

The Significance of the Four Year Plan *by Andrew Alexander*

Abstract

Developing a capacity to appreciate the significance of the series of International Plans, periodically launched by the Bahá'í World Centre, is an important activity for a Bahá'í in modern times. As the Bahá'í community and its institutions continue to evolve, the importance for its institutions and individuals to increase their familiarity with the vision outlined in this series of Plans has never been greater. The Four Year Plan (1996-2000) is often considered by individual Bahá'ís and their institutions as being one of the most significant of modern times: it simultaneously draws on past experience and reaches out to the future. The vision of the Plan is one that will influence, and be a key reference point for, the Bahá'í world community for a significant portion of the Twenty-First Century. It is for this reason that the author chose to have another look at the central documents which launched the Four Year Plan, seven years after first encountering them, at the Irish National Bahá'í Convention in 1996.

Introduction

International Plans are a series of campaigns periodically launched for the expansion and consolidation of the Bahá'í Faith and play a major part in modern Bahá'í activity. The origin of the contemporary sequence of International Plans stems primarily from initiatives undertaken by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and His letters known as the Tablets of the Divine Plan (1916-17). These Tablets were addressed to the relatively fledgling communities of the United States of America and Canada and their goals included a call for Bahá'ís to move or pioneer to a number of specified territories, expand the scope of Bahá'í literature and learn the languages of the communities to which they pioneered.

The following decades saw a slow if steady evolution of the planning concept under the auspices of the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, Shoghi Effendi. Gaining a degree of momentum with the North American Seven Year Plan (1937-44), among the goals of which were included the formation of at least one Local Spiritual Assembly in each of the North American States and Canadian Provinces and the completion of the exterior ornamentation of the

Bahá'í Temple in Wilmette, Illinois, other nations and regions of the world followed suit; national plans were adopted by the Bahá'í communities of India and Burma, the British Isles, Iran, Australia and New Zealand and Central America. While varying in duration, all of the national plans of this period were focused on the domestic development of national Bahá'í communities. One plan which differed somewhat in the nature of its goals was the two-year Africa Campaign (1951-3), which called for collaboration between a number of National Spiritual Assemblies, thereby heralding to some extent the age of the international Plan.

The Four Year Plan (1996-2000) belongs to this international 'family' of plans and forms part of a sequence, initiated under Shoghi Effendi and continued by the Universal House of Justice, which was first elected in 1963. The first international Plan was known as the Ten Year Crusade (1953-63), in which all of the twelve existing National Spiritual Assemblies in 1953 took part. The central aim of the Crusade was the establishment of Bahá'í communities in every significant territory and island group throughout the world. Since its election in 1963, the Universal House of Justice has initiated six international Plans up to the launch of the Four Year Plan (1996-2000) at the Festival of Ridván in 1996. These were known as the Nine (1964-73), Five (1974-9), Seven (1979-86), Six (1986-92) and Three Year Plans (1993-6). The year 1992-1993 was deemed a Holy Year, the one hundredth anniversary of the passing of Bahá'u'lláh, and was marked by commemorative ceremonies throughout the Bahá'í international community.¹

International Plans are typically launched through the medium of the Ridván Message, although not exclusively so. The Four Year Plan (1996-2000) is a case in point, where the Bahá'í world community was primed by a letter early in 1996 announcing that the next Plan would be four years in duration. Ridván constitutes the major Festival of the Bahá'í Calendar, commemorating Bahá'u'lláh's declaration as a Manifestation of God and marking the beginning of the Bahá'í administrative year, when annual elections take place for the Local and National Spiritual Assemblies. The goals of the international Plans are reflected and acted upon by local individuals and communities of the Faith under the auspices of the national and local

administrative bodies in their jurisdiction. The series of international Plans have included goals related to the numerical and qualitative expansion of the community, the production of literature, the translation of sacred texts, the search for greater public recognition, the enhancement of Bahá'í family life and the construction of building projects of international significance, for example, the construction of Continental Houses of Worship and the development of the administrative buildings at the Bahá'í World Centre on Mount Carmel, Israel.

Shoghi Effendi envisaged that the evolution of the Bahá'í community would be distinguished by a series of plans stretching far into the future to 'the fringes of the Golden Age' - a span of time whose length can only be speculated; it may extend to several hundred years.²

The Four Year Plan Documents

The methodology employed in this brief re-visit to the Four Year Plan (1996-2000) was to read the series of introductory messages that launched the Plan in the winter of 1995 and the spring of 1996. These messages were compiled in a booklet entitled *The Four Year Plan - Messages of the Universal House of Justice* (Palabra Publications, 1996). The messages contained therein consisted of a message dated 26 December 1995 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, a message dated 31 December 1995 to the Bahá'ís of the World, the Ridván 153 message to the Bahá'ís of the World and a series of messages (eight in all) addressed to Bahá'í national communities in different regions of the world. The messages to the Bahá'ís in these different regions were issued along with the Ridván 153 message and were referenced in consultations at the various National Conventions which were then taking place world-wide. In the context of the actual execution of the aims of the Four Year Plan, the above messages served merely to launch it. A large part, some would say a major part, of the Plan are or were the activities launched by national and local institutions in response to the introductory messages; the latter have not been reviewed in this paper. It has been decided that the most appropriate way to begin the process of identifying the significance of the Four Year Plan is to re-visit the original introductory documents:

Our work is intended not only to increase the size and consolidate the foundations of our community, but more particularly to exert a positive influence on the affairs of the entire human race.³

The Four Year Plan and a Leap in Consciousness

From the outset, the Four Year Plan was singled out by the Universal House of Justice as a plan of special significance. It is for this reason that the author considers its introductory messages worthy of review, almost eight years since the Plan was originally launched. In advance of this launch, in the letter to the Continental Boards of Counsellors (December 1995) care was taken to reiterate the seven objectives of the preceding Six and Three Year Plans:

carrying the healing Message of Bahá'u'lláh to the generality of humankind;

greater involvement of the Faith in the life of human society;

a world-wide increase in the translation, production, distribution and use of Bahá'í Literature;

further acceleration in the process of the maturation of local and national Bahá'í communities;

greater attention to universal participation and the spiritual enrichment of individual believers;

a wider extension of Bahá'í family life;

the pursuit of projects of social and economic development in well-established Bahá'í communities.⁴

The Universal House of Justice wrote that these seven objectives 'describe interacting processes that must advance simultaneously over many decades.'⁵ One sentence later, the House of Justice moved from the theme of goals to the theme of action and then beyond action itself to how that action should be undertaken:

National plans, however, will go beyond the mere enumeration of goals to include an analysis of approaches to be adopted and lines of action to be followed, so that the

friends will be able to set out on their endeavours with clarity of mind and decisiveness.⁶

In other words, beyond any analysis of what should and should not be done to further the aims of the Four Year Plan, just as important is the state of mind, 'the clarity of mind and decisiveness' with which any action should be undertaken. In this context, the Four Year Plan concerns a 'leap in consciousness' on the part of what are identified as the three essential components of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh - the individual, the institutions and the community.

Central to this 'leap of consciousness' is a call for the participants of the Plan to take decisive steps in taking ownership of the Plan and assuming responsibility for their own spiritual evolution, both as a community and as individuals. In launching the Plan, the House of Justice announced that the plan should have one major accomplishment: 'a significant advance in the process of entry by troops.' 'Entry by troops' is a term signifying sustained growth of the Bahá'í community on a large scale. In attempting this accomplishment, the first task to be undertaken was deemed to be a change in mindset, a revolution in the head: 'the individual, the institutions, and the community - can foster such growth first by spiritually and mentally accepting the possibility of it ...'⁷

In the section of the Ridván 153 message addressing individual Bahá'ís, the House of Justice draws attention to the fact that the individual has an important role to play in the evolution of the community:

at the crux of any progress to be made is the individual believer, who possesses the power of execution which only he can release through his own initiative and sustained action.⁸

For the institutions of the Bahá'í community, and those who elect them, the Ridván 153 message calls explicitly for 'a new state of mind':

The evolution of local and national Bahá'í Assemblies at this time calls for a new state of mind on the part their members

as well as on the part of those who elect them, for the Bahá'í community is engaged in an immense historical process that is entering a critical stage.⁹

For Bahá'í communities this theme is reflected in two paragraphs in particular. One of these paragraphs defines what 'a community' is deemed to be and the second clarifies the activities that need to be enacted in order for a community to flourish:

A community is of course more than the sum of its membership; it is a comprehensive unit of civilization composed of individuals, families and institutions that are originators and encouragers of systems, agencies and organisations working together with a common purpose for the welfare of people both within and beyond its own borders: it is a composition of diverse, interacting participants that are achieving unity in an unremitting quest for spiritual and social progress.¹⁰

The flourishing of the community, especially at the local level, demands a significant enhancement in patterns of behaviour: those patterns by which the collective expression of the virtues of the individual members and the functioning of the Spiritual Assembly is manifest in the unity and fellowship of the community and the dynamism of its activity and growth.¹¹

In the concluding paragraph of the Ridván 153 message, the House of Justice returns to the theme of individual initiative:

May you all arise to seize the tasks of this crucial moment. May each inscribe his or her own mark on a brief span of time so charged with potentialities and hope for all humanity ...¹²

The Development of Human Resources

In addition to a change of mindset, the Four Year Plan was significant in introducing to the Bahá'í community the phenomenon of world-wide human resource development. If the

Four Year Plan could be said to have two wings, then the 'cerebral wing' could be said to be a change of mindset which embraced the possibility of large-scale sustained growth and its implications, while its practical wing was that of world-wide endeavours in the field of developing human resources. The theme of human resource development is conspicuous in all of the introductory documents of the Four Year Plan. In the message of December addressed to the Continental Boards of Counsellors, it is related that:

During the Nine Year Plan , the Universal House of Justice called upon National Spiritual Assemblies in countries where large-scale expansion was taking place to establish teaching institutes to meet the deepening needs of the thousands who were entering the Faith ... Over the years, in conjunction with these institutes, and often independent of them, a number of courses ... were developed for the purpose of helping the friends gain an understanding of the fundamental verities of the Faith and arise to serve it.¹³

it has become apparent that such occasional courses of instruction ... are not sufficient as a means of human resource development ...¹⁴

The development of human resources on a large scale requires that the establishment of institutes be viewed in a new light ... This purpose can best be achieved through well-organised, formal programmes consisting of courses that follow appropriately designed curricula.¹⁵

In the message of Ridván 153, the theme of 'institutes' is outlined in a way which places human resource development at the centre of Bahá'í community life - and in particular, local Bahá'í community life. The paragraphs of the Ridván 153 message which deal with the theme of the development of human resources outline the pivotal role this process is intended to play in the aforementioned 'central aim' of the Four Year Plan, namely, 'a significant advance in the process of entry by troops.' In order for the process of human resource development to contribute to the 'central aim' of the Plan, Bahá'í institutions had a pivotal role to

play in engaging with the associated 'institute' process. In addition, there was a requirement that both individual Bahá'ís and Bahá'í institutions appreciate the significance and the importance of this process in the light of humanity's needs and the prevailing condition of world affairs:

To effect the possibilities of expansion and consolidation implied by entry by troops, a determined, world-wide effort to develop human resources must be made.¹⁶

There should be no delay in establishing permanent institutes designed to provide well-organised, formally conducted programmes of training on a regular schedule.¹⁷

To sum up the on the subject of the need to develop human resources, and emphasise the significance this process has at the centre of the Plan, the Ridván 153 message contains the following dramatic paragraph:

The next four years will represent an extraordinary period in the history of our Faith, a turning point of epochal magnitude. What the friends throughout the world are now being asked to do is commit themselves, their material resources, abilities and their time to the development of a network of training institutes on a scale never before attempted. These centres of Bahá'í learning will have as their goal one very practical outcome, namely, the raising of large numbers of believers who are trained to foster and facilitate the process of entry by troops with efficiency and love.¹⁸

Conclusion

It has now been almost eight years since the launch of the Four Year Plan. The Universal House of Justice has always stipulated that the Four Year Plan has a special place in the grand scheme of Bahá'í history. In writing this paper, I am reinforced in the belief that individual Bahá'ís and Bahá'í institutions would do well to study this Plan again. In doing so, they could 'touch base' with the original intent behind some of the most conspicuous activities in contemporary Bahá'í community life. In the period since the

launch of the Four Year Plan in 1996 and its conclusion in the year 2000, a number of documents exist which reflect upon the effectiveness of the Plan, and how it was implemented by Bahá'í communities throughout the world, the study of which was not included in this paper. However, it is safe to say that the Bahá'í community found the implementation an immensely challenging enterprise. As the above final quotation indicates, the process of entry by troops is to be facilitated not only with love, but with efficiency – a contradiction in terms, one might say.

The rate of the development of a flourishing and expanding local community life will be the litmus test as to how quickly the individuals, the institutions and the communities are successful in achieving the long-term goals of the Four Year Plan. Despite being international, the Plan, at its heart, was and is about enriching the life of local communities. Human resource development was a goal born of local needs. If there is a central 'canon' to be found at the heart of the Four Year Plan, it is that the three constituent elements of Bahá'í society – the individual, the institutions and the community – must realise that their destinies and well-being are intertwined and interdependent. They must learn to rise to a 'new state of mind' which allows them to embrace and facilitate sustainable growth, on a large scale, over a long period.

References

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2. The Universal House of Justice *The Four Year Plan: Messages of the Universal House of Justice* (Palabra) p. iii.
3. *Ibid.* paragraph 2.13
4. The Universal House of Justice, from a letter dated September 30, 1992 to all the National Spiritual Assemblies introducing the Three Year Plan.
5. *The Four Year Plan* (Palabra) paragraph 1.5.
6. *Ibid.* para. 1.5.
7. *Ibid.* para. 3.18.
8. *Ibid.* para. 3.22.
9. *Ibid.* para. 3.23.
10. *Ibid.* para. 3.25.
11. *Ibid.* para. 3.26.

12. *Ibid.* para. 3.42.
13. *Ibid.* para. 1.13.
14. *Ibid.* para. 1.14.
15. *Ibid.* para. 1.15.
16. *Ibid.* para. 3.27.
17. *Ibid.* para. 3.27.
18. *Ibid.* para. 3.29.