

Capacity Building, Participation, and Organic Growth

The Nature of Bahá'í Social and Economic Development

Issues for Social Action with Youth

Bahá'í Social – Social Action6_1 participation

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Human potentialities

We must now highly resolve to arise and lay hold of all those instrumentalities that promote the peace and well-being and happiness, the knowledge, culture and industry, the dignity, value and station, of the entire human race. Thus, through the restoring waters of pure intention and unselfish effort, the earth of human potentialities will blossom with its own latent excellence and flower into praiseworthy qualities, and bear and flourish until it comes to rival that rose garden of knowledge which belonged to our forefathers.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, [The Secret of Divine Civilization](#), p. 5)

Progress

The world of politics is like the world of man; he is seed at first, and then passes by degrees to the condition of embryo and foetus, acquiring a bone structure, being clothed with flesh, taking on his own special form, until at last he reaches the plane where he can befittingly fulfill the words: “the most excellent of Makers.”

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, pp. 124-125)

Progress

Just as this is a requirement of creation and is based on the universal Wisdom, the political world in the same way cannot instantaneously evolve from the nadir of defectiveness to the zenith of rightness and perfection. Rather, qualified individuals must strive by day and by night, using all those means which will conduce to progress, until the government and the people develop along every line from day to day and even from moment to moment.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, [The Secret of Divine Civilization](#), pp. 124-125)

Growth is Gradual

It is even as the seed: The tree exists within it but is hidden and concealed; when the seed grows and develops, the tree appears in its fullness. In like manner, the growth and development of all beings proceeds by gradual degrees. This is the universal and divinely ordained law and the natural order. The seed does not suddenly become the tree; the embryo does not at once become the man; the mineral substance does not in a moment become the stone: No, all these grow and develop gradually until they attain the limit of perfection.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, [Some Answered Questions](#), p. 229)

Gradual Progression

In a living organism the full measure of its development is not known or realized at the time of its inception or birth. Development and progression imply gradual stages or degrees. For example, spiritual advancement may be likened to the light of the early dawn. Although this dawn light is dim and pale, a wise man who views the march of the sunrise at its very beginning can foretell the ascendancy of the sun in its full glory and effulgence. He knows for a certainty that it is the beginning of its manifestation and that later it will assume great power and potency. Again, for example, if he takes a seed and observes that it is sprouting, he will know assuredly that it will ultimately become a tree.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, [The Promulgation of Universal Peace](#), pp. 181–182)

Universal Participation

“Regard the world as the human body,” wrote Bahá’u’lláh to Queen Victoria.... In the human body, every cell, every organ, every nerve has its part to play. When all do so the body is healthy, vigorous, radiant, ready for every call made upon it. No cell, however humble, lives apart from the body, whether in serving it or receiving from it.

(Universal House of Justice, September 1964 to the Bahá’ís of the World)

Universal Participation

This is true of the body of mankind in which God has “endowed each and all with talents and faculties”, and is supremely true of the body of the Bahá’í world community, for this body is already an organism, united in its aspirations, unified in its methods, seeking assistance and confirmation from the same Source, and illumined with the conscious knowledge of its unity. Therefore, in this organic, divinely guided, blessed, and illumined body the participation of every believer is of the utmost importance, and is a source of power and vitality as yet unknown to us....

(Universal House of Justice, September 1964 to the Bahá’ís of the World)

Universal Participation

The real secret of universal participation lies in the Master's oft expressed wish that the friends should love each other, constantly encourage each other, work together, be as one soul in one body, and in so doing become a true, organic, healthy body animated and illumined by the spirit. In such a body all will receive spiritual health and vitality from the organism itself, and the most perfect flowers and fruits will be brought forth.

(Universal House of Justice, September 1964 to the Bahá'ís of the World)

A Seed Needs to Grow

As you can see, all these developments relate directly to the teaching work inasmuch as the Bahá'í communities must reach a certain size before they can begin to implement many of them. How, for example, can a Bahá'í community demonstrate effectively the abolition of prejudices which divide the inhabitants of a country until it has a cross-section of those inhabitants within its ranks?

(3 January 1982 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

A Seed Needs to Grow

A seed is the vital origin of a tree and of a tremendous importance for that reason, but it cannot produce fruit until it has grown into a tree and flowered and fruited. So a Bahá'í community of nine believers is a vital step, since it can bring into being for that locality the divine institution of the Local Spiritual Assembly, but it is still only a seed, and needs to grow in size and in the diversity of its members before it can produce really convincing fruit for its fellow-citizens.

(3 January 1982 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

Principle of Organic Growth

The... fundamental principle which enables us to understand the pattern towards which Bahá'u'lláh wishes human society to evolve is the principle of organic growth which requires that detailed developments, and the understanding of detailed developments, become available only with the passage of time and with the help of the guidance given by that Central Authority in the Cause to whom all must turn.

(27 April 1995 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

Principle of Organic Growth

In this regard one can use the simile of a tree. If a farmer plants a tree, he cannot state at that moment what its exact height will be, the number of its branches or the exact time of its blossoming. He can, however, give a general impression of its size and pattern of growth and can state with confidence which fruit it will bear. The same is true of the evolution of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh.

(27 April 1995 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

Accepting Responsibility for All

Humanity's crying need will not be met by a struggle among competing ambitions or by protest against one or another of the countless wrongs afflicting a desperate age. It calls, rather, for a fundamental change of consciousness, for a wholehearted embrace of Bahá'u'lláh's teaching that the time has come when each human being on earth must learn to accept responsibility for the welfare of the entire human family.

(Universal House of Justice, 24 May 2001, Events Completing Mount Carmel Projects)

The Needs of Society

As you know, the attention of the Bahá'í world has been, and will continue to be for at least the next fifteen years, focused on advancing the process of entry by troops. It is expected that, as this process gathers momentum at the local level, one of the natural consequences will be the emergence of a vibrant Bahá'í community life characterized by a desire to apply the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh to the needs of society. Effective social action will result, then, as capacity at the grassroots of the community increases and collective consciousness is raised.

(6 September 2006 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

Process of Growth

A greater involvement in the life of society, individually and collectively, will be an inevitable outcome as the process of growth gathers momentum in advanced clusters. In Bahá'í communities with limited resources too much involvement in such efforts at an early stage may dissipate their energies and detract from the coherence of activities necessary for growth. Yet, in areas where the Faith has sufficiently consolidated itself, it is natural to expect that Bahá'ís would engage in social action, initially by finding ways to apply the Teachings to the problems afflicting their families, neighbors and the communities in which they live.

(11 September 2008 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

Involvement in the Life of Society

In its Ridván 2008 message, the House of Justice observed that, as the work of expansion and consolidation progresses, Bahá'ís will be drawn further and further into the life of the society around them. The nature of this encounter will necessarily be organic, gradual, and guided by the learning process in which the believers everywhere are already engaged. Moreover, it is hoped that the Bahá'í community's increasing involvement with society will occur naturally in every cluster around the world.

(16 June 2009 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

Not through the Bahá'ís alone

... every human being and every group of individuals, irrespective of whether they are counted among His followers, can take inspiration from His teachings, benefiting from whatever gems of wisdom and knowledge will aid them in addressing the challenges they face. Indeed, the civilization that beckons humanity will not be attained through the efforts of the Bahá'í community alone.

Numerous groups and organizations, animated by the spirit of world solidarity that is an indirect manifestation of Bahá'u'lláh's conception of the principle of the oneness of humankind, will contribute to the civilization destined to emerge out of the welter and chaos of present-day society.

(Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2010, to the Bahá'ís of the World)

The Challenge to be Faced

A small community, whose members are united by their shared beliefs, characterized by their high ideals, proficient in managing their affairs and tending to their needs, and perhaps engaged in several humanitarian projects—a community such as this, prospering but at a comfortable distance from the reality experienced by the masses of humanity, can never hope to serve as a pattern for restructuring the whole of society.

(Universal House of Justice, 28 December 2010 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors)

The Challenge to be Faced

That the worldwide Bahá'í community has managed to avert the dangers of complacency is a source of abiding joy to us. Indeed, the community has well in hand its expansion and consolidation. Yet, to administer the affairs of teeming numbers in villages and cities around the globe—to raise aloft the standard of Bahá'u'lláh's World Order for all to see—is still a distant goal.

(Universal House of Justice, 28 December 2010 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors)

The Challenge to be Faced

Therein, then, lies the challenge that must be faced by those in the forefront of the learning process which will continue to advance over the course of the next Plan. Wherever an intensive programme of growth is established, let the friends spare no effort to increase the level of participation. Let them strain every nerve to ensure that the system which they have so laboriously erected does not close in on itself but progressively expands to embrace more and more people....

(Universal House of Justice, 28 December 2010 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors)

The Challenge to be Faced

And let them not forget the lessons of the past which left no doubt that a relatively small band of active supporters of the Cause, no matter how resourceful, no matter how consecrated, cannot attend to the needs of communities comprising hundreds, much less thousands, of men, women and children.

(Universal House of Justice, 28 December 2010 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors)

Pattern of Spiritual and Social Life

The pattern of spiritual and social life taking shape in clusters that involves study circles, children's classes, junior youth groups, devotional meetings, home visits, teaching efforts, and reflection meetings, as well as Holy Day observances, Nineteen Day Feasts, and other gatherings, provides abundant opportunities for engagement, experience, consultation, and learning that will lead to change in personal and collective understanding and action.

(10 April 2011 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

Pattern of Spiritual and Social Life

Issues of prejudice of race, class, and color will inevitably arise as the friends reach out to diverse populations, especially in the closely knit context of neighborhoods. There, every activity can take a form most suited to the culture and interests of the population, so that new believers can be quickened and confirmed in a nurturing and familiar environment, until they are able to offer their share to the resolution of the challenges faced by a growing Bahá'í community.

(10 April 2011 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

Pattern of Spiritual and Social Life

For this is not a process that some carry out on behalf of others who are passive recipients—the mere extension of a congregation and invitation to paternalism—but one in which an ever-increasing number of souls recognize and take responsibility for the transformation of humanity set in motion by Bahá'u'lláh. In an environment of love and trust born of common belief, practice, and mission, individuals of different races will have the intimate connection of heart and mind upon which mutual understanding and change depend.

(10 April 2011 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

Pattern of Spiritual and Social Life

As a result of their training and deepening, a growing number of believers will draw insights from the Writings to sensitively and effectively address issues of racial prejudice that arise within their personal lives and families, among community members, and in social settings and the workplace. As programs of growth advance and the scope and intensity of activities grow, the friends will be drawn into participation in conversations and, in time, initiatives for social action at the grassroots where issues pertaining to freedom from prejudice naturally emerge, whether directly or indirectly.

(10 April 2011 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

Everyone Will Contribute

What should be stated plainly here is that Bahá'ís do not believe the transformation thus envisioned will come about exclusively through their own efforts. Nor are they trying to create a movement that would seek to impose on society their vision of the future. Every nation and every group—indeed, every individual—will, to a greater or lesser degree, contribute to the emergence of the world civilization towards which humanity is irresistibly moving.

(Universal House of Justice, 2 March 2013 to the Bahá'ís of Iran)

A Pattern of Community Life

... Bahá'ís are engaged in cities and villages across the globe in establishing a pattern of life in which increasing numbers, irrespective of background, are invited to take part.

(27 December 2017 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

A Pattern of Community Life

This pattern, expressive of the dynamic coherence between the material and spiritual dimensions of life, includes classes for the spiritual education of children in which they also develop a deep appreciation for the fundamental unity of the various world religions; groups that assist young people to navigate a crucial stage of their lives and to withstand the corrosive forces that especially target them; circles of study wherein participants reflect on the spiritual nature of existence and build capacity for service to the community and society; gatherings for collective worship that strengthen the devotional character of the community; and, in time, a growing range of endeavours for social and economic development.

(27 December 2017 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

A Pattern of Community Life

This pattern of community life is giving rise to vibrant and purposeful new communities wherein relationships are founded on the oneness of mankind, universal participation, justice, and freedom from prejudice. All are welcome. The process which is unfolding seeks to foster collaboration and build capacity within every human group—with no regard to class or religious background, with no concern for ethnicity or race, and irrespective of gender or social status—to arise and contribute to the advancement of civilization.

(27 December 2017 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

Canjavu, South Kivu Democratic Republic of Congo

Case Study of Social Action

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Canjavu, South Kivu, DRC

In Canjavu, a village in South Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo, residents have been learning to address long-standing challenges in education, agriculture, and societal harmony. The Bahá'í moral and spiritual education system has helped them develop capacities in their efforts to contribute to social transformation.



Canjavu, South Kivu, DRC

Canjavu, South Kivu, DRC

Education has played a central role in Canjavu's renewal over the decades. Years ago, a school was established in the village, but without adequate support, teachers eventually had to leave to find work elsewhere, and the school ceased operating. Children had to travel long distances to attend school, which was particularly challenging during the rainy season.



Canjavu school, South Kivu, DRC

Canjavu, South Kivu, DRC

One of the most striking developments in recent times was how the entire village came together to revive a school that was no longer there. The process of re-establishing the school began with residents, including village chiefs and people trained as teachers by a Bahá'í-inspired educational organization, consulting together about how to address their children's educational needs. Many began making baskets and this, along with small investments by some, supported the needs of the school and the teachers.



Canjavu, South Kivu, DRC

Canjavu, South Kivu, DRC

The school now serves students at both primary and secondary levels. Through community-building programs, young people have especially cultivated a spirit of service. Some youth have become the teachers of those who enter the lower classes.



Canjavu school, South Kivu, DRC



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Canjavu, South Kivu, DRC

The community's capacity for collective action became especially evident when heavy rains last year destroyed much of the school's infrastructure. Badi Barhigenga, chief of Canjavu village, recalled how quickly parents mobilized for recovery efforts. "I can contribute planks," said some parents, another, 'I can assist with masonry work.' Others said they would bring additional materials, and that is how the school was reopened."



Canjavu school, South Kivu, DRC



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Canjavu school, South Kivu, DRC

Canjavu, South Kivu, DRC

The village's development extended beyond education to addressing social patterns that had impacted community bonds, such as the departure of many men seeking work elsewhere. Through extensive consultation among families and local Bahá'í institutions, residents recognized the need to strengthen their local agricultural economy.



Canjavu, South Kivu, DRC

Canjavu, South Kivu, DRC

The men understood that through agriculture they had a very important part to play. Residents began emphasizing agriculture as an important livelihood. Today, when you enter Canjavu, you will find that both women and men are involved in every process together.



Canjavu, South Kivu, DRC



Canjavu, South Kivu, DRC



Canjavu, South Kivu, DRC

Canjavu, South Kivu, DRC

Devotional gatherings have contributed significantly to Canjavu's development by fostering social spaces that bring together worship with service. These gatherings have inspired various social action efforts, with residents applying sustainable farming techniques to transform previously unproductive soil into fertile farmland.



Canjavu, South Kivu, DRC



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Canjavu, South Kivu, DRC

These, and countless other efforts, have enhanced how residents of Canjavu relate to one another and undertake initiatives to address needs. Underlying all initiatives is a growing conviction that all are part of one human family. Residents see themselves as the protagonists of their own development.



Canjavu, South Kivu, DRC

Canjavu, South Kivu, DRC

They no longer view differences of religion as barriers to efforts toward the betterment of their village. They see each other as one big family and each person plays a role in helping change the village.

Bahá'í World News Service, 2026, Fostering collective action in Canjavu village
<https://news.bahai.org/podcasts/in-conversation/1863/in-conversation-fostering-collective-action-canjavu-village>