Rights to Human and Social Development: a Survey of the Activities of the Bahá'í International Community

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Throughout the second half of the Twentieth century the contribution of the Bahá'í International Community (BIC)[1] to dialogue concerning human and social development was principled, systematic, and sustained. It was principled in that it drew on the Bahá'í Writings for its core conceptions. It was systematic in that it subjected these conceptions to logical analysis, in addition to reporting on the practice of Bahá'í communities worldwide. Finally, it was sustained, inasmuch as the BIC contributed to, and encouraged, the major initiatives in the development dialogue, commencing with the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948,[2] to the *Millennium Forum* in 2000, the largest gathering of NGOs to ever assemble for consultation and dialogue on the mission of the United Nations, and which the BIC had the honour of co-chairing. In these five decades the BIC has presented several hundred oral and written statements to meetings of the UN, and to other significant NGO meetings, in addition to supporting the processes of dialogue through coordination and facilitation roles.[3]

In this essay I suggest that the contributions of the BIC to the articulation of rights to human and social development and have centered on six main themes: (1) the need for a global complex systems approach to contemporary problem solving; (2) the fundamental principle of the oneness of humanity;(3) the essential role of religious belief; (4) the primacy of education and training over the restraints offered by laws; (5) the need for a values-based approach that begins at the level of individual responsibility, and (6) Observations on the effectiveness of the United Nations Organization.

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Before examining these themes in detail, it is useful to summarize the emergence of human rights in the twentieth century.

The articulation of the rights of individuals, and the legal means for their protection, emerged partly as a response to the large-scale brutality of the twentieth century. Other factors included a decline in traditional guarantees of protection afforded to individuals, evident in increased incidences of human rights abuses by both state and non state actors. Furthermore, the dramatic changes in world conditions in the twentieth century, principally the shift to globalism and the accommodations this requires on the part of individual cultures and nations, have required the reconceptualisation of traditional practices so as to ensure agreement on common global or universal standards while allowing for individual difference and diversity. The rapid changes of the last two centuries, moreover, have necessitated a reconceptualization of the origin of rights, and the purposes for which rights are articulated. Since the late eighteenth century rights have been viewed as claims by individual citizens against the state, but this notion is increasingly giving way to the idea that rights express normative conditions of mutuality that underlie relations between states and the citizens who constitute 'civil society'.

The basic elements of the global human rights framework are readily identified. In 1946 an 18-member United Nations Commission on Human Rights commenced drafting a "declaration" of rights it considered to pertain to each individual, irrespective of their race, nationality, gender, or creed. This became the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,[4] adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948. The UDHR proposes that Human Rights are universal and indivisible. This means that the different aspects of human rights - civil, cultural, economic, political and social - must be considered together, rather than as separable entities.

Although merely a 'declaration' of desirable standards pertaining to human rights, the UDHR has had considerable impact on the ways in which states and citizens understand notions of individual rights and obligations. It has inspired more than 60 human rights instruments that now constitute an international standard of human rights. This second process, of transforming desirable 'norms' into international law, commenced with the concluding in 1966 of two "covenants" concerning human rights: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)[5] and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).[6]

The rights contained in the UDHR and the two covenants (which together have become known as the "International Bill of Rights") were further elaborated in such legal documents as the International Convention on the Elimi-

nation of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, which declares dissemination of ideas based on racial superiority or hatred as being punishable by law; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, covering measures to be taken for eliminating discrimination against women in political and public life, education, employment, health, marriage and family; and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which lays down guarantees in terms of the child's human rights. The more significant human rights treaties and declarations now include:

- Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948)

- Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1961)

- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965)

- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979)

- Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1984)

- Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)

- Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (1990).[7]

Although the nation-states are not yet welded into a united global body politic, they nonetheless feel impelled toward a common set of standards, and know intuitively that human rights development constitutes a noble aim. These treaties are now important instruments of international law. In voluntarily acceding to them, countries agree to bind themselves to the standards they contain, and undertake to report at set intervals to the United Nations' Committee on Human Rights. Within the UN system, six committees have been established to monitor compliance of States parties to specific treaties:

- The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

- The Human Rights Committee

- The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

- The Committee against Torture

- The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

- The Committee on the Rights of the Child

Together with the elaboration of these international laws and the international institutions to administer them, progress in their implementation has been considered at a series of world meetings: on the Environment (Stockholm, 1972 and Rio De Janiero, 1992), Human Rights (Vienna, 1993), Population and Development (Cairo, 1994), Women (Mexico 1975, Copenhagen 1980, and Beijing, 1995), and Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995). This latter conference focused on progress with the implementation of policies concerning 'human development, and 'social development', which have been at the focus of the United Nations Development Program.[8]

The UNDP's *Human Development Report for 1999* provides a seven-item agenda to secure human development in the era of globalisation:

1. Strengthen policies and actions for human development, and adapt them to the new realities of the global economy;

2. Reduce the threats of financial volatility – of the boom and bust economy – and all their human costs;

3. Take stronger global action to tackle global threats to human security;

4. Enhance public action to develop technologies for human development and the eradication of poverty;

5. Reverse the marginalisation of poor, small countries;

6. Remedy the imbalances in the structures of global governance with new efforts to create a more inclusive system;

7. Build a more coherent and more democratic architecture for global governance in the 21st century.[9]

The Need for a Global Complex Systems Approach to Contemporary Problem Solving

One of the clearest expositions of the idea of complexity within statements of the BIC is found in a 1992 statement to a Committee of the South Pacific Commission:

"The earth is but one country," Bahá'u'lláh asserted, "and mankind its citizens." As the magnitude, complexity and urgency of environmental problems have gradually forced themselves on public attention, the logic of this prescription has become daily more

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apparent. The available international legislative machinery and processes are proving in-adequate, primarily because they are based on laws governing nation-states. Moreover, the process for creating environmental legislation, which addresses only one problem at a time, is fragmented and unsystematic. No one body is responsible for drafting interna-tional environmental legislation. Nor have the nations of the world agreed on a set of principles upon which such legislation can be based. Furthermore, the countries signing the various legislative instruments are rarely identical. Thus, it is almost impossible to harmo-nize or combine agreements. Many countries with limited numbers of diplomats and experts cannot cope with the time-consuming and expensive procedures currently in place, particularly as the number of negotiations is increasing to respond to pressing global environmental problems. The present ad hoc process can only become more unmanage-able. Numerous proposals have been offered to provide global mechanisms to create and support a sustainable pattern of development. Some experts advise strengthening the existing UN system by upgrading the mandates of agencies such as the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), reconfiguring the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), or using the Trusteeship Council to administer certain global resources. Others suggest creating new bodies such as an environmental security council, a World Court of environmental justice, or an international environmental negotiating body to prepare, adopt and revise international legislation on issues requiring global action.

However well motivated and helpful such proposals are, it is apparent to the Bahá'í Inter-national Community that the establishment of a sustainable pattern of development is a complex task with widespread ramifications. It will clearly require a new level of commit-ment to solving major problems not exclusively associated with the environment. These problems include militarization, the inordinate disparity of wealth between and within nations, racism, lack of access to education, unrestrained nationalism, and the lack of equality between women and men. Rather than a piecemeal approach conceived in response to the needs of the nation-states, it seems clearly preferable to adopt an um-brella agreement under which specific international codes could be promulgated. Long-term solutions will require a new and comprehensive vision of a global society, supported by a new system of values. Acceptance of the oneness of humanity is the first fundamental prerequisite for this reorganization and administration of the world as one country, the home of humankind.[10]

This passage is quoted at length to illustrate the 'complex relations' that the BIC sees between specific problems of development, such as those related to the environment, and the system as a whole. This theme has been reiterated in numerous BIC statements. The idea of complexity in problem-solving is re-lated to the indivisibility of economic, civil, social, cultural and political rights:

Without economic rights, the exercise of civil or social rights is severely attenuated. With-out cultural rights, an individual or community will have the greatest difficulty in exercising political or economic rights to a degree that meets the essential requirements of their respective situations. [11]

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Bahá'í proposals before UN agencies have urged a "searching re-examination" of prevailing beliefs about the nature and purpose of the development process and the roles of its various protagonists. They relate development to such processes as gender equality, the extension of consultative processes, a new work ethnic, and access to the generation and application of knowledge.[12] The question of poverty alleviation, and alleviation of gross disparities between rich and poor is linked directly to consciousness of the oneness of humanity:

> A new economic order can be founded only on an unshakable conviction of the oneness of mankind. Discussions aimed at solving problems related to extreme poverty based on the premise that we are one human family rapidly expand beyond the current vocabulary of economics. They demand a wider context, one which anticipates the emergence of a global system of relationships resting on the principles of equity and justice.[13]

Concerning attempts to bridge the disparities between rich and poor, for instance, the BIC referred in a 1994 statement to the UN Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities to the Bahá'í view of income distribution,

> "…which allows for differences but would eliminate both extreme wealth and extreme poverty. The accumulation of excessive fortunes by a small number of individuals while the masses are in need is, according to Bahá'í teachings, an intolerable injustice. Moderation should, therefore, be established by means of laws and regulations that would limit personal wealth and provide everyone with access to the means for living a dignified life."[14]

Each of these statements points to a preference for examining the world-system as a whole, rather than seeing the solution to development and rights issues as a series of linear responses to individual challenges.

The Prosperity of Humankind

The need to see development as a set of complex relations was further explored in a document entitled *The Prosperity of Humankind* prepared by the Bahá'í International Community for distribution at the 1995 United Nations *Summit on Social Development*.[15] It consists of seven sections, each suggesting new approaches to defining a strategy for global development. These sections consider conceptions of "development," peace, the concept of "the oneness of humankind," justice, human rights, education, science and technology, science and

religion, history, human nature, economics, environment, power, authority, structures of government and law. *The Prosperity of Humankind* suggests that prosperity has both physical and spiritual dimensions. Development is widely defined materially, but this has proven inadequate. The incentives of existing systems - eg economic systems, aid systems, have not moved the masses (ie, despite so much attention to "economic development," the masses continue to live in poverty).

Reconceptualizing 'Governance'

Prosperity suggests that to think in terms of dichotomies such as "government v. the people," "science v. religion," individual rights v. group rights" - is to miss their *essential interrelatedness* (government & people, science & religion, individual & group rights, etc). This new, inclusive paradigm considers "wholes" or "connectivities," rather than "oppositions" (there can still be tensions within interrelations, but that is another subject). So-called commitment to both "democracy" and "economic development" presents a paradox: if so much power is now in the hands of "the people," why is it that they have not been able to change their material conditions? Partly, this shows flaws in the "roles" played by the "protagonists": governments have viewed the masses as recipients of aid and of development programs; future models of democracy will transfer powers of decision-making to the grass-roots.

The promotion of human rights thus requires "fundamental redefinition of human relationships" - and movement in this direction has "barely begun." Elements in the redefinition include:

- consultation (requiring standards far beyond current practices of negotiation and compromise, and "culture of protest" - associated with debate, propaganda, the adversarial method, and paradigms of partisanship).

- far greater access to knowledge, and to the opportunity to "apply it to the shaping of human affairs."

Democracy has become associated with partisanship, with cynicism, apathy and corruption. It has to be raised above these results of the "political theatre" produced by nominations, candidature, electioneering and solicitation. Both governments and groups of individuals have been galvanised by visions of the possibility of world order. The efforts of both groups are to be supported. Reassessment of structures and processes of government will include:

- redefinition of the terms "power" and "authority"

- Formulation of laws that are "universal in both character and authority."

- reformulation of consultative practices, which includes recognition of the interrelationship between justice, consultation, and the attainment of social and economic development.

- transformation of a sometimes "punitive" conception of justice to one that links justice to a) the inextricable link between the progress of the individual and the progress of society; b) the ability to consult dispassionately on options when making policy decisions

- ensuring that "technological break-throughs" and "limited resources" are not reserved for a privileged minority

- continued development of human rights law, protecting civil and political rights, as well as social and economic rights (without placing them in a dichotomous relationship).

Power has in the past been identified as an attribute of an individual or group, and seen as an instrument of domination, acquisition, etc. But this traditional sense of power is useless to the "needs of humanity's future." The correct approach to the use of power, particularly by leaders, is set out in section VI.

Prosperity suggests that traditional religions have continued paternalistic attitudes toward "the masses," and have not encouraged their maturation - ie, their involvement in making the decisions that have the most impact on their lives. The reasons for which modern thinkers have rejected religion are to some extent understandable, but it is necessary to recognise the fruits of religion, not only its past abuses. Religion has cultivated the moral qualities that the progress of civilisation has relied on - moral character, sense of duty, etc.

The Problem of Knowledge Production, Ownership, and Dissemination

Prosperity urges that attention be paid to the philosophy of knowledge. Science and religion can be conceived of as knowledge systems. These are interrelated through history, and have been used to organise experience, interpret surroundings, explore human powers, and discipline both intellectual and moral life. Society has to think in terms of process, rather than structure alone. Correct processes will create appropriate structures. Access to knowledge of science and technology must be more evenly spread across the globe. The document suggests that a strong link exists between knowledge production and morality. When people can distinguish between "fact" and "conjecture," they will be able to contribute to human progress. An expansion of knowledge extends human abilities, raises the level of human capacity, and when done in the right way will contribute to achieving prosperity

The Fundamental Principle of the Oneness of Humanity

The BIC urged the first meeting of the committee making preparations for the World Summit for Social Development to bring 'fresh thinking' and a 'unified spirit' to planning for the meeting, and suggested in particular adoption of the principle of the 'oneness of humanity' as the "essential standard for ordering humankind's collective life on the planet":

> To move beyond parochialism and particularism will necessitate bold initiatives and unprecedented courage on the part of the Preparatory Committee (PREPCOM). The responsibility to foster the well-being of all members of a society - the basic tenet of modern social welfare—must now be expanded to include all the peoples of the earth. Only by embracing the principle of the oneness of humanity can the PREPCOM ensure that deliberations throughout the preparatory process will center on the well-being of the entire human family, there by extending the concept of social welfare beyond national boundaries to the whole world. We, therefore, urge the PREPCOM to make the principle of the oneness of humanity the "central unifying theme of the Summit," to explore its ramifications for the peoples and nations of the earth, and to translate it into workable programs and practical commitments.[16]

"Consciousness" of the oneness of humanity refers to the realisation of this condition by the collectivity of "human consciousness" which is itself "an infinite diversity of individual minds and motivations." Consciousness of the oneness of humanity must be taught in educational systems, and must be propagated through the mass media. Fruits of the attainment of a Consciousness of the oneness of humanity will include:

- protection of peoples from the "age-old demons" of ethnic and religious strife.

- shift to processes of collaboration and conciliation

- desire to base decisions on just principles

- development of laws that are "universal in both character and authority."

- the more even spread of access to knowledge of science and technology across the globe.

The extent of international migration and the impact of international economic events on local and national economies reinforce the reality that the world has become one system.

The Emancipation of Women and the Achievement
of Full Equality Between the Sexes.

A related principle concerns the equality of the sexes. In June 1994 the BIC co-authored a statement to the same committee expressing concern that the Draft Declaration and Draft Programme of Action did not give sufficient recognition to the family "as a basic social institution and an undisputable social network," nor did it reflect its "vital contributions to individuals and its impact on society."[17]

BIC statements on social development have emerged from reflection of practice within the Bahá'í Community. For example, a UNIFEM-funded Bahá'í International Community project "Traditional Media as Change Agent" which started in 1991 had its origins in a statement by the Bahá'í International Community to the UN Commission on the Status of Women in 1988 which suggested that "a primary target for communication related to development projects for women may well be men." The project, which commenced in a rural region of eastern Cameroon in 1991, began with community consultation on the responsibilities carried by the males and females within the family and the community. Increased awareness amongst the males of the disproportionate duties conducted by the women led to new agreements concerning responsibility for child-care.[18]

The Essential Role of Religious Belief

The BIC has contributed to the articulation of the meaning of 'spiritual development' as referred to in UN documents. For instance, a document presented to a Consultation on "Development Social Welfare Policies and Programmes" in Vienna in September 1987,[19] drew attention to (Article 13 (b)) ("The establishment of a harmonious balance between scientific, technological and material progress and the intellectual, spiritual, cultural and moral advancement of humanity."), pointing out that spiritual factors include "social harmony, integration, and unity within the individual and in society."[20] Such cooperative trends exist in current social relations, and could be expanded if given "wide and systematic support, lead to a rapid channeling of the earth's abundant resources and the application of its technical know-how for the redress of current material problems."[21]

The BIC has also contributed an understanding of the proper role of religion as source of inspiration and has suggested that Religion "has played and continues to play an important role in facilitating a spirit of cooperation as well

as of service and harmony."[22] Historically, religion has exerted a "profound influence on all societies" had has been a primary force for social progress:

> Those universal spiritual principles which lie at the heart of religion—tolerance, compassion, love, justice, humility, sacrifice, trustworthiness, dedication to the well-being of others, and unity – are the foundations of progressive civilization.[23]

In Comments on the Draft Declaration and Draft Programme of Action for Social Development presented at the second session of the Preparatory Committee for the World Summit for Social Development in August 1994 the BIC was critical of the fundamentally materialistic view of "the purpose and fundamental nature of the individual and society." Development measured in terms of "at every level of our world society to promote economic and social justice" are all essential elements of the development paradigm for the 21st century, but they are not sufficient.

Development will only result from a balanced regard to both spiritual and material dimensions. For instance, rather than simply being the implementation of social policy, development requires such spiritual values as "a sense of excellence, a willingness to sacrifice, integrity, trustworthiness, capacity for co-operation and a desire for unity."[24]

The idea that meeting material needs; providing universal education; and fashioning democratic institutions and legal codes, are the main factors in securing social development suggests a purely materialistic conception of development. It presumes that human happiness, security and well-being, social cohesion, and economic justice will result as by-products of material success – a premise which in the Bahá'í view is false, since such conditions are in reality produced through a "complex and dynamic interplay between the satisfaction of material and social needs and the spiritual fulfillment of the individual." Satisfaction of both spiritual and material needs requires an appeal to universal values that allow the individual to transcend "narrow self-interest," and that recognise the interdependence "of the peoples and nations of the planet."[25]

The Bahá'í International Community urged that the Declaration and Programme of Action penned at the Copenhagen Summit on Social Development "address in a substantive manner the constructive role that religion should play in social development."[26]

The Primacy of Education and Training over the Restraints Offered by Laws

Bahá'ís have long been involved in the promotion of human rights, both within the framework of the evolving UN system, and beyond it.[7] Bahá'í communities were active participants in the International Human Rights Year, 1968,[8] and have contributed greatly to human rights discussions in international meetings many times since. This involvement has recently been noted by Traer, who observed that the Bahá'í statement of 1968 was similar to that of the Commission of Churches on International Affairs, in that both emphasised the principle that "…governments could not grant human rights, but could only recognize the human rights which man, by virtue of his being and destiny, already possessed."[29] It is certainly the case that the Bahá'í contribution includes constant reminders of the historic connection between the ancient quest for knowledge, rooted in all the major religious and cultural traditions, and the modern expression of the same "fundamental right" as expressed in such formulations as freedom of thought, conscience and belief.[30]

BIC activity within the UN focused on defence of the rights of Bahá'ís persecuted for their beliefs in Iran and other countries have sensitized the Bahá'í Community to issues of religious prejudice, and to the search for remedies to such persecution. At the same time, this experience has contributed to the BIC's awareness of the existing human rights mechanisms, and allows it to make proposals concerning practical reforms to the system. Despite its flagrant disregard for its obligations as a signatory to the ICCPR, Iran "…has neither denounced, derogated from, nor attached any reservations to the ICPR since the succession of the Khomeini government."[31] In "Religious Human Rights Under the United Nations," Lerner describes the reporting process, and provides an instance in which the fate of the Bahá'í Community is mentioned:

> The yearly reports of the [Human Rights] Committee, issued as General Assembly Official Records (GAPR), Supplement No. 40, contain rich information on religious rights. When examining the periodic state reports, members of the Committee asked relevant questions and required additional information from the representatives of the states on legislation and facts concerning such rights. Just to mention a few recent instances, when the second periodic report of Morocco was discussed, questions were asked regarding procedures relating to the recognition of religious sects, the status of the Bahá'í Faith, marriages between members of different religious groups, and the meaning of terms such as 'religion of the state', 'revealed religions' or 'heretical sects'.[32]

In the Bahá'í view, freedom of belief in matters of religion is best pursued by promoting education.[33] Since prejudice "…has no basis in logic or reason,"

and "…cannot be legislated out of existence,"[34] the BIC has suggested that success in implementing the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination based on Religion or Belief lay in the document's wide dissemination, and in taking determined and active steps to "promote understanding, tolerance and respect in matters relating to religion or belief. While laws may "…prevent the gross and overt victimization of individuals or groups" they cannot "…remove the seeds of prejudice from men's hearts."[35]

In 1993 the United Nations convened a Conference in Vienna to review global progress in advancing human rights.[36] In addition to presenting a statement, the BIC presented a joint statement on behalf of fourteen other religious NGOs concerning the promotion of religious tolerance, a statement that emphasised the role of education, rather than law, in promoting tolerance:

> If tolerance is rooted in love, intolerance is often rooted in the cultural and historical antagonisms associated with religious traditions. Because antagonisms are often born of ignorance and limited understanding, education can reveal the common spiritual values underlying various beliefs and practices and can thereby foster religious tolerance. The role of the individual in promoting tolerance is of paramount importance. Legal mechanisms alone will not end religious intolerance as long as people believe that differences in religious beliefs and practices are legitimate grounds for discrimination. Therefore, education programs must be aimed not only at providing accurate information and correcting misconceptions but at identifying those principles and values that will open both minds and hearts. It is proposed, therefore, that education seek to foster not just tolerance of religious diversity but genuine appreciation for various beliefs. Curriculum must include not only study of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination based on Religion or Belief but the comparative study of various scriptures and spiritual traditions. Such an exploration, if undertaken with an open mind, will doubtless reveal remarkable similarities among religious teachings on ethical matters. The discovery of a common thread of shared values will help to instill in individuals an appreciation for the Declaration and demonstrate its necessity.[37]

The BIC has also presented statements concerning the promotion of religious tolerance at other UN sessions, particularly those of the Commission on Human Rights.[38] In August 1993 it suggested to the Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities a call for "…efforts to promote greater understanding amongst all people, particularly through interfaith dialogues and through systematic efforts by the Centre for Human Rights to disseminate the principles of the 1981 Declaration through the media" and urged their inclusion in the curriculum of schools and universities.[39]

When the United Nations declared the UN Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004) the BIC submitted a written statement to the UN Commission on Human Rights indicating its full support for the Commission's *Plan of Action.* The BIC commented:

> The *Plan of Action* prepared by the High Commissioner for Human Rights reflects this integrated conception of education by defining human rights education as "training, dissemination and information efforts aimed at the building of a universal culture of human rights through the imparting of knowledge and skills and the moulding of attitudes which are directed to:
>
> a) The strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms;
>
> b) The full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity;
>
> c) The promotion of understanding, tolerance, gender equality and friendship among all nations, indigenous peoples and racial, national, ethnic, religious and linguistic groups;
>
> d) The enabling of all persons to participate effectively in a free society; and
>
> e) The furtherance of the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
>
> The Bahá'í International Community fully embraces these goals and objectives. Human rights education, if it is to succeed, must seek to transform individual attitudes and behaviour and thereby establish, within every local and national community, a new "culture" of respect for human rights. Only such a change in the fundamental social outlook of every individual - whether a government official or an ordinary citizen - can bring about the universal observance of human rights principles in the daily lives of people. In the final analysis, the human rights of an individual are respected and protected - or violated - by other individuals, even if they are acting in an official capacity. Accordingly, it is essential to touch the hearts, and elevate the behaviour, of all human beings, if, in the words of the Plan of Action, human rights are to be transformed "from the expression of abstract norms" to the "reality" of the "social, economic, cultural and political conditions" experienced by people in their daily lives."[40]

In 1993 the BIC suggested the three most significant obstacles to the implementation of human rights as being "the exercise of unfettered national sovereignty," inadequate enforcement mechanisms for human rights treaty obligations, and a general lack of awareness of human rights, "…particularly among those entrusted with administering justice at the local level."[41]

Accordingly, the BIC has frequently supported the idea of strengthening various branches of the UN. In regard to the enforcement of compliance with human rights obligations, it recommended to the Vienna Conference on

Human Rights in 1993 that such Committees as the Human Rights Committee and the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination be strengthened, and that international criminal jurisdiction for crimes against humanity and for flagrant violations of internationally recognized human rights be invested in a permanent body.[42] At other times the BIC has suggested wording for declarations being drafted by the Commission on Human Rights.[43]

The Need for a Values-based Approach that Begins at the Level of Individual Responsibility

This approach to development emphasises the need for *moral and ethical values*, without which problems of corruption, crime and erosion of family-life will render real development impossible. It also emphasises the need for change at grass roots, as much as in institutions at higher levels.[44] Hence the BIC suggested to the 49th (1993) session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights on the issue of realizing the economic, social and cultural rights contained in the UDHR and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: "The fostering of grassroots initiative is essential to the elimination of poverty; this concept has both moral and educational implications which demand profound study: [45]

> In the New World Order envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh, rights are inseparable from responsibilities. A fundamental purpose of life is to contribute to the advancement of civilization. Idleness and begging are unacceptable in a well-functioning society, while work performed in the spirit of service is elevated to the station of worship. Thus the right to work, the right to contribute to society, takes on a spiritual dimension, and the responsibility to be productive applies to everyone. This attitude toward work profoundly influences the Bahá'í approach to social and economic development. Communities are encouraged to identify their own needs and initiate their own projects, many of which focus on alleviating poverty.[46]

Several BIC statements illustrate this principle with examples from the experience of the Bahá'í Community.[47] *Popular participation* is essential to the success of social programmes. "It promotes the dignity of individuals and enables communities to benefit from the outflow of human creativity and spirit."[48] Yet another aspect of promoting 'grass roots' responsibility and participation concerns promotion of a 'work ethic':

> Both the responsibility and the right to work are sacred. Idleness and begging have no place in a well-functioning society, while work performed in the spirit of service is elevated to the station of worship. The Special Rapporteur states that "the poorest, in general, in their capacity as citizens, are neither associated to the decision making process nor are they allowed to exercise responsibilities within the community." This situation is unacceptable, given that a fundamental purpose of life is to contribute to the advancement of civilization. Thus the right to work takes on a spiritual dimension, and the responsibility to be productive applies to everyone.[49]

The role of the individual is further treated in *The Prosperity of Humankind*. This document, referred to above, suggests that the maturation of society (the group) has not occurred at the expense of individuality. It requires, rather, for its fullest development, the development of the potential of each individual.

Observations on the Effectiveness of the United Nations Organization

A final theme of Bahá'í contributions to dialogue on rights and develop has focused on the development institutions and processes themselves. The BIC first commented on the structure of the United Nations Organization in 1955.[50] The BIC has promoted the Bahá'í view that ultimately a world federation will emerge, either through restructuring or transformation of the United Nations system.[51] Optimal global institutions will emerge through diligent regard to the effectiveness of existing structures, and their revision in light of experience and need.

The Operation of the NGO System

In addition to commenting on the UN structure, the BIC has contributed ideas concerning the operation of the NGO system. When invited to comment on the operation of ECOSOC Resolution 1296, which regulates the arrangements for consultations between NGOs and the UN at meetings called by ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies, the BIC made a number of specific recommendations. It noted that the resolution's failure to consider arrangements for NGO participation in meetings called by the General Assembly or other non-ECOSOC entities of the United Nations System results in "a wide range of confusing and contradictory approaches to NGO participation in non-ECOSOC meetings" and pointed to the need for "a common framework which would maximize the number and diversity of NGOs able to participate."[52] It suggested that the guidelines be extended to cover NGO activities with the Commission on Sustainable Development. The BIC recommended making a distinction between accreditation for participation in year-round consultations, and participa-

tion in 'one or twice in a life-time conferences', such as the "World Conferences." It encouraged distinguishing between NGOs that operate at global, national and local levels, and that operate at local levels, and suggested that this could be accomplished by allowing local NGOs to participate in meetings of UN Regional Commissions, regional preparatory meetings for global conferences, and in the activities of Special Rapporteurs and Representatives. The BIC also encouraged the expansion of consultative status for NGOs beyond ECOSOC to the entire UN system, pointing out that issues of human rights are increasingly reaching the Security Council before they reach the Commission on Human Rights. In short, the BIC encouraged a general expansion of NGO participation in UN deliberations.

Conclusions

This paper has summarised the contributions made by the BIC to dialogue within the United Nations system concerning the advancement of human rights. Over a 50-year period the BIC has monitored the progress of the rights dialogue closely and carefully. It has made contributions to this dialogue in a principled and systematic manner. In other words, it has shown its commitment to the dialogue process by being an active participant in regular sessions of the Human Rights Commission as well as in the various special Conferences and events that were held in the second half of the twentieth century to promote the causes of human and social development. In addressing the issues of rights to human and social development the BIC has drawn on the principles enunciated in the Bahá'í Writings, and on the experience of Bahá'í communities that are endeavouring to put these principles into practice. Ironically, part of the Bahá'í experience has been of deprivation of the very rights that Bahá'ís champion, particularly freedom of thought, the right to education, and to freedom of religious belief. However, at a broader level, the work of the BIC provides an exemplary model of NGO involvement in and support for the processes of dialogue that are advancing the practices of rights-based governance and social responsibility for people everywhere.

Footnotes

1   That the Bahá'í Sacred Writings include wise counsel on remedies to the ills confronting the modern world is evident to their reader, irrespective of whether he or she is a professed believer in their Divine origins. The Bahá'í International Community, an NGO with consultative Status at the United Nations' Economic and Social Council, has played a major role in correlating Bahá'í beliefs with the emerging pattern of human rights norms. For a description of the Bahá'í International Community see www.bic-un.bahai.org/99-0522.htm.

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2   A statement outlining the Bahá'í perspective on human rights entitled "A Bahá'í Declaration of Human Obligations and Rights" was presented to the first session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in February 1947: The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the USA presented *A Bahá'í Declaration of Human Obligations and Rights* to the United Nations in February 1947, as a contribution to discussions leading to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, of 1948.

3   These are summarized in the quadrennial reports of the Bahá'í International Community to the Economic and Social Council. The four reports published on the Bahá'í International Community's website are: 81-0269: *Quadrennial Report To The UN Economic & Social Council (ECOSOC) 1977-1981;* 86-0620: *Quadrennial Report to the UN Economic & Social Council (ECOSOC) 1981-1985;* 90-0510: *Quadrennial Report to the UN Economic & Social Council (ECOSOC) 1986-1989;* and 94-0601: *Quadrennial Report to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), 1990-1993.*

4   The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. www.unhchr.ch/udhr/index.htm. For further information on the background and operation of the UNHDR, as well as on its practical influence, see www.universalrights.net.

5   International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/a_ccpr.htm.

6   International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/a_cescr.htm.

7   These treaties, and the signatories to them, are accessible at the University of Minnesota Human Rights Library, www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instree/auob.htm.

8   See Mendez, Ruben P. *The United Nations Development Programme: A History.* at www.yale.edu.unysys/UNDPhist.htm

9   UNDP (1999). Human Development Report. New York, NY and Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press. pp.9-12.

10 Bahá'í International Community (May 1992). *Restructuring the International Order.* Statement to the 16th Meeting of the Committee of Representatives of Governments and Administrations (CRGA) of South Pacific Commission (SPC) Noumea, New Caledonia. pp. 18-22. (Bahá'í International Community Document #92-0518).

11 Bahá'í International Community (June 1993). *Development, Democracy and Human Rights.* Statement to the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights Agenda Item 10: Consideration of the relationship between development, democracy and the universal enjoyment of all human rights, keeping in view the interrelationship and indivisibility of economics Social, cultural, civil and political rights, Vienna, Austria. pp. 14-25. (Bahá'í International Community Document #93-0610).

12 Bahá'í International Community (6 March 1995). *Prosperity.* Oral statement presented to the plenary of the United Nations World Summit on Social Development, Copenhagen, Denmark. (Bahá'í International Community Document #95-0305).

13 Bahá'í International Community (12 February 1993). *Human Rights and Extreme Poverty.* Statement to the 49th session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. Agenda item 7: Question of the realization in all countries of the economic, social and cultural rights contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and study of special problems which the developing countries face in their efforts to achieve these human rights, including: problems related to the right to enjoy an adequate standard of living; foreign debt, economic adjustment policies and their effects on the full enjoyment of human rights and, in particular, on the implementation of the Declaration on the Right to Development, Geneva, Switzerland. (Bahá'í International Community Document #93-0212).

14   Bahá'í International Community (August 1994). *Human Rights and Extreme Poverty.* Statement to the United Nations Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, Geneva, Switzerland. (Bahá'í International Community Document #94-0817).

15   The Bahá'í International Community statement can also be found at www.un.org/documents/ga/conf166/ngo/950306124451.htm

16   "The Bahá'í International Community, therefore, urges the PREPCOM to reject the justifications of narrow material and national self-interest and adopt the oneness of humanity as the moral and ethical touchstone for the proposed global strategy and action-plan for social development. Embracing such a unifying principle will facilitate both the discovery and the implementation of enduring solutions to the overwhelming social development problems facing the Summit. For only as the peoples of the world come to view the planet as one home and all its inhabitants as one people, will the vision, moral integrity and commitment necessary to address the complex challenges of social development emerge. Then and only then will humankind be able to erect a single social order whose boundaries are those of the planet." Bahá'í International Community (31 January-11 February 1994). *Global Action Plan for Social Development.* Contribution to the first substantive session of the Preparatory Committee for the United Nations World Summit for Social Development, New York, NY. (Bahá'í International Community Document #94-0121).

17   Bahá'í International Community (June 1994). *Family and Social Development.* Joint NGO statement drafted by the NGO Committee on the Family at the First Preparatory Committee (Prepcom) for the World Summit for Social Development and presented at the Second Prepcom, Vienna, Austria. (Bahá'í International Community Document #94-0705J).

18   Bahá'í International Community (June 1993). *Approaching Men to Improve Lives for Women.* UNIFEM News, Volume 1, Number 2. p. 21. (Bahá'í International Community Document #93-0601).

19   Bahá'í International Community (7-15 September 1987). *Social Progress.* Written statement to the United Nations Interregional Consultation "Interregional Consultation on Development Social Welfare Policies and Programmes," Vienna, Austria. (United Nations Document #E/CONF.80/NGO; Bahá'í International Community Document #87-0909).

20   ibid.

21   ibid.

22   ibid.

23   Bahá'í International Community (22 August-2 September 1994). *The Role of Religion in Social Development.* Comments on the Draft Declaration and Draft Programme of Action for Social Development (A/CONF.166/PC/L.13) presented at the second session of the Preparatory Committee for the World Summit for Social Development, New York, NY. (Bahá'í International Community Document #94-0824).

24   Bahá'í International Community. *Social Progress.*

25   Bahá'í International Community (22 August-2 September 1994). *Toward a Development Paradigm for the 21st Century.* Comments on the Draft Declaration and Draft Programme of Action for Social Development (A/CONF.166/PC/L.13) presented at the second session of the Preparatory Committee for the World Summit for Social Development, New York, NY. (Bahá'í International Community Document #94-0822).

26   Bahá'í International Community. *The Role of Religion in Social Development.*

27   See Hainsworth, Philip (1985). Bahá'í Focus on Human Rights. London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust; Cole, J. R. (1984). Human Rights and the Bahá'í Faith; Roshanian, T. (1985). Circle of Unity. Los Angeles, CA: Kalimat Press; *Human Rights and World Peace.* Circle of Peace. Los Angeles, CA: Kalimat Press.

28 North American Bahá'í Office for Human Rights (1968). *Human Rights are God Given Rights*. Report of Activities in Observance of International Human Rights Year 1968. Wilmette, IL: North American Bahá'í Office for Human Rights.

29 Traer, R. (1991). <u>Faith in Human Rights: Support in Religious Traditions for a Global Struggle</u>. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press. p.182, citing Mary Ellen Togtman Wood 9Winter/Spring 1989). *Prerequisites to Human Rights: A Bahá'í Perspective*. <u>Breakthrough</u> 10, nos. 2, 3. pp. 41-42.

30 Hence the Bahá'í International Community refers to the "right of each individual to investigate reality for himself or herself, and to benefit from the results of this exploration." Bahá'í International Community. *Development, Democracy and Human Rights*.

31 Allen, P. D. (1987). *The Bahá'ís of Iran: A Proposal for Enforcement of International Human Rights Standards*. <u>Cornell International Law Journal</u> 20(2). p. 345.

32 GOAR, Forty Seventh Session, Supp. No 40 (A/47/40), 1994, 15 17.), p.99, in Lerner, N. (1996). *Religious Human Rights Under the United Nations*. <u>Religious Human Rights in Global Perspective: Legal Perspectives</u>. The Hague, Boston & London: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers. pp. 79-134.

33 "The most powerful remedy for religious superstition and contention is an examination of the original teachings of the founders of the world's great faiths. No student of co mparative religion can fail to be struck by the extraordinary degree of harmony to be found in these original scriptures. Certainly, a fair-minded examination of these principal sources for the civilizing of human nature will reveal nothing to support the animosities that pit one religious community against another," Bahá'í International Community (February-March 1992). *Creating a Climate of Religious Tolerance*. Statement submitted to the 48th session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Geneva, Switzerland. (Bahá'í International Community Document #92-0210).

34 Bahá'í International Community (18 February 1993). *Eliminating Religious Intolerance*. Statement to the 49th session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. Agenda item 22: Implementation of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, Geneva, Switzerland. (Bahá'í International Community Document #93-0218).

35 ibid.

36 United Nations (14-25 June 1993). *Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action*. World Conference on Human Rights, Vienna, Austria. (A/Conf.157/23).

37 Bahá'í International Community (14-25 June 1993). *Promoting Religious Tolerance*. Joint statement presented by the Bahá'í International Community to the World Conference on Human Rights on behalf of the following non-governmental organizations: Anglican Observer Office at the United Nations, Bahá'í International Community, Dayemi Complex, Gray Panthers, International Association for the Defense of Religious Liberty, International Council of Jewish Women, International Mahavir Jain Mission, International Organization for World Peace, Disarmament, and Human Rights, Pax Romana, Planetary Citizens, Temple of Understanding, Unitarian Universalist, Voice of the World's Citizens, and World Spiritual Assembly Vienna, Austria. (Bahá'í International Community Document #93-0612J).

38 Bahá'í International Community (10 January 1995). *Promoting Religious Tolerance*. Written statement submitted to the 51st session of the United Nations Co mmission on Human Rights, Geneva, Switzerland. (Bahá'í International Community Document #95-0110).

39 Bahá'í International Community (August 1993). *Ending Religious Intolerance*. Statement to the United Nations Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, Geneva, Switzerland.

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40 Bahá'í International Community (1997). *Human Rights Education*. <u>The Bahá'í World 1995-96</u>. Haifa, Israel: World Centre Publications. pp. 295-308.

41 Bahá'í International Community (14-25 June 1993). *Obstacles to Progress in Human Rights*. Statement to the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights Agenda Item 9: General debate on the progress made in the field of human rights since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and on the identification of obstacles to further progress in this area, and ways in which they can be overcome, Vienna, Austria. (Bahá'í International Community Document #93-0609).

42 ibid.

43 Bahá'í International Community (18 January 1993). *Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*. Written statement to the 49th session of the Commission on Human Rights Agenda Item 23: Draft Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, Geneva, Switzerland. (Bahá'í International Community Document #93-0200; UN Document #E/CN.4/1993/NGO/5).

44 ibid.

45 Bahá'í International Community. *Human Rights and Extreme Poverty*.

46 ibid.

47 Eg, "In Bolivia a project in the Chaco region strives to uplift and empower a long-ignored population of impoverished farmers through an integrated program of technical training, community organization, and spiritual ideas. The goal is to cultivate self-sufficiency through community awareness in order to reduce dependency on outside aid and advice. The Bahá'í International Community believes that fostering grass-roots initiative is essential to the elimination of poverty. The concept of uplifting and empowering individuals and communities has both moral and educational implications which demand profound study." Bahá'í International Community. *Human Rights and Extreme Poverty*.

48 Bahá'í International Community. *Social Progress*.

49 Bahá'í International Community. *Human Rights and Extreme Poverty*.

50 Bahá'í International Community (1955). *Proposals for Charter Revision Submitted to the United Nations by the Bahá'í International Community*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.

51 Bahá'í International Community. *Prosperity*.

52 Bahá'í International Community (June 1994). *Arrangements for Consultations with Non-Governmental Organizations*. Statement of the first session of United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Open-Ended Working Group on the Review of Arrangements for Consultations with Non-Governmental Organizations. Agenda item 3: General review of arrangements for consultations with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) New York, NY. pp. 20-24. (Bahá'í International Community Document #94-0621).