

# Capacity Building, Participation, and Organic Growth Development Projects

The Nature of Bahá'í Social and Economic Development

Issues for Social Action with Youth

Bahá'í Social – Social Action6\_2 projects

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# Philanthropy for All

*In all the prophetic Dispensations, philanthropic affairs were confined to their respective peoples only—with the exception of small matters, such as charity, which it was permissible to extend to others. But in this wonderful Dispensation, philanthropic undertakings are for all humanity, without any exception, because this is the manifestation of the mercifulness of God.*

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, from a talk—translated from the Persian)

# Equality of Man and Woman

*The realities of things have been revealed in this radiant century, and that which is true must come to the surface. Among these realities is the principle of the equality of man and woman—equal rights and prerogatives in all things appertaining to humanity.... Woman must especially devote her energies and abilities toward the industrial and agricultural sciences, seeking to assist mankind in that which is most needful. By this means she will demonstrate capability and ensure recognition of equality in the social and economic equation.*

*(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, [The Promulgation of Universal Peace](#), p. 395)*

# Sacred Writings - History

Another essential requirement is the expediting of the tasks of transcribing, collecting and despatching the Sacred Writings to the Holy Land, and recording the general history of the Cause of God. The Western believers in the far-flung reaches of the free world, who have set about prosecuting important plans, are anxious and expectant that these two tasks be speedily completed and the necessary preparations for their forthcoming projects be made without delay, thus enabling them to give concrete expression to their hopes and plans for the future, and to impart a great momentum to the spread of the Holy Cause.

(Shoghi Effendi, letter of September 1926 to the Bahá'ís of the East, compilation §89)

# Participation in Associations

The same applies to the participation of the friends in charitable, scientific, and literary associations. The friends must, with wisdom and moderation, after careful consultation, and according to their capacity and means, assist any association that sincerely aims to contribute to the common weal and to the best interests of the world of humanity. They should participate to the extent possible, but must refrain from the least involvement in politics, whether in their deeds, hearts, or words, and must shun and avoid any association with malevolent and contending parties.

(Shoghi Effendi, letter of September 1926 to the Bahá'ís of the East, compilation §89)

# Inner Life and Environment

We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions.

(17 February 1933 on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

# Principles for Projects

There are two principles which the House of Justice feels are fundamental to the generality of such projects of social and economic development, although, of course, there will be exceptions. The first is that they should be built on a substructure of existing, sufficiently strong local Bahá'í communities. The second is that the long-term conduct of the project should aim at self-sufficiency and not be dependent upon continuing financial support from outside.

(8 May 1984 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

# Principles for Projects

The first principle implies that the projects of social and economic development now to be undertaken are a natural stage of the growth of the Bahá'í community and are needed by the community itself, although they will, of course, benefit a much wider segment of society....

(8 May 1984 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

# Principles for Projects

The second principle must take into account that any project started by the Cause should be designed to grow soundly and steadily, and not to collapse from attrition. In other words, external assistance and funds, Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í, may be used for capital acquisitions, to make surveys, to initiate activities, to bring in expertise, but the aim should be for each project to be able to continue and to develop on the strength of local Bahá'í labour, funds and enthusiasm even if all external aid should be cut off.

(8 May 1984 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

# Local Involvement

These projects include schools, literacy programmes, moral education classes, academic training, health plans, special programmes for the advancement of women and minority groups, agricultural programmes, and special programmes for the conservation of the environment, etc. Experience has shown that if help is provided from abroad without the cooperation and involvement of the local inhabitants, the locals do not consider the project as something that belongs to them and feel no responsibility toward it, but if they initiate the process of identifying their needs and take part in the decision-making and execution processes they will feel responsible for the preservation and continued operation of the project.

(30 July 1996 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

# Bahá'í Approach to Development

The worldwide Bahá'í community, as an organic whole, transcends divisions prevalent in society today, such as “North” and “South”, “developed” and “underdeveloped”. Social and economic development efforts are undertaken by Bahá'ís, irrespective of the degree of material prosperity achieved by their nations, as they strive to apply the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh to the gradual process of building a new civilization. Every follower of Bahá'u'lláh is a member of this worldwide community and can rightfully offer to contribute to a specific endeavor in any country.

(Universal House of Justice, memorandum of 11 March 1997 to Office of Social and Economic Development)

# Bahá'í Approach to Development

As the friends gain experience in social and economic development, and as they advance in their studies of various branches of learning or in their professional fields, individuals arise in every continent who have expertise in some aspect of development work and who wish to offer their services to projects at home or abroad. If their energies are not channelled effectively, and they are not given a realistic picture of Bahá'í development efforts, these friends will later become frustrated when they realize that the capacity of Bahá'í projects overseas to utilize their talents and services is limited.

(Universal House of Justice, memorandum of 11 March 1997 to Office of Social and Economic Development)

# Bahá'í Approach to Development

For this reason, it is important that conferences, seminars and promotional materials not reinforce an image of “development projects” as understood by society at large. Bahá'í efforts in this field generally take the form of grassroots initiatives carried out by small groups of believers in the towns and villages where they reside. As these initiatives are nurtured, some grow into more substantial programs with permanent administrative structures. Yet very few can be compared with the kind of complex projects promoted and funded by government agencies and large nongovernmental organizations.

[\(Universal House of Justice, memorandum of 11 March 1997 to Office of Social and Economic Development\)](#)

# Bahá'í Approach to Development

The effective use of the talents of individuals with particular expertise also demands vigilance in ensuring that the initiative of some, usually those with access to more resources, does not end up suffocating the initiatives of others. The Administrative Order is structured in a way that fosters initiative and safeguards the right of people to be meaningfully involved in the development of their own communities. Accordingly the activities of the friends in each country fall under the guidance of the institutions of the Faith in that country....

(Universal House of Justice, memorandum of 11 March 1997 to Office of Social and Economic Development)

# Bahá'í Approach to Development

In general, the determining factor in matching offers of service and assistance to projects should be the capacity of the projects to receive help and not the amount of resources available. It is quite possible that the talents of the friends, especially those in ... exceed the capacity of the development projects elsewhere to receive assistance at this stage in the growth of the Faith.

(Universal House of Justice, memorandum of 11 March 1997 to Office of Social and Economic Development)

# Bahá'í Approach to Development

In this connection, the two-pronged approach you are pursuing seems most appropriate. While striving to help increase the capacity of projects worldwide, you are at the same time encouraging individual believers from more materially prosperous countries to become involved in Bahá'í projects at home. You should also continue encouraging them to participate in worthy endeavors outside the Faith in order to influence their professional fields and infuse them with the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. They should be assured that this is, in and of itself, a tremendous service to the Cause and not feel that they are serving the Faith only if they dedicate themselves directly to Bahá'í projects.

(Universal House of Justice, memorandum of 11 March 1997 to Office of Social and Economic Development)

# Social Change

As noted in the Ridván message, social change is not a project that one group of people carries out for the benefit of another. The scope and complexity of social action, the message explains, must be commensurate with the human resources available in a village or neighbourhood to carry it forward. This implies that efforts best begin on a modest scale and grow organically as capacity within the population develops—essentially capacity to apply with increasing effectiveness elements of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, together with the contents and methods of science, to social reality.

(18 July 2010 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

# Social Change

In this light, the House of Justice has made clear in many of its recent messages that, at the present stage in the development of the Faith, building capacity to address the material needs of a local community should not be considered in isolation from a process already set in motion to address its spiritual needs. This process, of course, gathers momentum as devotional meetings, children's classes, junior youth groups and study circles are established in a region. It is directed by the institutions and agencies of the Faith and depends heavily on the exercise of initiative by a growing number of individuals in the region concerned for the well-being of their communities.

# Social Change

It is such individuals—men and women, young and old—who, thus empowered, begin to make and implement decisions about their spiritual and material progress, increasing still further their collective capacity as they do so. Depending on the circumstances in the region, the endeavours of a non-profit development organization, operating in keeping with the principles of the Faith, may well help to facilitate this now more complex process of empowerment unfolding in the region.

(18 July 2010 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

# Social Change

- Such an organization, which itself emerges organically and grows in strength over time, functions under the moral guidance of the institutions in the country. Those most intimately involved with the organization by necessity submit themselves to the discipline needed to ensure that their efforts constantly serve to contribute to the empowerment of a population, requiring them to work close to the grassroots, alongside the people themselves; to share in their struggles; and to recognize that economic benefits will be few.

(18 July 2010 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

# Sustainable Social Action

You will no doubt be familiar with the guidance provided by the Universal House of Justice in its *Riḍván 2010* message concerning “certain fundamental concepts” that pertain to instances of social action pursued by Bahá’ís, which would include social and economic development projects. Among these are the principles that “while social action may involve the provision of goods and services in some form, its primary concern must be to build capacity within a given population to participate in creating a better world” and that “social change is not a project that one group of people carries out for the benefit of another.”

(22 October 2012 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

# Sustainable Social Action

- Indeed, such endeavours are best initiated from within the communities they are intended to benefit, and great care must be exercised so as to ensure that the resources available from outside the community do not define the nature of the projects undertaken.

(22 October 2012 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

# Sustainable Social Action

In places around the world where the process of growth is advancing well, the enhanced capabilities fostered within individuals by the training institute process are naturally giving rise to sustainable programmes of social action at the grassroots, as it is the members of a given community who are in the best position to understand their social reality, assess their needs, and trace their own path of progress. For this reason, Bahá'ís are discouraged from designing and implementing development projects in countries other than their own.

(22 October 2012 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

# Capacity Building

At the heart of such an approach lies the question of capacity building. It has been observed in cluster after cluster that the capacity to carry out efforts in the area of social action is gradually raised as growing numbers of individuals are involved in the institute process and are assisted to dedicate their energies to the spiritual and material transformation of the regions in which they live. Generally speaking, Bahá'í social and economic development efforts begin at the grassroots, start small, and grow organically, commensurate with the local human and financial resources available to them.

(19 April 2013 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

# Capacity Building

In this connection,... social change should not be conceived of as a project that one group of people carries out for the benefit of another, nor should it be reduced to the mere delivery of goods or services. In light of these considerations, Bahá'ís are discouraged from implementing projects in countries where they do not reside. Further, for a number of reasons, considerable caution needs to be exercised in cases where external funds are made available to a particular endeavor.

(19 April 2013 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

# Capacity Building

Experience has shown, for example, that the right of the local community to trace its own path of progress can be compromised when those providing resources from outside of the community assume responsibility for the management and direction of an initiative or exert undue influence on the nature of projects undertaken.

(19 April 2013 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

# Capacity Building

Moreover, organizations which are solely reliant on external support often struggle to sustain their activities in the event that outside sources of funding are withdrawn. In order to avoid such challenges, the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá'í World Centre helps to coordinate the flow of resources to Bahá'í-inspired development projects, taking into account both the conditions in the region and the maturity of particular initiatives.

(19 April 2013 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

# The Capacity of Communities

... development, from a Bahá'í perspective, is viewed as a process, the main protagonists of which are the people themselves. Emphasis is placed on building the capacity of communities to make and implement decisions about their spiritual and material progress. This necessitates a process whereby small-scale endeavors emerge organically from a pattern of community life which is created as the friends in a given cluster gain experience in applying the framework for action associated with the Five Year Plan.

(30 December 2014 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

# The Capacity of Communities

As the believers engage in the processes of expansion and consolidation, they acquire through their efforts a sharper understanding of the challenges faced by the populations they serve and gradually learn to apply the Teachings of the Faith to the pressing needs of their communities. Experience throughout the Bahá'í world has demonstrated that it is generally unproductive to introduce external agencies, technologies, or funding sources at an early stage—that is, before capacity to initiate and sustain projects is built at the grassroots.

(30 December 2014 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

# Local Population in the Vanguard

In its early stages, the systematic effort to reach out to a population and foster its participation in the process of capacity building accelerates markedly when members of that population are themselves in the vanguard of such an effort. These individuals will have special insight into those forces and structures in their societies that can, in various ways, reinforce the endeavours under way.

(Universal House of Justice, 29 December 2015 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors)

# Iceland Reforestation

## Case Study of Social Action

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# Iceland Reforestation

A unique project over several generations is pioneering reforestation in Iceland, where centuries of forest cutting for firewood and sheep grazing left the country denuded with severe soil erosion. Skógar (or “forests”) was originally a farm with a land cover of 13 sq. Km, mostly mountainous. The site lies in northwest Iceland in a region called the Westfjords. Already in the 1800’s the forests at Skógar, which had been highly prized at its settlement, had been lost, but some of the scrub remained.



Skógar Þorskalirði  
Júkkaskógur



Iceland Reforestation - Skógar

# Iceland Reforestation

Skógar is an historic and treasured site in Iceland. It was the location where, from the 9th century, tribal chiefs of the early settlers met to resolve disputes and discuss other issues. It is also the site where the Poet-Laureate of Iceland was born. His nephew Jochum Eggertsson, was known as a writer, poet, translator, amateur archaeologist and one of the first Bahá'ís in Iceland, and in 1950 he was able to purchase the land.

Jochum Eggertsson

early Bahá'í in  
Iceland



# Iceland Reforestation

He wanted to develop the land through reforestation. The area was at that time isolated and the weather conditions were formidable. He worked alone, living in a small hut on the land, in the isolated northwest corner of Iceland, starting the replanting process as the first step in the effort to regrow the depleted forests. Prior to his passing in 1966, he endowed the property at Skógar to the Bahá'í Community requesting that his reforestation efforts be continued. What started as an individual project became a community activity.



Iceland Reforestation – Hut at Skógar

# Iceland Reforestation

Ecosystem degradation is by far the largest environmental problem in Iceland. Vast areas have become deserts through the ages and it is an enormous task to reverse the process and regain what has been lost. There are areas which are desert-like with no vegetation, but these places respond well due to the moist environment. When fertiliser is spread in May, by July all kinds of gravel bed flowers appear, so seeds from plants not found anywhere in the vicinity of these barren areas somehow found their way there.



Iceland Reforestation  
May and July

# Iceland Reforestation

At Skógar, restoring a holistic ecosystem is in two steps: first re-establish a healthy soil system, followed by the sowing, seeding, cultivation and caring for new forest elements. Protecting the fragile growth from the destructive winter conditions of Iceland requires additional work. Frost, snow and heavy winds are common and in some places it is necessary to protect the young trees by building shelters.



Iceland Reforestation – snow protection

# Iceland Reforestation

The trees were not for timber production, but the most diverse species of trees that could thrive in this north-western portion of Iceland. Some of the trees chosen included spruce, pine, larch, birch, elder, hemlock, mountain ash, and various species of willow and poplar.



Iceland Reforestation

# Iceland Reforestation

The Icelandic nation faces a gigantic task to regain its forest cover. At the same time the world is heading into a future which is full of uncertainty, but the vision for Skógar and the future is positive. The land is diverse and magnificent and will in the near future act like an outdoor classroom for children and youth in the area, creating a general public interest in forestation and showing that forests can be restored even in the northernmost parts of the country.

[https://iefworld.org/Iceland\\_reforestation](https://iefworld.org/Iceland_reforestation)



Iceland Reforestation

# Iceland Reforestation

In a letter some years ago, the Universal House of Justice wrote: “With regard to the endowment property at Skógar, the attention you are giving to its maintenance is noted with appreciation, and these efforts may be sufficient for the time being. This land holds much promise for the future and, in time, the capacity for learning in your community will extend beyond the realm of expansion and consolidation to encompass social action and participation in the prevalent discourses of society.”

# Iceland Reforestation

“As capacity in these areas grows, it is the hope of the House of Justice that the friends, through consultation and loving united action, will then be able to give fresh consideration to the opportunities available for the utilization of this land—not just as a model of stewardship and reclamation, but as a means for expanding your community’s engagement with others interested in conservation issues....” (Universal House of Justice)