




For the Betterment of the World

**The Worldwide Bahá'í Community's Approach
to Social and Economic Development**

Prepared by the Office of Social and Economic Development
BAHÁ'Í INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY



“Take ye counsel together, and let
your concern be only for that which
profiteth mankind and bettereth
the condition thereof . . .”

— Bahá'u'lláh

Introduction

Bahá'í efforts in the area of development seek to promote the social and material well-being of people of all walks of life, whatever their beliefs or background. Such endeavors are motivated by the desire to serve humanity and contribute to constructive social change. Together they represent a growing process of learning concerned with the application of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, along with knowledge accumulated in different fields of human endeavor, to social reality. Social action is pursued with the conviction that every population has the right and responsibility to mark out the path of its own progress. Indeed, every

people and nation has a vital contribution to make in constructing a new society characterized by principles such as harmony, justice, and prosperity.

This booklet describes the ongoing process of learning about development from the local to the global level. It offers an illustration of how Bahá'í social and economic development is being carried out in practice. The sections that immediately follow provide a brief discussion on some of the main concepts that guide Bahá'í activities in the sphere of development and describe certain elements of the emerging approach being adopted throughout the world and being refined through experience.

Foundations

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.

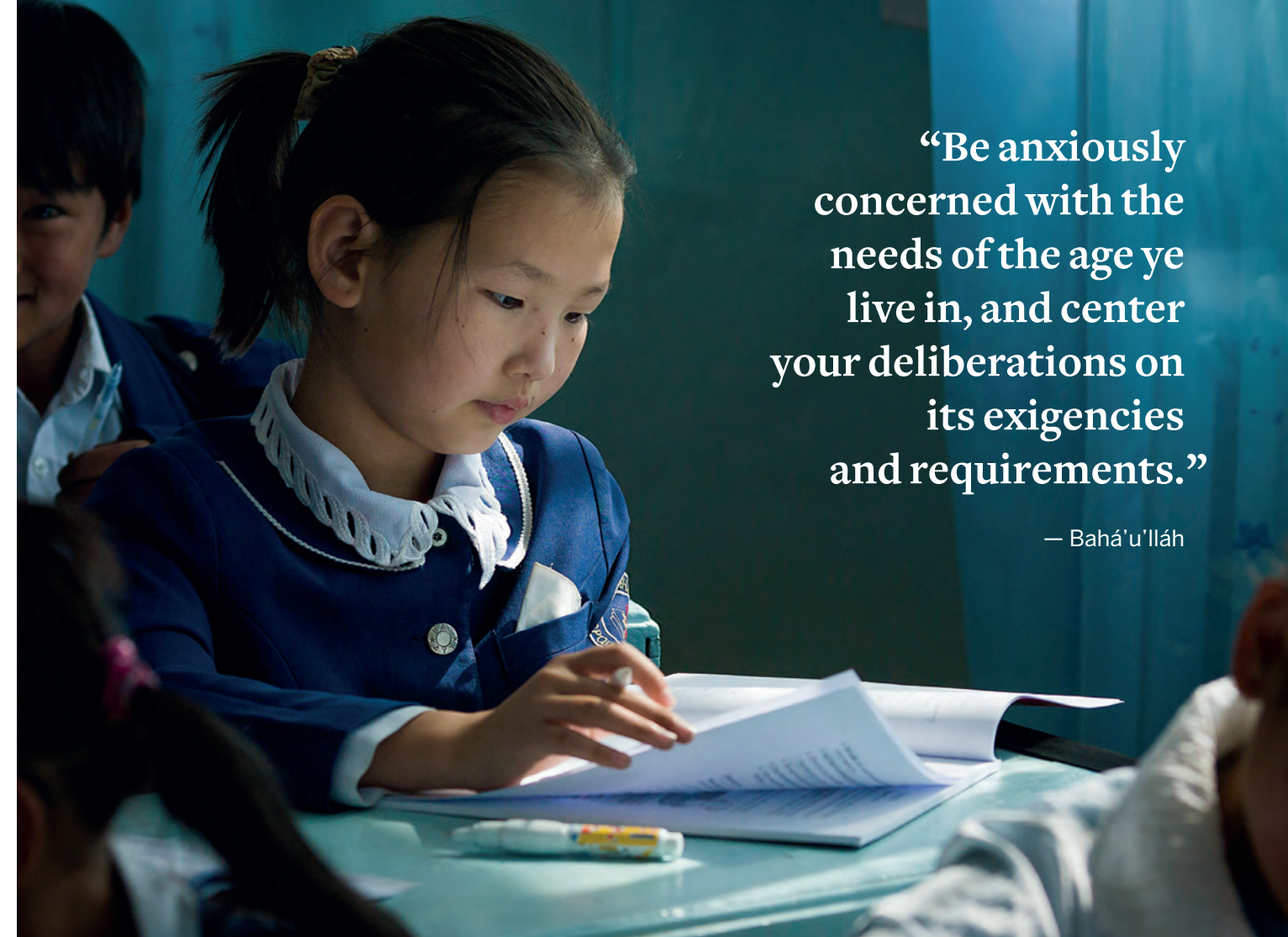
And the honor and distinction of the individual consist in this, that he among all the world's multitudes should become a source of social good. Is any larger bounty conceivable than this, that an individual, looking within himself, should find that by the confirming grace of God he has become the cause 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.

In traditional thinking about development, the role of religion in contributing to the betterment of the world has long been marginalized. "Religion," a celebrated book from the early 1970s asserts, "should be studied for what it really is among the people: a ritualized and stratified complex of highly emotional beliefs and valuations that give the sanction of sacredness, taboo, and immutability to inherited institutional arrangements, modes of living, and attitudes. Understood in this realistic and comprehensive sense, religion usually acts as a tremendous force for social inertia."

Yet over the past several decades, thinking in the field of development has been sobered by realistic assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the prevailing approach. Despite decades of rigorous effort and an enormous outlay of funds, numerous social and economic ills persist or may have worsened, such as the gap between the rich and the poor and a host of environmental issues. Social and economic development, it is now widely recognized,

is a complex process, unresponsive to simple formulae that are based on raising income or the propagation of technological packages. Under intense pressure to find solutions, development thought has focused increasingly on people—their cultures, values, and worldviews, which, for the vast majority of the earth's inhabitants, are shaped by religion. In such an expanded perspective, it has become abundantly clear that materialistic approaches alone will never succeed in building the capacity of individuals and communities to take action and in releasing their power. Rather the opposite: their tendency is to produce a debilitating effect. Interest has thus grown markedly in recent years in the potential contribution that spirituality and religion can make to development discourse. The aim is to bring religious insights to bear on the search for ways to harness the scientific, technical, and economic creativity of the modern world so as to improve the human condition and foster prosperity among the diverse inhabitants of the planet.



“Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.”

— Bahá'u'lláh

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 individuals 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 at that time.

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 hesitation, thoughtful planning and haphazard action, achievements and setbacks. While most projects found it difficult to escape the patterns of development practice prevalent in the world, some offered glimpses of promising paradigms of action. From this initial stage of diverse activity, the community emerged with the pursuit of social and economic development firmly established as a feature of its organic life and with enhanced capacity to forge over time a distinctly Bahá'í approach.

At various levels, from local to global, the process of learning about

development has continued to unfold and evolve over the years. Facilitated by ongoing efforts to foster and support action, reflection on action, study, and consultation, to systematize the accumulating body of experience, and to build capacity in individuals, communities, and institutions, insights have continued to accrue as to how Bahá'í concepts, principles, and methods can be applied to the manifold dimensions of the social and economic life of populations.

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 revolutionary changes that are occurring with bewildering swiftness in every department of life assume their real meaning in this light. During this period, the barriers raised by the thoughts, attitudes, and habits of the childhood of humankind are gradually being uprooted, and the structures of a new civilization that can reflect the powers of adulthood are taking shape.



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. On the community rests the challenge of providing the milieu in which individual wills blend, in which powers are multiplied and manifest themselves in collective action, in which higher expressions of the human spirit can appear.

Beyond the training of individuals and the cultivation of community life, development strategies have to pay attention to the strengthening of organizational structures. Institutions are needed at every level of society 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 170 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 and ever-advancing civilization requires a vast increase in their access to relevant knowledge. It also involves the ongoing generation, application, and dissemination of new knowledge at all levels of society and within every field of human endeavor. Given that such a civilization will have to be cognizant 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, the race'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. "Religion," according to the Faith's writings, "is the outer expression of the

divine reality. Therefore, it must be living, vitalized, moving and progressive." "Science is the first emanation from God toward man. All created beings embody the potentiality of material perfection, but the power of intellectual investigation and scientific acquisition is a higher virtue specialized to man alone." An imaginary duality between reason and faith—a duality that would confine reason to the realm of empirical evidence and logical argumentation and which would associate faith with superstition and irrational thought—must be avoided. The process of development has to be rational and systematic—incorporating, for example, scientific capabilities of observing, of measuring, of rigorously testing ideas—and at the same time has to be deeply aware of faith and spiritual convictions—contributing, for instance, to virtue, good character, high resolve, cooperation, and sacrificial endeavor.

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 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 . . ."

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. There are, of course, 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 the spiritual principles of their Faith 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. Often projects are undertaken in collaboration with government agencies and organizations of civil society that share similar aims.

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 and economic development emerge in localities where

a pronounced sense of community exists and a growing collective consciousness and will is becoming manifest. These efforts often 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 organizations in a region 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 multisectoral 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 advance. The growing network of such organizations in the Bahá'í world community allows, too, for

well-conceived methods 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, which lies at the heart of all collective action, is something that must be learned through experience. 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 in areas such as economics, agriculture, and environmental protection. Development as a learning process, then, can best be described as one of study, consultation, action, and reflection on action—all carried out in the light of the guidance inherent in religious teachings and knowledge drawn from science.

When efforts are carried out in a learning mode, visions and strategies are re-examined time and again. As



tasks are accomplished, obstacles removed, resources multiplied, and lessons learned, modifications are made in goals and methods. The learning process, which is given direction through appropriate institutional arrangements, unfolds in a way that resembles the growth and differentiation of a living organism. Haphazard change is avoided, and continuity of action maintained. Over the decades, the insights gained by Bahá'ís in various parts of the world have helped give rise to a common framework for learning about development that gives shape to activities and evolves as experience accumulates.

To facilitate learning about development theory and practice within the Bahá'í community, the Office of Social and Economic Development (OSD) has been established at the Faith's world headquarters in Haifa, Israel. It helps to strengthen institutional capacity in every country to promote Bahá'í development efforts, ensures that material resources become

increasingly available to such efforts, and offers general advice, based on insights gained around the world, in response to questions that arise. OSD sees itself as a learning entity dedicated to the systematization of a growing worldwide experience made possible by the participation of increasing numbers of individuals, agencies, and communities in the development of their societies. The approach to development that comes into focus, then, defies categorization into either "top-down" or "bottom-up"; it is one, rather, of reciprocity and interconnectedness.

The following pages offer an overview of Bahá'í efforts in the area of development. Not discussed here, but no less significant, are the contributions to the development field made by thousands of Bahá'ís who, in their professional lives, are working within a host of agencies—in the public sector and in civil society—to bring about the betterment of humanity.



Overview of Bahá'í Development Activities

Bahá'í efforts in the field of development comprise a spectrum of activities. Generally speaking, they are initiated by individuals and small groups of friends in a locality, or by the Faith's administrative institutions—local or national governing councils. The vast majority are simple grassroots endeavors of limited duration. Conservative estimates indicate that there are close to 40,000 such activities undertaken over the course of a year, a small number of which are described in the section titled "First Stirrings" (page 12). Some efforts evolve into projects of a more sustained nature, with a commensurate degree of administrative structure. Examples may include schools, radio stations, and community gardens. Over 1,400 sustained projects of this scale are currently being carried out addressing any one of several areas of community life such as education, health, agriculture, or media. In more than 130 instances, projects have developed further—typically over the course of many years coordinating a growing number of lines of action—and taken the form of nonprofit, nongovernmental organizations. Generally referred to as "Bahá'í-inspired organiza-

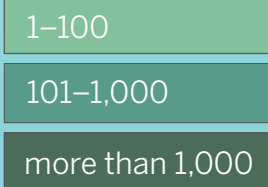
tions," these entities operate at a higher level of sophistication and often manage several programs and projects. The section titled "Growing Complexity" (page 17) offers a few examples of such efforts. The map that follows provides an illustration of the scale of these various types of activity in countries around the world.

Regardless of where along the spectrum it falls, the involvement of Bahá'ís in efforts of social action represents an attempt to apply concepts and principles from the Bahá'í writings to improve some aspect of the social or economic life of their communities. Among these concepts and principles are the oneness of humankind, the equality of men and women, the elimination of all forms of prejudice, the harmony between science and religion, the inherent nobility of the human being, the recognition that every people has the right and responsibility to be the protagonist of its own development, the need for universal education, and the conviction that individuals are imbued with a twofold moral purpose: to develop and express their inherent potentialities and to contribute to the betterment of society.

Bahá'í Development Activities Worldwide

Spectrum of Development Activities in 2017

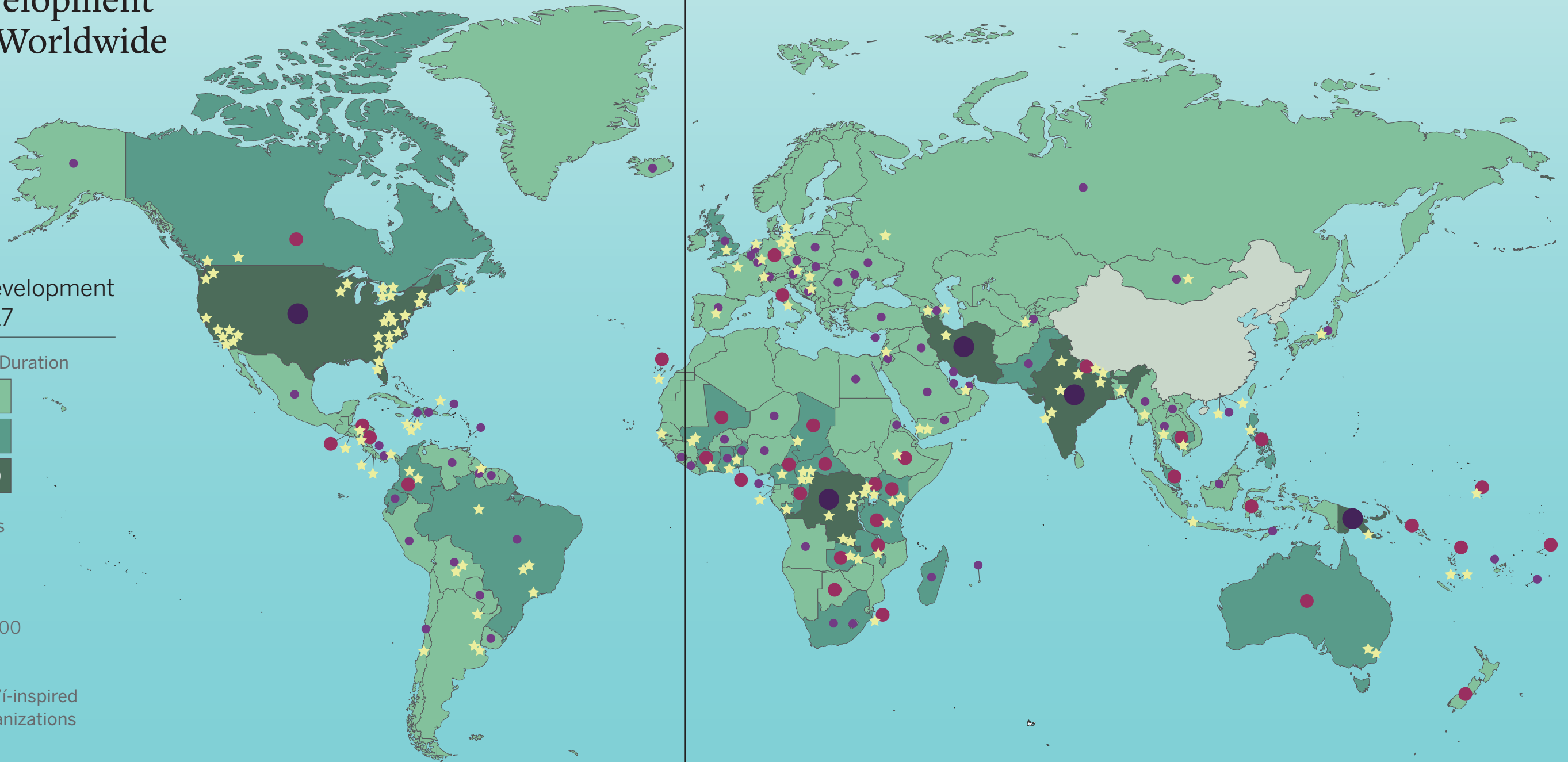
Activities of Fixed Duration



Sustained Projects

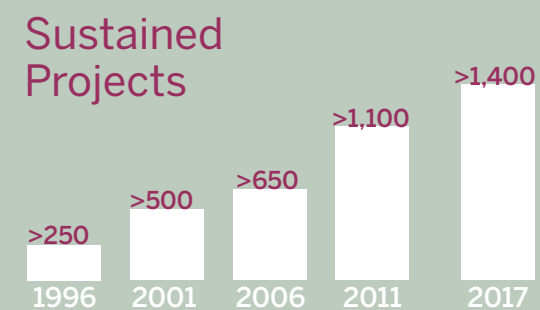
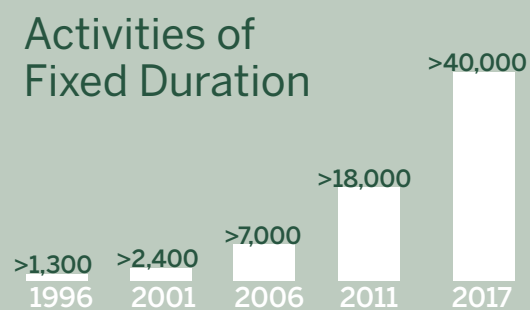


Locations of Bahá'í-inspired Development Organizations



Trends in Number of Development Activities from 1996–2017*

*Numbers given are conservative estimates based on information provided to the Office of Social and Economic Development by national Bahá'í institutions. For further explanation of these categories, see page 9.



First Stirrings

Bahá'ís live and work in tens of thousands of localities spread across every continent of the globe. Viewed together, they can be said to represent the diversity of the entire human race. Wherever they reside, Bahá'í families and friends engage in efforts to draw insights from the Bahá'í Writings and to apply them to the material and spiritual progress of their communities. The pattern of community life that they strive to create is one in which acts of worship and a diversity of activities that promote the common good are woven together, and where all are free to participate, regardless of religious background, social standing, gender, or race.

Learning lies at the heart of the efforts under way. It involves an ongoing process of study, consultation, action, and reflection on action, all in light of the teachings of the Faith. Bahá'ís will typically gather with other members of their local community and, in one another's homes, explore the application of spiritual teachings to daily life and to the life of the village or neighborhood in which they reside. In an environment free from any sense of superiority or claim to exclusive understanding of truth, these small groups of friends study materials that help them acquire the skills, attitudes, qualities, and knowledge needed to serve their communities. The energies of the participants are channeled into action through consultation, a process of collective decision-making prescribed in the Bahá'í writings. In addition to providing a framework within which collective decisions can be taken, consultation also serves as a means of harmonizing points of view, promoting unity among diverse members of a

community, of strengthening the bonds of trust and love between individuals and institutions, and of allowing new insights into complex issues to be brought forth and examined dispassionately.

Study and consultation leads to well-informed and purposeful action. Among the acts of service carried out by individuals and groups are classes that tend to the spiritual education of children, a moral empowerment program that channels the energies of young people toward the betterment of society, circles of study that extend the educational process to more youth and adults, and gatherings for collective worship that strengthen the devotional character of the community. By arising to carry out these and other acts of service, men and women, young and old alike, come to recognize that they have the power in their hands to re-create the world around them.

For many participating in this process of capacity building at the grassroots, the first stirrings to engage in social action will naturally follow, as

they find themselves drawn into extending their endeavors to include activities that more explicitly improve one or another aspect of the social and economic life of their communities. Most of the initiatives that emerge are modest in nature and of fixed duration, coming to a close when their objectives have been met. They represent a response of a people to the particular challenges facing their own communities. As such, they may be related to any one of a variety of concerns depending on the social conditions of a place. Examples include health and sanitation, education, community organization, management of funds and resources, infrastructure, gender equality, arts and media, agriculture, and environmental protection.

It is estimated that over 40,000 activities of this scale occur annually in communities in which Bahá'ís reside. A few instances are described in the next two pages.



Instances of Activities of Fixed Duration

Australia

A group of youth in Sydney, Australia, involved adults, children, and other youth from the community in a project to clear up littered and overgrown green areas in their neighborhood. They initiated the effort so that space could be provided for parents to play with their children, and for young people and adults to read, play sport, and hold conversations on topics relevant to the well-being of the locality.

Canary Islands

In the Canary Islands, a number of youth and adults organized music camps for young adolescents, during which they composed and sang songs on themes such as friendship, service, and excellence. The recordings they made have been enjoyed by young people in the country and further afield, all of whom yearn for music that can uplift their hearts.

Colombia

A group of youth in Cordoba, Colombia, noticed the large amounts of garbage polluting the streets and the river and decided to start a waste management project. They began by raising awareness among individuals and families within their community on the causes of the environmental damage they witnessed. The consultations that they initiated then led to the formation of work groups in different parts of the neighborhood to maintain the cleanliness of the physical environment.

Côte d'Ivoire

In a small locality in Côte d'Ivoire, a group of young people cleaned out the village's hydraulic pump as an act of collective service to help improve the cleanliness of water coming into the village.

Tamil Nadu, India

In a village in Tamil Nadu, India, where many people were affected by dengue fever, a group of youth involved in the educational processes of the Bahá'í community assisted a doctor and some medical students in carrying out awareness-raising activities in the locality. The young people, who were more familiar with the village than the visiting medical staff, assisted by introducing them to some 50 homes and helped them explain to the residents how the dengue virus spreads and how to suppress the breeding of mosquitoes.

Jordan

In Jordan, a three-day workshop was held with several community leaders of a village. Among the topics discussed were the principle of consultation, the equality of women and men, the spiritual and material resources ready to be harnessed in the community, and the great potential youth have to help bring about constructive change.

Madagascar

A group of young friends in Antananarivo, Madagascar, composed poems and shared them with their neighbors with the purpose of bringing hope to their community and uplifting its social environment.

Malaysia

In a village in the Asli region of Malaysia, community members consulted at a local meeting about the education of their children. These conversations led to the addition of academic content to informal classes for moral education that were already under way. The classes also became more formalized and began to be offered on a daily basis.

Nepal

In Nepal, a group of Bahá'ís in the community of Kanj mobilized 150 residents and leaders of their village to help repair the main road that had been damaged by heavy rainfall.

New Zealand

In Christchurch, New Zealand, a group of Bahá'ís participated in a tree-planting project to help improve the natural environment of their community.

Papua New Guinea

In Makamaka, Papua New Guinea, community members decided to build additional classrooms for a local school, as well as homes for some of the new teachers. Funds for these construction efforts were raised by the school's agricultural plots as well as other projects.

South Africa

In a township in Pretoria, South Africa, a teenager began to promote conversations among her peers about women's empowerment. They taught one another songs on the subject and shared them at various community events.

Spain

In a neighborhood in Madrid, Spain, a number of young people engaged in Bahá'í educational activities noticed that some of their younger peers needed help in their academic work and so began to offer them regular tutorial assistance.

Vanuatu

Following a devastating cyclone that destroyed coffee farms in the Tanna island of Vanuatu, a group of Bahá'ís set up a nursery, planted 36,000 coffee seedlings, and distributed them among coffee farmers free of charge.

The collective impact of many such initiatives in a single community is more than just the sum of the individual actions. Gradually, a culture emerges in which applying the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith in order to advance the social and material well-being of the locality becomes a way of life for increasing numbers of people. Insight is progressively gained into the many implications of vital concepts and principles on the progress of families and community life—universal partici-

pation, justice, the imperative of providing education for all, the need to ensure coherence between the material and spiritual aspects of life, the centrality of knowledge to social progress, freedom from prejudice, and the equality of men and women, to name a few.

Consider a few examples of places in which hundreds or thousands of individuals are participating in activities aimed at enhancing the spiritual and material prosperity of the community.



Australia



Philippines



Canada



Madagascar



South Africa



India



Canary Islands

Instances of Change at the Level of Culture



Cambodia

Battambang, Cambodia

In certain places in Cambodia, boys have traditionally been the preferred recipients of formal education. In several villages in the Battambang district of the country, as consciousness of the equality of women and men grew over time, more and more girls were able to receive higher levels of education. Around a decade ago, a girl from a locality where community-building activities had been sustained for many years, was able to attend high school—the first girl from her village to do so. Gradually, this youth began assisting a number of younger girls in her village to advance in their own education. After graduating from high school, she was invited by a national educational agency of the Bahá'í community to offer training to youth in other rural communities. In her own community, her example, as well as those of the girls she had accompanied, helped further deepen consciousness on the importance of education of girls. Now it is common practice for girls in her village to receive formal education. Women have also begun to take on more prominent roles in the community.

Uttar Pradesh, India

The removal of long-standing prejudices, such as those of the caste system in India, is a natural outcome of community-building efforts that seek to uphold the principle of the oneness of humanity. In a few villages in the Banthra and Kakori districts of Uttar Pradesh, India, young people from different castes have established strong friendships, based on their common desire to serve those younger than themselves. New relationships and patterns of activity have subsequently emerged. For instance, the youth began interacting more freely and sustaining conversation on topics of import, visiting one another's homes, carrying out acts of service together, and reflecting on concepts such as the oneness of humanity and freedom from prejudice. Such relationships among the young people have also exerted influence on the wider community, where it is now common for families to open their homes for prayer gatherings and community events, and for some parents to consent to marriages where bride and groom are from different castes.

Toronto, Canada

In a neighborhood in Toronto, Canada, generally known as a place of rife drug use and violence, an increasing number of young people and their families have engaged in service to their community, dedicating themselves to its progress and well-being. Community gatherings and other events have helped open a dialogue on themes such as hope and unity, as well as allowing for reflection on issues related to the conduct of young people in the neighborhood. Newcomers who often felt isolated became better integrated as they joined picnics organized for the community and received visits in their homes. Thus, while the community has a variety of populations, spaces have been created for people of different backgrounds to interact, build friendships across cultures, and learn to trust one another. In this way, many people who would otherwise take the first opportunity to leave the neighborhood have decided to stay. They have developed a love for the neighborhood and its inhabitants, and are committed to its long-term advancement.



Growing Complexity

In addition to tens of thousands of grassroots initiatives, Bahá'ís—often working shoulder to shoulder with friends and other like-minded individuals—are engaged in over 1,400 ongoing projects that are larger in scope. Some emerge from smaller efforts at the local level, while others are established as structured projects in the communities they serve from the outset. Sustainability is a natural feature of a project that emerges organically from a grassroots effort. Where a project is introduced into a community, particular care is taken to ensure that its scope does not exceed local capacity to sustain it.

Bahá'í projects, like all development work, have as their primary concern the visible improvement of some aspect of life, and taken together they cover a wide range of areas. Some examples of such efforts may include a community school providing education to children in a locality or a larger academic school reaching a broader cross-section of a region; a local health clinic offering basic health services to the surrounding population; a community garden in an urban neighborhood that provides nutritious food for the local area and strengthens bonds of friendship; a simple language program being offered to newcomers in a country to help them participate more meaningfully in community life; a radio station producing programs for the surrounding population; or a cooperative group that shares resources and provides various types of assistance to each member. Depending on the size of the endeavor, its objectives may be modest or relatively far-reaching. As action unfolds, and increasingly greater challenges arise, those involved must be capable of learning from experience in order to bring about enduring change. While it is appreciated that concerted action should lead in

time to concrete results, success is measured chiefly in terms of the impact the action has on building the capacity of individuals and their communities to address development issues at progressively higher levels of complexity and effectiveness.

As Bahá'í development projects grow and the lines of action they pursue increase in number and complexity, organizational structures evolve to ensure long-term viability and to meet expanding needs. In some cases, a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization may be established by a group of like-minded individuals. Operating according to the principles of the Bahá'í Faith, it is generally referred to as a “Bahá'í-inspired organization.” Such an organization has as its aim the application of the Faith's teachings to one or more aspects of the process of civilization building. To this end, it systematically raises human resources and promotes the generation, application, and diffusion of knowledge about development in a country or region. Typically, such an organization will begin with one primary line of action and will allow its efforts to increase in complexity as needs require and resources



Asociación Bayan, Honduras

permit. Over time, it may develop the capacity to pursue a number of lines of action to address challenges of local communities and entire regions in a coordinated fashion. As such an organization systematizes the knowledge being gained through action and reflection in diverse fields, the learning that is a prerequisite for meaningful transformation is generated. Today there are over 130 Bahá'í development organizations worldwide with relatively complex programmatic structures and significant spheres of influence, each at a different stage of evolution.

The map on pages 10 and 11 contains a subset of these organizations and shows their geographic spread. Ten such organizations are briefly profiled in the pages that follow, and the experience of one agency in the Central African Republic is described in greater depth.

In-Brief: Selected Development Organizations

FUNDAEC

Fundación para la Aplicación y Enseñanza de las Ciencias (FUNDAEC) was established in **Colombia** in 1974. It is animated by two key concepts: first, that 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. FUNDAEC's secondary education program, known as Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial (SAT), has received governmental certification in Colombia and has spread beyond its borders to several other countries in Latin America, reaching an estimated 300,000 young women and men. To respond to the interest shown in SAT by an increasing number of Bahá'í-inspired organizations around the world, FUNDAEC has modified some of its curricular elements and assembled them into a program called Preparation for Social Action, which is now being implemented in a number of countries in Africa, Asia, Australasia, and Latin America.



FUNDAEC, Colombia

Asociación Bayan

Asociación Bayan started in 1986 as a small rural hospital in **Honduras** in the Department of Gracias a Dios to serve the Miskito and Garifuna peoples. In the late 1990s, the agency turned its attention to the field of education, embarking on a major initiative to introduce into the region FUNDAEC's SAT program. During 2017, over 8,000 students were enrolled in the program, which has been formally recognized by, and receives funding from, the national government. The Brookings Institution, a nonprofit public policy organization based in the United States, has highlighted the experience of SAT in Honduras as an effective educational endeavor that has been scaled up to reach large numbers.

New Era Foundation

Located in Panchgani in the state of Maharashtra in **India**, the New Era Foundation oversees the New Era High School and the New Era Teacher Training Centre (NETTC). The New Era High School, which was established in 1945, currently serves over 900



New Era Foundation, India

students; it is known throughout the state both for its standards of academic excellence and the emphasis it places on moral education. In relation to NETTC, at any one time, over 150 students are being trained as preschool or primary school teachers. Many of the graduates are eagerly employed by existing schools, while others have gone on to establish their own in different parts of India or in neighboring countries.

CORDE

In the wake of decades of internal conflict and civil unrest in the country, the **Cambodian** Organization for Research, Development and Education (CORDE) grew out of the efforts of individuals striving to raise the capacity of the population to determine for itself a path of development. Since its establishment in 1994, CORDE's endeavors have focused primarily on education and have included the operation of the University for Education and Development, the promotion of community schools, and the implementation of training programs to develop the capacity of youth in rural areas.



CORDE, Cambodia



Rays of Light Foundation, Papua New Guinea

Fondation Erfan-Connaissance

Fondation Erfan-Connaissance was established in Bukavu, in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, to promote the establishment of community schools in the Kivu region. By early 2018, it was supporting 45 schools with close to 4,300 students, and was offering training for teachers from preschool to grade 6. The organization has also begun offering agriculture training to teachers in order to begin learning about addressing the nutritional needs of children and improving farming practices.

Kimanya-Ngeyo Foundation

The Kimanya-Ngeyo Foundation was established in 2007 to work toward the empowerment of youth and the development of communities in **Uganda** through the application, generation, and systematization of knowledge. To this end, it implements the Preparation for Social Action program in several villages in the country and has reached over two thousand individuals thus far. It also carries out an agricultural research program and an in-service teacher-training program, assisting local teachers in public schools to reflect on the aims of education and to enhance their capacity for effective classroom instruction.



Wordswell Association, Canada

Rays of Light Foundation

The Rays of Light Foundation was established in 2007 to address the educational needs of populations in the sparsely inhabited and remote regions of **Papua New Guinea**, where access to education is limited. The Foundation offers the Preparation for Social Action program to assist youth and adults to build capacity to promote the well-being of their communities. The program has been introduced to three provinces in the country, and by 2017 there were over 200 participants. The organization also conducts a teacher-training program for individuals who wish to work with their communities to establish nursery and primary schools. In 2017, the Foundation supported some 35 schools with almost 1,300 students.

Wordswell Association for Community Learning

The Wordswell Association for Community Learning was established in Toronto, **Canada**, in 2007 by a group of youth and young adults, who are teachers, doctors, engineers, and community workers concerned with releasing the potential of youth across the city. One of the Association's lines of action involves assisting youth to serve as



Unity Foundation, Luxembourg

animators for the junior youth spiritual empowerment program, which is carried out in a number of housing complexes across the city in collaboration with the Toronto Community Housing Corporation. Wordswell also carries out research into the opportunities open to young people to pursue further education and to develop skills and abilities that will allow them to secure employment that contributes in some way to the common good.

Unity Foundation

The Unity Foundation is an agency located in **Luxembourg** that is focused on raising funds for Bahá'í-inspired organizations in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia offering educational programs. Over the past five years, the Foundation has facilitated the flow of more than three million euros to such endeavors. One of the Foundation's most significant donors is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Luxembourg. In recent years, the organization has conducted workshops in schools and universities in the country, as well as film presentations and discussions, to raise awareness of concepts relating to social and economic development inspired by the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith.

In-Depth: The Evolution of a Development Organization in the Central African Republic

In 2003, a group of individuals in the **Central African Republic (CAR)** began to consult on how they could contribute to the social and economic progress of their country. They were particularly inspired by Bahá'u'lláh's injunction: "Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom."

As they analyzed social conditions in the country, they were struck by the pressing need for primary education, especially in rural areas, given the debilitating effect of years of internal strife on the development of the nation's educational system. Thus, **Fondation Nahid et Hushang Ahdieh** (Ahdieh Foundation) was established as part of a search for a better response to the educational needs of the people of the country. While keenly aware of the challenges involved, the founders of the Foundation saw in the people of the country a vast source of potential and talent that could, if tapped into and channeled appropriately, play an essential role in overcoming these challenges. Drawing on insights and training materials from Bahá'í-inspired organizations in Chad and Mali, they set out to learn about how to assist local communities to establish and manage their own primary schools.

Development of a Program through Action-Reflection

Among the first actions which they took was to organize a month-long training seminar for some 20 aspiring teachers selected by their respective communities. The purpose of the training was to help build the participants' capacity to

start kindergartens in their own communities shortly after returning. Five schools were subsequently established. In its work with these schools, the organization gained several insights into areas such as raising consciousness in a community about the nature of education, training new teachers, adding new grade levels each year, and building capacity in a community to sustain the livelihood of teachers and to manage and administer a growing school. That the schools were locally operated and relied on financial resources from within the community allowed the organization to increase the scale of its efforts in an organic manner.

In its efforts to develop its program, the organization had to be ever-conscious of the reality of the population with which it was working, and able to adjust its plans accordingly. For instance, many of the teachers engaged in the project were young mothers with limited formal education and with responsibilities that did not allow them to participate in training programs of several months' duration. This led the Foundation to adopt an approach to teacher training that wove together theory and practice in a particular way: rather than requiring participants to relocate for extended periods, the Foundation offered training annually for one to two months, after which the teachers were encouraged to quickly put into practice what they learned. Teachers were trained to offer one grade level at a time, starting first with kindergarten. Through regular visits from staff of the Foundation, and a system in which more experienced teachers would support those newer to



the program, gradual improvements were made to the quality of instruction.

Naturally, the schools had to overcome many challenges as part of their evolution. In the early years, for instance, official school inspectors were at times skeptical of the community schools, which generally operated in simple structures constructed with locally available materials, or sometimes even under a tree. Nevertheless, through a continuous process of action, reflection, and refinement, the organization developed various elements of a program for the multiplication of community schools. Indeed, by 2008 there were some 28 schools in operation and over 100 teachers who had received training.

Consolidating Structures and Strengthening Relationships

The promising results being achieved led to requests from a growing number of organizations in Africa that endeavored to follow a similar path of learning. In 2008, in consultation with the Office of Social and Economic Development, the Foundation then began assisting the staff of these organizations to develop teacher-training programs in their respective countries. So as to ensure that capacity for the implementation of the program within CAR continued to grow, a few university graduates from

Bangui were identified and invited to join the organization. Further, five training sites were established in various parts of the country to decentralize some of its activities. By 2011, the Foundation was working in 13 municipal areas with 33 schools that were providing education to nearly 2,800 children. At the same time, it was extending support to organizations in seven countries that were working with 95 schools offering education to over 5,000 students.

Notwithstanding the general state of civil unrest in the country since 2012, the organization's activities continued to grow and develop. In addition, the quality of the education it offered had earned the appreciation of not only parents but also of education practitioners and government officials. In the words of one government official in relation to one of the first community schools that had been formed:

"I have been able to visit this school regularly since its establishment. In the beginning the school was informal and had inadequate infrastructure, but parents really saw the intellectual capacity of their children being developed. So I went to talk to the educational authorities to help the school become recognized. Other government officers visited as well and were really impressed by the will of the parents to keep the school going. Over the years I have really seen the capacity of the children grow, and one thing that differentiates them is their moral values. What I have seen is that without morality, there is no harmony. . . . There is a saying that goes, 'Every time you open a school you have closed a prison.'"

As collaboration with officials and other actors became stronger, the Foundation began to consider how it could participate more systematically in conversations taking place at the national level about primary education. It saw a need for the creation of a forum in which key concepts pertaining to the improvement of primary education in the country could be discussed. In April 2012, the Foundation organized a seminar for representatives of government and nongovernmental agencies engaged in the education sector, during which ideas related to the purpose of education and the role of the teacher in society were explored. The following year, the Ministry of Education of CAR and the Ahdieh Foundation entered into an agreement that provided official recognition for all schools established with the support of the organization. In 2014, the University of Bangui accredited the Foundation as a teacher-training organization and offered its collaborators access to degree programs. The organization has continued to be drawn into discussions on matters related to educational practice and policy with various local, national, and international actors.

Emergence of Additional Lines of Action

As the Ahdieh Foundation gained experience with supporting communities to address the educational needs of their children, it also found itself drawn ever more deeply into understanding and addressing other concerns of the populations with which it was working. A common challenge many of the communities faced was related to nutrition and children's health. The children attending the schools were often not adequately nourished and had

difficulties concentrating during the school day. In 2010, the organization began assisting the teachers of certain community schools, along with members of the community, to study materials aimed at building capacity to engage in highly productive, environmentally sustainable agricultural practices. With the institution's support, these communities then established and began tending to experimental agricultural plots. At a basic level, schools were then able to provide a hot meal to the students each day. Beyond this, a process was also set in motion to assist the community to generate, apply, and disseminate knowledge about how to effectively meet the nutritional needs of the population while also increasing the income of farming families. More recently, the Foundation began to give greater attention to the educational needs of youth in a handful of communities—particularly students graduating from the primary schools. By 2014, the Foundation had set about facilitating the study of a set of materials from a Bahá'í-inspired organization in Colombia to raise up promoters of community well-being by strengthening in young people mathematical, scientific, language, and service capabilities.

The evolution of the Foundation and all of its lines of action has been sustained by a steady rise in human resources. The largest reservoir of human resources for the Foundation has been the teachers themselves. As teachers have gained experience, they have begun to serve in other ways: training and supporting newer teachers and refining the content of the curriculum used in the classrooms, to give two examples. A number of teachers have also been assisted to enroll in formal university programs.



Areas of Action

As described in the foregoing pages, Bahá'í development activities comprise a broad spectrum. They range from simple grassroots efforts of limited duration undertaken by individuals or small groups of friends, to programs of social and economic development with a high level of sophistication implemented by Bahá'í-inspired nongovernmental organizations. These activities represent responses to the needs of the particular community in which they are initiated. They may be related to one or more areas, such as agriculture, education, arts and media, health, the local

economy, and the advancement of women. The pages that follow describe a selection of Bahá'í endeavors in these areas of action. The efforts profiled within each area are by no means exhaustive—they merely serve to provide a glimpse into the range and diversity of activities under way within that area. Bahá'í development activities concerned with one of several other aspects of development, such as the environment, language and migration, and the channeling of funds, have not been included here but are no less significant.



Education

The Bahá'í Writings place a special emphasis on the importance of education, describing it as the "primary, the most urgent requirement" for achieving the prosperity of nations. Bahá'u'lláh states: "Knowledge is as wings to man's life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone." "Every child is potentially the light of the world—and at the same time its darkness," 'Abdu'l-Bahá adds, "wherefore must the question of education be accounted as of primary importance." He further writes: "The education and training of children is among the most meritorious acts of human-kind and draweth down the grace and favor of the All-Merciful, for education is the indispensable foundation of all human excellence and alloweth man to work his way to the heights of abiding glory."

The response of the Bahá'í community to these principles has been to undertake a wide variety of educational initiatives. Indeed, educational projects have comprised approximately 80 percent of sustained Bahá'í development endeavors in the world. These range in sophistication from informal after-school classes to universities. They include morals classes for children in kindergartens and primary schools, literacy projects for youth and adults, education and training for women and girls, programs aimed at enhancing capacities of young people to promote social well-being, and organizations offering post-secondary education, developing curriculum, or providing teacher

training. Hundreds of Bahá'í-inspired academic schools have been established worldwide. Regardless of the form they take, all educational initiatives have as their primary objective the development of capacity in generation after generation to contribute to the betterment of society in meaningful ways. The pages that follow provide a description of several of these initiatives. Further, the section titled "Systematization of Learning" (page 41) profiles three educational programs developed by Bahá'í-inspired organizations that have shown particular promise and have been applied in several countries around the world with suitable conditions.

Ruhi Arbab School, Colombia; Community school, Tanzania; Ocean of Light International School, Tonga; Community school, India; Moral class for children, Australia; School of the Nations, Brazil



Colombia



Tanzania



Brazil



Tonga



Australia



India

Selected Educational Projects



Olinga Foundation, Ghana

Olinga Foundation for Human Development

In the mid-1990s, the Bahá'í community of **Ghana** initiated a moral education and literacy campaign entitled "Enlightening the Hearts" in several regions of the country. The effectiveness of this experience led to the establishment, in 2001, of the Olinga Foundation for Human Development, which has extended the reach of the campaign to students of public schools. The organization collaborates with district education offices in addressing high illiteracy rates among upper primary students in rural regions throughout the country. Teachers are trained to help students improve literacy and reading skills in the local language over a period of nine months. In addition to receiving training on the organization's methodology for literacy instruction, the teachers study materials that are aimed at building their moral capabilities and improving attitudes toward teaching. Through the influence of the program, cases of corporal punishment have been completely eliminated in several schools, and greater attention is being given to the educational needs of girls.



Parent University, United States

Parent University

Parent University in the **United States** was established in 2000 with an aim of helping families in low-income neighborhoods of Savannah to take greater ownership of the education of their children and to assist them to overcome certain social issues facing the local population, such as poverty and relatively low access to formal educational opportunities. The organization offers a variety of courses to parents as well as other members of the extended family to assist in equipping them with the knowledge and skills required to create environments that are conducive for their children's learning. Parent University has more recently started to offer a new multi-session module called "Early Learning College," tailored to parents of children aged zero to five. Some 3,000 individuals have thus far participated in the courses offered by Parent University.



Núr University, Bolivia

Núr University

Núr University in **Bolivia** has been in operation for over three decades. It offers diploma, undergraduate, and postgraduate programs in areas such as management, administration, auditing, law, teaching, marketing, consulting and coaching, social and economic development, and public health. The University promotes the integration of academic knowledge with both practical experience and the teaching of basic moral principles, while emphasizing community service, social justice, and a respect for human diversity. By 2017, over 3,000 students were enrolled in the University's undergraduate and postgraduate programs. Teachers and government administrators in hundreds of rural communities in Bolivia have participated in a specialized program that the University has developed for training in moral leadership. Núr University has also collaborated with nongovernmental organizations and educational institutions in other countries on research and development projects to promote literacy, moral leadership, public health, public administration and governance, the advancement of women, and sustainable development.

Mongolian Development Centre

The **Mongolian** Development Centre (MDC) was established in 1993 to empower individuals, institutions, and local communities in the country through programs centered on education and development. MDC's early childhood development program began in 2000 and is rooted in the conviction that every child is created noble and endowed with innate capacities and potential. As part of the program, a character development curriculum was created to nurture moral reasoning in children between three and five years of age, emphasizing service to humanity. Training is provided to assist teachers of kindergarten classes in using the curriculum as a supplement to the existing preschool curriculum produced by the government. Managers also participate in workshops that help them understand the education being provided by the teachers. The organization also works with parents to help them build capacity to create a home environment conducive to their children's development. In 2016, MDC worked with over 300 teachers from some 40 kindergartens and delivered workshops with 950 parents.

Bahá'í Academy

Founded in 1982, Bahá'í Academy is engaged in research and action in the field of value and moral education; its main line of action is offering courses on this subject to university students, faculty, and staff. Over 30,000 individuals from various institutions for higher learning in **India** have participated in at least one such course since the Academy's establishment.



MDC, Mongolia

Selected Academic Schools

The establishment of schools has been a significant feature of Bahá'í experience in the field of development. More than 800 Bahá'í-inspired academic schools have been established worldwide. Over half of these are in Africa, about 200 are in Asia, some 100 are in Australasia, and a few dozen are in the Americas and in Europe. These educational centers exist in a variety of settings and range from simple kindergartens serving tens of children to large schools at elementary and secondary levels offering education to thousands of students. All aim at academic excellence and place special emphasis on service to the community through the application of moral values and spiritual principles, and each strives to meet the particular needs of the society in which it operates. A few examples from various parts of the globe illustrate how the schools are attempting to put these ideals into practice.



Townshend International School, Czech Republic

Ocean of Light International School

The Ocean of Light International School in **Tonga** offers pre-tertiary grade levels to some 400 students, with an aim of raising students who not only excel academically but also develop exemplary habits and spiritual qualities channeled toward service to their local communities and society at large. The school's efforts in this regard have received recognition not only from parents, but also the Minister of Education.

Brilliant Star School

The Brilliant Star School was established in 2011 in the neighborhood of Tabuariki, **Solomon Islands**, and by 2017 had grown to offer preschool and primary grade education to around 150 children. While continuous efforts are being made to strengthen the capacity of its teachers, the positive response of the population it serves has led to the creation of a new organization focused on contributing to education in the community and surrounding villages.



Nancy Campbell Academy, Canada

School of the Nations, Macau



Townshend International School

In Europe, the Townshend International School in the **Czech Republic** starts at preschool and goes through secondary school, serving some 140 students. It offers a particular program for students attending grades 7 through 9 that incorporates the study of civics lessons in such areas as health, environment, and justice, with the study of themes related to character development and the planning of service projects.

Nancy Campbell Academy

The Nancy Campbell Academy in **Canada**, an accredited private international school for boys and girls in grades 7 to 12, fosters academic achievement within a clear moral framework that incorporates 19 specific capabilities.

School of the Nations, Brazil

Located in **Brazil's** capital city, Brasilia, the School of the Nations, established in 1980, provides academic instruction in English and Portuguese to over 850 students attending nursery through grade 12. Several years ago, it began offering the junior youth program (see page 46) and utilizing other materials, paying particular attention to the implementation of service projects by the students.

Bambino Private Schools

In Lilongwe, **Malawi**, Bambino Private Schools offers preschool through secondary education to over 700 students. It supplements the academic curriculum with a character development program and activities for service to the community. Among the acts of service that high school students undertake is to implement a moral empowerment program for young adolescents in public schools in the area.

Lycée Enoch Olinga

Lycée Enoch Olinga, established in 2001 in Niamey, **Niger**, provides preschool through secondary education to around 450 students. Over the years, the school has been considering different ways it can extend its efforts beyond its own student population. In this regard, it has gained experience collaborating with other schools in the city by providing training to their teachers and more recently has begun considering ways in which it can help to establish schools in rural areas of the country where there is little access to formal education.

Mazin Academy

The Mazin Academy, located in a village in Jogi Moor, **Pakistan**, provides academic education to some 150 students. The school has gradually impacted various aspects of the community and its culture, bringing for the first time literacy among its women, reducing gambling and fights, which were common practices in the village, and raising a population both eager and capable to contribute to the well-being of the community.

School of the Nations, Macau

The School of the Nations in **Macau**, which was originally opened in 1988, is offering education to over 600 students from kindergarten to high school level. It has gained widespread recognition in the country for its high standards of academic education, and its character development program has won awards at both the national and international levels. In recent years it has extended its collaboration to other schools in the country, inviting them to explore in practice the application of concepts it has found indispensable to its own efforts.



Bambino Private Schools, Malawi



Health

Bahá'í endeavors in the field of health strive to assist local populations to develop the capacity to address a growing range of local health concerns. Initiatives in this area take diverse forms including the creation of hospitals, clinics, and Bahá'í medical associations, the organization of events such as medical camps and campaigns to raise awareness about habits and practices that promote health, the implementation of health-education programs in schools, and the development of programs to train community health workers who can help bridge the gap between health needs at the grassroots and medical services of government agencies. All Bahá'í efforts in the area of health envision the development of a culture in which the physical and spiritual well-being of the community becomes the concern of a growing number of its members, who are able to apply scientific knowledge and spiritual principles to an expanding range of local health issues. A few examples of initiatives that contribute to enhancing the health of communities are provided below.

The educational programs of the Bahá'í community often give rise to activities of fixed duration that contribute to the improvement of the health of community members at the grassroots. A group of junior youth in **Canada**, for instance, organized a community gathering on the topic of children's nutrition with the help of a nutritionist. In a village in **India**, individuals conducting educational activities in their community became increasingly aware of the health-related needs of participants and their families. They undertook to collaborate with professionals to hold health camps and to conduct workshops to raise awareness about concepts and practices relevant to the health of families and communities. A number of older youth in **Zambia** participating in a program that helps train promoters of community well-being collaborated with

community health workers to raise awareness in neighborhoods and villages about the prevention and treatment of typhoid, following an outbreak in the region. As a result, eight of the program's participants were appointed to neighborhood health committees. A number of sustained projects in the field of health are also conducted by individuals and groups inspired by the Bahá'í teachings. In the Kivu region of the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, many such efforts have been carried out since the 1980s, including the training of hundreds of community health workers and the establishment of dispensaries, clinics, and health centers. Today, several Bahá'í-inspired health clinics exist in the region, which place particular emphasis on improving the relationship between health workers and community members



Zambia



United States



India



Canada

through, for instance, follow-up visits to patients in their homes to confirm their well-being and to discuss daily practices they can carry out to improve and maintain their health. In 2013, Fondation Graine d'Espoir (Seed of Hope Foundation) was established to provide advisory and technical support to some of the Bahá'í-inspired health initiatives in the region and to help strengthen their systems of administration in order to ensure their sustainability. Graine d'Espoir also creates spaces of reflection at the local level in which community members can discuss ways the Bahá'í-inspired clinics can better serve their needs. In a further effort to widen the access of the population to primary health care, the organization offers training to individuals to serve as health educators in their own localities.



Uganda



Democratic Republic of the Congo

Youth raising awareness about illness prevention, Zambia; Health for Humanity, United States; Community meeting about nutrition, Canada; Fondation Graine d'Espoir, Democratic Republic of the Congo; Community health worker, Uganda; Youth doing a presentation about health, India



Agriculture

The Bahá'í teachings place agriculture at the heart of community life, and urge that a special regard be paid to the advancement of this field. "The fundamental basis of the community," 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "is agriculture, tillage of the soil. All must be producers."

Inspired by these teachings, Bahá'ís have historically engaged in a diversity of activities to contribute to agricultural development. In both rural and urban settings, groups of individuals have collectively undertaken crop production or animal husbandry activities to improve food security and nutrition within their communities, as well as to generate income for participating families. One such example is in Tanna, **Vanuatu**, where a number of youth and adults started a piggery in order to contribute a new source of food and income to the community. They began by investigating how to raise pigs, and set up a suitable pen. As piglets were born, they were sold to members of the community so that more piggeries could be established. Another example is in Salt Lake City, **United States**, where a group of youth was considering the needs of the neighborhood and identified a lack of healthy, fresh, affordable food. Through consultation with other community members, the youth were able to secure a plot of land, necessary equipment, and seeds. With some advice from experienced individuals, they then established a vegetable garden, the harvest from which was made available for free to the members of the community.

In addition to these less formal undertakings, several Bahá'í-inspired schools and universities in Africa and Latin America have included agricultural sciences as a main component of their

curricula in order to foster in young people a love for agriculture and to help in the dissemination of knowledge. In the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, for example, the Bahá'í community has operated an agricultural school called Institut Technique Agricole Tshilaka for some three decades to raise up youth who can provide technical assistance to local farmers.

A number of Bahá'í-inspired organizations have also been engaged in a process of action-research in an effort to develop diverse, sustainable, high-yielding, and ecologically sound production systems that are appropriate for the realities faced by the small farm. Among these organizations is the Kimanya-Ngeyo Foundation for Science and Education in **Uganda**, which since 2013 has been carrying out agricultural experiments to generate knowledge in such areas as soil and water conservation, pest and disease management, and diversification of genetic resources. The research on "Diversified High-Efficiency Plots," carried out with local farmers, benefits from their knowledge of traditional farming systems as well as the findings of modern science. The active participation of an increasing number of farmers in such a process of structured, scientific learning about agriculture, the organization hopes, will contribute over time to the advancement of the scientific and technological culture of farming populations in the region.



Belarus



India



Uganda



Papua New Guinea



Colombia

Planting in a community garden, Belarus; Conducting an agriculture experiment, India; Conducting an agriculture experiment, Uganda; Planting in a community garden, Colombia; Measuring spacing of plants in an experimental plot, Papua New Guinea



Economic Life of Communities

Among the basic tenets of the Bahá'í Faith is the elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty by promoting just economic systems and the voluntary striving of everyone, rich and poor. Bahá'ís everywhere are called on to learn about how to advance collective prosperity through the implementation of methods and approaches that promote unity and justice, as well as the application to economic affairs of such spiritual principles and concepts as generosity, trustworthiness, and integrity. A handful of examples of activities that have contributed in one or another way to enhancing the economic life of families and communities, albeit modestly, are provided below.

In many communities around the world, a growing spirit of mutual support and assistance naturally finds expression in economic activities. In a village in **Togo**, a group of 18 friends formed a cooperative with the aim of sharing resources and helping improve the material well-being of their families. A farm was created on which all of its members would work. Over many years, with the money that had been raised from the produce, the members were able to cover the cost of several of their families' health and educational needs. For instance, the children of these individuals were the first in the village to go through tertiary education. At the same time, the group's concern with the advancement of the entire community prompted it to consider how opportunities could be created for all children to have access to better education. The group also obtained a mill which, in addition to being used for its own activities, was intended to benefit two neighboring villages that did not have access to similar technology.

Many Bahá'í educational projects, while not directly focused on strengthening local economies, help build the capacity of individuals to earn a livelihood as they strive to contribute to the advancement of their communities. In **Colombia**, the Supporting Community Leaders (SCL) program of FUNDAEC assists young people living in rural regions of the country to select and pursue a path related to one or another trade or profession. The youth take part in apprenticeships and technical or undergraduate degree programs, and some are assisted to pursue a path of entrepreneurship by starting a production project or a small business.

Specific programs focused on one or another aspect of local economic activity are also under way in some places. Almost two decades ago, the Bahá'í-inspired organization Education, Curriculum, and Training Associates (ECTA) in **Nepal** developed a community banking program. The program involves offering training to groups of 10 to 30 individuals, who then begin to

save small sums and make modest loans available to bank members at a reasonable rate of interest. The banks are managed entirely by the members themselves, and interest earned is divided proportionally according to the amount each holds in savings. Further, a portion of the profits is put into a social and economic development fund for the benefit of the community at large. The banks provide their members with the opportunity to learn skills of sound financial management and encourage them to establish or expand their own businesses.

A number of organizations in other parts of the world, primarily in Africa and Latin America, have implemented

this program in different settings. Among these is Asociación Bayan in **Honduras**, which in 2017 was supporting some 70 banks. Through saving, young people have been able to continue their education or pursue a means of livelihood within their own communities, alleviating to a certain degree pressures that lead youth in the rural regions of Honduras to move away. Banking groups have also been able to carry out a variety of community development initiatives of fixed duration, including digging a well, constructing a bridge, building and painting classrooms, installing a culvert beneath a road, and engaging in agricultural experiments.

Small business started by community bank member, Nepal; Community bank members installing well for village, Honduras; Coffee roasting business started by participant of SCL program, Colombia; Small business started by community bank member, Malawi; Basket weaving for income generation, Democratic Republic of the Congo



Nepal



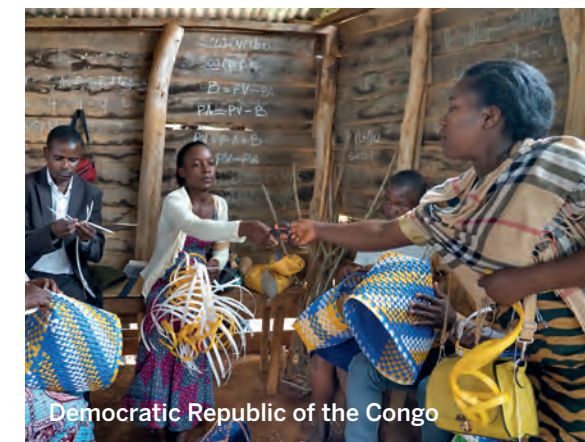
Honduras



Colombia



Malawi



Democratic Republic of the Congo



Arts and Media

The Bahá'í Writings give particular significance to the arts, asserting their capacity to “uplift the world of being” and to “awaken noble sentiments” among the masses of people. Bahá'í development efforts that utilize arts and media, then, use various means of communication to help inspire high aims and raise consciousness about principles pertinent to the material and spiritual progress of a population. They attempt to give concepts and themes drawn from the principles of the Faith expression in new forms in order to assist in effecting constructive social change. A small selection of such efforts is described below.

Early instances of initiatives in the field of arts and communications media include the establishment of Bahá'í radio stations in Latin America and Asia. These agencies have provided a notable example of the role that media can play in contributing to the material and spiritual progress of society. Radio Bahá'í in Soloy, **Panama**, was established in the 1980s to give voice to and serve as an educational and cultural channel for indigenous peoples. The station broadcasts in both Spanish and Ngäbere, the language of the local population, and has at least 7,000 listeners. It produces and airs content especially for children, youth, and women on themes of spiritual import including service, truthfulness, love, and generosity in the form of original songs, skits, announcements, and interviews.

A number of dance workshops and theater companies were also created over the years in an effort to raise awareness about certain social issues through the arts. One such example is the Children's Theater Company in the **United States**, which works with children and youth between the ages of

five and nineteen to produce musicals and perform them for the general public in communities of New York City. Cast members meet weekly to reflect on the social and moral implications of the musicals, which address such themes as racial unity, the advancement of women, the elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty, and preservation of the environment. The Company also hosts a weekly discussion group with parents during which subjects related to early childhood development and parenting are explored.

More recently, a few Bahá'í communities have engaged in a process of learning aimed at creating and sharing meaningful content at the grassroots through several means of communication, such as film, music, and theater, in a way that raises collective understanding and contributes to the transformation of their social environment. Illumine Media Project in Toronto, **Canada**, for instance, offers workshops for youth on different aspects of filmmaking and invites them to participate in producing short films on themes reflecting the capacity of youth to transform their own



Panama



Canada



India



Ecuador

lives and their environment. The films are then shared with the community through screenings at locations such as schools, community centers, and film festivals, during which the audience is posed a number of questions that are intended to stimulate meaningful conversation. Since the Project's start in 2012, some 2,000 young people have participated in such screenings.

A similar project in Chongón, **Ecuador**, helped give rise to a series of

songwriting workshops that brought together musicians from several countries in Latin America to produce music for young people that addresses their unique aspirations and enhances their understanding of moral issues. The songs produced are shared with local populations through concerts, visits with families, and meetings of young people participating in the junior youth spiritual empowerment program (see page 46).



Germany

Bahá'í Radio, Panama; Illumine Media Project, Canada; Songwriting workshop, Ecuador; People's Theater, Germany; Puppet show to raise awareness about social issues, India

Advancement of Women

The equality of men and women is another cardinal principle of the Bahá'í Faith. "The world of humanity has two wings—one is women and the other men," 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote. "Not until both wings are equally developed can the bird fly." Intrinsic to every instance of social action undertaken by Bahá'ís, regardless of the area of action it strives to address, is a commitment to the goal of ensuring that women and men are allowed to advance shoulder to shoulder in all fields of human endeavor—scientific, political, economic, social, and cultural. In addition, certain programs have focused specifically on the advancement of women by, for instance, providing education to women and girls to assist them to take their rightful place in society, striving to eliminate prejudices against women, and establishing mechanisms to protect their well-being.

At the grassroots, Bahá'ís strive to enhance the participation of women and girls in educational programs as students and participants, teachers and tutors, and coordinators and directors. These efforts have contributed to enhancing the role of women and changing attitudes in villages and neighborhoods. In the Monduli district of **Tanzania**, for example, as more and more girls attended Bahá'í-inspired community schools, it became increasingly common for parents to allow their daughters to continue their studies and get married at a later age. Further, ongoing conversations about the negative effects of female genital mutilation have led to a reduction in the percentage of female students being subjected to this practice.

The Barli Development Institute for Rural Women in **India** was established in 1985 with the aim of empowering rural and tribal women to become agents of social change in their communities. The Institute offers a free

six-month residential training program to 260 illiterate or semi-literate women each year in areas including literacy, moral leadership, nutrition and health, environmental conservation, and income generation. It also builds the capacity of a smaller group of women who have received secondary education to facilitate a similar training in extension centers. Recognizing that attitudinal change on the part of husbands, parents, children, grassroots leaders, local institutions and other members of the community is equally essential to the process of empowering women, the Institute continues to visit the villages of former participants and conducts conferences and meetings and offers short-term courses. More than 8,000 women from approximately 800 villages of Madhya Pradesh and other parts of the country have thus far taken part in the Institute's program.

Another example is the Tahirih Justice Center in the **United States**, which provides free legal and social



services to immigrant women and girls who are seeking protection from gender-based violence. Since its establishment in 1997, the Center has assisted nearly 22,000 women and girls fleeing abuse and has reached thousands more through advocacy, training, and public education programs. In the area of public policy advocacy, the Tahirih Justice Center launched a campaign to end exploitation of foreign-born women by international marriage brokers, which led to the signing into law of the International Marriage Broker Regulation Act. The Center's Forced Marriage Initiative that was launched in 2011 strives to protect vulnerable children across the United States from child marriage and has served to initiate a movement to reform laws on the minimum age of marriage in the country.

Barli Development Institute for Rural Women, India; Women working on a project, Kiribati; Community school in Monduli district, Tanzania; Tahirih Justice Center, United States



Systematization of Learning

As indicated previously, learning is a central concern for every effort of social and economic development. Those involved strive that their activities evolve through an ongoing process of consultation, study, action, and reflection on action. In such a process, adjustments are made in response to objective analysis of experience, changing circumstances, and regular reflection on the meaning and implications of the writings of the Faith.

A process of learning at the local level, however, will remain limited in its efficacy if it is not connected to a body of knowledge informed by a broader process of learning. The role of the Office of Social and Economic Development (OSED) at the Faith's world headquarters in Haifa, Israel, assumes particular significance in this light. The agency has been established to facilitate learning about development theory and practice in the Bahá'í community (see page 7). The functions it performs provide it with the perspective needed to gather and systematize 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 to countries where conditions allow for its implementation so that national Bahá'í communities can adapt it to their specific needs. As the number of institutions involved in carrying out the program grows, arrangements and structures for facilitating the flow of information and learning evolve accordingly, ensuring that communities around the world not only benefit from the program, but can also contribute to its further advancement.

To one or another extent, over the last few decades, efforts to systematize learning have been under way with respect to each of the areas described in the previous section, including arts and media, agricultural research, education, health, and community banking. It is expected that, over time, as more and more Bahá'í-inspired organizations emerge with the capacity to generate knowledge regarding various aspects of the development of their respective regions, their experience will give rise to new insights and programs that demonstrate their effectiveness in practice and could have application in other contexts.

The examples in the following section represent some of the fruits of efforts to systematize learning in the area of education.

Promotion of Community Schools through Teacher Training

A pressing concern of the Bahá'í community over the decades has been the extension of pre- and primary school level academic instruction in regions of the world where the reach of the national education system is significantly limited. In the 1970s and early 1980s, simultaneous to the introduction by the Bahá'í community of large academic schools throughout the world, a global campaign was launched to promote tutorial schools—schools with modest facilities, typically in rural settings, and usually managed by local Bahá'í institutions. Numerous Bahá'í communities around the world were successful in establishing such schools. However, in the absence of institutional capacity at the regional or national levels to support their continued progress, it proved impossible to sustain them.



Tanzania



Papua New Guinea



Central African Republic



Indonesia

Over time, two Bahá'í development organizations emerged in Africa, one in the Central African Republic (CAR) and the other in Mali, to promote community schools through the provision of a coherent teacher-training program. The evolution of the efforts of Fondation Nahid et Hushang Ahdieh in CAR is described in more detail on page 20. Informed by the experience accumulated by these two agencies, as well as previous insights gained over the decades, in 2007 OSED outlined elements of a strategy to assist, in a systematic way, the establishment of community schools in countries where the institutional and human resources exist to embark on such an effort.

Since that time, a growing number of Bahá'í-inspired agencies in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific have been working toward the multiplication of community schools in villages and towns. As their number has grown, arrangements have gradually been put in place to facilitate the sharing of learning among these agencies. For instance, a few organizations with significant experience have begun to act as training centers

for emerging agencies—assisting them in their efforts to develop and refine their teacher-training program. In Africa, a secretariat for the network of agencies in the continent promoting community schools has been in operation to help develop the institutional capacity of these organizations and to systematize the knowledge being gained across the region.

At this time, there are 26 organizations promoting the establishment of community schools in 20 countries. Collectively, these organizations support approximately 1,400 teachers in 420 schools with 28,000 students.

Elements of an Emerging Approach

Drawing primarily on locally available resources, community schools often begin with a single class at the preschool level. They expand organically according to circumstances in the locality, gradually adding more teachers and grade levels up until the last year of primary school. Some have advanced beyond the primary level. While there is as yet no comprehensive curriculum being used across all community schools, all

seek to integrate academic and spiritual curricular elements and aim to raise up individuals of refined character and keen intellect who, in time, can contribute to the material, social, and spiritual progress of their society.

At the heart of the work of the organizations is the development of a teacher-training program that helps build the capacity of youth and adults to offer pre-primary and primary academic instruction to children in their communities. These organizations are animated by a vision of raising up teachers who are “distinguished for their high standards of conduct and general excellence” and are “scholars and educators with a thorough knowledge of sciences and arts.” The approach to teacher training seeks to integrate theory and practice by creating regular opportunities for the teachers to study relevant content and to reflect with others on the experience they are gaining in the classroom.

A basic conviction held by these organizations is that local communities can be protagonists in providing for the education of their children. In this regard, experience has

underscored the importance of communities having a sense of ownership of the process of education and supporting the establishment of a school, both in principle and in practical terms. Thus, much of the effort of the organizations is focused on helping communities explore their aspirations for the education of their children and on assisting them to consider how they can take charge of meeting this imperative. An initial step that communities take in response to this rise in consciousness is that of identifying individuals from within their localities to whom they can entrust the education of the younger generations. Once schools are established, community members often demonstrate their commitment to sustaining them in a variety of ways beyond the payment of school fees. For instance, they provide food for the students and teachers, contribute land, assist with the construction of classrooms, and maintain school agricultural plots.

Glimpses from around the World

Papua New Guinea

The Sunrise Community School in Papua New Guinea is among a growing number of community schools that is being supported by an organization in the country named the Rays of Light Foundation. The school was established in 2009 in Milne Bay Province as a preschool, and it celebrated the graduation of students from grade 6 for the first time in December 2015. Over the years, the community assisted it to build classroom facilities, establish an agricultural field to run experiments, and create a library. The school has a parent-teacher association which oversees its management. Together with the help of the community, the association has ventured into such projects as vanilla production and constructing a school canteen. The students continue their education in public schools upon graduation and are distinguished in their further studies by their intellectual capacity and upright character.

Tanzania

The population in the Monduli district in the Arusha region of Tanzania is mainly nomadic and the majority of its members have never received a primary school education. Although reluctant to send their young children to distant schools in the district, parents supported the concept of community schools. Since these schools provide children with access to academic education while they remain under the care of their parents, the children could continue to learn about values and qualities relevant to the life of the population. In natural ways, the influence of the school extended beyond

the student body. For instance, in one village, mothers of students observed that since they did not know how to read and write, they could not assist their children with the work that they were doing in the school. When they raised this concern with the teacher, he sought the assistance of the Foundation to develop a simple literacy class and started to offer it in the afternoons, open to all the mothers in the village. “We first built the school for the children; now this school is for the entire community as well,” they said.

Swaziland

In Swaziland, some community schools have begun to be viewed as social spaces that belong to all and that can help strengthen certain facets of community life. The Asibemunye Community School, which has been offering preschool education since 2010, placed emphasis on educating its students about the importance of hygiene and sanitation. Students would take these lessons home, encouraging their families to improve certain practices, such as the regular washing of linen. This process of raising awareness was reinforced by visits from the teacher and gradually helped bring about noticeable improvements in the health of the community. For example, scabies—a highly contagious skin disease that would break out annually in the community—was eliminated over time. Recognizing the important role that the community-school teacher played in this process, the Ministry of Health has started collaborating with teachers in order to assist with raising consciousness about how to improve the health of communities.

Central African Republic

In the Central African Republic, years of conflict have led to suffering and regular interruptions to patterns of community life. In the capital city of Bangui, nearly all of the schools were shut down during the most recent war, which began in 2013. However, several of the community schools were able to remain open and even provide education to children from other schools that had been forced to close. At the same time, in many rural areas, entire communities were forced to flee and resettle in forest areas when subject to potential attacks. While teachers from urban centers returned to the cities, teachers of community schools relocated with their respective communities. This allowed them to re-establish a pattern of providing education in their temporary locations and helped bring a degree of stability to their communities in the midst of uncertainty. In some localities, the qualities demonstrated by these teachers put them in a unique position to assist the local population in other ways during the conflict. In one village, for instance, a leader of one of the groups involved in the battle requested to speak with the members of the community. The community agreed, on condition that the discussions were held at the school and were led by its teachers. In the same locality, when government and nongovernmental agencies started to deliver material assistance, the inhabitants of the village gave the teachers the responsibility for distributing resources, trusting that they would discharge the duty with fairness and justice.

Experience gained in various parts of the world, including the examples cited in this section, offer a glimpse as to the potential that exists when a spirit of reciprocity and mutual support is established among various actors concerned with the education of children—the school, the teachers, the parents, and the community at large. Rather than being seen as a passive deliverer of content, a teacher can be an essential protagonist, along with other collaborators, in the spiritual and intellectual development of children and in the overall progress of a community. In addition to assisting children to acquire knowledge in various branches of learning, teachers

can help to nurture a culture of learning in a community, cultivate a spirit of service to others, and promote the application of principles such as love and unity. As an integral component of the life of a population, a community school can contribute to learning for the entire community as it gains in strength. Often in simple ways and as an organic extension of the service it is carrying out, a community school can aid the advancement of various aspects of community well-being such as agriculture and health and can provide access to wider knowledge through means such as the establishment of a library.



Democratic Republic of the Congo



Swaziland

The Moral and Spiritual Empowerment of Junior Youth

In the mid-1990s, a group of individuals were invited by OSED to analyze the experience gained by Bahá'í communities in promoting literacy. On this basis, pilot literacy projects were created in a number of countries. In subsequent consultations which were arranged to share observations and reflect on achievements, it became increasingly clear that junior youth aged between, say, 12 and 15, had a particular idealism and energy, and a special receptivity to programs that enhance the power of expression. The junior youth spiritual empowerment program was developed as a result and continues to evolve through experience worldwide. Beyond instructions in the simple mechanics of reading and writing, the 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.

The program is based on the conviction that the short and critical period of young adolescence represents a period of transition during which ideas about the individual and society which shape the rest of one's life are formed. While some conceptions paint a dark picture of adolescence, perceiving this stage of life as one fraught with difficulties and crisis, the Bahá'í community views young people as invaluable protagonists for the construction of a better society. The program, then, aims at awakening the junior youth to their own potential, developing their talents, and directing their new abilities toward service to humanity. It is organized around the concept of a junior youth group, which serves as an environment of mutual support for its members. Guided by older youth, who serve as "animators," junior youth study materials based on moral and spiritual concepts, engage in artistic activities, and carry out acts of community service.

At present, the program is being carried out in some 165 countries involving more than 160,000 junior youth in over 17,000 groups. In response to the considerable demand for the program experienced worldwide, a network of sites for the dissemination of learning has been established in all continents. These sites, some 60 of which are currently in operation, provide training to coordinators of the program and help systematize and diffuse knowledge accruing in diverse contexts.

Voices of Young People from around the World

The words of young people participating in the program offer glimpses into the potential of this age group—their altruism, acute sense of justice, eagerness to learn about the universe, and desire to become agents of positive change in their communities. Comments such as the following have come from animators and junior youth in all continents:

"In my village many people are religious fundamentalists and many people are always ready to fight. They keep fighting over small things. One thinks that if there is a little bit of land and he takes it over, this land is his. . . . I also had some land and it was taken over. . . . After seeing this I thought, 'What if it weren't this way? What if unity and love were to come about and these thoughts of service were to come about?' I think about working for all this in the village. To do this, we will have to progress, so why don't I help the village to progress and bring about these changes? Hence I am working towards this."

"The worst thing in the village is caste prejudice. People fight because of caste. It seems to me that we need to change this caste prejudice very urgently. We should live together in unity. Here there is fighting for this reason. . . ."



Brazil



Italy



Kenya

For example, if someone is of a higher caste and you are of a lower caste, the higher caste people will not let you set foot in their house. But I don't think this way. I think they have come to my house, so they should sit with me, pray with me. As we read in the books [of the junior youth program], we should live in unity so that all prejudices will come to an end. Having studied this book, people will become educated."

"After starting the [junior youth group] my character changed greatly. Before, I would just be busy with housework. Afterwards, I would also teach the children's class and I started tutoring. I started to go to different places, and I also went to a nearby village to teach a class. . . . Before, I didn't feel like leaving the house, but now it seems to me

that wherever I go, I should learn something. Before, my family used to say that girls should not go out. But now they say, 'No. Daughters and sons are equal. She will go out, and she will study and learn.'"

"Development means to attain materially, but also to have a life dedicated to service, and not to focus on only the things that are material. For the moment, there are two purposes of my life: one is to develop my spiritual qualities, and the other is to have a job where I may not make that much money but I will be able to help the community. . . . I want to create a cooperative to buy and sell goods, because I saw that this was sustainable."

"There are times that people stay away from others because of the color of their skin or because of race. Sometimes I'm with friends playing football and they say, 'You can't play with us because you're black, you're a blackie . . .' It brings me a lot of pain, because we're all playing there and we should all play together, we should all be united. The way I respond to this is that I say you can't be like that with others because we're all children of God. The quotation I remember that inspired me is 'Ye are all the fruits of one tree and the leaves of one branch.' To me it means that we are all children of God and that we shouldn't take people for granted."

"Starting from this village we will bring peace to the village, then the state, the country, and the world, and in this way we will become united and live in harmony."

The following comments provide a glimpse of the manner in which the dedicated efforts of young people can contribute to positive changes in a community:

"This neighborhood now is very different. Life is hard here, even for youth, and we used to have many different gangs and groups, but now we have something in common even with those who we used to consider our enemies. Now we are all part of the junior youth groups."

"The program has really had a significant impact on the lives of the junior youth and the whole community. Today if you pass through the village, you will see the junior youth behaving very well. . . . Even in the homes, the junior youth help their families to consult properly, avoid backbiting and uphold the unity of the family at all times. They encourage rectitude of conduct in all. Now the spiritual life of the com-

munity has significantly improved. Many parents tell me that they see a significant difference between their older children who had not attended the program and the ones who are attending the program. If their child has an idea, he or she will consult with their parents and share his or her idea and seek their thoughts. This has contributed to the unity of the families. They are learning how to consult and respect each other's thoughts."

The junior youth spiritual empowerment program has, in a number of places, also been adopted by academic schools which have made it available to their students in order to contribute to their moral empowerment and to enhance their capacity to serve society. In **Kiribati**, where the Ootan Marawa Educational Institute has been offering the program in public schools, a growing number of teachers, principals, and parents have described how the participants of the program are able to more clearly express themselves, improve their academic performance, and demonstrate more upright conduct. Prominent education officials noted that the program had contributed to a decline in the rate of student expulsions and in the number of instances where students publicly engage in such harmful activities as the consumption of alcohol. On various occasions, the organization has been invited to speak at formal gatherings arranged by the Ministry of Education on the importance of creating environments for students that foster mutual support and that reinforce academic progress and behavioral transformation.



Kiribati



Democratic Republic of the Congo



Canada

Building Capacity among Young People in a Rural Community in Tajikistan

Sovkhoz Banomi Michurina is an agrarian village with a population of 3,200 on the border between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. As is common in such villages around the world, many of the youth migrate elsewhere to pursue employment opportunities. The junior youth spiritual empowerment program was first introduced to the area in 2007. Early on, a school in the locality began offering the program to its students with the assistance of a nongovernmental organization, Education Science Advancement Foundation. Camps for junior youth participating in the program have also been organized during summer and winter holidays.

Over the years, many service projects have been carried out by junior youth groups, such as tree planting and cleaning the streets. One of the more complex projects a group decided to undertake was to install signs indicating the names of the roads in the village, since visitors from outside would often find it difficult to orient themselves in the village. The junior youth mobilized some of the necessary resources by approaching the local government, and many neighbors decided to join them in their efforts.

This service project and numerous others carried out by some 500 junior youth who have participated in the program have had a significant influence on the community. The residents of the village now organize an annual cleaning of the streets and gutters in preparation for the traditional New Year celebrations. Community festivals have also taken root in the culture of the village ever since the youth participating in the program started to host them for their families and neighbors every six months. Particularly significant is the fact that strong, long-lasting prejudices between the various ethnic groups in the area are gradually fading away, as the youth build friendships based on working together for the common weal.

Contrary to the prevalent trend for young people in the area to decide against pursuing tertiary education, a number of individuals who participated in the program chose to enroll in university. The enhanced reading and comprehension abilities they developed through their participation helped sharpen their intellectual faculties. Also significant was the program's influence on their motivation for pursuing higher

education. One youth noted after attending a conference related to the program:

"We saw that we can change the reality of our village. We saw clearly what aspects of our village life have to be changed completely, and we saw our role in this process. At the conference, we understood what the junior youth program stood for, and when we were planning what we would do in the village, it was the most inspiring part for us and infused us with determination."

A number of these young people, then, assisted each other to enroll in educational programs that would allow them to develop the capacity to meet specific needs they identified in their village. Some of them, for instance, entered agriculture programs that would enable them to bring some of the benefits of modern agriculture to the village. Others enrolled in courses that would enable them to serve as teachers or to establish institutions dedicated to pre-primary education. Some of these youth were able to attend the local university, while others who had to study further afield intend to return once they complete their studies.



Tajikistan

Khujand

Preparation for Social Action Program

Through many years of research and action to address the needs of rural populations in Colombia, Fundación para la Aplicación y Enseñanza de las Ciencias (FUNDAEC), a Bahá'í-inspired organization based in Cali, developed an alternative secondary tutorial school system that aimed at building the capacity of young people to become protagonists of their own development. The “Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial” (SAT) program has been offered for more than three decades, reaching well over 100,000 students in Colombia alone and more recently being implemented in several countries in Latin America as a fully accredited, formal yet flexible option for secondary education recognized by government.



To respond to the interest shown in SAT by an increasing number of Bahá'í-inspired organizations around the world, and in consultation with OSSED, FUNDAEC modified some of its curricular elements and assembled them into a program called “Preparation for Social Action” (PSA). The PSA program is organized around the concept of a capability, conceived as “developed capacity to think and act effectively within a particular sphere of activity and according to an explicit purpose.” The 25 units that make up the program help participants acquire one or more capabilities in the areas of language, mathematics, science, and processes of community life including education, agriculture, health, and environmental conservation. Each unit aims at enabling the participants to serve their regions as “promoters of community well-being”; this it does by imparting relevant concepts, presenting pertinent information, and strengthening a set of related skills and abilities, as well as attitudes and spiritual qualities.

Since its inception in 2006, the PSA program has been implemented in 17 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific, and has thus far reached over 10,000 participants. The countries in which the program has been established are Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Zambia, Uganda, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Central African Republic, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Philippines, Cambodia, Malaysia, and India. In a further 15 countries, initial steps have been taken to build capacity for the introduction of the program, in response to local requests.

The following comments from individuals who have participated in the PSA program or other community members shed light on their perspectives on the development of their communities:

*A participant of the program in **Papua New Guinea** reflects on the development of his community: “This is a new concept of education. It is very challenging, and we will encounter many questions as we go along. Reaching our vision requires a learning process. We are building a new kind of system that isn’t ready-made. It will evolve through action and reflection. We need to cooperate and work as a community, and have ownership of the things that we do. Development should be driven from our own community.”*

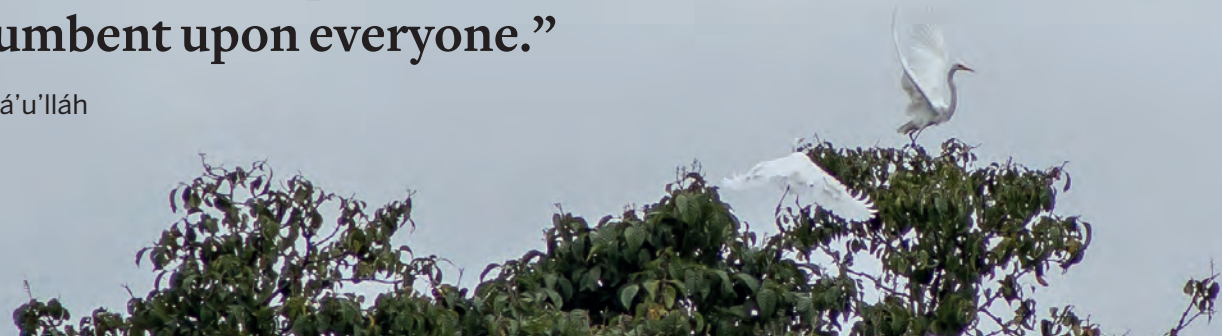
*A participant from **Zambia** describes his hopes for a reforestation project that he started with other members of his PSA group: “I want to continue and incorporate an educational aspect into our interactions with the community so that people don’t just plant, but they plant with a purpose—for people to have an understanding of the environmental challenges we face and how such a project helps address these challenges. The rainfall pattern has changed a lot and reforestation projects are one way of solving certain problems facing our population. I understand that even if I plant as many plants as possible, the impact will be limited, but if many people come on board, the impact will be much greater.”*

*A mother in **Vanuatu** highlights the impact her daughter’s participation in the program has had on the family and community: “When my daughter began participating [in] the PSA program, we began witnessing changes in our home. She brought changes to the way we used to do things, especially in relation to cleanliness, order, health, and hygiene. She taught us to wash our hands after using the toilet and rearranged our kitchen. She also prepared a special garden in which she planted various vegetables. [She received assistance] to purchase some nursery pots . . . plus plastic sheeting and seeds. She and [a group of] junior youth set up a little nursery. The seedlings from the nursery were planted in the community’s garden and in the [garden kept by] the junior youth. Through this process the junior youth and some other youth and the community are benefiting from my daughter’s new knowledge.”*



“Knowledge is as wings to man’s life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone.”

— Bahá’u’lláh



Glimpses from Around the World

Those who have participated in the PSA program have initiated a wide variety of projects aimed at contributing to one or another aspect of the social and economic lives of their communities. Such efforts have included campaigns to conduct research and to raise awareness about prevalent issues, projects providing services that respond to particular needs in a population, and endeavors to offer training and support so as to raise capacity within a community to take charge of its own progress. These initiatives have been carried out in areas such as agriculture, secondary production, economic activity, environmental conservation, health and health promotion, community organization, and education. The examples below provide illustrations of some of the projects which participants of the PSA program have initiated.

Papua New Guinea

In Daga, a group of PSA participants and tutors, supported by the Rays of Light Foundation, began a research project to learn about tackling major diseases affecting the local population. They found that the most prevalent ailments were diarrhea, tuberculosis, pneumonia, scabies, and sudden loss of consciousness. They began to document ways in

which community members respond to these illnesses and sought input from the local health post to determine which methods, both modern and traditional, were most effective in prevention and cure.

Colombia

A PSA group in the North Coast region of the country observed that there were many basic goods that were difficult for the people of their community to access. With FUNDAEC’s assistance, they started a small store to make these commodities more readily available to the local population. They took a modest loan to set up the shop and were able to pay it back with profits from their sales.

Uganda

During his study of a unit of the PSA program about teaching young children, one participant became inspired to contribute to education in his community. When he completed the program, offered by the Kimanya-Ngeyo Foundation, he decided to open a nursery school for the local children. With support from the community, the school has grown to include over 100 students and four teachers. It has its own building constructed with assistance from community members and

is being sustained through financial contributions of parents. The education provided by the school assists students to develop intellectual capacity as well as spiritual qualities.

Cameroon

In certain villages in eastern Cameroon, various institutions have begun to draw on the experience of adults and youth who have gone through the PSA program being implemented by Emergence Foundation for Education and Development. For instance, in 2014 when a significant number of refugees from neighboring Central African Republic sought shelter in the region, a number of previous participants in the program were approached by governmental and nongovernmental organizations to assist them in overseeing relief and development efforts. The PSA participants were also often consulted by local leaders before major decisions were made. In one case, a community had been invited to participate in an agricultural project that would have resulted in many farmers growing maize in monoculture. With the assistance of the PSA participants, the community leaders were able to understand the potential environmental, social, and economic impacts of the proposal and decided against proceeding with it.

Zambia: Fostering Local Initiative and Collective Action

The PSA program has been implemented in Zambia with the support of the Inshindo Foundation. While studying some of the PSA materials about the environment, a group in Mwinilunga—a district in the northwestern province of Zambia—explored the concept of the interconnectedness of ecosystems and carried out an analysis of certain ecosystems in their local area. Having deepened their appreciation of the vital importance of caring for the health of the natural environment, a few of the members of the group started to consider how they could help to restore some of the stressed ecosystems in the vicinity. There was one area, for example, in which many ponds could be found that used to contain fish but no longer did. They started efforts to revitalize the fish ponds and to raise consciousness in the community about how its members could fish in a way that would not deplete the stocks. There were also spaces that were once forest, but where the trees had mostly been cleared. They began to replant trees in these areas.

As the group continued to try to find ways to contribute to its community, it attracted more youth. They chose the name, “Youth Vision Group.” In addition to their environmental conservation projects, they decided to serve various members of the community, for instance, helping people, particularly the elderly, to clear the grass around their homes and fetch water and firewood.

They noticed that there were many young members of the community who had a lot of energy that could be channeled in more constructive ways. In response to this observation, the group decided to start studying some materials that aim to assist young people to apply their talents and abilities to the betterment of their community. Several youth were attracted to this study—it grew in size to reach some 40



members—and at the same time more and more community members, young and old alike, were touched by the dedication and enthusiasm with which it carried out its efforts.

The efforts of this group continued to evolve, along with its assessment of the needs of the community. For instance, at a certain point in time the government began to construct roads that required a number of community members to relocate. The group immediately began considering how to help people to rebuild their homes in new locations, so that they would not be forced to move without having a place to go. They also took the opportunity to help the community members think about how to build their homes in a way that could be more conducive to the health of the family and the environment. For instance, while a number of homes used to have latrines or rubbish pits next to the kitchen, the group encouraged them to change this practice in order to improve sanitation.

Over the years, the group’s efforts have helped stimulate a range of other development activities in the locality. For instance, a number of youth had started backyard gardens in order to grow vegetables to improve nutrition in the community; this practice has since spread to others in the village. Community members have also given greater significance to increasing the number of trees in the area, following the consciousness-raising efforts of the group on the importance of trees for the environment.

The various conversations and actions arising from the group’s endeavors have even contributed to improving certain aspects of the culture of the community. Barriers that had existed between people of different religious backgrounds gradually diminished as people began to work shoulder-to-shoulder to contribute to the overall advancement of the community. Indeed, the shared understanding of the very term “development” has moved beyond one in which the local community is relegated to being a mere recipient of services to one in which people think of themselves as protagonists of their own progress. In the words of one of the tutors of the groups:

Before, people thought that development could only occur when others with money come in to fund projects. But then they started to see development as something that can come from within the community—that when we work together in unity we can build our community.

A group of approximately 15 young people are sitting in a circle on a green lawn, engaged in a discussion. They are dressed in casual attire, including t-shirts, blouses, and jeans. Some are holding papers or notebooks. The setting is outdoors, with a brick walkway in the foreground and a building with large windows and trees in the background. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

Development Discourse

For the Bahá'í community the expanding network of activities described in the foregoing pages has had significance beyond the immediate benefits in the communities in which they operate. The experience of applying principles found in the writings of the Bahá'í Faith to a wide range of situations has enabled the Bahá'í community to progressively gain insight into the current challenges in the development field and equipped it to contribute ever more confidently to the global discourse taking place. It should be noted

that the purpose of Bahá'í participation in discourses is not to persuade others to accept a Bahá'í position on this or that subject. Nor is effort in this area of endeavor pursued as a public relations activity or an academic exercise. Rather, Bahá'ís are eager to share what they are learning in their efforts to apply Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to contribute toward the advancement of civilization and to learn with and from other like-minded individuals and groups in a range of settings around the world.

Contributing to Development Discourse at Various Levels

At any given moment, and in social spaces at all levels of society, there are ongoing conversations concerned with various aspects of humanity's well-being and progress. At the local level, the involvement of Bahá'ís in conversations relevant to social progress is a natural part of their community-building efforts. Bahá'í-inspired development agencies also contribute to discourses pertinent to their work. While such an orientation is generally present from the earliest stages of an agency's efforts, opportunities to participate in relevant conversations and fora grow naturally together with an agency's accumulating experience (see, for instance, page 21).

At the international level, the Bahá'í International Community (BIC) has for decades been engaged in several discourses related to the betterment of society within the United Nations (UN), and in more recent years in fora associated with the African Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the European Union, and other supranational groupings. These discourses include those concerned with development, equality of women and men, peace and security, the role of religion in society, human rights, the environment and climate change, the role of youth, and global citizenship education. In this regard, the BIC regularly participates in international conferences and nongovernmental fora such as the UN Commissions on Social Development and on the Status of Women.

Over the years, the BIC has also published numerous statements addressing concepts relevant to the discourses mentioned above. One major document that continues to assist Bahá'í communities and agencies to contribute to conversations under way

at various levels is *The Prosperity of Humankind*. The document examines the concept of global prosperity in the context of the Bahá'í teachings. It presents an exploration of essential matters such as the nature and purpose of the development process and the roles assigned to its various protagonists. Among the more recent statements released by the BIC, *Rising Together: Building the Capacity to Recover from Within*, was published for the UN's first World Humanitarian Summit held in Istanbul, Turkey. The document—which drew on the experience of several national communities including Vanuatu, Haiti, India, Myanmar, Nepal, the Philippines, and Togo, as well as on the specialized knowledge of Bahá'ís involved in international relief work—discusses how Bahá'í endeavors at the grassroots, aimed at raising capacity within populations to take charge of their own development, have fostered greater resilience in the face of natural disasters.

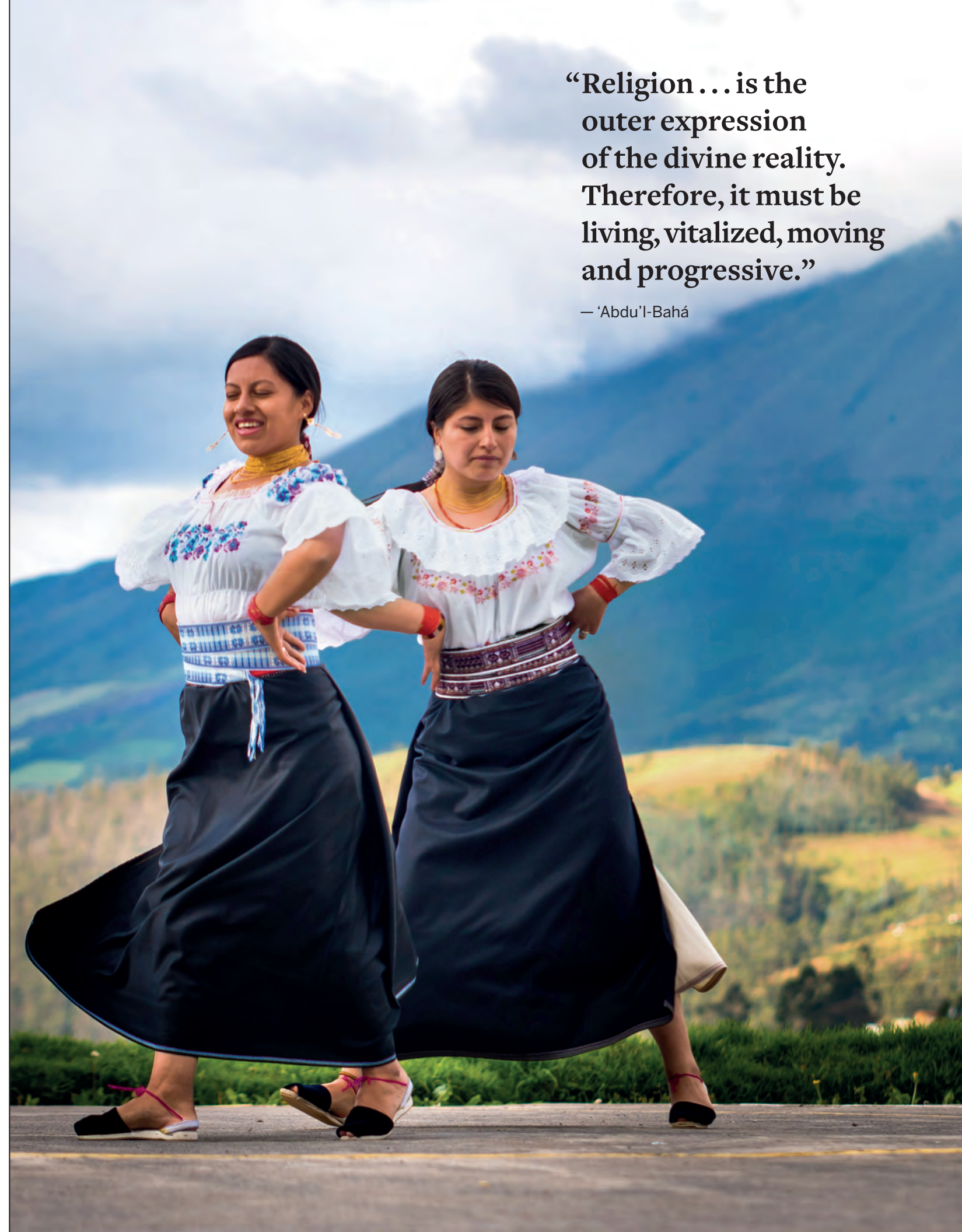
As the twentieth century drew to a close, Bahá'í institutions reached the

conclusion that a permanent forum was required for ongoing, in-depth exploration of concerns relevant to the advancement of civilization. The result was the creation of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, whose first initiative involved sponsoring a series of colloquia on science, religion, and development in several countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. As a continuation of its earlier work, in 2013 the Institute initiated a line of action concerned with “areas of inquiry.” In areas where the work has advanced, it has collaborated with like-minded individuals and institutions in exploring such vital themes as peace and justice in societies in transition, the global movement of populations, the role of religion in migration, and growth and development of cities.

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 further advancement of its own development endeavors, the Bahá'í community continues to refine its vision that learning and capacity building lie at the heart of successful development. Such a vision calls for engaging people everywhere, from all walks of life and representing the full diversity of the human family, in the generation and application of knowledge. Spiritual principles and the methods of science, together, can mediate such engagement. It is in sharing the insights thus acquired, as a result of systematic experience, that the community believes its most useful contribution to the discourses on development must ultimately lie.

“Religion . . . is the outer expression of the divine reality. Therefore, it must be living, vitalized, moving and progressive.”

— ‘Abdu’l-Bahá



For the Betterment of the World

The Worldwide Bahá'í Community's Approach
to Social and Economic Development

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