

BAHÁ'Í FOCUS ON DEVELOPMENT

Author: Moojan Momen

Published by: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, London, 1988, 56 pages

The Universal House of Justice's letter of October 20, 1983 on social and economic development captured the interest and stimulated the imagination of Bahá'ís worldwide. For the last six years Bahá'ís have studied and discussed this letter in attempts to understand its purpose and its implications for action. *Bahá'í Focus on Development* is a contribution to this process. Divided into eight chapters, this small booklet offers a Bahá'í perspective on popular notions of development.

Citing the Brandt Commission Report, the first sections of the booklet analyze existing development theory and practice from the perspective of "developed" countries. The author presents development as essentially an economic process, concerned with such things as Gross National Product, population growth rates, agricultural practices, the environment, and so on. By page ten, having amply confirmed the bankruptcy of current development efforts, the author proposes an examination of Bahá'í teachings as a "radical rethinking" of the philosophy and aims of the entire enterprise of development.

Subsequent sections are devoted to a summary of some Bahá'í principles such as world unity, a world-embracing vision, the importance of education, and the status of women. Bahá'í social practices, including universal participation, consultation, and the development of local Assemblies, are also listed.

The final sections of the booklet summarize Bahá'í projects in education, culture, agriculture, health, and women's development. A brief but lucid conclusion provides a summary of the Bahá'í approach to development. The appendix is a statement on social and economic development by the Bahá'í International Community. A short list of suggested readings is provided.

In the introduction the author warns the reader that his is "not an authoritative statement on the Bahá'í approach to social and economic development. Rather it should be looked upon as one approach to the subject of development informed by the Bahá'í teachings." However, given its title, the level of interest in its subject, its simple format, and the author's formidable and well-earned credentials as a scholar of the Bahá'í Faith, *Bahá'í Focus on Development* will have a broad appeal.

The Bahá'í principles and practices offered as "radical rethinking" are beautifully and powerfully articulated in the quotations provided. Few would argue with the necessity of world peace or the importance of agriculture. Unquestionably, concepts such as universal participation and the enhancement of the status of women were radical teachings in Bahá'u'lláh's time, but as development theory they can no longer be called radical or new. Such ideas have been dominant themes among development professionals during the past decade and longer (witness the efforts of the United Nations Development Programme and the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, to name but two).

On the evidence presented, the reader will likely agree that Bahá'ís are doing many commendable things in the education of women, the establishment of rural schools, the provision of health care to villages, building community radio stations to serve indigenous cultures, and the like. While this is commendable, it is not unique. Bahá'ís are not alone in such work; many charitable organizations have a rich history of providing such services.

The world has an abundance of development theories and practices, but mere knowledge of these principles and practices has not proved sufficient to alleviate human suffering. Somehow the crises persist and increase. It is paradoxical that we are suffering terrible social and economic calamities at a time when humanity enjoys more general prosperity, more material abundance, more health, more ease of transport and communication than at any previous time in history.

Humanity desperately needs enduring solutions to the rising number and complexity of problems that beset it. Bahá'ís rejoice in the recognition that some of the fundamental social principles enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh over 100 years ago are at long last being recognized as essential to development. But what evidence do Bahá'ís offer that their principles and practices are any more capable of achieving the desired changes than past attempts? What motivates people to change? What will enable them to endure hardship and suffering as they undertake the changes necessary to improve their lot? Where are the projects that have succeeded in helping people to become self-sufficient and self-reliant? Has anyone been able to assist in restoring people's identity and dignity?

The experience of the Bahá'í community offers powerful answers to such concerns. Bahá'ís have some stunning results to point to in the area of personal and collective transformation. These answers and results are not easily gleaned from this booklet, however.

The author states that the Bahá'í Faith has two interdependent aims: the spiritual regeneration of the world and the transformation of society. He explains that the Bahá'ís have a world-embracing vision, a new definition of human potential, and a design for a new world order. But he is less than audacious regarding the Source of this vision and design, the one power capable of this global regeneration and transformation: Bahá'u'lláh, Whom Bahá'ís regard as the Manifestation of God (Prophet or Messenger) for this day. The essence of the Bahá'í "focus" on development is that the Spirit of Bahá'u'lláh and his Revelation provide the forces necessary for development in the Bahá'í community and ultimately, Bahá'ís believe, in the world.

The Bahá'í Faith asserts that development is achieved through recognition of God's Messenger and fulfilment of his teachings. Bahá'ís regard the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh as the sole foundation for the healing of the nations and the progress and well-being of their peoples. This constitutes development from a Bahá'í perspective: the transformation of the individual and collective lives of humanity into one world, unified politically, economically, socially, and spiritually through conformity to the Will of God as revealed by his Messenger.

In this light, "development" is nothing less than the process of implementing God's plan for his creation—the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. This may not be readily palatable to development theorists, but it is the essence of the Bahá'í understanding of development. Only within the context of the regenerating and transforming power of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh do the Bahá'í development principles and projects have meaning.

The principle of moral and spiritual development is mentioned (last) in the author's list of "Principles of Bahá'í Development." But its significance is understated; it is *the* preeminent principle of Bahá'í development.

The author notes that in *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, "'Abdu'l-Bahá puts forward some principles and proposals for the social and economic development of Iran" (11). What is not made clear, but what the reader of *Bahá'í Focus* should understand, is that *The Secret of Divine Civilization* became "a blueprint for Bahá'í . . . development" because in that book 'Abdu'l-Bahá establishes unequivocally the Bahá'í position that social and economic development are contingent upon moral leadership, on the acquisition of spiritual attributes. 'Abdu'l-Bahá categorically states that this can only be achieved through conformity with and obedience to the social and spiritual laws of God's revealed religions.

Given this perspective, the other four "principles" listed by Momen—universal participation, consultation, development of local institutions, and education—are not so much principles as they are methods. They constitute the divinely ordained means through which the essential moral and spiritual bases of development are learned and applied.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's analysis remains compelling and relevant today because it has worked. More than offering a mere compendium of principles and projects, the Bahá'í community can share its history of an ever-increasing number of successful community development experiences. These experiences substantiate the validity of a theory and practice of development that Bahá'ís regard as no less than divine in origin.

As Momen notes, the earliest example is the experience of the Iranian Bahá'í community. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's interpretations of the Bahá'í Revelation as applied to development provided the framework for the rapid and radical transformation of that community. His perspective enabled the Bahá'ís to move from being a persecuted, oppressed, scattered, disorganized, and leaderless collection of backward peasants into the best educated, most self-sufficient, well-organized, and honorable community in Iran. But the Bahá'í community's success cannot be attributed merely to their efforts "to try to implement some of these social teachings," as the author suggests (11). This does not do justice to the Source of their remarkable victory: the inspiration, motivation, courage, perseverance and, above all, the *unity* they derived from their adherence to the moral and spiritual teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. They were inspired and empowered by the transforming power of the Revelation and guided by their obedience to Bahá'u'lláh's redemptive Plan.

The power of the Holy Spirit was canalized by humble believers through their participation in processes of consultation, in their election of local Assemblies and their obedience to its decisions. This is what enabled the backward, oppressed, and ignorant band of Bahá'ís in Iran to achieve universal literacy, establish trust funds, build and staff the nation's first village hospitals, and open its first schools for girls. At a time when, by contemporary accounts, Persia was still in the Middle Ages, such accomplishments rank among the most noteworthy instances of community development in human history.

The author cites several Bahá'í sources which demand that "development" be defined in a holistic context and not be reduced merely to material indices. However, the author's presentation, his points of reference, and even the structure of his presentation remain heavily reliant upon an economic analysis of the problem. The truly revolutionary, life-transforming power of the Bahá'í Revelation stands in marked contrast to the concept of development as "narrowing . . . the gap between rich and poor" (vi).

The Bahá'í model can neither be described by the language nor explained within the conceptual framework of current development theories. This is because current development theories and practices are products of a materialistic paradigm. This dominant paradigm presents a worldview that cannot accommodate notions of soul, spirit, Revelation, and God. It rejects their relevance to the solution of problems whose essential nature is presumed to be economic and/or political. In contrast, the Bahá'í view is that the economic and political problems facing humanity are virulent symptoms of a spiritual malaise, which only a spiritual solution, universally applied by a divine Physician, can remedy.

The author suggests (and therefore the reader will assume it to be the Bahá'í standpoint) that the problems of the "poor" nations can be attributed primarily to the spiritual degeneracy of the "rich" nations:

Since, from the Bahá'í viewpoint, the whole world exists as a complex inter-related unity, there can ultimately be no hope of progress in the social and economic development of poorer countries unless there is also corresponding progress on the front of the moral and spiritual development of the richer countries. (21)

One might infer from this statement a continued dependency of "poor" nations upon "rich" nations. Clearly the economic realities of global life demand recognition and resolution of the profound disparities between the rich few and the impoverished masses. Bahá'ís anticipate the necessary and inevitable restructuring of global economic patterns, such as the elimination of the extremes of poverty and wealth, the voluntary redistribution of capital, and the collective exploitation of natural resources. However, it is inaccurate to characterize the Bahá'í concept of development as conditioned solely on a cause and effect relationship between the spiritualization of "rich" countries and the economic progress of "poor" countries.

From a Bahá'í perspective, more fundamental than the "donor-recipient dichotomy" (20) is the dichotomy between the godly and the godless, between

those who conform to God's Will in this day and those who ignore or reject it. Bahá'u'lláh's teachings show that this is the root cause of all our current crises, not only the economic disparities between rich and poor nations but also addiction, starvation, the destruction of the environment, AIDS, the collapse of families, the threat of nuclear peril, and so on.

Many of the tangible problems faced by people today, village dwellers and urbanites alike, are as attributable to local greed and corruption, to individual immorality and spiritual bankruptcy, as they are to the machinations of international business cartels, neocolonialist powers, or authoritarian regimes. At both the macro and the micro levels of human affairs, whether in major metropolitan areas or makeshift refugee camps, millionaire's mansions or mud huts, moral and spiritual transformation are essential to human development and prosperity. Spiritual transformation must occur simultaneously with any economic and political reforms, otherwise the reforms will come to naught. The world news eloquently testifies to this fact on a daily basis.

Iran was bankrupt both spiritually and materially at the time of Bahá'u'lláh's appearance. The spiritual and material prosperity of the Iranian Bahá'í community resulted not from enlightened benevolence on the part of outsiders, but rather from the transformation they achieved by following the guidance of the Bahá'í Revelation.

Like the Iranian Bahá'í community, the size and influence of the worldwide Bahá'í community is circumscribed. This provides the rationale for the Universal House of Justice's statement, in its letter of October 1983, that the Bahá'í contribution to social and economic development must necessarily begin within the Bahá'í communities themselves. In the process and as a consequence of achieving self-sufficiency and self-reliance, Bahá'ís are able to extend the Bahá'í Faith's benefits to others.

This booklet would benefit from tangible examples of the spiritually regenerating and society-transforming power of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. The victories are diverse and abundant, instructive and inspiring. For example, the contemporary experiences of Guaymí Bahá'ís in Panama and Pygmy Bahá'ís in Zaire provide powerful testimony to the power and effect of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation on some of the world's most marginalized populations. (These examples and others are well documented in research conducted by staff in the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá'í World Centre. These sources are notable omissions from the booklet's references.)

Bahá'í Focus on Development is an intelligent, informed work, enhanced by many illustrations of Bahá'í development activities. It is rich in Bahá'í principles and elements of the "radical rethinking" that Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation provides. However, the Bahá'í approach to development is much more than a composite of principles and projects. Its basis is the glory of Bahá'u'lláh, the stunning, exhilarating beauty, harmony, and symmetry of his World Order, and the unprecedented, revolutionary, spirit-regenerating, life-transforming impact his teachings have on individuals and societies around the world. The Bahá'í concept of development comes into focus only when placed in the light of Bahá'u'lláh.