all Bahá'í development efforts is learning. As members of a religious community, Bahá'ís hold to a common set of beliefs and fundamental principles. Yet the

wise application of these principles to social transformation is something that must be learned through experience. At the heart of all collective action, therefore, is a concern for the application of spiritual principles. Not only do such principles point the way to practical solutions, but they also induce the attitudes, the will, and the dynamics that facilitate implementation. Equally important to the learning process are the content and methods of science, for by religious truth is not meant mere assertions about the esoteric, but statements that lead to experimentation, application, and the creation of systems and processes, whose results can be validated through observation and the use of reason. Further, the advancement of civilization requires the multiplication of material means, and these have to be generated by scientific endeavor. Development as a learning process, then, can best be described as one of action, reflection, and consultation—all carried out in the light of the guidance inherent in religious teachings and drawing on scientific knowledge.

The following pages offer an overview of the projects and organizations operated by Bahá'ís worldwide. Not discussed here, but no less significant, are the contributions to the development field made by thousands of Bahá'ís who, in their professional lives, are working within a host of agencies—in the public sector and in civil society—to bring about the betterment of humanity.







# First Stirrings

**B**AHÁ'Í DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS are initiated either by the Faith's administrative institutions—local or national governing councils—or by individuals acting alone or in groups. Of the several thousand social and economic development activities worldwide, the majority are fairly simple grassroots endeavors of fixed duration. They are fledgling efforts of Bahá'ís in villages and towns throughout the globe to draw on the guidance of their Faith's spiritual and social teachings in order to address challenges faced by their local communities. Central to these teachings is the principle that individual potential finds fulfillment in service to humanity.

Consider, for example, a small group in Tanzania who gathered to study materials on the purpose of life, the spiritual nature of humanity, and the power of communion with God. Animated by their ongoing discussions, they broadened their collective efforts in a simple yet natural way, first to include literacy activities to better comprehend the materials under study and then to address vocational needs through tailoring classes. Most of the members of the group have had limited formal education. Now they testify to having acquired a strong sense of identity and to having attained new understanding and capacities. They feel galvanized by a desire to serve their communities. They have learned “how to study” and know “how to use their minds.” Their neighbors “look up to them” and “recognize them as people of capacity.”

The growing confidence and energies of individuals in thousands of such groups are channeled into action through consultation, a process of collective decision making prescribed in the Bahá'í writings. Rather than being a forum for negotiation, this consultative process is viewed as the collective investigation of reality. It calls for the free

exchange of opinion, detachment from personal views, and rational and dispassionate analysis of options. It promotes creative solutions to common concerns and the fair distribution of resources. It provides a voice for community members who have traditionally been excluded from decision making, most notably women, and nurtures such spiritual qualities as honesty, tolerance, patience, and courtesy. It produces agreement on the steps to be taken and a commitment to unified action.

The local initiatives that arise from individual motivation and group action represent the first level of experience by Bahá'ís in applying their religious teachings to the everyday life of their communities. A few examples of such initiatives are presented on the next two pages.

## Grassroots Initiatives

**D**EMONSTRATING the difference that a single individual can make, a Zambian woman returns home from a community health educators training course, cleans up her own compound, and carries out health activities—which leads to the formation of a local women’s club dedicated to improving sanitation in the home and community.

**T**HE BAHÁ’ÍS of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, concerned about the moral education of youth, meet with the Minister of Education, who encourages them to undertake a campaign, addressing high school students and staff, conducting classes, presenting books to schools and libraries, and holding public meetings on the topic.

**I**N ORDER TO HELP young people in their community learn about the importance of the environment, Bahá’ís in Évora, Portugal, coordinate a “Clean Dam, Live Water” campaign in two schools, with student volunteers cleaning the dam that provides drinking water to their city.



*La Guajira, Colombia*

**I**N WAR-TORN Colombia, a soldier stationed in a remote area teaches an indigenous youth to read and write. With the help of a Bahá’í-inspired foundation, the youth sets up a tutorial school, which later grows into a network of such schools in a region where children would not otherwise have access to basic education.

**O**N NATIONAL Immunization Days in Bangladesh, a team of Bahá’í medical doctors in Dhaka serves the community by visiting certain neighborhoods and providing free vaccinations,

*Évora, Portugal*





consultations, and medicines to hundreds of children and other patients.

**A** LOCAL BAHÁ'Í GOVERNING COUNCIL in India encourages the establishment of a fish pond, with proceeds from the sale of the fish going towards a hatchery and a training program to help local people acquire and use appropriate technology.

**A** BAHÁ'Í LIVING in Vanuatu, concerned about the expense of burning oil and its damaging effects on the environment, explores the use of an economical and plentiful fuel, coconut oil, to power diesel engines through a system involving heat exchangers.

**B** AHÁ'Í YOUTH in Equatorial Guinea use drama to promote the advancement of women—a theme that is also the focus of radio and television discussions, as well as short courses cosponsored by the Bahá'ís and the government.

**I** N AN EFFORT TO HELP prison inmates turn their lives around, a group of Bahá'ís in the United States develops a course, “Successful Self-Direction,” which results in a significant drop in the number of repeat offenders among those who have completed it.

**I** N SOUTH PERTH, Australia, the Bahá'í community, seeing the concern of their fellow citizens



*South Perth, Australia*



*Public gardening project in Bucharest, Romania*

with issues such as race unity, leadership, and education in the twenty-first century, organizes public discussions that offer valuable insights as well as practical suggestions for change.

**W** ITH THE HELP of the town council, which provides saplings, manpower, and equipment, the Bahá'í community of Klang, Malaysia, organizes a tree planting project. Local dignitaries, teachers, and students participate.

**I** N ICELAND, a Bahá'í in the pharmaceutical business prepares boxes of medical supplies for use by local fishermen. Realizing that their knowledge of first aid may be limited, he arranges for doctors to give two courses to increase safety at sea.

**C** ONCERNED ABOUT declining moral values, a small group in Bulgaria decides to use the power of the media and the arts to reach young people. They produce a short video, put on a puppet show, and write a newspaper column—all focused on improving interethnic relations and living a drug-free life.

**I** N A TOWN in Sri Lanka, Bahá'ís go door-to-door to promote children's health, responding to a request by local doctors to raise awareness about worm treatment. As a result, 300 children arrive at the designated clinic for diagnosis and treatment.



*Vanuatu*







# Sustained Projects

**A** PART FROM SEVERAL THOUSAND grassroots initiatives, Bahá'ís are engaged in over 400 ongoing projects that are larger in scope and more ambitious in their objectives. Some emerge from small efforts at the local level, while others are established from the beginning as structured projects. Sustainability is a natural feature of a project that emerges organically from a grassroots effort. Where a project is introduced into a community, particular care is taken to ensure that its scope does not exceed local capacity to sustain it. Projects, then, gradually grow in complexity over time and extend the range of their influence in keeping with experience and human resources.

The evolution of one project, an academic school in Panama, provides a helpful example. When it opened in 1993 in a small rented house on the outskirts of Panama City, the school had three teachers and a handful of students enrolled in prekindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade. At the outset, the focus was on gaining the support of the local community and establishing academic and administrative structures. Each year two or three grades were added, and eventually permanent facilities were acquired. With time, elements incorporated into the curriculum were able to infuse the learning atmosphere with such principles as the oneness of humankind, the equality of men and women, and the harmony of science and religion. Today the school offers a complete elementary education and has an ongoing teacher-training program to maintain the standard of excellence it has achieved. To strengthen family unity and promote parental involvement, it holds regular meetings for students' parents. As service to the community, it has opened its computer laboratory as a vocational center for local women.

Bahá'í projects, like all development work, have as their primary concern the visible improvement of some aspect of life. Depending on the size of the endeavor, its objectives may be modest or far-reaching. As action unfolds, and increasingly greater challenges arise, a project must be capable of learning from experience in order to bring about enduring change. Every Bahá'í development project—whatever its size or scope—serves as a center for learning that promotes material, moral, and spiritual progress. Thus, while it is appreciated that concerted action should lead in time to concrete results, success is measured chiefly in terms of the impact the action has on building the capacity of individuals and their communities to address development issues at progressively higher levels of complexity and effectiveness.

Bahá'ís have initiated sustained projects in a wide range of areas. The following pages provide a sampling.



*On the Wings of Words, Guyana*

## Literacy

**B**AHA'Í LITERACY PROJECTS promote not only the acquisition of reading and writing skills, but also the spiritual empowerment of individuals and communities. Guyana is an impressive example. There, the “On the Wings of Words” literacy project is helping youth to reflect on moral issues and participate in service activities. The project has trained more than 3,000 volunteer facilitators and reached more than 10,000 young people in both urban and rural areas.

In nearby Colombia, the project “Conquering the Word” focuses on junior youth between the ages of 12 and 15. Tutors trained by the Ruhi Institute have established scores of youth groups throughout the country, all engaged in the study of a set of materials designed to increase their power of expression and provide them with the first elements of a conceptual framework for future social action.

The Uganda Program of Literacy for Transformation (UPLIFT), to take another example, is working with illiterate adults, mainly women. Its program stresses the necessity of promoting the



*Conquering the Word, Colombia*

equality of women and men and the importance of establishing proper relationships among family members. Materials discuss topics such as community decision making, virtues, and health, including the prevention of HIV/AIDS and malaria.



*Uganda Program of Literacy for Transformation (UPLIFT)*



## Academic Schools

**B**AHÁ'Í EDUCATIONAL CENTERS range from simple tutorial classes to schools at both elementary and secondary levels. While all aim at academic excellence and place special emphasis on service to the community based on moral values and spiritual principles, each strives to meet the particular needs of the society in which it operates. A few examples from various parts of the globe illustrate how Bahá'ís are putting this ideal into practice.

In Cambodia, the Bahá'í community offers free daily tutorial classes to boys and girls of all religions who do not have access to the country's public school system. The Santitham Vidhayakhom School in neighboring Thailand provides government-accredited nursery, kindergarten, and primary education for children from the surrounding rural communities. Recipient of the UNESCO Prize for Peace Education 2002, the City Montessori School in Lucknow, India, works to prepare its 25,000 students in 15 branches across the city to assume their responsibilities as conscientious citi-

*Santitham Vidhayakhom School, Thailand*



*Maxwell International Bahá'í School, Canada*

zens through a curriculum built on Bahá'í principles of peace and tolerance.

Free education, recreation, and general care for some 120 boys and girls between 7 and 14 years of age who come from low-income backgrounds are the focus of the Associação Monte Carmelo in Porto Feliz, Brazil. Maxwell International Bahá'í School in Canada, a coeducational, residential secondary school, draws its student body from countries around the globe and takes advantage of this impressive diversity to create an environment of world citizenship. In Tanzania, the Ruaha Secondary School is providing instruction for grades 8 to 11, paying particular attention to the education of girls and incorporating into its curriculum activities of social and economic development, including agricultural projects.

*Ruaha Secondary School, Tanzania*



## Moral Education

**M**ORAL EDUCATION is basic to the curricula of all academic schools operated by Bahá'ís. In addition, a range of programs have been developed that reach out to the wider community.

The Royal Falcon Education Initiative in South Africa, for example, trains young people to offer classes in secondary schools that engage students in discussions on topics such as AIDS, community service, global consciousness, and the environment.

In Russia, two projects particularly deserve mention. The Institute of Moral and Spiritual Education has published ten titles on moral education and disseminated over 100,000 copies to teachers in some 2,000 schools in Russia, the Ukraine, Belarus, and Latvia. The “Stop and Act” program of the Association for Creative Moral Education (ACME), based in Moscow, consists of dramatic presentations on contemporary moral issues followed by audience consultation. Five hundred scripts have been prepared that cover various aspects of life. Initially directed at youth, the program has been adapted for a wide audience, including business professionals and educators. More than 1,000 people have been trained as “Stop and Act” presenters in 40 countries.

Elsewhere in Europe, the “Education for Peace” project in Bosnia and Herzegovina, initiated by Switzerland’s long-standing educational institution, Landegg, has reached some 6,000 students

*Education for Peace project, Bosnia and Herzegovina*



*Stop and Act, Romania*

and 400 teachers at schools in various cities and has involved Bosnian, Croat, and Serb ethnic groups. The project introduces fundamental concepts about peace, unity, and interethnic cooperation into the major subjects of the school curriculum. Through training seminars, teachers acquire the knowledge and skills needed to integrate these concepts into their lesson plans throughout the year.

The Virtues Project, to cite another example, strives to cultivate in individuals and families time-honored moral values and spiritual attitudes. Five texts are used as the basis of programs in schools, day-care centers, corporations, diverse faith communities, and traditional cultural settings. Beyond Canada, where it originated, the Virtues Project has been implemented directly or has inspired similar approaches in several other countries.





## Elimination of Prejudice

**B**ELIEF IN UNITY finds expression in a host of projects designed to combat prejudice of race, caste, or culture. Two projects serve to illustrate the scope of these endeavors.

In the United States, the Institute for the Healing of Racism helps participants in its workshops to understand the subtleties of racial intolerance and recognize the principle of the oneness of humankind as the true basis for relating to people of different cultures and appearance. Conducted in an atmosphere of respect and appreciation, and bringing together racially diverse participants, the workshops have been held across North America for civil and corporate groups, police departments, and schools and universities.

In sorely tried Kosovo, a group of young people has established the Global Perspective Development Center to reach across ethnic divisions and forge collective action based on moral leadership and service to the community. The Center, which carries out training seminars in the use of the media to promote unity and moral education, has received the backing of several influential agencies, including UNICEF.

## Advancement of Women

**T**HE EQUALITY OF MEN AND WOMEN is a cardinal principle of the Bahá'í Faith. Central to every project undertaken by Bahá'ís is a commitment to the goal of ensuring that men and women are allowed to work shoulder to shoulder in all fields of human endeavor—scientific, political, economic, social, and cultural—with the same rewards and in equal conditions. Specific programs aim at eliminating prejudices against women, at establishing mechanisms to protect their interests, and at providing the education they need to take their rightful place in society.

An example is the Barli Development Institute for Rural Women, which offers a six-month resi-



dential program for tribal women at its facilities in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. The program combines practical skills training with consciousness raising and the development of spiritual qualities. Recognizing that attitudinal change on the part of husbands, parents, and children is equally essential, the Institute continues to work with the women after they return home and conducts conferences and meetings in their villages. More than 1,000 women in some 200 villages have taken part in the program since the Institute's inception in 1985.

In a different kind of context, the Tahirih Justice Center in the United States offers legal, medical, and social services to immigrant and refugee women seeking protection from gender-based human rights abuses. The Center sponsors the Gender-Based Political Asylum, Immigration, and Human Rights Project; the Afghan Refugee Women Advocacy Project; and the Battered Women Advocacy Project that gives legal protection to foreign-born women fleeing domestic violence. A referral program makes available psychological counseling, literacy classes, English instruction, day-care services, job skills training, and housing assistance. Since its founding in 1997, the Center has helped over 1,800 people.



*Barli Development Institute for Rural Women, India*



*Tahirih Justice Center, United States*



*Coral Gardens Initiative, Fiji*

## Environment

**I**N THE FIELD OF ENVIRONMENT, Bahá'í projects generally take a community-based approach. Two examples demonstrate the impact of such projects on environmental protection.

In Fiji, traditional knowledge, innovative scientific techniques, environmental education, consultative planning meetings, and sustainable income-generating practices come together in the Coral Gardens Initiative, which aims at helping local fishing communities to preserve their coral reef resources. Reef restoration and coral aquaculture sites were first established in 1997, with follow-up workshops in three villages in Fiji and four in the Solomon Islands. Impressed by these endeavors, an international agency working throughout the South Pacific has adopted the project.

On the other side of the globe, in Chad, an ongoing program is raising awareness about the importance of conserving wildlife, and trains local fish farmers in sustainable methods of pisciculture. One objective is to eliminate such harmful practices as the use of dynamite to kill fish. As a result of these and other efforts, the region's once nearly extinct hippo population is steadily increasing.

*Community Garden Project, Mongolia*



Besides such community-based initiatives, the International Environmental Forum operating in Europe links environmental professionals and activists worldwide. The Forum, whose membership is drawn from over 40 countries, hosts an annual seminar, promotes networking, publishes monographs, and provides mentoring to students and young professionals.

## Agriculture

**B**AHÁ'Í-SPONSORED AGRICULTURAL PROJECTS seek to bring the advances of science and technology to bear on production processes—usually of a microregion—while respecting traditional knowledge systems and paying close attention to the social dimension of development. In this sense, agricultural production is seen as one approach to community development.

A striking example is the Community Garden Project in Erdenebulgan, Mongolia. The project is helping to improve the nutrition of local residents through the incorporation of fresh vegetables into their diet and adding a welcome supplement to their incomes. More significant still is the opportunity it offers them to increase their capacity for collective action through consultation. The project began with the participation of 18 families, but training programs and seminars sponsored by the Mongolian Development Center, a Bahá'í-inspired nongovernmental organization, on subjects such as land preparation, planting and harvesting methods, and pickling and cooking techniques have persuaded many more residents to become involved.

## Health

**B**AHÁ'Í ACTIVITIES IN THE HEALTH FIELD take diverse forms including clinics, dispensaries, and medical and dental camps, as well as primary health care and health education. A number of countries have established programs to support





*Community Health Worker, Africa*

a network of Community Health Workers (CHWs). One long-standing example is the health program in Uganda, where over 100 trained CHWs achieved a significant increase in immunization coverage in targeted regions. More recent efforts have focused on training Family Health Educators, who are working in villages with small groups to establish sound preventative health measures in the home.

Bahá'ís are also eager to respond to calls for assistance in the health-related endeavors of others. Since 1997, for instance, the Bahá'ís in Cameroon have been collaborating with the government and the World Health Organization (WHO) in combating onchocerciasis, also known as river blindness. One oral dose of a drug supplied by WHO is required for each person in an affected population annually over an extended period. More than 500 communities have been reached by the Bahá'ís. Recognizing that success will ultimately depend on community education, they have received support in this area from Health for Humanity, a Bahá'í-inspired nongovernmental organization in the United States. Health for Humanity provides a channel for those in medical professions to offer their services to projects at home and abroad, such as the one in Cameroon.

## The Arts and Media

**T**Hemes such as unity, courage, optimism, trustworthiness, generosity, courtesy, and racial harmony form the basis of many Bahá'í programs using the arts and media. The Children's Theater Company, for example, works to incorporate such spiritual values into artistic performances among children of different races in New York City, in the United States. In May 2000 the company's two artistic directors were named "New Yorkers of the Week" for their efforts to edify children through drama, and in May 2002 the company performed at the United Nations Special Session on Children.

Meanwhile, Bahá'í-operated radio stations in Latin America provide a notable example of the role that media can play in enhancing culture. Radio Bahá'í Ecuador, for instance, has served the 300,000 Quechua- and Spanish-speaking inhabitants of the rural provinces of Imbabura and Pichincha and the urban areas of Otavalo and Cayambe since it began broadcasting in December 1977. The station promotes education, development, and community service through programs that nurture moral values and emphasize indigenous music, folklore, customs, traditions, festivals, and crafts.



*Children's Theater Company, United States*

*Radio Bahá'í Ecuador*









# Development Organizations

**A**S BAHÁ'Í DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS grow and diversify, organizational structures evolve to ensure their long-term viability and to meet expanding needs. At present most Bahá'í development organizations fall into one of two categories. Some are agencies of Bahá'í governing councils and benefit from the legal recognition these enjoy. Others are initiatives undertaken by groups of individual Bahá'ís—often with like-minded colleagues—as non-profit, nongovernmental organizations operating under the laws of their respective countries. Both types of organizations have as their aim the application of the Faith's teachings to one or more aspects of the process of civilization building. To this end, they systematically train human resources and manage a number of lines of action to address problems of local communities and entire regions in a coordinated, interdisciplinary fashion.

The seed of one such organization, for example, was planted when two doctors and their families decided to move to a remote region in Honduras and do what they could to help the progress of the indigenous population. To support themselves and provide a service to the wider community, the families established a small hospital with modest surgical facilities. From this simple beginning sprang a range of programs in such areas as health education and sanitation. After a decade of activity, a nongovernmental organization then was created to give formal structure to the programs offered in the region. Emphasis shifted to the larger problems of education, and a pilot project was launched to introduce a tutorial secondary program into local communities. With support from various agencies—the Kellogg Foundation, the Department for International Development of the United Kingdom, and the Canadian International Development Agency—the organization successfully tackled the usual problems of implementation. Gradually stu-

dent enrollment increased. The program has since been formally recognized by the government, and upon completing it, students receive a fully accredited secondary diploma. The organization is now working to extend the program to other parts of the country.

The existence in a region of a development organization dedicated to the advancement of a population provides a coherent framework for actions of various kinds. Capacity is created to assess social forces and conditions, to build a vision of the future, to evaluate resources, and to devise well-defined strategies. As the organization systematizes the knowledge being generated through action and reflection in diverse fields, the learning that is a prerequisite for meaningful transformation occurs.

Today there are about 40 Bahá'í development organizations worldwide with relatively complex programmatic structures and significant spheres of influence, each at a different stage of evolution. Five are described in the pages that follow.



## Universidad Núr

**U**NIVERSIDAD NÚR in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, opened in 1985. Now among the country's most prominent private universities, with an enrollment of several thousand students, it offers nine undergraduate degree programs, master's degrees in four specializations, and eleven graduate diploma programs.

The institution was created to serve Bolivian society and respond to the needs of its people. Núr offers residential, semiresidential, and distance-learning programs, providing alternative training, research, and educational services in addition to its traditional academic programs. Emphasizing student service to the community, it facilitates grassroots participatory research and action in areas such as adult literacy, youth empowerment, and village health care.



Núr has collaborated with international organizations like the World Bank and the World Health Organization (WHO) and with educational institutions in other countries on research and development projects to promote literacy, institution building, moral leadership, public health, public ad-

ministration and governance, the advancement of women, and sustainable development. Its most noteworthy program focuses on rural schoolteachers as agents of social change. The program is built around the concept of moral leadership and strives to develop a number of moral capabilities, the acquisition of which it considers indispensable for assuming such a social responsibility. Already, schoolteachers in some 400 rural communities in Bolivia have benefited, and the initiative has spread to countries throughout Latin America and is being tested in Africa, Europe, and North America.





## FUNDAEC

**L**A FUNDACIÓN PARA la Aplicación y Enseñanza de las Ciencias (FUNDAEC) was established in Colombia in 1974. It is animated by two key concepts: first, that in order for a population to walk its own path of development, there must be institutions and structures that genuinely belong to the people; second, if people are to take charge of their own development, they must engage in systematic learning. To translate these principles into action, FUNDAEC has created the University for Integral Development—a framework within which learning processes can be set in motion in a given population. The processes include the search for alternative systems of production, the establishment of viable systems of formal education, and the strengthening of local economies.

Most notable among the results of this learning is a program now being implemented in several other countries in Latin America. Through years of research and action to address the needs of rural youth, FUNDAEC has developed an alternative secondary tutorial school system, Sistema de







## FUNDAEC

*continued*

Aprendizaje Tutorial (SAT), and a corresponding university-level teacher training program—both suited in content and method to rural populations. The SAT program, with its emphasis on the application of scientific capabilities to local contexts, reaches some 30,000 students in Colombia alone.

Apart from its own research and action among the populations it serves directly, FUNDAEC has also developed the capacity—with the help of a postgraduate program called “Education for Development”—to enable other organizations to apply the approaches of the University for Integral Development to their programs and projects: to effectively foster people’s motivation and aspiration to take responsibility for their own development; to build local institutions, which are essential if rural communities are not to be swept away or assimilated by the process of globalization; to place the powers of science in the hands of rural people so they can become protagonists in the collective enterprise of generating and applying new knowledge; and to wed the knowledge systems of science and religion in the investigation of reality and the transformation of society.



## New Era Development Institute

**T**HE NEW ERA DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE (NEDI), founded in 1987, is located in Panchgani, Maharashtra State, India. Its driving force is the belief that sustainable development occurs when individuals and communities are empowered to make decisions about their daily lives which, in turn, are translated into simple development actions. NEDI offers one-year certificate and two-year diploma programs containing four components: a vocational or small business component to provide for one’s livelihood, a moral and spiritual component, a service component which stresses the use of skills and training for the well-being of society, and a cultural component to engender a sense of cultural identity and an appreciation for unity in diversity.

In order to learn about the strengthening of village life and to build the capacity of rural



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## New Era Development Institute

*continued*

populations, NEDI has conducted a number of community-based projects in various parts of the highly diverse country it serves. These have included initiatives in the areas of environmental protection, sanitation, health, child education, the advancement of women, and small-scale income generation, as well as activities designed to reinforce the positive aspects of Indian culture. NEDI's curricula are based on the findings of its grassroots projects. Combining technical and scientific information with spiritual principles that it sees as basic to moral development, its materials have been welcomed into the programs of schools and other agencies throughout India.

Over 800 individuals have undergone training at NEDI's main campus, and hundreds more have participated in its outreach programs. Collaboration with international development agencies has allowed NEDI to document and share its experience with a network of partners in India and internationally.



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## The Badi Foundation

**T**HE BADI FOUNDATION, established in 1990, is a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization based in Macau. Networking with similar organizations around the world, it creates and applies strategies for the development of human resources and designs curricula and methods for educational programs in China.

One of the Foundation's major projects is the School of the Nations in Macau, which has more than 260 students in its regular academic program, from preschool through the secondary level. The school also operates a Center for Continuing Education for adults in the evenings. Instructional materials for use by public and private schools and



## The Badi Foundation *continued*

training programs of various kinds, including moral education materials, are supplied by the Foundation's Center for Curriculum Development.

Badi's Social Enterprise Program helps form groups of like-minded individuals who wish to initiate social service projects. It offers training that enables them to identify local needs and launch projects of community service, improve their internal functioning, and formalize their organizational arrangements. It also provides them with technical assistance in such diverse fields as environmental protection, literacy, early childhood education, and job-market research. As participants advance in their collective endeavors, they are challenged to incorporate new collaborators, maintain unity and enthusiasm, plan strategically, and acquire administrative skills. Close collaboration between each group and the Foundation's trained facilitators is encouraged. On the basis of the experience gained, a set of materials is emerging that will allow the program to be implemented on a wide scale by the Foundation and others.





## William Mmutle Masetlha Foundation

**D**EDICATED TO THE ADVANCEMENT of the Zambian people, the William Mmutle Masetlha Foundation in Zambia was registered in 1995. Its activities date back to 1983, with its initial efforts to offer a program of study and service involving vocational training in rural technology, farming, food production, arts and crafts, health and hygiene, and other practical skills.

From the beginning, the Foundation has demonstrated its commitment to the spiritual principle of equality between men and women. Its conviction that quality education of young girls is crucial to the advancement of women led it to establish the Banani International Secondary School, which provides an International Certificate of General Secondary Education (ICGSE) to some 120 resident female students.

Another component of the Foundation, the William Masetlha Institute, focuses on primary health care, literacy, and spiritual and moral education. The Primary Health Care Project has trained nearly 150 Community Health Workers (CHWs) to promote preventive health measures in their own communities, increase the level of immunization coverage, and diffuse knowledge of primary health care, with an emphasis on HIV/AIDS and malaria prevention. Health education training materials, developed on the basis of this and other projects, are being made available to Bahá'í organizations throughout the world. Meanwhile, a one-year tutorial program, "Capstone," is in preparation to reinforce the language and scientific skills and knowledge acquired in primary school. Its aim is to increase the capacity of rural youth in Zambia to pursue a secondary-level education, guiding them through the critical passage from childhood to youth and opening before them the possibilities of a life of service to their communities.





# Systematization of Learning

**T**O FACILITATE LEARNING about development theory and practice within the Bahá'í community, the Office of Social and Economic Development (OSED) has been established at the Faith's world headquarters in Haifa, Israel. The agency supports organizations that have reached a certain level of complexity through a network of collaborators working in the field. In addition, it ensures that material resources become increasingly available to Bahá'í development efforts, coordinating the international flow of such resources and administering some of the funds intended for this purpose. OSED also offers general advice, technical and otherwise, in response to questions that arise.

The functions OSED performs provide it with the perspective needed to gather and systematize the learning about development taking place in Bahá'í communities around the world. When it identifies certain approaches and methodologies that are achieving particularly good results in some area of action, OSED arranges for pilot projects to be launched in different continents, the aim being to refine the content and methods and assemble them in a tested program. The program is then disseminated worldwide, so that national Bahá'í communities can adapt it to their specific needs, as they wish. Three examples will help illustrate how the process unfolds.

The identification of trends in Bahá'í literacy efforts gave rise to what is known as the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program. In 1994, a group of educators were invited by OSED to analyze the experience gained by Bahá'í communities in eliminating illiteracy. On this basis, pilot literacy projects were created in Cambodia, the Central African Republic, and Guyana. Consultations at the end of the projects' first year produced a refinement of strategy and the decision to extend the learning

process to four other countries—Colombia, Ethiopia, Ghana, and Malaysia. Representatives subsequently met to share observations and reflect on achievements, which led to the production of a packet of information and materials designed for widespread distribution.

It became clear from the pilot projects that the group most receptive to programs that could enhance the power of expression were junior youth, aged 12 to 15. Beyond instructions in the simple mechanics of reading and writing, the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program seeks to endow young people in this age group with the capabilities of reading with good comprehension and expressing thoughts clearly and eloquently. Emphasis is placed on the need for positive words and thoughts to be accompanied by pure deeds.

Primary health care is another area of concerted effort. During the 1980s and the early part of the 1990s a wide range of health-related projects were undertaken by Bahá'ís. In analyzing their experience, OSED noted that the most successful projects belonged to a network in East Africa that promoted primary health care, especially



through the training of Community Health Workers (CHWs). Those involved in the projects were brought together by OSED for consultations at the end of 1996. Out of their discussions emerged a training program of progressively higher levels of complexity: Family Health Educator, Community Health Worker, CHW Trainer, and Village Health Committee Member. A module for the first level is currently being offered to development organizations throughout the world, while materials for the other levels, including supplementary ones that focus on specialized areas such as nutrition, women's health, children's health, alcohol abuse, and HIV/AIDS, are being written and field-tested.

The advancement of women is an area of action that is also receiving systematic attention. In 1990, a series of projects were established in Bolivia, Cameroon, and Malaysia, sponsored by the Bahá'í International Community's Office for the Advancement of Women with funding from UNIFEM. Traditional media, such as music and drama, figured prominently in the effort to change attitudes that perpetuate inequalities between men and women. Impressed with the results, OSED asked participants from Malaysia to develop a program of fixed duration that could be implemented in villages and towns to raise consciousness about the equality of men and women. Eight modules were designed, four intended specifically for women, two for men, and two for both sexes. Following their testing in pilot projects in Bangladesh, Korea, Laos, and Malaysia, the modules are now being introduced into countries in Asia, Africa,

and the Americas. They serve to reinforce the many other projects in which Bahá'ís are engaged to increase the participation of women in community affairs.



# Contributing to Global Development Discourse

**F**OR THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY the expanding network of activities described in the foregoing has had significance well beyond the immediate benefits that have accrued. The experience of applying the principles in the Faith's writings to a highly diverse range of situations has progressively clarified the community's understanding of current challenges in the development field and equipped it to contribute ever more confidently to the global discourse taking place. That involvement, in turn, represents another important and continuing learning opportunity.

At the general level, the Bahá'í International Community (BIC) has participated in a number of major international summits and nongovernmental forums. Notable among them have been the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the "Earth Summit") in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995, and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing that same year, as well as the World Conference against Racism in Durban in 2001.

Because of the worldview deriving from the Bahá'í system of belief, the community has taken a particularly keen interest in discussions that explore the contribution of religion to questions of development. These have included the World Faiths Development Dialogue Conference, cosponsored by the World Bank and the Archbishop of Canterbury held in Lambeth Palace, London, in 1998, and the Parliament of the World's Religions held in South Africa in 1999. Especially enriching has been the involvement, from 1995 to 2000, in a project sponsored by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada, which explored the relationship between science, religion, and development.

The community has found in this series of activities welcome opportunities to give expression to the central conviction animating Bahá'í work in the development field. As early as the Earth Summit, a statement submitted by the BIC to the plenary session, on behalf of all religious nongovernmental organizations, concluded: "The profound and far-reaching changes, the unity and unprecedented cooperation required to reorient the world toward an environmentally sustainable and just future, will only be possible by touching the human spirit, by appealing to those universal values which alone can empower individuals and peoples to act in accordance with the long-term interests of the planet and humanity as a whole."

Two major BIC documents develop this conception at greater length: *The Prosperity of Humankind*, distributed at the World Summit for Social Development, and *Valuing Spirituality in Development: Initial Considerations Regarding the Creation of Spiritually Based Indicators for Development*, prepared for presentation at the World Faiths Development Dialogue Conference. The first of the two statements, which defines human prosperity in both spiritual and material terms, advances a frank analysis of



the prevailing materialistic notions and practices in the development field, and proposes a development strategy aimed at empowering the generality of humankind in taking responsibility in the shaping of the planet's future. *Valuing Spirituality in Development* suggests five principles fundamental to the attainment of a civilization that is just, united, and sustainable: unity in diversity, equity and justice, the equality of the sexes, trustworthiness and moral leadership, and the independent investigation of truth. The statement goes on to focus attention on areas of work that it believes must command priority in the application of these principles: economic development; education; environmental stewardship; the meeting of basic needs in food, nutrition, health, and shelter; and governance and participation.

As the twentieth century drew to a close, Bahá'í institutions had reached the conclusion that a permanent forum was required for ongoing, in-depth exploration of these concerns. The result was the creation of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, whose first initiative, in November 2000, was to sponsor a colloquium on science, religion, and development in New Delhi, India. The conference, devoted to the discussion of integrating religious values and scientific methods in development work, brought together more than a hundred representatives of nongovernmental organizations from all regions of the country. Greatly encouraged by the success of the event, and the responses it evoked, the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity is now setting in motion a similar process of consultation with organizations of civil

society in different countries around the world.

No serious observer can fail to appreciate the need for the massive investments of human and material resources that governments and organizations of civil society dedicate to promoting the well-being of the human race; nor indeed to value the intelligence and spirit of idealism that animates this work. Committed to the expansion of its own development programs, the Bahá'í community continues to refine its vision that the key to successful development is the building of capacity. Such a vision calls for engaging people everywhere in the generation and application of knowledge. Spiritual principles and the methods of science, together, can mediate such engagement. It is in sharing the learning thus acquired, the community believes, that its most useful contribution to the global discourse on development must ultimately lie.



# For the Betterment of the World

The Worldwide  
Bahá'í Community's  
Approach to Social and  
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