

# First Century of the Formative Age

Summary for youth

Part 3: Involvement in Society, World Centre

*Reflections on the First Century of the Formative Age*

Universal House of Justice

To the Bahá'ís of the World

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Involvement in  
the life of society

# Involvement in the life of society

Yet another dimension of the unfoldment of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Divine Plan is a greater involvement of the Bahá'í community in the life of society

- the power of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation to effect an organic change in society, resulting in the emergence of a spiritual civilization
- learning to apply Bahá'u'lláh's teachings for material and social change, within communities and in the wider society

# Involvement in the life of society

- ‘Abdu’l-Bahá worked with the friends in Iran and nearby countries for social and economic development
  - establish schools for girls as well as boys, to offer training in good character as well as in the arts and sciences
  - believers from the West assisted with this development work
- Bahá’í villages of ‘Adasíyyih (Palestine) and Daidanaw (Burma)
  - dependencies for education and other social services around the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár in ‘Ishqábád
- schools were founded in Egypt and the Caucasus

# Involvement in the life of society

Shoghi Effendi provided guidance to expand these efforts

- promoting health, literacy, and the education of women and girls throughout the Iranian community

- schools continued to be opened in cities and villages across Iran until closed by the government in 1934

Elsewhere, Shoghi Effendi advised to concentrate on teaching and on raising the Administrative Order

This continued in the early years following the election of the House of Justice

# Social and economic development

In 1983, the work of social and economic development had to be started

- Baha'is urged to strive, through their application of spiritual principles, rectitude of conduct, and practice of the art of consultation, to uplift themselves and take responsibility as agents of their own development
- Office of Social and Economic Development established at the World Centre
- individual believers initiated activities embracing not only Bahá'ís but also the wider community

# Social and economic development

Within a decade, hundreds of development activities had been initiated around the world, addressing a range of concerns such as the advancement of women, education, health, mass communication, agriculture, economic activity, and the environment

- simple activities of short duration in villages and towns
- schools and clinics were established to meet social needs
- with organizational structures to ensure their viability and effectiveness

# Social and economic development

- by 1996, a few Bahá'í-inspired organizations with complex programmatic structures were founded by individuals to systematically pursue a coherent approach to development within a population
- the impact of their efforts within the community and the wider society manifested a dynamic coherence between the material and spiritual dimensions of life

# Social and economic development

A set of fundamental concepts:

- the world is not divided into developed and underdeveloped
- all are in need of transformation and an environment that provides the spiritual, social, and material conditions necessary to their security and flourishing
- development is not a process carried out by one people on behalf of another
- people themselves, wherever they reside, are the protagonists of their own development

# Social and economic development

- access to knowledge and participation in its generation, application, and diffusion is at the heart of the endeavour
- efforts start small and grow in complexity as experience accumulates.
- programmes whose effectiveness has been demonstrated in one region can be systematically introduced into others

# Social and economic development

As these principles and concepts are applied within a particular setting, the friends analyse their social conditions, draw insights from the Writings and from various relevant fields of knowledge, and initiate activities that are fully integrated with the work of community building.

# Social and economic development

The establishment in 2018 of the Bahá'í International Development Organization in the Holy Land

- to facilitate the global process of learning about development that is unfolding in the Bahá'í world
- fostering and supporting action and reflection
- gathering and systematization of experience, conceptualization, and training
- fostering a distinctly Bahá'í approach to development

# Participation in public discourse

Another major area of action emerged: greater participation in the prevalent discourses of society

Bahá'u'lláh Himself initially proclaimed His healing remedy directly to the world's leaders

'Abdu'l-Bahá unceasingly proclaimed His Father's teachings to the powerful and the masses grappling with the myriad difficulties facing humanity

# Participation in public discourse

Shoghi Effendi fostered initiatives for this purpose

- Bahá'í information bureau in Geneva in 1925
- publication of the volumes of *The Bahá'í World*
- call for knowledgeable Bahá'ís to correlate the Teachings with contemporary thought in relation to the manifold pressing problems of the world

# Participation in public discourse

At the United Nations, the Bahá'í International Community was established in 1948 as a nongovernmental organization representing Bahá'í communities throughout the world

- an attempt should be made to establish closer contact with the leaders of public thought
- engage with kindred organizations concerned with social issues and to acquaint them with the aims and purposes of the Faith and the nature of its teachings on such matters as the establishment of world peace

# Participation in public discourse

The House of Justice itself arranged for widespread dissemination of the principles of the Faith

- “*The Promise of World Peace*” addressed to the peoples of the world

# Participation in public discourse

- Bahá'í International Community secured a more formal association with various UN agencies in the 1970s
- it published statements on world affairs
  - it played a constructive role at the Conference on Environment and Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro, the World Conference on Women in Beijing, the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, and the Millennium Forum in New York.
  - national offices of external affairs established

# Participation in public discourse

As the twenty-first century began, a more systematic engagement in the discourses of society:

- International and national Bahá'í websites
- Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity for research into the implications of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings for pressing social issues
- a series of seminars to promote understanding and develop capacity among Bahá'í university students
- Bahá'í International Community regional centres in Addis Ababa, Brussels, and Jakarta

# Participation in public discourse

National offices of external affairs participated in specific national discourses on the advancement of women, the role of religion in society, the spiritual and moral empowerment of youth, the promotion of justice, and the strengthening of social cohesion

- Office of Public Discourse at the Bahá'í World Centre
- individual efforts at the grassroots, in their professions and other social spaces, to offer concepts from the Bahá'í Writings as a contribution to the evolution of thought and action necessary to bring about constructive change

# Participation in public discourse

Involvement at all these levels of society becomes more pressing as the process of the disintegration of the old world order intensifies and discourse becomes increasingly coarsened and polarized, leading to the recrudescence of conflict among the competing factions and ideologies that divide humanity.

# Participation in public discourse

Bahá'ís seek to work with the many sympathetic individuals and organizations who pursue common objectives. In such collaborative efforts, the friends share insights from the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh as well as practical lessons gained in their own community-building efforts, while at the same time learning from the experience of their collaborating partners.

# Participation in public discourse

In all settings where Bahá'ís become more deeply engaged with the wider society, they seek to foster consensus and unity of thought, and to promote collaboration and a common search for solutions to humanity's pressing problems. To them, the means by which the end is attained is as important as the end itself

# Involvement in the life of society

In recent decades, the efforts for social action and involvement in the discourses of society have achieved marked coherence with those related to expansion and consolidation

# Involvement in the life of society

Community life is increasingly characterized by its contribution to material, social, and spiritual progress as the friends cultivate their capability to understand the conditions of society around them, create spaces in which to explore concepts from Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation and from relevant fields of human knowledge, bring insights to bear upon practical problems, and build capacity among the believers and within the wider community.

# Involvement in the life of society

As a result of this coherence across the various areas of endeavour, the most basic grassroots activities for social and economic development grew from a few hundred in 1990 to several thousand by 2000, and to tens of thousands by 2021.

# Involvement in the life of society

Bahá'í engagement in social discourse has been met with an affirmative response in countless settings, from neighbourhoods to nations, as a humanity baffled and divided by the manifold problems resulting from the operation of the forces of disintegration eagerly seeks new insights.

At all levels of society, leaders of thought increasingly associate the Bahá'í community with fresh conceptions and approaches sorely needed by an ever more disunited and dysfunctional world.

# Involvement in the life of society

The society-building power of the Faith, mostly latent at the start of the first century of the Formative Age, is now increasingly discernible in country after country.

The release of this society-building power resulting from a new consciousness and a new capacity for learning among individuals, communities, and institutions worldwide is destined to be the hallmark of the current and next several stages in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan.

# The development of the Bahá'í World Centre

# Development of the Bahá'í World Centre

Parallel with the growth of the Faith and the unfoldment of the administration, equally significant developments occurred at the Bahá'í World Centre during the first century of the Formative Age

# Development of the Bahá'í World Centre

The spiritual potency of the Holy Land was immeasurably enhanced by Bahá'u'lláh's presence and the interment of His sacred remains and, soon after, those of His Herald, Himself a Manifestation of God. It is now the point to which every Bahá'í heart is drawn, the focal centre of their devotions, the goal of every aspiring pilgrim.

# Development of the Bahá'í World Centre

The perilous and insecure condition of the World Centre persisted into the ministry of the Guardian. Thus, among the first and most vital duties of Shoghi Effendi, pursued throughout his ministry, were the protection and preservation, the extension and beautification of the twin Holy Shrines and other Holy Places. In his final days, the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh was finally recognized as a Bahá'í Holy Place by the civil authorities, and the Bahá'í world was at last free to preserve and beautify its most sacred site.

# Development of the Bahá'í World Centre

The Guardian significantly expanded the properties surrounding the Holy Shrine and the Mansion at Bahjí and initiated what would eventually become extensive formal gardens. On the Mountain of God, he brought to its long-delayed completion the Shrine of the Báb, begun by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, adding three additional rooms, creating its arcade, raising its golden dome, and surrounding it with verdure. He traced "the far-flung arc around which the edifices of the World Bahá'í Administrative Order" were to be built; raised at one end of that arc its first structure, the International Archives Building.

# Development of the Bahá'í World Centre

Under the direction of the Universal House of Justice, additional land and Holy Places were acquired and beautified, the buildings on the Arc raised, and terraces extended from the bottom to the top of Mount Carmel, as originally envisioned by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and begun by the Guardian.

# Development of the Bahá'í World Centre

Before the end of the first century of the Formative Age, the property in the vicinity of the Shrine of the Báb was increased to over 170,000 square metres, while a series of land exchanges and acquisitions extended the property immediately surrounding the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh from some 4,000 to over 450,000 square metres. And in 2019 construction began in 'Akká, near the Ridván Garden, on a fitting Shrine to serve as the final resting place of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

# Development of the Bahá'í World Centre

Over the course of the century, the pace of the development of the Bahá'í administrative centre also accelerated.

House of Justice was increasingly able to benefit from a continuous stream of volunteers to establish the departments and agencies vital to a rapidly developing Faith, serving the needs at the World Centre as well as of the communities multiplying worldwide.

# Development of the Bahá'í World Centre

Civil authorities in Israel formally recognised the status of the Bahá'í World Centre as the spiritual and administrative centre of the worldwide Bahá'í community, operating under the aegis of the Universal House of Justice.

# Development of the Bahá'í World Centre

“The majestic buildings that now stand along the Arc traced for them by Shoghi Effendi on the slope of the Mountain of God, together with the magnificent flight of garden terraces that embrace the Shrine of the Báb, are an outward expression of the immense power animating the Cause we serve.”

# Development of the Bahá'í World Centre

“They offer timeless witness to the fact that the followers of Bahá'u'lláh have successfully laid the foundations of a worldwide community transcending all differences that divide the human race, and have brought into existence the principal institutions of a unique and unassailable Administrative Order that shapes this community's life.”

# Development of the Bahá'í World Centre

“In the transformation that has taken place on Mount Carmel, the Bahá'í Cause emerges as a visible and compelling reality on the global stage, as the focal centre of forces that will, in God's good time, bring about the reconstruction of society, and as a mystic source of spiritual renewal for all who turn to it.” (24 May 2001)