For the Betterment of the World

Historically, religion has been among the most powerful agents of change. Bahá’ís draw on God’s spiritual, social, and administrative laws for today in their efforts to effect social transformation and the advancement of civilization.

The Bahá’í Community’s commitment to social and economic development is rooted in its sacred scriptures, which state that all human beings “have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.” Bahá’u’lláh wrote, “Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.” Fundamental to Bahá’í belief is the conviction that every person, every people, every nation has a part to play in building a peaceful and prosperous global society. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote:

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

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

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

Widespread involvement in social and economic development, however, is a relatively new thrust for the Bahá’í world community; it rose in significance in the early 1980s, chiefly as a result of a substantial increase in the Bahá’í populations of many nations. The ensuing decade constituted a period of experimentation, characterized simultaneously by enthusiasm and trepidation, thoughtful planning and haphazard action, achievements and setbacks.

From this initial stage of diverse activity, the community emerged with the social and economic development work firmly established as a feature of its organic life and with enhanced capacity to gradually shape a distinctly Bahá’í approach.

Concept
Bahá’ís view development as a global enterprise whose purpose is to bring prosperity to all peoples, an enterprise that must pursue its aim in the context of an emerging world civilization. Humanity, the Bahá’í writings explain, is experiencing an age of transition best described as a passage from collective childhood to collective maturity. The hallmark of the age of maturity will be the unification of the human race, which, in turn, requires the establishment of the principles of justice. The current disparity between rich and poor cannot be permitted to persist. All of the earth’s inhabitants should be able to enjoy the fruits of a materially and spiritually prosperous global society. To create such a society, it is essential that people everywhere be empowered to participate in the constructive processes that will give rise to it. Building the capacity in individuals, communities, and institutions to contribute effectively to these processes is the primary task of development.

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

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

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

Bahá’ís reject the notion that there is an inherent conflict between science and religion, a notion that became prevalent in intellectual discourse at a time when the very conception of each system was far from adequate. The harmony of science and religion is one of the fundamental principles of the Bahá’í Faith, which teaches that religion without science soon degenerates into superstition and fanaticism, while science without religion becomes merely the instrument of crude materialism.

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

“Every man of discernment, while walking upon the earth, feeleth indeed abashed, inasmuch as he is fully aware that the thing which is the source of his prosperity, his wealth, his might, his exaltation, his advancement and power is, as ordained by God, the very earth which is trodden beneath the feet of all men.”

— BAHÁ’U’LLÁH

**Approach**

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

Endeavors of social and economic development play a distinct function in the life of the Bahá’í community. They represent the efforts of individuals, groups, and Bahá’í governing councils to apply their religious principles to the achievement of material and social progress. They are intended not to serve Bahá’ís alone but people of all beliefs, and they strive to elicit the widest possible participation.

Because the Bahá’í community is global in scope, it transcends divisions prevalent in society today such as urban and rural, “North” and “South,” “developed” and “underdeveloped.” The process of capacity building that defines development has to be carried forward in every part of the world. In whatever country Bahá’ís reside, whether in their native lands or elsewhere, they are morally bound to participate in this process and contribute their talents to its advancement as members of that national community. Bonds of collaboration, however, extend across national boundaries, and resources flow from the more materially prosperous countries to those with less. Bahá’ís believe that it is the right of every people to trace its own path of development and direct its own affairs. The Bahá’í global administrative structure safeguards this right. Thus, while outside support and resources may be readily available to a project, it is left to those directing it to determine whether the capacity exists to utilize such support constructively.

Progress in the development field, from a Bahá’í perspective, depends largely on natural stirrings at the grassroots of the community, and it is from such stirrings that it should derive its motivating force. In general, then, Bahá’í efforts in social [continued on page 74]
Grassroots initiatives

Of the several thousand social and economic development activities worldwide, the majority are small-scale efforts of Bahá’ís in villages and towns across the globe to draw on the guidance of their Faith’s spiritual and social teachings in order to address challenges faced by local communities. Central to these teachings is the principle that individual potential finds fulfillment in service to humanity. Below is a sampling of initiatives of this type.

- A small group in Tanzania gathers to study materials on the purpose of life, the spiritual nature of humanity, and the power of communion with God. Animated by their ongoing discussions, they broaden their collective efforts in a simple yet natural way, first to include literacy activities to better comprehend the materials under study and then to address vocational needs through tailoring classes.

- The Bahá’ís of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, concerned about the moral education of youth, meet with the Minister of Education, who encourages them to undertake a campaign, address high school students and staff, conduct classes, present books to schools and libraries, and hold public meetings on the topic.

- With the help of the town council, which provides saplings, manpower, and equipment, the Bahá’í community of Klang, Malaysia, organizes a tree planting project. Local dignitaries, teachers, and students participate.

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

- A local Bahá’í governing council in India encourages the establishment of a fish pond, with proceeds from the sale of the fish going towards a hatchery and a training program to help local people acquire and use appropriate technology.

- In South Perth, Australia, the Bahá’í community, seeing the concern of its fellow citizens with issues such as race unity, leadership, and education in the twenty-first century, organizes public discussions that offer valuable insights as well as practical suggestions for change.

- Concerned about declining moral values, a small group in Bulgaria decides to use the power of the media and the arts to reach young people. It produces a short video, puts on a puppet show, and writes a newspaper column — all focused on improving interethnic relations and living a drug-free life.

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

- In an effort to help prison inmates turn their lives around, a group of Bahá’ís in the United States develops a course, “Successful Self-Direction,” which results in a significant drop in the number of repeat offenders among those who have completed it.

▲ A public discussion on social issues organized by the Bahá’í community in South Perth, Australia.

▼ “Clean Dam, Live Water” campaign in Évora, Portugal.
Learning to undertake systematic action: Barli Development Institute for Rural Women

Once a Bahá’í development effort gains a certain amount of experience, it is able to consolidate its activities and begin to benefit, in line with its human resources, large numbers of people. An example is the Barli Development Institute for Rural Women, which has been operating in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh since 1985. Its programs are aimed at the empowerment of women, which it sees as crucial to any process of enduring change in the largely rural areas of the state.

The institute has designed its programs to foster change and to overcome obstacles that outworn practices of the past place in the pathway of development. To this end, it provides the women with an opportunity to reflect on the nature of their relationships with others and with their social institutions, as well as on age-old caste, tribal, and class prejudices. At the same time, they are encouraged to identify positive elements in their culture which need to be preserved and strengthened. Special emphasis is placed on art, music, and dance. Aware that such reflection alone will not help the women become equal partners with men in the development of their communities, the institute also seeks to assist them in acquiring an awareness of their own innate capacities and in developing practical skills to improve health and nutrition, raise household income, increase literacy, and preserve the environment. Besides focusing on women, the institute views the change of attitudes of the other members of their communities — their husbands, parents, and children — as essential and endeavors to promote such change through its programs.

Since its inception, more than 1,600 women have taken part in the flagship component of Barli’s program, a residential course of several months’ duration. Graduates return home to initiate small business ventures, form youth groups, provide moral education to children, and hold parenting and literacy classes. The education of young girls is given priority, and a measurable increase in the number of girls attending school in some areas has been witnessed.

Since 1985, more than 1,600 young women have participated in the flagship residential program of the Barli Development Institute for Rural Women in Indore, India. Empowered by their experiences that enhance their capabilities to be agents of social change, graduates have had a measurable impact on the well-being of their families and home villages. Shown here is a group of participants at the institute.
Programs of the Barli Development Institute have the ultimate goal of assisting women to be equal partners in the development of their communities. Activities in a wide variety of areas, including literacy, environmental preservation, health, and nutrition, all serve to further this end.
and economic development begin with a relatively simple set of actions that can be managed by the local community itself. Complexity emerges naturally and in an organic fashion, as the participants achieve success, gain experience, and increase their capacity to make decisions about their spiritual and material progress and implement them. Local action gives rise to projects of a more sustained nature with more ambitious goals. Invariably, organizational structures are created to support such projects, and some of these nascent agencies possess the potential to evolve into fully fledged development organizations with the ability to undertake programs in a wide field of action.

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

▼ This “Conquering the Word” program in Colombia, one of the Bahá’í community’s many initiatives for the spiritual empowerment of junior youth, focuses on young people aged 12–15. Its materials are designed to improve their power of expression and enhance their capabilities related to making moral choices.

“Be united in counsel, be one in thought. Let each morn be better than its eve and each morrow richer than its yesterday. Man’s merit lieth in service and virtue and not in the pageantry of wealth and riches.” — Bahá’u’lláh
and approaches that have emerged in one country or region to be shared with others, providing a natural channel for the flow of knowledge.

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

Systematization of learning

As Bahá’í development organizations in the field systematize the knowledge being generated through action and reflection, the learning that is a prerequisite for enabling individuals, communities, and institutions to transform society occurs. To facilitate this learning about development theory and practice within the Bahá’í community, the Office of Social and Economic Development (OSED) has been established at the Faith’s world headquarters in Haifa, Israel. Through a network of collaborators working in the field, the agency supports organizations that have reached a certain level of complexity. In addition, it ensures that material resources become increasingly available to Bahá’í development efforts, coordinating the international flow of such resources and administering some of the funds intended for this purpose. OSED also offers general advice, technical and otherwise, in response to questions that arise.

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

The identification of trends in Bahá’í literacy efforts gave rise to what is known as the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program. In 1994, a group of edu-
As Bahá’í development projects grow and diversify, organizational structures evolve to ensure their long-term viability and to meet expanding needs. These agencies systematically train human resources and manage a number of lines of action to address problems of local communities and entire regions in a coordinated, interdisciplinary fashion. The existence in a region of a development organization dedicated to the advancement of a population provides a coherent framework for actions of various kinds. Capacity is created to assess social forces and conditions, to build a vision of the future, to evaluate resources, and to devise well-defined strategies. As the organization systematizes the knowledge being generated through action and reflection in diverse fields, the learning that is a prerequisite for meaningful transformation occurs. An example of this type of organization is the Fundación para la Aplicación y Enseñanza de las Ciencias (FUNDAEC, Foundation for the Application and Teaching of the Sciences).

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

Most notable among the results of this learning is a program now being implemented in several other countries in Latin America. Through years of research and action to address the needs of rural youth, FUNDAEC has developed an alternative secondary tutorial school system, Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial (SAT, System of Tutorial Learning), and a corresponding university-level teacher training program. The SAT program, with its emphasis on the application of scientific capabilities to local contexts, reaches some 30,000 students in Colombia alone. A central concern of the curriculum it delivers is the integration of knowledge. A unit of instruction focusing on the development of any given capability will draw its material from a number of academic disciplines, while at the same time seamlessly weaving elements of knowledge about social and spiritual reality into course content. Theory is studied in the context of practice, and students are asked to consider the broader implications of what they are learning for the betterment of their lives and society.

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

▲ The campus at which some of the university-level programs of FUNDAEC are conducted.

▲ FUNDAEC’s approach enables communities to generate and apply scientific knowledge to address locally-identified needs and to contribute to the transformation of society.
[continued from page 75]

cators was invited by OSED to analyze the experiences gained by Bahá’í communities in eliminating illiteracy. On this basis, pilot literacy projects were created in Cambodia, the Central African Republic, and Guyana. It became clear from these and subsequent projects that the group most receptive to programs that could enhance the power of expression were junior youth, aged 12 to 15. Beyond instructions in the simple mechanics of reading and writing, the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program seeks to endow young people in this age-group with the capabilities of reading with good comprehension and expressing thoughts clearly and eloquently. Emphasis is placed on the need for positive words and thoughts to be accompanied by pure deeds.

Primary health care is another area of concerted effort. During the 1980s and the early part of the 1990s a wide range of health-related projects were undertaken by Bahá’ís. In analyzing their experience, OSED noted that the most successful projects belonged to a network in East Africa that promoted primary health care, especially through the training of Community Health Workers. Those involved in the projects were brought together by OSED for consultations at the end of 1996. Out of their discussions emerged a program of several modules that will train individuals to promote health within their extended families and communities. A text for the first level is currently being offered to development organizations throughout the world, while materials for the other levels, including supplementary ones that focus on specialized areas such as nutrition, women’s health, prevention of alcohol use, and HIV/AIDS, are being written and field-tested.

Contributing to the Global Development Discourse

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

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

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

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

Two major BIC documents develop this conception at greater length: The Prosperity of Humankind, distributed at the World Summit for Social Development, and Valuing Spirituality in Development: Initial Considerations Regarding the Creation of Spiritually Based Indicators for Development, prepared for presentation at the World Faiths Development Dialogue Conference. The first of two statements, which defines human prosperity in both spiritual and material terms, advances a frank analysis of the prevailing materialistic notions and practices in the development field, and proposes a development strategy aimed at empowering the generality of humankind to take responsibility in the shaping of the planet’s future. Valuing Spirituality in Development suggests five principles fundamental to the attainment of a civilization that
The Colloquium on Science, Religion, and Development, held in November 2000 in New Delhi, India, brought together some 150 development specialists, religious leaders, and scientists to discuss how the complementary knowledge systems of science and religion could be systematically applied to development efforts. Shown here on the final day of the event, representatives of different consultative working groups that held in-depth deliberations on specific topics report their findings to all the participants.

is just, united, and sustainable: unity in diversity, equity and justice, the equality of the sexes, trustworthiness and moral leadership, and the independent investigation of truth. The statement goes on to focus attention on areas of work that it believes must command priority in the application of these principles: economic development; education; environmental stewardship; the meeting of basic needs in food, nutrition, health, and shelter; and governance and participation.

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

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