

Bahá'í Consultation and Freireian Dialogue in Development A Comparative Perspective

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“The ‘development debate’ is re-forming around a conflict between privileging the global market and privileging human communities: Do we continue expanding industry and wealth indefinitely, or do we find a way that human communities (however defined) can recover social intimacy, spiritual coherence, healthy environments, and sustainable material practices?”¹

History and meaning of development

Development as a practice and as an intellectual concept has become a significant feature in many parts of the world for many decades, and over time it has carried very different meanings. The meaning of ‘development’ that is most related to this dissertation dates from the post war era of modern development thinking. According to Pieterse² in modern development, the core meaning of development was economic growth through Western aspirations such as mechanization and industrialisation, which was later broadened to encompass the advancement of social, economic and political modernisation. Around this period, so-called developed nations believed that it is only through material advancement (industrialisation and urbanisation) that social, cultural and political progress can be achieved, and that capital investment was the key to economic growth and development³ It was also then that many developed nations believed in the importance of advancing the role of modernisation as an effective way of dealing with the so-called social, cultural, and political backwardness of the nations that they come to regard as ‘Third World’.

In January 20, 1949 US president Truman seized the moment as one of the powerful leaders of the First World by asserting the importance of the US in aiding the economic progress of the world:

“We must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdevelopment areas. The old imperialism- exploitation for foreign profit – has no place in our

¹ P McMichael, *Development and Social Change: A Global Perspective*, Thousand Oaks, California: Pine Forge Press, 2000, xlii.

² Jan, N Pieterse, *Development Theory: Deconstructions/Reconstructions*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications Inc, 2001. 6.

³ A Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995, 39-40.

plans. What we envisage is a program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair dealing”⁴

However, the motivations for the introduction of ‘development’ as a global project and the introduction of the notion of “underdeveloped’ has been widely criticised by intellectuals such as Gustavo Esteva, who makes the following powerful statement:

“Underdevelopment began, then, on January 20, 1949. On that day, two billion people became underdeveloped. In a real sense, from that time on, they ceased being what they were, in all their diversity, and were transmogrified into an inverted mirror of others’ reality: a mirror that defines their identity ... simply in the terms of a homogenizing and narrow minority”⁵

According to McMichael⁶ this historical proclamation divided the humanity into the “developed” and the “underdeveloped” regions. This became a new way of looking at the world where so-called modern became the standard that all the societies of the world were measured and judged. Furthermore this became a new paradigm for producing a strategy to improve the conditions of the Third World, mentioned before came to be known as the development project. This strategy by the First World assumed that firstly, no matter how diverse those “underdeveloped” nations where, they were viewed in a similar way and that the western experience became the universal model for their development. Secondly, the Third World nations were seen as being only at the early stages of a universal path to modern society.

At this period, underdeveloped nations were seen trapped in a cycle of poverty and lacking the capital to achieve economic growth. To achieve this material success, international supports such as foreign aid, technology transfer, stable currency exchange and robust international trade became an essential part of the development project. To accommodate these necessary supports and funds United States spearheaded two initiatives to reconstruct the world economy: the Marshall Plan and the Bretton Woods program⁷. As the result of these initiatives the “twin sisters” of World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) were established, to stabilize national finances and economic growth by funding the Third World, among others.

The following statement expressed at the 1944 Bretton Woods conference offered invaluable evidence, for the types of attitudes that supported the aims of development project for peace and free trade as a whole:

⁴ H. S Truman, *Harry S. Truman: Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President, 1945-53*. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office. 1961, 114

⁵ G Esteva, “Development”. In Wolfgang Sachs (ed.), *The Development Dictionary*. London: Zed Books. 1992, 7.

⁶ McMichael, *Social Change*, 24.

⁷ *Ibid*, 44.

“Creation of a dynamic world economy in which the peoples of every nation will be able to realize their potentialities in peace ... and enjoy, increasingly, the fruits of material progress on an earth infinitely blessed with natural riches. This is the indispensable cornerstone of freedom and security. All else must be built upon this. For freedom of opportunity is the foundation for all other freedom”⁸

Moreover, on delivering the “Resolution of Thanks” at the conference, the Brazilian delegate, Souza Costa, proclaimed that the Bretton Woods institutions were “inspired by a single ideal - that happiness be distributed throughout the face of the earth”⁹ Overall, these became the key sentiments of the development project: multinational universalism, viewing natural bounty as unlimited, and a liberal belief in freedom of opportunity as the basis of political development and human satisfaction was linked to rising living standards¹⁰

Later as a direct outcome of those development initiatives and institutions, many newly independent states were turned into financially dependent states. It was at this point around the 1960's that the dependency school of thought began to expose the unequal economic relationships of aid, trade, and investment between First and Third World nations. According to Pieterse¹¹ dependency theory acknowledged that the core meaning of development was economic growth, under the heading of accumulation, which was a distorted form of dependent accumulation that led to the development of underdevelopment. Well-known dependency theorists like A.G. Frank criticised development thinking for denying the historical relationship between development and underdevelopment. Frank¹² argued that ‘if the now underdeveloped were really to follow the stages of growth of the now developed ones, they would have to find still other peoples to exploit into underdevelopment, as the now developed countries did before them’.

Dependency theory with its unique critique of development further established a platform for new reflections and strategies that contributed to the emergence of ‘alternative development’ and ‘human development’. From the 1970's to the end of the 1980's alternative and human development thinking offered new understanding and approaches on development that mainly focused on issues regarding social and community development. According to Pieterse¹³ these new development paradigms

⁸ Theodore Roosevelt, *United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference*. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office. 1947, 4 (Statement by President Roosevelt, read by Henry Morgenthau)

⁹ Souza Costa, 1947, in *Ibid*, 4

¹⁰ McMichael, *Social Change*, 48

¹¹ Pieterse, *Development Theory*, 6

¹² AG Frank, *Latin America: Underdevelopment or Revolution*. New York: Monthly Review Press. 1969, 46

¹³ Pieterse, *Development Theory*, 81

tended to be practice-oriented rather than theoretically inclined, and aimed to create a people-centred development model that valued equity, participation and sustainability.

The emergence of these new people-centred and action-oriented development paradigms offers the most relevant context for the central topic of this paper, discussed below. However it would be appropriate in this historical overview to briefly discuss the emergence of radically different development schools of 'neo-liberalism' and 'post-development' in the late 1980's and 1990's. According to Pieterse¹⁴ neo-liberalism introduced the return to the neoclassical economics model of economic growth, to be achieved through structural reform, privatisation and deregulation. In this approach development as a source of economic growth remains the central goal and the market replaces the state as the agent of achieving this goal. Pieterse further adds that the neo-liberalist approach can be regraded as anti-development in terms of its emphasis on the power of the market for achieving economic growth.

In the 1990's post-development thinkers also put forth an anti-development position. Post-development scholars such as Tucker¹⁵, Rist¹⁶ and Escobar¹⁷, began to question the whole nature and the validity of development. Vincent Tucker¹⁸ refers to the "Myth of Development" and criticises its application as a natural law and a necessity that has been forced on millions upon millions of human beings by "developed" nations. Furthermore, he strongly views development as 'the process whereby other peoples are dominated and their destinies are shaped according to an essentially Western way of conceiving and perceiving the world'. Similarly, Rist¹⁹ affirms that development is not a natural process or a transcultural concept that can be simply transplanted to "developing" nations without a careful consideration of peoples' needs, histories and aspirations. Rist further argues that it is for this very reason that despite all kinds of Western technological or economical advancements, these accomplishments of the West cannot be replicated in Third World countries. Some have argued that this attempted replication of First World socio-economic accomplishments has come to control the destinies of Third World nations and directly or indirectly began to influence their social and cultural values and meaning systems²⁰

¹⁴ Pieterse, *Development Theory*, 6

¹⁵ Vincent Tucker, *The Myth of Development: A Critique of a Eurocentric Discourse*. In Munck, R. & O'Hearn, D., (eds) *Critical Development Theory: Contributions to a New Paradigm*, Zed Books: London. 1999.

¹⁶ Rist, G., "Development" as Part of the Modern Myth: The Western Socio-Economic Dimension of Development "Development", *European Journal of Development Alternatives*, 1990, 2(1), 10-21.

¹⁷ Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 1995

¹⁸ Tucker, *Myth*, 1

¹⁹ Rist, *Modern Myth*, 12

²⁰ Escobar, 1999.

Furthermore, Tucker²¹ recognises this type of control as being a central issue in development discourse, and questions whether these accomplishments as well as Western values should be replicated or imposed on those nations in the name of 'development'. Likewise which traditional values and practices must be abandoned and which retained to make way for development and modernisation. These questions are only some of those asked by critical development theorists to challenge the myth of development.

Does this imply that there is no need for nations, developed or underdeveloped, to assist one another as inhabitants of one planet? Post-development thinkers like Escobar²², Tucker²³ and McMichael²⁴ have suggested that the West should abandon the concept of development as a means for legitimising the oppression and domination of many nations. Hegemonical development discourse has failed to acknowledge other forms of rationality and ways of life that have existed before the introduction of modernisation. There is an urgent need to rethink the notion of development by addressing these destructive and dehumanising practices that have resulted in unhealthy inequalities of power. Tucker²⁵ sees this inequality of power at the heart of the problem of development, where modernisation and dependency discourses have 'reduced the subjects of development to passive objects'.

Today development is no longer divided between mainstream (based on economic growth) and alternative (based on increasing of people's choices and human capacitation). According to Pieterse²⁶, there is now a considerable overlap between mainstream and alternative development, especially in relation to their approach in defining and conceptualising development in terms of participation, working with the poor and vulnerable groups, and emphasis on local action. She further acknowledges that these overlapping ideologies and practices with their particular emphasis on peoples basic needs (health, literacy, education and housing), are giving people-centred development a more mainstream position in recent years. Overall, development is not what it used to be and it is in a constant state of flux, with development practice, policy and studies rapidly flourishing and universities establishing development schools more than ever before.

The alternative development paradigm

As mentioned by Pieterse²⁷ alternative development since its inception in the 1970's has introduced alternative practices and redefining goals of development. Its significant contribution has mainly been in the areas of

²¹ Tucker, *Myth*, 3

²² Escobar, *Encountering Development*

²³ Tucker, *Myth*

²⁴ McMichael, *Social Change*

²⁵ Tucker, *Myth*, 14

²⁶ Pieterse, *Development Theory* 94

²⁷ *Ibid*, 74

local and grassroots development. Alternative development is often identified with development-by-NGOs²⁸, however it can be further distinguished with respect to its development notions of participation and self-reliance aimed at achieving basic needs. Also according to Pieterse²⁹ and Korten³⁰, in alternative development the state has an important role in being a facilitator of people's self-development, complemented by business and other voluntary agencies. For example as mentioned in Pieterse³¹ the Thailand Five Star Partnership programme integrates the efforts of government, NGO's, private sector, religious communities and academic institutions to facilitate local and grassroots development.

In recent years, alternative development has been regarded as a paradigm that values equity, participation and sustainability³². Alternative development thinkers such as Rahman³³ unlike post-development thinkers disapprove of abandoning development, as he regards the word "development" to be a very powerful means of expressing peoples creativity. He further argues that we must not abandon valuable words because they are abused: what do we do then with words like democracy and socialism, which have also been abused? However as Korten³⁴ has argued it is important to redefine development in relation to its benefits to developing societies:

“ Development is a process by which the members of a society increase their personal and institutional capacities to mobilize and manage resources to produce sustainable and justly distributed improvements in their quality of life consistent with their own aspirations”³⁵

One of the ways such definition of development becomes realised has been through the practical concept of 'mobilisation' in the Participatory Action Research (PAR) movement. Rahman³⁶ regards mobilisation as a process where by people are emotionally stimulated, in the sense of generating *inner urges* for collective activity, an inner urge being defined as an urge that arises from one's own consciousness to achieve emotional fulfilment. Hefurther emphasis that mobilisation requires the following:

²⁸ AG Drabek, (ed.), 1, Development Alternatives: The Challenge for NGOs, *World Development*, 987, 15, Supplement: 1-261.

²⁹ Pieterse, *Development Theory*, 83

³⁰ DC Korten, *Getting to the 21st Century: Voluntary Action and Global Agenda*. West Hartford: CT: Kumarian Press. 1990, 95

³¹ Pieterse, *Development Theory*

³² Arruda, M., 1994, 'A Creative Approach to Structural Adjustment: Towards A People-Centred Development', in John Cavanagh, Daphne Wysham & Marcos Arruda (eds), *Beyond Bretton Woods: Alternatives to the Global Economic Order*, London:Pluto Press. 1994, 139

³³ Anisur Rahman, *Peoples Self-Development: Perspectives on Participatory Action Research. A Journey Through Experience*, London: Zed Books. 1993, 213-214

³⁴ Korten, *Voluntary Action*

³⁵ Korten, *Voluntary Action*, 67

³⁶ Rahman, *Self-Development*, 19-20

Firstly, that people have a sense of owning the means of production and a sense of being the agents of decision-making. Secondly, they must have a sense of positive purpose in the exercise of ownership and decision-making. Thirdly, above all they must achieve *self-reliance*, that can be defined as a state of mind that regards one's own mental and material resources as the primary source of achieving one's collective objectives and emotional fulfilment.

In relation to the aims of this study it would be relevant to place a particular emphasis on what Anisur Rahman³⁷ calls 'people's self-development'. In his informative book with the same title Rahman comprehensively discusses PAR as a significant movement within the field of alternative development. This book presents Rahman's reflection on development through collective grass-roots initiatives by people themselves. His intellectual and practical involvement in grassroots, people led development, experimentation with participatory research, and his experience in the field of 'animation' is invaluable to the field of alternative development.

Furthermore, the PAR group decision-making practice of 'animation' has been a significant feature of this movement, which according to Rahman³⁸ aims to stimulate unprivileged people to regard themselves as the principal actors in the development of their communities and to develop a critical understanding of their conditions and to express and assert themselves through collective action. In this decision-making process a significant emphasis is placed on enabling people to get collectively engaged in seeking creative solutions to their problems. This collective inquiry of people in to their circumstances must be further complemented by collective action. As Tilakaratna³⁹ has observed:

"People operate as animated subjects when they are able to investigate, critically reflect on and analyse the social reality on their own, perceive self-possibilities for change, take initiatives and engage in critical review of their ongoing actions as a regular practice. The role of animation is therefore to assist the people to build up the above capacities, and a knowledge base to think and act creatively to transform their realities".

Animation further requires 'facilitation' for it to be systemically possible. Rahman⁴⁰ explains that facilitation is needed for the acquisition of basic skills such as literacy and management skills, for effective operation of organizations and collective undertakings. Through facilitation people are also encouraged to develop contact with development agencies and

³⁷ Rahman, *Self-Development*

³⁸ Rahman, *Self-Development*, 156

³⁹ S Tilakaratna, *The Animator in Participatory Rural Development (Concept and Practice)*, Geneva: ILO, 1987, 23.

⁴⁰ Rahman, *Self-Development*, 157

institutions for funding and support. It is important to mention that this process is initially introduced to a group by an *animator*, which has the responsibility of stimulating people and advancing their knowledge for collective inquiry and decision-making.

Furthermore, alternative development involves a social and political process of 'empowerment' that aims to rebalance the structure of power through greater participation. According to Oakley⁴¹, 'power-formal, traditional, or informal lies in the heart of any process of change and is the fundamental dynamics that determines social and economic relations'. Empowerment is concerned with the recognition of people's capacities to take action and to play an active role in development initiatives. Empowerment is an intentional and ongoing dynamic process centred on the local community, involving mutual dignity, critical reflection, caring and group participation, through the exercise of an increased leverage on power⁴². Overall, according to Oakley⁴³, empowerment requires the full participation of people in every step of the decision-making processes of: formulation, implementation and evaluation for the well being of the society to be achieved.

In relation to the main topic of this paper, people's participations in decision-making has been recognised as one of the main features of empowerment. Alternative development authors such as Friedman⁴⁴, Galjart⁴⁵, Stiefel and Wolfe⁴⁶ think of development as '*participation in decision-making*' in matters to the target group. According to Oakley⁴⁷, this expression of empowerment is significant when it comes to capturing the basic element of 'power': the power of decision-making. Empowerment assists the subjects of development, who normally are, or have been excluded from decision-making to be come 'self empowered'⁴⁸. In this sense decision-making becomes central in exercising one's power to influence change in a developing community in a social-political context.

The significance of decision-making has been discussed above in relation to a number of concepts in alternative development thinking. However, when it comes to the practical application of decision-making, alternative development does not offer enough methodologies and principles to guide the participants in the decision-making process. This paper aims to offer and discuss two possible alternative group decision-making methods in the

⁴¹ P Oakley, Empowerment and Its Evaluation. In Oakley, P. (ed.), *Evaluating Empowerment: Reviewing the Concept and Practice*. Oxford, UK: INTRAC. 2001,13

⁴² W Van Eyken, 1991, *The Concept and Process of Empowerment*. The Hague: Bernard Van Leer Foundation

⁴³ Oakley *Empowerment*, 39

⁴⁴ J Friedman, *Empowerment: The Politics of Alternative Development*. Oxford: Blackwell. 1992

⁴⁵ B Galjart, 'Participatory Development Projects: The History of a research Project and Summary of Results', *Netherlands Review of Development Studies*, No. 1., 1987

⁴⁶ M Stiefel & M Wolf, *Voice for the Excluded: Popular Participation in Development, Utopia or Necessity?* London: Zed Books. 1994

⁴⁷ Oakley, *Empowerment*, 59

⁴⁸ R Tandon, *Participatory Training for Rural Development*. New Delhi: PRIA. 1987

context of development theory and practice: Bahá'í consultation, and Paulo Freire's notion of dialogue.

The Bahá'í consultation model

According to Wendi Momen⁴⁹ the Bahá'í Faith acknowledges that the social, political, economic and spiritual capacity of people around the world is advancing, as the scope of human's sense of loyalty to a group is broadening from family to clan, tribe, city-state, nation and ultimately to the recognition of the oneness of humanity. Bahá'u'llah's foundational principle of the oneness of humankind is articulated in terms of unity in diversity, peace, justice, and brotherhood among all the peoples of the earth regardless of religion, nationhood, race or class. This implies, according to the Bahá'í writings, "an organic change in the structure of present day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced."⁵⁰ To achieve these aspirations, Bahá'u'llah advances a series of spiritual, moral, and social guidelines for human development, one of which involves the decision-making system of consultation.

Bahá'í consultation advocates dialogue between individuals and within groups as the ideal method of clear decision-making. Consultation is encouraged in personal, family and community decisions⁵¹. Bahá'í consultation is put forward in the Bahá'í writings as a method for problem-solving and decision-making, and a contributor to the well being of the group which through its processes enables its maturity and understanding to manifest⁵². In this communicative process; true understanding materialises when all the different views regarding a matter are courteously but candidly expressed by everyone who would like to contribute to the discussion. This level of openness to considering multiple views allows for a greater and more holistic understanding of a subject matter. According to Bahá'u'llah, 'consultation is the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding'⁵³. Bahá'í consultation is seen as a powerful process that can only be discovered gradually through practice and reflection. It is regarded as significant in its potential to transcend the more hierarchical decision-making processes of the institutions of church and state. The Bahá'í Faith has no clergy and the entire administrative body of the Bahá'í Faith locally, nationally and internationally is elected by all adult members of its community. Authority is vested solely in collective consultative bodies where individuals have no decision-making power⁵⁴.

⁴⁹ Wendi Momen, *A Basic Bahá'í Dictionary*. Oxford, UK: George Ronald. 1989,186-187

⁵⁰ Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1992-1932*, Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust. (7th ed), 1974, 43

⁵¹ Momen, *Dictionary*,57

⁵² Baha'u'llah, in *Bahá'í Consultation: A Compilation by the Universal House of Justice*, Auckland, New Zealand: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of New Zealand. 1978, 93

⁵³ Bahá'u'llah, *Consultation*,1

⁵⁴ Guy Sinclair, *Mediation, Transformation and Consultation: A Comparative Analysis of Conflict Resolution Models*, Unpublished, Auckland: University of Auckland.1997.

Bahá'í consultation is aimed to advance beyond the arena of limited interest, replacing brute force and contending vested interests with a spiritually engaged participatory process, while ideally enabling human beings to graduate from divisive partisan politics⁵⁵

The most significant purpose of Bahá'í consultation is the “investigation of truth”⁵⁶. This search for truth according to the Bahá'í writings has universal application. Whether it is used for administrative purposes or purely personal matters, consultation is a process of achieving “insight into things”⁵⁷ and a method of establishing greater awareness in the spirit of “unity in diversity”. Consultation entails both joint consideration and allowing an idea to grow. Once an idea is put forward by an individual as a contribution to the search for truth, it is considered as belonging to the group. At the same time, regardless of its propounder or the apparent quality of the idea, the group is urged to consider its possible relevance and value and consult on whether it needs implementation, further growth, considered dismissal or postponement for future consultation. This process is designed to ensure that every idea or recommendation is treated with justice and fairness regardless of the position and background of the individual. Bahá'í consultation is thus a multi-dimensional concept that respects and combines the experiences, knowledge, minds, hearts, feelings, hopes and fears of the participants. For this reason consultation can initially be somewhat complex and challenging for individuals inexperienced in its dynamics, and it is through committed self-inquiry and personal observation that one's quality of participation can increase.

In Bahá'í consultative bodies of the Bahá'í Faith, a chairperson is elected to facilitate the consultative process and ensure that each member is provided with the opportunity to contribute to the discussions. Overall, the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith emphasises collective leadership and through the process of consultation the decision-making power of the elected group should be realised and utilised. The group should welcome the views of all, including “the most lowly, untutored and inexperienced”⁵⁸ In this forum, decision-making is dialectically structured by differences of opinions and “through the clash of personal opinions the spark of truth is often ignited”⁵⁹.

Bahá'ís are encouraged to come to terms with this challenging decision-making process in the recognition that consultation is not an easy matter, because of the imperfect individual behaviours, attitudes and orientations we bring to this consultative process. Bahá'í consultation is therefore not merely a mechanical process or a specific methodology, but a journey of personal maturation in which success will also depend on the qualities of

⁵⁵ J Kolstoe, *Consultation: A Universal Lamp of Guidance*, Oxford: George Ronald, 1985, 8

⁵⁶ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, (4th ed) 1982, 68-70

⁵⁷ Ibid, 97

⁵⁸ Shoghi Effendi, *Administration*, 102

⁵⁹ Ibid

one's character and personal conduct. Consultation requires therefore constant examination of one's motives and conscious adjustment of one's behaviour⁶⁰ Sinclair suggests that these real dilemmas and conflicts challenge individuals to mature over time, engendering a process of spiritual transformation.

The Bahá'í writings regard the domain of consultation as a "spiritual conference" and "not the mere voicing of personal views"⁶¹. In such a conference, the participants are urged to detach themselves from their opinion and "set it forth as a contribution to the consensus of opinion". 'Abdu'l-Bahá⁶² encourages the participants through a "spiritual conference" to evaluate their personal opinions with utmost "serenity, calmness and composure". By controlling one's emotional attachment to an opinion the individual is able to consider the worth and the truth of the opinions that have already been expressed; therefore they are able to willingly modify their stance. In such situations, one's detachment and clarity enables one to allow the consultation process to arrive at unity and truth. "Therefore true consultation is a spiritual conference in the attitude and atmosphere that good results may be forthcoming. Love and fellowship are the foundation"⁶³

Bahá'ís are urged to approach all collective matters in "the spirit of frank and loving consultation"⁶⁴. Opinions and ideas must be expressed with "the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation"⁶⁵ Those who engage in Bahá'í consultation must "search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden"⁶⁶ This involves learning increasingly to reconcile in consultation "the principles of mercy and justice, of freedom and submission, of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion and prudence on the one hand and fellowship, candour and courage on the other"⁶⁷

Above all else, then, Bahá'í consultation stems from an engaged spirituality: a state, an inner condition, that should manifest itself in action, in everyday choices, in a profound understanding of human nature and in meaningful contributions to community life and society."⁶⁸ Such individual cultivation of spirituality is considered fundamental to collective and united consultation for the investigation of truth. According to Sinclair⁶⁹ the act of consultation is itself sacred and sanctified; first, through the spiritual

⁶⁰ Sinclair, *Mediation*, 12

⁶¹ 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Promulgation*, 68-70

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *Administration*, 101

⁶⁵ 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Promulgation*, 95

⁶⁶ Ibid, 88

⁶⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *Administration*, 101

⁶⁸ Farzam Arbab, "The Process of Social Transformation" in Eyford, G., (ed.), *The Bahá'í Faith and Marxism: Proceedings of a Conference held in January 1986*, Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies. 1987, 49-50

⁶⁹ Sinclair, *Mediation*, 11

outlook each participant brings to the consultation process, secondly through their prayers and concentrated efforts to manifest spiritual qualities; finally, dialogue is understood to be facilitated by the power of God and one's reliance on God in all matters. "The prime requisite for them that they take counsel together," Bahá'í writings assert, "are purity of motive, radiance of spirit, detachment from all else save God, attraction to His Divine fragrances, humility amongst His loved ones, patience and long-suffering and servitude."

Sustained by the spiritual dimension of consultation, then, Bahá'ís are encouraged to develop strong cooperation and association to achieve true happiness and development, individual and collective⁷⁰. Within this context, Bahá'ís become increasingly able to examine any issue from various points of view, together finding the most suitable direction to embark upon, consulting until a solution for collective action emerges. Through consultation, unity of thought is persistently pursued and achieved, and when the thoughts and views of all participants are united, imaginative plans for development and growth of any community can be achieved⁷¹ (Ruhi, Book 2, 1985).

Consultation is "no easy skill to learn, requiring as it does the subjugation of all egoism and unruly passions, the cultivation of frankness and freedom of thought as well as courtesy, openness of mind, and wholehearted acquiescence in a majority decision"⁷² (UHJ, Wellspring, p.96). Certainly, in this early stage of growth of the Bahá'í community with its wide diversity of individuals the process of consultation may present itself as a challenge, and at times the perfect decision may not be a practical possibility⁷³ (Abdu'l-Bahá, 1982: 96). However, it is important for the group to remain united in all stages of the decision making process, especially after the group has reached its final decision. If the final decision is implemented and it does not produce the desired outcome, the group must reflect and consult on the matter again in unity and solidarity.

Overall, Vick⁷⁴ (1989:49) believes Bahá'í consultation is a method of human interaction and communication that suits all situations. It is a new social institution that shapes and develops people and communities. Bahá'í consultation is put forward by its proponents as unique and evolutionary, its full potential and powers only gradually being discovered and developed⁷⁵ (Kolstoe:1985&1995, Vick:1989). The process of consultation is advanced

⁷⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, 35

⁷¹ The Ruhi Institute, Book 2: *Arising to Serve*, Ruhi Foundation, Colombia, Florida: Palabra Publications, 1987.

⁷² The Universal House of Justice, *Wellspring of Guidance: Messages 1963-1968*. Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969,96).

⁷³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, 96

⁷⁴ HH Vick, *Social and Economic development: A Bahá'í Approach*, Oxford: George Ronald, 1989,49

⁷⁵ Kolstoe, *Consultation*; John Kolstoe, *Developing Genius: Getting the Most Out of Group Decision-Making*, Oxford: George Ronald, 1995; Vick, *Social*

by Bahá'u'llah as a universal 'lamp of guidance', and as a reflection of the maturation of humanity and its ability to make informed decisions.

A case study of Bahá'í consultation in development practice: Radio for Development (Ecuador)

Consultation is one of the fundamental features of any Bahá'í initiated development project around the world. Below a case study of a Bahá'í development project is discussed in which Bahá'í consultation has been used in practice. It is important at this point to offer a brief explanation of the Bahá'í understanding of development. Generally, it has been regarded by the Bahá'í Faith as the process of maturation of social institutions together with an increase in participation of individuals and groups in those institutions, and improvements in the economic welfare, wealth, standard of living and material comfort of individuals, groups and whole populations⁷⁶.

Furthermore, the success of any form of material development is held to be related to the level of spiritual development. All of the social teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, such as universal education, equality of men and women, the importance of agriculture, etc., are approached from a spiritually informed perspective in both theory and practice. This fundamentally spiritual approach to development has been the most significant vehicle for humanitarian aid and assistance by the members of the Bahá'í Faith.

In 1977, the Bahá'ís of Ecuador began the first Bahá'í radio station. Radio Bahá'í of Ecuador was established through consultation between the Bahá'ís in the Otavalo region and the National Spiritual Assembly of Ecuador. According to the Bahá'í scholar Kurt Hein⁷⁷ the station was established in part to promote self-determination and self-reliance among rural populations by encouraging their participation in the operations of the station. In particular the Bahá'ís aimed to offer their services to the spiritual, administrative, social, and economic of the indigenous population.

The station was licensed as an educational, cultural, and religious institution. Its aims included:

- Providing universal education for the general population.
- Promoting the development of human potential.
- Promoting the unification of humankind into "one universal family".
- Assisting in the development and instruction of the Bahá'í community in the region.

⁷⁶ Momen, *Dictionary*, 69

⁷⁷ Kurt Hein, Radio for Development. *World Order*, 1987, 198(3-4), 39-50.

- Helping raise the listener's standard of living without destroying their values.⁷⁸

In addition Radio Bahá'í began serving community organizations through programming that encouraged participation by all community members, especially women, and by teaching the principles of Bahá'í consultation as a method of community decision making. This was initially to develop and strengthen consultative skills among the Bahá'í communities in the region, later extending its benefits and possible usage to the rest of the community.

Bahá'í consultation became an important feature of the management and administration of Radio Bahá'í, implemented by the Radio Bahá'í Commission. According to Hein⁷⁹, the Commission met weekly to review programming and personal issues. After consultation between the members of the station staff and the Executive Director, the decisions and the policies of the Commission were implemented. By following the principles of Bahá'í consultation each staff member had the opportunity to offer ideas for improving the services of Radio Bahá'í.

Since its inception Radio Bahá'í has served the community by producing many regular programs on agricultural and health issues; public announcements; regular visits to the villagers to interview the people concerning rural farming issues, women's activities, oral traditions; indigenous music festivals and local news and information. These programs have been effective for two reasons. First, the audience needs are addressed and then the programming is developed to address those needs. Second, Radio Bahá'í uses the voices of the villagers and the indigenous people not only so they can hear themselves but also using radio as a medium to reach civil servants⁸⁰

With regards to staff training many visiting consultants offered short-term courses for those interested in learning to produce their own programs. As mentioned by Hein for example a number of indigenous women produced their own programs, although none had any radio experience before coming to the station. In fact, only one of the women had received any formal schooling. Nonetheless, after completing some initial courses, they were teamed up with more experienced staff until they felt comfortable operating the equipment on their own. As their confidence grew they started to participate in daily consultation regarding Bahá'í Radio's activities, especially in relation to indigenous women's issues.

In addition, through effective consultation between consultants, the administrative bodies of the Bahá'í Faith and volunteers, the station has continued to fulfil its mandate as a participatory service to the indigenous

⁷⁸ Hein, Radio, 41

⁷⁹ Ibid, 44

⁸⁰ Ibid, 46

community for more than two decades. Radio Bahá'í of Ecuador has inspired many other communities around the world to initiate similar projects, Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í.

Freirean notion of dialogue

Paulo Freire has become one of the most influential educationists for nearly four decades. His work and philosophy have inspired not only educational workers but also others in the fields of human and social development, in many developing nations and also in many developed countries. In his most widely read book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he lays the foundations of some of his most thought provoking concepts such as the notions of, 'liberation', 'humanisation', 'dehumanisation', 'conscientisation', and 'dialogue'. Many of these concepts were developed while developing and conducting his revolutionary literacy programs in his home nation of Brazil. However, after the military coup in 1964, the officials found his educational activities and teaching philosophies too radical and placed him under house arrest. He was later asked to leave his country and spent more than two decades in exile.

With regards to the main theme of this study, the notion of dialogue can be regarded as a significant contribution of Freirian philosophy. However, we cannot treat dialogue as an isolated notion, and as a stand-alone contribution of his philosophy. We must as Roberts⁸¹ (1998:33) argues, go beyond his classic work the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and read Freire holistically. 'A holistic reading allows a more complex picture of both Freirean theory in general, and the place of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in that theory in particular, to emerge'

In another early work, *Cultural Action for Freedom*⁸² (1972) Freire addresses some of the political and developmental issues in the Third World with specific reference to Latin America. He examines the significant process of conscientisation, and dialogue as one of its key components. Here we must also mention that, although the concept of conscientisation has been directly associated to Freire, he was not the first to use the notion. The original Portuguese term, '*conscientizacao*', came in to being during a series of meetings between professors at the Brazilian Institute of Higher Studies, and later popularised by Helder Camara⁸³

It is appropriate at this point of the study to make an explicit and systematic analysis of the concept of conscientisation and its relationship to the notion of dialogue. In his work before the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire refers to dialogue as "communion" in relation to the project of conscientisation by

⁸¹ P Roberts, Knowledge, Dialogue and Humanization: The Moral Philosophy of Paulo Freire. *Journal of Educational Thought*, 1998, 32(2), 95-117 [33](#)

⁸² Paulo Freire, , *Cultural Action for Freedom*, Harmondsworth: Penquin.1972

⁸³ P Roberts, Rethinking Conscientization . *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 1996, 30(2), 179-196

stating that “only praxis in the context of communion makes conscientisation a viable project”⁸⁴ (1972: 46). In this sense conscientisation is a joint project that takes its form with unity and solidarity between the people through action and constant reflection upon that action and upon the world. Freire emphasises that, in order for conscientisation to take place a radical denunciation of dehumanising structures must occur alongside people constructing a new reality for themselves. By doing this people come to openly challenge the oppressive conditions they have been subjected to, and through dialogue and action take charge of their own progress and development.

According to Freire, the starting point for the analysis of conscientisation is to critically comprehend humans as beings who exist in and with the world. “It is as conscious beings that men are not only in the world, but with the world, together with other men. Only men, as “open” beings are able to achieve the complex operation of simultaneously transforming the world by their action and grasping and expressing the world’s reality in their creative language.”⁸⁵ According to Roberts, “‘conscientisation’ is the reflective moment which occurs in a liberating educational programme designed to dialogically address and transform conditions of oppression.”⁸⁶ .

Freire has often referred to the importance of dialogue and its significant role in the *conscientizacao*, or “conscientization”, process⁸⁷. For example, with regards to students and their process of becoming conscious and transformed, dialogue represents a powerful and transformative political process. It is through dialogical interaction and relationships that students learn to build strong learning communities in which they can freely communicate their thoughts and ideas about what they know and also in relation to the larger political project of emancipation⁸⁸. Even though in this example the relationship of dialogue and conscientisation is expressed with regards to students, the same would apply to other members of a society who continue to engage in the process of critical consciousness and liberation. According to Darder⁸⁹ it is important to understand that a true act of dialogue needs purposeful focus, particularly, on the process of developing critical consciousness or transformative social action.

⁸⁴ Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Herder and Herder.1972,46

⁸⁵ Paolo Freire, Cultural Action and Conscientization, *Harvard Educational Review*, 1970, 40(3), 452-477 28

⁸⁶ Roberts, *Conscientization*, 89

⁸⁷ Antonia Darder, Teaching as an Act of Love: Reflections on Paulo Freire and His Contributions in Torres, R.D. (ed), *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*, New York & London: Routledge Falmer. ;Roberts; *Conscientization*

⁸⁸ Darder, *Teaching*, 103

⁸⁹ Darder, *Teaching*

According to Krank and Steiner⁹⁰, Freirean transformation in relation to education is based on the active engagement of students as liberatory learners during their educational experiences and the critical facilitation of learning. Furthermore this kind of transformation creates liberated learners whom are actively involved in the humanisation of their individual realities through subjective reflection, and rational objective action. Individual transformation further contributes to the collective transformation outside of the learning environment through active and united participation in dialogical action and reflection. Taylor⁹¹ argues that Freire's work constantly asserts that conscientisation, engendered by dialogue, is the means of transforming objects into subjects, the oppressed into the liberated. Taylor goes on to identify five premises that accumulatively provide the infrastructure of the pedagogy of the oppressed and highlights the liberating and transformative power of dialogue:

- The individual deprived of dialogue is oppressed.
- Dialogue is the process and practice of liberation.
- The individual engaged in dialogue is liberated.
- Dialogue, by definition, requires more than one person.
- More than one person could be called a society.

Roberts⁹² stresses the fact that 'dialogue for conscientisation implies a certain unity of purpose' and that this collective effort as human beings originates from the ontological vocation of humanisation⁹³. This unifying nature of dialogue and its role as agent of unity is one of the key features of this study and it will be further discussed in relation to the Bahá'í model of consultation.

Freire emphasises the importance of a constant dialectical relationship and interaction for objective transformation. Further, Freire urges us to approach this dialectical intervention as a way of verbally explaining to the people their own action. This form of communication 'with' the oppressed, rather than 'to' the oppressed Freire explicitly relates to the notion of 'dialogue' in chapter three of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. However before focusing further on his notion of dialogue we must reflect on his notions of 'action' and 'reflection'. As mentioned in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, for action to be humanising it must be more than an occupation, a preoccupation, which must not be separated from reflection. This interdependence of action and reflection is highly important to the advancement of any liberation process. For the oppressed to pursue liberation, they must engage with each other dialogically through a constant process of critical action and reflection. In this sense liberation is a process of struggle that encourages

⁹⁰ HM Krank, & Stanley Steiner, A pedagogy of transformation : An introduction. In S.F. Steiner, H.M. Krank, P. McLaren & R.E. Bahruth (Eds.), *Freirian pedagogy, praxis, and possibilities: Projects for the new millennium* (pp. ix-xiii). New York: Falmer. 2000, xi

⁹¹ P. V Taylor, *The Texts of Paulo Freire*, Buckingham: Open University Press. .1993, 58-59

⁹² Roberts, *Knowledge*,191

⁹³ Ibid.

people to actively strive to improve their conditions as humans with unity, and at the same time evaluate and reflect on their achievements through ongoing communication with each other. Even though Freire did not regard himself as a member of the oppressed class, as a teacher and a human being he saw the importance of joining the oppressed with their struggle for liberation and humanisation, and he encouraged others to do the same. However, Freire warned people, whether academics or community workers to avoid the trap of thinking that they are the executors of transformation, just because they truly want to change injustices in the world.

Turning now to dialogue proper, Freire suggests that our initial attempts to understand the nature and the meaning of dialogue, involves discovering something that is the very essence of dialogue itself: it is not simply to view the word as the instrument to carry out dialogue and its literal role in constructing speech, but to go deeper and comprehend its constitutive elements. We must understand that this word contains two important dimensions of reflection and action, and that both need to interact for authentic dialogue to emerge⁹⁴. In the absence of one of these dimensions the word becomes unauthentic. When the word is deprived of one of these dimensions, Freire adds⁹⁵, the other one suffers; in this sense action without reflection leads to an activism based on action for action's sake that negates true praxis and makes dialogue impossible. On the other hand reflection without action leads to verbalism, resulting in verbal reflection as an empty word or idle chatter with no transformative power. These are both undesirable outcomes in Freire's pedagogy for liberation, humanisation, and transformation of the oppressed. Overall, dialogue must become the encounter between human beings, which is essentially mediated by the world, in order to name the world⁹⁶.

Clearly, then, Freirean dialogue requires certain personal qualities to succeed. Freire has discussed these in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*⁹⁷, as essential requirements for dialogue, including love, humility, faith, and mutual trust, among others.

Freire, regards love as the foundation of dialogue, an act of courage, not of fear, and an act of commitment to others. Dialogue, cannot exist without a profound love for the world and humanity as a whole. Dialogue requires humility, for the dialoguers to be able to name the world in unity and partnership. In this way everyone's dialogical contribution is valuable and no one can be regarded as ignorant. According to Freire, by having faith in others the "dialogical man" believes in others before even engaging in dialogue with them. It is also, by having faith in their power to make and remake; and in their vocation to become more fully human. This faith,

⁹⁴ Freire, *Oppressed*, 68.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 69

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 70-74

however, is not naïve, and the dialogical man must be critical, although it is possible for an individual to have the power to transform, it does not mean individual dialogical action is in isolation. By achieving these virtues, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of mutual trust between the dialoguers in a logical sequence.

Dialogue emerges from this discussion as a collective and united interaction (action and reflection) between the dialoguers, a necessary tool for transforming and humanising the world. In this pedagogy human existence is not silent, and no one in this collective struggle is denied his or her right to speak his or her word. Therefore, dialogue becomes a necessary tool for achieving significance as human beings and through speaking their word, through naming their world, they have the power to transform their reality:

“If it is in their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings. Dialogue is thus an existential necessity”⁹⁸

Freirean Dialogue and Bahá'í Consultation: A Comparative Analysis

A comparative analysis of Freirean dialogue and Bahá'í consultation can begin by understanding their similarities and differences.

The Bahá'í writings on consultation place significant emphasis on the importance of developing a number of personal (spiritual) qualities when taking part in the consultation process. Similarly, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *A Response* among others Freire stresses the importance of dialogical qualities and virtues that are necessary for individual and the group as a whole.

In Bahá'í consultation, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has emphasised that “the first condition is absolute love and harmony amongst the members...”⁹⁹. By acquiring this condition the consultative body are able to free themselves from estrangement and antipathy and to care for each other personally¹⁰⁰. Furthermore Bahá'ís are reminded by Shoghi Effendi, that the keynote of this Faith is “not arbitrary power, but... loving consultation”. This is a kind of love that is not simply based on just tolerating one another, but truly committing ourselves to understanding one another.

In a similar way Freire¹⁰¹, regards love as the foundation for dialogue: dialogue “cannot exist in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people”. Indeed, he clearly emphasises that love is dialogue itself and

⁹⁸ Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the City*. New York: Continuum 1993, 69

⁹⁹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre. 1978,3.

¹⁰⁰ Kolstoe, *Consultation*, 20

¹⁰¹ Freire: *Oppressed*, 70

that only people who love one another are able to enter into this dialogue with each other. According to Darder¹⁰² Freire spoke of a love that is rooted in commitment to humanity and the willingness to struggle to attain what he calls our “true vocation” – that of being human. Furthermore, he spoke of a kind of love that was lively, inspiring but at the same time, challenging and critical: an “armed love - the fighting love of those convinced of the right and the duty to fight, to denounce, and to announce”¹⁰³

Hence, although love as a starting point is shared between the two perspectives, the notion of love used by Freire is fundamentally different to the Bahá'í notion of love. Bahá'í love is based on the spiritual nature of human relationships springing from the love of God, whereas Freirean love is based on a humanistic understanding of people's love and commitment to their fellow humans and to the cause of liberation.

Humility is another crucial requisite of Bahá'í consultation. Shoghi Effendi¹⁰⁴ urges Bahá'ís to take counsel together with “humility and lowliness”. Bahá'ís are discouraged from self-aggrandisement or self-praise over their contributions to the consultative process. According to Kolstoe¹⁰⁵, humility is achieved through action and service to humanity and the Bahá'í community. Furthermore, he explains that true humility lies in the development and use of talents, capacities and resources by individuals who have participated in the consultative process¹⁰⁶. In Bahá'í consultation the ability to listen to others and take in to consideration the opinion of others is another significant characteristic of a humble participant and an open-minded individual.

Freire likewise considers humility a crucial component of humanitarian dialogue. He sees it as enabling dialoguers to name the world in partnership to achieve common goals. In this way no one is regarded as ignorant, rather people as partners attempt together to increase their knowledge and understanding about their world. Freire explicitly states, “Dialogue cannot exist without humility. The naming of the world, through which people constantly recreate that world, cannot be an act of arrogance”¹⁰⁷. Freire too emphasises the importance of the virtue of listening as a sign of humility and that ultimately “only those who listen, speak”¹⁰⁸.

However it is important to mention that Freire is not a relativist and does not believe that everyone's dialogical contribution is of equal value; but on the

¹⁰² Darder Teaching, 498

¹⁰³ Paulo Freire, *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare to Teach*. Boulder, Co: Westview.1998, 42

¹⁰⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *Administration*,21

¹⁰⁵ Kolstoe: Consultation,17

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

¹⁰⁷ Freire, *Oppressed*,71

¹⁰⁸ Freire, P, Fraser, J.W., Macedo, D., McKinnon, T. & Stokes, W. T. (eds), 1997, *Mentoring the Mentor: A Critical Dialogue with Paulo Freire*, New York: Peter Lang.1997, 306.

contrary, some peoples' ideas and thoughts are better than others¹⁰⁹. In comparison, while acknowledging the differential value of concrete ideas, the members of the Bahá'í faith elect their Bahá'í consultative groups with an emphasis on their collective contribution to the community, and not the quality or record of their individual ideas.

Bahá'í consultation and Freirean dialogue also share a concern for unity within a field of human diversity. The virtue of unity and unity in diversity are fundamental teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'u'llah has explicitly stated that, "no power can exist except through unity, no welfare and no wellbeing can be attained except through consultation"¹¹⁰. Furthermore both unity and consultation are bedrocks of Bahá'í administration. The Bahá'í consultative process requires unity to create a sense of wholeness, togetherness and solidarity among the group. In this form of group decision-making, it is the first duty of the members to effect their own unity and harmony in order to obtain good results. Overall according to Kolstoe¹¹¹, unity in consultation is a matter of identifying a clear common purpose. When this clear common purpose is combined with other consultative qualities of love, humility and respect, the group is then able to move towards decisiveness. Even if a decision is made that is later proven to be wrong, a united consultative body will simply review the matter, without any disappointment or blame.

The principle of unity in diversity is closely related to the quality of unity in consultation. The notion of unity in diversity offered by Bahá'u'llah encourages Bahá'ís to first observe their oneness as human beings, so they can make their differences harmonious. According to this principle, the diversity of the individuals in a consultative body is acknowledged and respected; and their personal views and background are welcomed. At the same time through the ongoing process of consultation on all matters, Bahá'ís further recognise and celebrate their common spiritual path, guided by Bahá'í principles. The practical application of unity in diversity in many Bahá'í communities is in its formative stage and an ongoing learning process.

In Freirean pedagogy, the notion of unity is closely related to the revolutionary praxis of liberation. In this model, it is the responsibility of revolutionary leaders to dedicate themselves to a ceaseless effort towards unity among the oppressed - and unity of the leaders with the oppressed - in order to achieve liberation and that the unity between the leaders grows out of communion with the people. Freire further emphasises that achieving this level of unity requires a form of cultural action through dialogue, for people to come to understand their adhesion to reality¹¹². In this sense, unity is a

¹⁰⁹ Roberts, *Knowledge*, 101

¹¹⁰ Baha'u'llah, *Consultation*, 1

¹¹¹ Kolstoe, *Developing Genius*, 1995

¹¹² Freire, *Oppressed*, 153-154.

relationship between individual leaders and the people, whereas from a Bahá'í point of view, unity is achieved through consultative processes between the collective leadership elected by the believers locally, nationally and internationally and the wider community.

In Bahá'í administration unity has been regarded as the most vital element of the organization and management of communities around the world. In particular, at the local and national level the collective leadership (local and national spiritual assemblies) and the members of the community as a whole are encouraged to work and consult in full harmony in a cooperative manner. According to Shoghi Effendi¹¹³ the unity and cooperation of Bahá'í administrative bodies at the local and national level are of utmost importance, upon them depend the unity of the Bahá'í faith and the solidarity of the members of the faith. Freire¹¹⁴ also regards unity as vital to group organization and management development. For him, organization is a highly educational process of learning and perfecting necessary skills and knowledge required to achieve liberation. Which further requires the unity of leaders and the people to create true authority and freedom through dialogue.

Thus unity is a recognised notion in both the Bahá'í Faith and Freirian pedagogy, however they represent two different models of unity. The Bahá'í approach to unity presents a collective spiritual vision of a global faith community for the systematic and united implementation of Bahá'í teachings and its administrative order. For Freire unity represents a collective action and reflection (dialogue) between people and revolutionary leaders for social and political change and humanisation of the world.

According to Freire the notion of unity in diversity was born from his growing awareness of the patterning of the specifics of oppression along the lines of language, race, gender and ethnicity, etc. He further states that he has “been defending the fundamental thesis of unity in diversity, so that various oppressed groups can become more effective in their collective struggle against all forms of oppression”¹¹⁵. Freire believes that through unity in diversity and democratic solidarity, people are potentially able to generate profound shifts in the political and economic systems that intensify racism and separatism. Freire argues that we must begin by understanding the history of these cultural differences, due to the presence of factors such as class, race and gender, and secondly to understand how these differences have contributed to discriminatory practices that exist in our societies today¹¹⁶.

¹¹³ Shoghi Effendi, *Administration*, 24

¹¹⁴ Freire, *Oppressed*, 160

¹¹⁵ Freire, *Dialogue*, 310

¹¹⁶ Freire (1995:395).

Freire's approach to the notion of unity in diversity is in some ways compatible to the Bahá'í approach especially when it comes to the importance of open dialogue and solidarity among diverse sections of society and humanity as a whole for the betterment of the world. Another similarity is Freire's acknowledgement of the importance of understanding and embracing cultural differences for achieving unity in diversity. In the Bahá'í faith the vision of unity in diversity is foundational, considered a fundamental step towards a greater understanding and the celebration of our differences, and consultation provides the opportunity to communicate those differences. In comparison, Freire only began to discuss unity in diversity or unity within diversity later in his writing, without any in depth exposition of the topic. His brief expressions on this topic have been mainly in relation to unity in diversity among educators from educationally and politically oppressive backgrounds.

Another noticeable similarity between the two philosophies is their systematic approach to achieving group goals and aspirations. In the case of Bahá'í consultation, the Universal House of Justice¹¹⁷ directs all Bahá'í institutions and communities to foster the advancement of Bahá'í community growth and development by engaging in a constant process of action, consultation and reflection/learning. Bahá'ís around the world engage in regular consultation meetings; to reflect on issues, consider adjustments, and maintain enthusiasm and unity of thought.

Similarly in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire rouses the oppressed to achieve transformation through dialogue by committing themselves to a constant process of action and reflection. If dialogue or the "word" is deprived of the dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well, and it becomes mere verbalism (Sacrifice of Action). On the other hand if action is emphasised exclusively, to the detriment of reflection, the "word" is converted into activism for activism's sake (Sacrifice of Reflection)¹¹⁸ (1972:68-69). For Freire reflection provides people with a greater understanding of the historical backgrounds of oppression, so that their fight against oppressive conditions is not purely based on informative exposition, without radical action. Freire has regarded the above as his revolutionary theory, holding that any human activity or revolution must consist of action and reflection for it to be transformative. "Human activity is theory and practice, it is reflection and action. It cannot be reduced to either verbalism or activism"¹¹⁹.

Finally, it is important to recognise that there are a number of fundamental differences between the two approaches. Bahá'ís believe that it is through spiritualisation that humanity can advance and develop materially. Also the

¹¹⁷ The Universal House of Justice, *The Five Year Plan 2001-2006: Messages of the Universal House of Justice*, Florida, USA: Palabra Publications, 2001

¹¹⁸ Freire, *Oppressed*, 68-69

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 106

institution of Bahá'í consultation is regarded as a means whereby people can now utilise their God-given wisdom to determine their own destiny, and no longer need self-appointed leaders, clergy and priests to instruct them. Bahá'í teachings most of all stress the spiritual nature of justice and freedom and see them as innate, bestowed when we enter the world. Bahá'í teachings also call us to engage, as individuals, with the social injustices of the world through the development and application of virtues, noble deeds and the development of spiritual, physical, emotional and intellectual capacities. Bahá'ís strongly believe that serious attention must be given to the role of spiritual values in building human capacity, and that overall human progress and development cannot come from political and revolutionary participations alone.

By contrast, Freire focuses on the importance of revolutionary leadership and theory, to transform the world. He also emphasises the political and social nature of justice and fighting for freedom from oppression. He most certainly sees humans as ethical beings always in the state of becoming more “fully human” by engaging in authentic praxis, through dialogue with others, in a critically conscious way¹²⁰. Unlike Bahá'ís, Freire does not recognise religious spirituality as the key element for human betterment and progress. For Freire, liberation and betterment is achieved through conscientisation and humanisation of people and their willingness to fight oppression through dialogue and political activism.

Both Bahá'í consultation and Freireian dialogue are, it is suggested, effective means of freeing people from oppression and a way of giving them the power to make their own decisions and realise their own potential. For Bahá'ís, however, consultation is also a way of “redefining power in society” making radiance of spirit, love of God, humility and patience the dominant forces in all decision-making¹²¹. From the Bahá'í point of view human power is directly connected with spiritual power initiated through the love of God and communion with him. Hence, all consultative meetings always start with prayers and remembrance of the Creator, which is also an effective way for the group to achieve a meditative state and a level of clarity in preparation for the decision-making process itself. Bahá'í teachings acknowledge the power of human intellect and expression in consultation, especially when combined with the power of spiritual insight and faith.

Freire, on the other hand emphasises the power of human intellect and human ethics for humans to achieve their significance. For instance in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* he states that dialogue “requires an intense faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and re-create faith in their vocation to become more fully human”¹²². In this

¹²⁰ Freire, *Teachers*, 102-103

¹²¹ Vick; *Development*, 59-60

¹²² Freire, *Oppressed*, 71

pedagogy the relationship between the dialoguers is the centre of achieving true dialogue, whereas the Bahá'ís believe that this relationship is secondary to the relationship that people must develop with the Creator. However as mentioned previously when it comes to peoples' treatment and their relationship with each other both Freirean and the Bahá'í faith demand the same degree of commitment.

According to Elias¹²³ Freire was committed to the Christian gospel and many concepts such as freedom and equality have deep religious roots, and in his work as consultant to the World Council of Churches he more fully developed the connection between his theological and his educational theories. As an educationist, he preferred a prophetic type of religion that used education as “an instrument of transforming action, a political praxis at the service of permanent human liberation”¹²⁴.

Overall, both the Bahá'í Faith as a religious movement and Freirean pedagogy as a revolutionary movement aim to empower the oppressed and the downtrodden to be more conscious about their own abilities and potentials as human beings. This sense of awakening and consciousness can be pursued in significant measure through the decision-making powers of Bahá'í consultation and Freirean dialogue. Furthermore, they can both be recognised as effective tools for people to unite and depend on one another with intense love and faith. They also provide an ideal environment for people to develop their humanity and human virtues while learning to listen to others with patience, humility and trust.

Possible Contributions of Bahá'í consultation and Freirean Dialogue to the Field of Development

Consultation as a method of communication, decision-making and problem solving has been one of the major features of Bahá'í community development for many decades. In relation to the field of development its usage became official after the 20 October 1983 message from the Universal House of Justice. Bahá'ís around the world were encouraged to become more effective in the field of socio-economic development “through their application of spiritual principles, their rectitude of conduct and the practice of the art of consultation, to uplift themselves and thus become self-sufficient and self-reliant”. As a consequence of this process they would be able to extend the benefits of their experience and their efforts to society as a whole¹²⁵

The call was made globally to Bahá'ís of all social, economic, educational backgrounds to contribute to the field of development by evoking their

¹²³ J.L. Elias, Paulo Freire: *Pedagogue of Liberation*, Malabar, Florida: Krieger Publishing Company. 1994, 110-112

¹²⁴ Paolo, Freire, *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power and Liberation*. London: Macmillan. Translated by Donaldo Macedo with an introduction by Henry Giroux. 1985, 140.

¹²⁵ Vick, *Development*, 1-6

resourcefulness, flexibility and cohesiveness. This is to say that all Bahá'ís, irrespective of their circumstances and resources, are endowed with the capacity to participate in activities and can use the Bahá'í principle of consultation, among others, to raise the quality of human life, followed by unity in spirit and in action.

According to Vick¹²⁶, “social and economic development requires consultation to restore hope and self-confidence to people who do not recognise their own potential”. Although many people are regarded as “underdeveloped”, as belonging to the “third world”, they are presented, within a Bahá'í paradigm, with an equal opportunity to participate in any consultative process. First, they begin by creating a greater awareness about their circumstances by listening to others, secondly, by gaining self-confidence in expressing their own ideas, and thirdly by becoming aware of their own abilities to transform their ideas into united action.

Furthermore, Bahá'í consultation is central to the task of reconceptualizing systems of human relationships. The standard of truth seeking that is required by Bahá'í consultation is far beyond the patterns of negotiation and compromise that tend to characterize present-day discussion of human affairs¹²⁷. This ultimate search for truth as a moral and ethical foundation allows a group to arrive at a consensus about the truth and the most appropriate line of action to be taken in any given situation in unity and solidarity.

In any social and economic development project, individual Bahá'ís are called to strive to transcend their individualist perspectives, in order to function as members of a body¹²⁸. Even when a collective body arrives at a decision about an aspect of a project, and some individuals may not fully agree with the decision they are encouraged to support the decision to preserve and facilitate the learning processes of the group. With regards to development, I believe that this kind of approach to decision-making and problem solving allows people the opportunity to learn from their own mistakes. They come to understand that Bahá'í consultation is a process of discovery rather than a magical solution for their issues and problems. Viewed in this light, consultation is the operating expression of justice in any given development practice. In this context true justice is the ability to consider and consult all possible options with unity of thought and an open mind.

According to Bahá'u'llah¹²⁹ no Bahá'í can achieve their true station as spiritual beings “except through justice. No power can exist except through unity. No welfare and no wellbeing can be attained except through

¹²⁶ Ibid, 51

¹²⁷ Kolestoe, *Developing Genius*, 10

¹²⁸ Ibid, 10.

¹²⁹ Bahá'u'llah, *Consultation*, 1

consultation". The Prosperity of Humankind, a statement by the Bahá'í International Community, points to the significance of justice: "so vital is it to the success of collective endeavour that it must constitute a basic feature of a viable strategy of social and economic development. Indeed, the participation of the people on whose commitment and efforts the success of such a strategy depends becomes effective only as consultation is made the organising principle of every project"¹³⁰.

According to Dahl¹³¹ the use of Bahá'í consultation in development practice is more than just a procedure for arriving at good decisions; more importantly it is a method to teach groups to work together and establish stronger human ties. By participating in the process of consultation people are forced to acknowledge and hopefully appreciate their differences, while respecting and being open to each individual's unique contribution. Dahl also emphasises that in a Bahá'í consultative group everyone has an equal voice regardless of their level of education or wealth, each individual equally possesses a human wisdom. In some cases, in his experience, the best ideas have come from the most humble participants. Overall Dahl regards such consultative development groups as powerful forums for practically and concretely exposing Bahá'ís to the spirit of equality and brotherhood, which is central to the Bahá'í teachings.

Bahá'í consultation according to Vick¹³², challenges injustice by eliminating power relationships in decision-making. Shoghi Effendi¹³³ stresses "...the keynote of the cause of God (Bahá'í Faith) is not dictatorial authority but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation". Bahá'í consultation is an exercise of collaborative power, based on personal and collective qualities such as love, humility and patience, and the importance of considering all ideas regardless of people's status in the society. Again this shows that consultation is no easy skill to learn, especially when it comes to people in positions of power coming to view others as their equals.

Experience has shown, according to Vick¹³⁴ and Dahl¹³⁵ that in numerous Bahá'í development projects, consultation has enabled highly educated development experts and communities of illiterate people to make unified and effective decisions. Such consultation offers all parties a ladder to climb beyond the limited experiences and attitudes they held about each other before entering into the domain of consultation.

¹³⁰ The Bahá'í International Community, *The Prosperity of Humankind. A Statement Prepared by the Bahá'í Office of Public Information*: Haifa, Israel.1995, 1985:10.

¹³¹ GC Dahl, A Bahá'í Perspective on Economic and Social Development. In Lee, A (ed.), *Circle of Unity: Bahá'í Approach to Current Social Issues*. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press. 1984, 158

¹³² Vick, *Development*

¹³³ Shoghi Effendi, *Administration*, 10

¹³⁴ Vick, *Development*

¹³⁵ Dahl, Perspective; GC Dahl, Values, Culture and Development: A Bahá'í Approach. *World Order*, Volume 1987,19(3-4), 11-20.

Consultation is no easy skill to learn, its application in development can at times be slow and seemingly inefficient¹³⁶. It takes patience, sensitivity and profound love to draw out the noble qualities and sentiments in people who have been denied a voice all their lives¹³⁷. Bahá'í consultation, as difficult and challenging as it might seem, will remain at the heart of the Bahá'í faith's contribution to the field development. I believe as the number of successful Bahá'í development projects grow, more and more communities will be interested to collaborate with Bahá'ís in a mutual process of learning and consolidation. While in the short-term Bahá'í consultation is used by Bahá'ís in development practice, the many positive decisions and solutions achieved through it aim to benefit humanity as a whole.

With regards to Freire, his work and philosophy has already been recognised in alternative development tools like Participatory Action Research (PAR), and he is regarded as a legend in this field. In particular the Freirean concept of conscientisation or the stimulation of self-reflected critical awareness has been widely used in the PAR movement. For example, its usage is proven to be effective in a number of Asian initiatives, where the rejection of 'aid' has been recognised as a solution to the problem of people's development ('liberation')¹³⁸.

Furthermore Freirean thinking is well articulated in relation to the role of education in social development and has come to be viewed as an organic component of the process of 'animation'¹³⁹. Similar to dialogue and Bahá'í consultation animation is about learning, knowing and understanding, as well as coming to terms with their own intellectual powers and self discovery as creators of knowledge. Inspired by Freire, the dialogical process of Participatory Action Research has offered many developing communities the chance to create a method of collective reflection and communication. This dialogical process has also been referred to as 'animation', which can be defined as a communication process of people's development of 'intellectual capabilities and collective self-knowledge', and through this process they come to recognise themselves as 'the principal actors in their lives and not as subordinates to other social classes, to stand up with self-esteem, to develop a critical understanding of the conditions of their lives and to express and assert themselves through collective action'¹⁴⁰.

Freire's work in alternative development has increased people's awareness by helping them develop their 'critical faculty' and has encouraged them to break down decades of passive acceptance to become legitimate development actors¹⁴¹. Rahman¹⁴² uses the example of an NGO in

¹³⁶ Vick, *Development*; Universal House of Justice, Wellsprings

¹³⁷ Vick, *Development*, 58

¹³⁸ Rahman, *Self Development*, 81

¹³⁹ Tilakaratna, *Animator*

¹⁴⁰ Rahman, *Self Development*, 156.

¹⁴¹ Oakely, *Empowerment*, 14

Bangladesh implementing Freirean pedagogy to develop self-reflected awareness ('conscientisation') of the landless. The efforts began with a three months process of learning and dialogue on matters relating to land ownership, and even discussing some vocabulary used for expressing land ownership and landlessness in that community. Through this process landless people developed organization consciousness at a local level, starting a savings programme that eventually led to a collective ownership of a number of agriculturally suitable lands.

As discussed above, according to Oakley¹⁴³, Rahman¹⁴⁴, Roberts¹⁴⁵ and other development thinkers, unequal power relations are a key issue in people's participation in their own development. As early as 1974 Roberts declared that development should emphasize more equal distribution of power among people. Paulo Freire¹⁴⁶ convincingly argued that only access to real power could break what he termed 'cultural of silence', which can be characterised by the dependence and the marginality of the powerless. According to Oakley¹⁴⁷, power in a Freirean sense refers to power 'to do', 'to be able' and the feeling of being more capable and in control of situations. This implies that development must recognise people's capacities to take action and to play an active role in development initiatives, and that dialogue is a significant aspect of it.

Freire believes that the development and the transformation of a society must occur in its own existential time, never outside it. He then goes on to state that:

"It is obvious that only a society which is a 'being for itself' can develop. It is essential not to confuse modernisation with development. In order to determine whether or not a society is developing, one must go beyond criteria based on indices of per capita income, the basic elementary criteria is whether or not the society is a 'being for itself'"¹⁴⁸.

This notion of 'being for itself' can only be fully realised by a developing nation or a community through the political, economic and cultural decision-making power of dialogue. Promoting a culture of self-reliance, people are able to realise their own potential and feel a sense of (positive) purpose in the exercise of ownership and decision-making¹⁴⁹.

¹⁴² Rahman, *Self Development*, 62

¹⁴³ Oakely, *Empowerment*

¹⁴⁴ Rahman, *Self Development*

¹⁴⁵ Roberts 1974

¹⁴⁶ Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*. London: Sheed and Ward.1974

¹⁴⁷ Oakely, *Empowerment*, 14

¹⁴⁸ Freire, *Oppressed*, 130

¹⁴⁹ Rahman, *Self-Development*, 19

By using the principles of Freirean dialogue and Bahá'í consultation, development practice can further empower and enable people to articulate and assert themselves verbally and intellectually. The power to voice one's ideas and hopes can ultimately lead to people's control over their own development and self-reliance. This self-reliance and control over their material resources is strengthened by people's united vision, collective identity and solidarity, driving their material strength and also their spiritual, mental and emotional powers.

The power of Bahá'í consultation and Freirean dialogue has already been discovered and used by many grassroots projects to awaken a sense of hope and increased capacity among many peoples. In both approaches people's humanity and self-worth lie at the centre of their methodological goals, they both acknowledge and promote the need for development of certain qualities. These qualities include love, respect, trust and patience, among others, when engaging in developmental decision-making. In addition, they both place a significant emphasis on the power of unity (in diversity, through diversity), and collective nature of group decision-making. In addition they both see the importance of complementing communication with action and vice versa. Overall both approaches share the fundamental principle that through collective and united dialogue and consultation people gain a greater awareness an understanding about their own need for self-development.

It is important to note that the Bahá'í Faith recognises that a large number of people in developing nations hold particular spiritual and religious belief, that make Bahá'í consultation highly relevant. This is where Bahá'í consultation is distinguished from Freirean dialogue and other methods such as "animation" and "consciousness raising". Bahá'í consultation calls for spiritual qualities and positive responses to problems based on truth and justice under a collective elected leadership¹⁵⁰. On the other hand Rahman¹⁵¹ believes that Freirean pedagogy will continue to be influential in people's self-development in the field of PAR, especially in the area of education development.

In this paper, I have tried to address issues to do with the decision-making powers of consultation and dialogue. Further exploration and discussion of the main themes of this study through comprehensive empirical research would be beneficial. Overall, as growing disenchantment with the top down approach in development increases and as some expert consultants fail to provide suitable solutions to development problems, the decision-making processes of Bahá'í consultation and Freirean dialogue will continue to provide alternative modes of achievement and models of what constitutes a desirable world of development.

¹⁵⁰ Vick, *Development*, 53.

¹⁵¹ Rahman, *Self-Development*

