

EMPLOYMENT AND BEYOND:

*Drawing on the Capacities of All
to Contribute to Society*



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Drawing on the Capacities of All to Contribute to Society

*A statement of the Bahá'í International Community
to the 61st session of the Commission for Social Development*

The nature of work is projected to change dramatically in the coming decades. Artificial intelligence, automation, and digitalization, for example, are expected to displace significant numbers of workers, potentially rendering entire categories of labor obsolete. Yet such tools hold the potential to significantly extend the bounds of human agency. Conceptions of what it means to foster social well-being must therefore expand and evolve in response. Formal employment is one means by which people can contribute to the greater good, and traditional wages one way that



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basic needs can be met. But these are far from the only models by which society can benefit from individuals' innate talents and abilities. A much fuller conception is needed of the many kinds of contributions that promote a flourishing society, along with practical means to support them. The aim must be societies that draw effectively on the capacities of all their members.

The focus of this year's Commission for Social Development, on creating full and productive employment and decent work for all as a way of overcoming inequalities, can be a powerful impetus toward this end. Lack of a sound economic base, capable of providing all with the necessities of life, is a grievous barrier to the advancement of any population. At the same time, history demonstrates that employment alone does not invariably foster equality. Many countries have, for example, experienced periods in which high rates of employment were accompanied by widening inequalities. The Commission's consideration of employment and work, then, must be undertaken in light of the far deeper objective of fostering societies in which all are equally valued and all are afforded the opportunity to contribute



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Progress toward more equitable societies will require a broad-based expansion of social and moral capacities, in addition to technical skills. The real-world results of capacity are determined not only by a person's potential to achieve goals but also by the types of goals she or he embraces. Skills gained through higher education, for example, could help advance worthy endeavors, but could also be used to profit from systems of corruption and exploitation. To create more equitable societies—and not just more skillful navigators of unequal ones—capacity building must be approached as a normative and moral endeavor as much as an economic and political one. Individuals and communities will need to deepen capacities to, for example, generate shared vision and commitment to action among diverse actors or to identify root causes of challenges and devise effective responses. They will need to be able to inculcate qualities such as

trustworthiness, mutual support, commitment to truth, and a sense of responsibility, that are building blocks of a stable social order.

To speak of the ends toward which capacity will be turned is to enter the realm of values and priorities. What is the purpose of employment? What kind of lives conduce to human fulfillment? What kind of societies do we seek to create together? These are questions that businesses and governing institutions have often avoided, focusing instead on procedural matters of increasing efficiency or expanding choice. Yet ideologies detrimental to the common weal—those that justify selfishness, reward exploitation, excuse indifference, or glorify consumption, thereby fueling inequality—are actively promoted around



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the world without reservation or apology. If reducing inequality is the aim, society must be infused with attitudes, characteristics, and habits that consciously promote that end.

Movement in this direction will require a thorough reconceptualization of what is understood to be “work,” including ways by which value is attached to its various forms. That some professions are associated with lavish compensation while others, equally vital to social



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well-being, are afforded only the barest living wage reveals deep-seated distortions in the social contract. Such contradictions must be conclusively resolved if the full potential of any society is to be released and a truly equitable social order to come within reach.



Every person is born with talents and abilities. The notion that societal progress depends on these capacities being cultivated and directed toward constructive ends is well accepted. In practice, however, many populations are viewed in a very different light and treated accordingly—for example, as victims in need of services or as problems in want of resolution. Such assumptions can obscure capacity, disempower communities, and reinforce counterproductive patterns of dependency.

To affirm that capacity is inherent in all is not to deny a host of very real challenges. Many capacities are latent and must be developed through appropriate training and education. Structural obstacles and biases must be removed. Practical opportunities must also be created for large numbers to contribute their share to the development of society. The role to be played by the

state, as steward and guardian of the common good, is vital in this regard. Economic and political tools such as tax policy, permitting requirements, labor standards, and other legal structures will need to be organized around the overarching aim of developing and drawing on the capacities inherent in populations—and not simply providing services, necessary as that can be. Put simply, state action should focus on fostering and releasing the capacity of individuals and communities to contribute to the advancement of society.

Different types of support and reforms will be needed to facilitate the productive engagement—whether remunerated or not—of different groups or people in specific life circumstances. For society to benefit from the full contributions of women, for example, social institutions will need to honor and facilitate the provision of care by all members of society—not least by family leave policies and corporate and societal norms that embrace parenthood and child rearing among both fathers and mothers. Volunteers wishing to offer a dedicated period of service to their community, such as youth completing



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studies or elders wanting to stay engaged after full-time employment, might be able to provide for themselves, but might also need a measure of assistance to be able to offer their services. Experience has shown that the personal development of individuals and the collective advance of society necessarily go hand in hand; each is linked with the other, and efforts to further one require that, sooner or later, attention be given to the other.



Government has a key role to play in fostering conditions that facilitate the expression of constructive agency, not least through efforts to create full and productive employment. At the same time, the release of capacity is a “horizontal” process as well as a “vertical” one. A person contributes to progress in part by assisting others to realize their own potential. Individuals empower other individuals; communities empower other communities. In this way, when such an orientation takes hold in an area, progress is increasingly approached as the outcome of joint interactions between government agencies, local communities, and individual actors, each concerned with both the quality of its own functioning and supporting the efficacy of the others. Far from mere aspiration or speculation, this is a path the early stages of which Bahá’í communities have begun to see unfold in diverse neighborhoods and villages around the world. It is a tangible movement whose features can be explored and whose dynamics can be advanced in virtually any context where those involved are committed to mutual support, universal participation, and advancement of the common good.



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Approaching all as potential protagonists in the betterment of society is profoundly equalizing and morally empowering, in both principle and practice. To base action on the presumption that every individual and community is a reservoir of capacity and possibility for constructive transformation—regardless of wealth, education, social standing, or any other characteristic—is to reject the assumptions of superiority and inferiority that perpetuate countless inequalities. Productive employment and decent work are central to the operation of society—in their direct outcomes of goods produced and services rendered, but also in the livelihoods they support and the role they play as a source of identity, purpose, and the development and expression of personal talents. The changing world of work offers a valuable opportunity to reconsider conceptions of progress and to organize economic structures in ways that are suited to contemporary needs. Let this be the task before us and let movement toward this vision increasingly draw on the capacities and contributions of the entire human family.

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866 United Nations Plaza, Suite 120
New York, NY 10017, USA
www.bic.org