

Bahá'í social and economic development

Participating in the unfoldment of world civilisation

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1. Introduction

Bahá'í social and economic development encompasses a broad range of endeavours that contribute to an organic process of learning about the application of the Bahá'í spirit and teachings to the problems of society. It is an integral component of the broader transformative process set in motion by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and destined to push humanity through the turbulence of adolescence into the glorious radiance of its long awaited maturity; a coming of age that will culminate in the “efflorescence of a world civilisation”² far removed from any that has been witnessed by our race, or conceived by its brightest minds.

The call of the Universal House of Justice for the worldwide community to give systematic attention to this “vital sphere of Bahá'í endeavour”³ is, therefore, not to be understood simply as a directive to find ways of ameliorating poverty and destitution, important as this is. A far broader impetus is required than that which has driven much of development activity since World War II, namely, the attempt to replicate the economic prosperity of selected regions of the world in other regions. Instead, it represents one more dimension of the duty of all Bahá'ís to “erect the fabric of the Kingdom of God on earth”.⁴ It is, when viewed in this broader perspective, a call to participate in

1. This paper was written during the author's term of service at the Office of Social and Economic Development (OSED) in Haifa, Israel. It is not necessarily representative of the philosophy or views of that Office.
2. Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith*, p.6
3. 20 October 1983 message of the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world (published in *A Wider Horizon: Selected Messages of the Universal House of Justice, 1983-1992*, pp.6-10)
4. From a letter written by the Universal House of Justice dated 8 December 1967 to an individual believer (published in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986*, pp.125-128)

the unfoldment of a new, divinely inspired System of planetary organisation.

The radical transformation of human consciousness and social structures implied by such a stupendous undertaking cannot conceivably be limited to one section of the globe, however its boundaries are defined. Indeed, to shape our vision of the future on national, regional, continental, or even hemispheric bases seems to fly in the face of the very spirit of the age, which is unambiguously global. The breathtaking acceleration, this century, of the worldwide integration of human affairs only serves to reinforce the growing realisation that serious-minded contemporary undertakings, however much they vary in form across time and space, must be animated by a universal spirit.

In like manner, Bahá'í social and economic development is a global process that must be propelled and enriched by activities in every corner of the earth. In guidance provided to the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá'í World Centre, the Universal House of Justice makes the following statements:

The worldwide Bahá'í community, as an organic whole, transcends divisions prevalent in society today, such as "North" and "South", "developed" and "underdeveloped". Social and economic development efforts are undertaken by Bahá'ís, irrespective of the degree of material prosperity achieved by their nations, as they strive to apply the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh to the gradual process of building a new civilisation. Every follower of Bahá'u'lláh is a member of this worldwide community and can rightfully offer to contribute to a specific endeavour in any country.⁵

Every Bahá'í community, including those in more materially prosperous countries such as Australia, must gradually enhance its capacity to participate in this process by learning to channel the forces released by Bahá'u'lláh toward the betterment of society. No attempt is made here to provide an exhaustive description of the nature and principles of Bahá'í social and economic development. Indeed, it would seem grossly premature to do so. Broad guidance continues to emanate from the Bahá'í World Centre, and will expand in accordance with the exertions of the Bahá'í community. Rather, the aim of this paper is to highlight certain features of a revised conceptual framework within which Bahá'í social and economic development might be considered, and to identify several imperatives for individuals and communities in Australia to become more involved in this field of action.

5. Memorandum dated 11 March 1997 from the Universal House of Justice to the Office of Social and Economic Development

1.1 The evolution of development praxis

The term 'economic development', as it is currently used, can be traced to the reconstruction of post-World War II Europe. In the late 1940s and 1950s the efforts of the United States, under the Marshall Plan, and of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank), were largely focused on rebuilding the infrastructure of a war-ravaged continent. In the 1950s, within a world context of rapid de-colonisation and the establishment of independent nation states, the World Bank and leading nations began to shift their focus from reconstruction to development, applying the same principles that had led to such a dramatic recovery in European industrial production levels to these newly-formed states.⁶ The goal of development was generally defined as putting the "less developed countries, as soon as possible in a position where they can realise their aspirations with regard to economic progress without relying on foreign aid".⁷

Regrettably, after half a century of well-intentioned efforts to improve the economic welfare of the world's poorest countries, and despite the eagerness with which these countries have striven to attain the relative prosperity of industrialised nations, the world enters a new millennium facing two disturbing trends. On one hand, large masses of its population are lagging further and further behind the economic wealth of the privileged minority.⁸ At the same time, however, the largely uninterrupted growth in the aggregate income and wealth of richer nations is rapidly becoming undermined by – and arguably contributing to – massive social, moral and environmental breakdown.

An increasingly vocal legion of thinkers is beginning to recognise that perhaps these two processes are more similar in their underlying causes than may first appear. The idea that a fundamental shift might be required in the definitions of, and assumptions underlying, key concepts such as progress, wealth, and prosperity is one which is driving some leading lights of development theory to question the very bases on which models of thought and action in this field are currently constructed.⁹

This is not to say that development thinking has been completely stagnant for decades. The failure to achieve lasting improvements in the economic welfare of the masses of people in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia and the Pacific has led to evolving paradigms of thought, each of which has, for a time, been viewed as the answer to the dilemma of poverty. In the

6. The so-called "third world"

7. *Partners in Development: Report of the Commission on International Development*, Lester B. Pearson, Chairman, 1969, p.11

8. The United Nations' Development Programme's *Human Development Report 1999* laments the "grotesque proportions" of global inequalities in income and living standards. Since 1960, the income gap between the world's richest 20 per cent and poorest 20 per cent has widened from 30 to one to 74 to one.

9. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that "we should continually be establishing new bases for human happiness and creating and promoting new instrumentalities toward this end" (*The Secret of Divine Civilization*, pp.3-4)

earliest models of development, there was almost exclusive emphasis placed on increasing physical capital to raise production and income levels. From the outset, then, the question of development was, for the most part, reduced to one of economic growth. Industrialisation, synonymous for many with modernisation, was seen as the prime instrument for achieving this objective. In many 'developing' countries it was the state that played a leading role in promoting economic growth, often taking measures to protect the domestic economy from imports and pouring resources obtained from foreign aid into industry and high technology projects. However, it soon became clear that the expected "trickle down" of wealth to the poorer strata of the population was not occurring. Instead, patterns of growth were inequitable, with upper and middle class elites capturing most of the benefits. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was a shift in emphasis away from trying to achieve aggregate economic growth to a more explicit focus on the alleviation of poverty and on meeting basic human needs such as education, health and nutrition. With social development now being targeted directly, movements began to arise within the development field centred on the promotion of democracy and popular participation, environmental concerns, and womens' affairs. The 1980s saw a shift back to growth-focused arguments and policies, with an emphasis on structural macroeconomic adjustment. Instead of the state-led planning of the 1960s, however, it was market forces that were given reign, leading many countries to take steps toward opening up their economies to the competitive rigours of rapidly emerging global markets. There was ongoing debate on the meaning and merit of key phrases such as 'participatory development', 'appropriate technology' and 'sustainable development'. Most recently, and perhaps most promisingly, discussion at the leading edge of development thinking has begun to include notions of values and spirituality.¹⁰

This evolution of thought contains some hopeful elements but has failed to incorporate a "searching re-examination of the [essentially materialistic] attitudes and assumptions that currently underlie approaches to social and economic development,"¹¹ including, in particular, those pertaining to the purpose and goals of the development process. As stated unambiguously in *The Prosperity of Humankind*, unless "the development of society finds a purpose beyond the mere amelioration of material conditions, it will fail of attaining even these goals. That purpose must be sought in spiritual dimensions of life and motivation".

Within the Bahá'í community as well, a change is required in the way

10. Witness, for example, the "World Faiths and Development Dialogue" hosted by Dr. George Carey, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and Mr. James D. Wolfensohn, the President of the World Bank, at Lambeth Palace, London on 18-19 February 1998. The contribution of the Bahá'í community to this dialogue has been published in the booklet *Valuing Spirituality in Development: Initial Considerations Regarding the Creation of Spiritually Based Indicators for Development*

11. Bahá'í International Community, *The Prosperity of Humankind*, 1995

these issues are perceived. The tendency to immediately associate social and economic development with images of rural tutorial schools and primary health care programmes in poorer countries is deeply and widely entrenched, and can sometimes reflect an uncritical acceptance of some of the materialistic assumptions which have driven secular thought:

In this connection, it is a source of concern that communities in materially advanced countries may have a tendency to view social and economic development as being chiefly of interest to the so-called developing world. Yet even in those countries where the most advanced public services and infrastructures are to be enjoyed, important segments of the population may suffer relative privation. Indeed, literacy and public health campaigns, usually thought of in connection with poor nations, may be just as appropriate for the industrialised world's disadvantaged districts. Moreover, such social problems as a soaring rate of failed marriages, interracial strife, inadequate education, substance abuse and criminality show no preference for the Third World and may at times be more devastatingly pervasive in materially advanced countries. This social disarray which increasingly infringes upon the quality of life in every part of the globe provides many potential arenas for the social and economic development efforts of Bahá'í communities.¹²

Bahá'í social and economic development is nothing less than the global application of profound spiritual principles for the transformation of society and the building of new patterns of human association. Its purpose is to lay the “foundations for a new social order that can cultivate the limitless potentialities latent in human consciousness.”¹³

2.0 New patterns of thought

New patterns of action are intimately associated with new patterns of thought. It is, indeed, difficult to break free from dominant modes of thinking, features of which include the adoption of a materialistic mindset; a strong focus on individualism in ethical relations; a tendency to dichotomise between thought and action, science and religion, and objectivism and relativism; and the largely unchallenged acceptance of conflict “as the mainspring of human interaction.”¹⁴ These underlying attitudes and assumptions form the basis of the conceptual framework within which the world has been and continues to be viewed. However, there is a strong argument to suggest that a new framework of thought is required in order to allow humanity to develop a

12. From a letter dated 30 June 1993 written by the Office of Social and Economic Development to an individual believer

13. *The Prosperity of Humankind*

14. *The Prosperity of Humankind*, p.6

vision of – and the volition to move toward – the next stage in its collective evolution. The “supreme animating power” for such a transformation derives from the counsels revealed by the Pen of Bahá'u'lláh¹⁵:

*All things are now made new ... Renewal is the order of the day ... The people, therefore, must be set completely free from their old patterns of thought, that all their attention may be focused upon these new principles, for these are the light of this time and the very spirit of this age.*¹⁶

In this section, it is argued that a sea change is required in the way that several concepts intrinsic to development thinking – namely civilisation, welfare, and growth – are conceived. From such a change in thinking, a broader understanding of development will begin to emerge and, it is argued, imperatives for global participation in the development process become more readily apparent.

2.1 Civilisation

Because the ultimate purpose of Bahá'í social and economic development is to contribute to the gradual building of a new civilisation, an understanding of the concept of civilisation is pivotal to any discussion about development. In his highly influential book, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*, Samuel Huntington identifies several “central propositions concerning the nature, identity, and dynamics of civilisations”. These include the distinction between ‘civilisation’ as an ideal and simultaneously co-existing ‘civilisations’; the enmeshment of civilisations with culture and, in general, their close identification with one of the world’s great religions; the integrative relationship of civilisations with their constituent components; and the enduring and evolutionary continuity of civilisations.¹⁷

The Bahá'í concept of civilisation might be defined as the enterprise whereby “the human mind and heart have created progressively more complex and efficient means to express their inherent moral and intellectual capacities.”¹⁸ Important elements of this understanding include the spiritual reality of civilisation,¹⁹ its reflection in the material realm,²⁰ its developmental

15. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.93

16. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p.252

17. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*, 1996, pp.40-45

18. Bahá'í International Community, *Who is Writing the Future? Reflections on the Twentieth Century*, 1999, p.2

19. The spiritual nature of reality is a fundamental Bahá'í belief: “The mainspring of Bahá'u'lláh's Message is an exposition of reality as fundamentally spiritual in nature, and of the laws that govern that reality's operation”: *Who is Writing the Future?*, p.2

20. The first paragraph of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* refers to a three-layered hierarchy of reality: the “Godhead” or the “Reality of the Divinity” which is beyond all comprehension; the “Kingdom of His Cause”, or “Primal Will”, in which the names and attributes of God are fully revealed and exist in perfect form; and the “world of creation”, which is the material world apparent to our senses, every element of which is a sign of these names and attributes (see *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.184)

nature, and its' necessary subjection to the law of moderation by harmonising material advancement with "moral precepts and foundations of divine civilisation."²¹ As Bahá'ís around the world strive to translate the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh into social reality, this understanding will be gradually enriched.

Bahá'u'lláh's statement that "all men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilisation"²² cannot merely be reduced to a call for humanity to generate progressively higher levels of economic activity and wealth, to adopt increasingly refined standards of living, or even to establish more sophisticated institutions and agencies for the governance of human affairs. Rather, it seems to allude to a process, driven by the power associated with the generation and application of knowledge, that is aimed at achieving "an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced."²³ A deeper comprehension of this idea derives from the fact that "the working of the material world is merely a reflection of spiritual conditions and until the spiritual conditions can be changed there can be no lasting change for the better in material affairs."²⁴

In describing contemporary civilisation, Shoghi Effendi refers extensively to the "universal fermentation which, in *every continent* of the globe and in every department of human life, be it religious, social, economic or political, is purging and reshaping humanity."²⁵ The forces of internal disintegration and destruction assailing the world are ubiquitous, and are eating into the vitals, and tearing down the foundations, of every society. The one truly integrative, constructive process at work in the world today stands associated with the consecrated efforts of the Community of the Most Great Name to put into effect the Divine Program revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, "embodying in its essentials God's divinely appointed scheme for the unification of mankind in this age".²⁶ The most fundamental task in this respect is "spreading the Word of God" and lending support to the "establishment of the Bahá'í Administrative Order". However, a no-less vital effort is required for the implementation and support of "projects and institutions for human advancement"²⁷, and this constitutes a clear mandate for involvement in Bahá'í social and economic development activities. It is possible, therefore, to conceive of an 'integrative' imperative for engagement in this sphere of endeavour.

21. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp.109-110

22. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.215

23. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.43

24. From a letter dated 19 November 1974 written by the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Italy (published in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986*, p. 283). According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "The divine teachings and the admonitions and exhortations of Bahá'u'lláh are manifestly evident. These constitute the organisation of the Kingdom and their enforcement is obligatory." (*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p.106)

25. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.170 (note: emphasis added)

26. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.34

27. From a letter dated 21 August 1977 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer (published in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986*, pp.368-370)

2.2 Welfare

At the heart of every social and economic development project is some notion of human welfare. Institutions are established, programmes are implemented, and ideals and sentiments are given voice, all in the name of enhancing well-being, generating prosperity, or furthering human happiness. The overwhelming majority of these efforts give prime importance to economic considerations; for many thinkers and policy makers, the objective of prosperity and well-being is readily equated with, reduced to, or measured by the generation and distribution of income and wealth.

Clearly, economic activity is a vital component of the advancement of civilisation, and the welfare of its people. Material means are crucial to survival, and they facilitate the expression of human capacities and the manifestation of the potential of the human spirit. However, from the materialistic mindset – which is a defining feature of our moment in history, and which implies a particular view of human nature that pays very little attention, if any at all, to the spiritual element of life or to the role of the individual as an agent for social transformation – it readily follows that the wealth generated by economic activity is an end in itself.

The Bahá'í approach to development rests on a broader conception of welfare, which in turn derives from a fundamentally different understanding of human nature and of the purpose of human existence. True welfare, for a Bahá'í, has a spiritual basis. It consists in drawing closer to God and striving to align our will with His. It is manifested by a life-long effort to know and to love God, to live in accordance with His dictates, and to “become a source of social good”.²⁸ True advancement and prosperity, in this view, are spiritual, and our focus on the material aspect of life is considered a means of allowing us to achieve this deeper objective.²⁹ True wealth is found not in the pursuit of selfish interests, but rather in dedication to the well-being of society and the enrichment of the lives of its peoples.³⁰

Such an approach is based not only on a broader, spiritually inspired conception of human welfare, but on the confident expectation that a comprehensive, Divinely-ordained System – comprising laws, institutions and the essentials of a Divine Economy³¹ – is gradually being implemented to promote and safeguard it. The lynchpin of this system is the spiritual principle of the oneness of mankind; a principle that drives the efforts of the Bahá'í community to promote world unity. According to Bahá'u'lláh “(t)he well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless

28. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilisation*, p.2

29. See *The Prosperity of Humankind*, Section V

30. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilisation*, pp.24-25

31. See *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.19. The context in which the phrase “Divine Economy” is used by Shoghi Effendi indicates that it should, perhaps, be read as a reference to the incarnation of spiritual principles in a broad system of management, organisation, or administration of social affairs.

and until its unity is firmly established.³² The unity of any entity must be based on a particular order, and the key force in this respect is religion, which is “a radiant light and an impregnable stronghold for the protection and welfare of the peoples of the world.”³³ In the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, nothing short of the “various laws, institutions and principles of the world” found in the divine teachings “can assure peace and tranquillity to mankind.”³⁴

Accompanying the Revelation of these laws and principles is the release of the requisite generative power necessary to effect change in the reality of all created things.³⁵ Human will is the agency through which these spiritual forces are gradually made incarnate in the social realm. Mankind has been invested with the capacity, and the obligation, to draw on the power of the creative Word to bring earthly existence into closer alignment with the World of the Kingdom. In His Most Holy Book, Bahá’u’lláh instructs the people of the world to promote “the development of the cities of God and His countries.”³⁶ To think of this ordinance as being for another time or place demonstrates a failure to adequately recognise the station of the Word of God. “No place is there for any one to flee to”, writes Bahá’u’lláh, “once Thy laws have been sent down, and no refuge can be found by any soul after the revelation of Thy commandments.”³⁷ The spirit released by Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation must, therefore, be given expression in the world of creation. There is thus a ‘generative’ imperative for all Bahá’ís to apply the Teachings for the improvement of human welfare; an imperative that encompasses the challenge of engaging in Bahá’í social and economic development:

*This challenge evokes the resourcefulness, flexibility and cohesiveness of the many communities composing the Bahá’í world. Different communities will, of course, perceive different approaches and different solutions to similar needs. Some can offer assistance abroad, while, at the outset, others must of necessity receive assistance; but all, irrespective of circumstances or resources, are endowed with the capacity to respond in some measure; all can share; all can participate in the joint enterprise of applying more systematically the principles of the Faith to upraising the quality of human life.*³⁸

32. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, p.286

33. *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*, p.125

34. *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p.249

35. See, for example, *Prayers and Meditations*, pp.294-296

36. *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p.77. “In unnumbered verses and tablets He repeatedly and variously declared the ‘progress of the world’ and the ‘development of nations’ as being among the ordinances of God for this day” (20 October 1983 message of the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá’ís of the world)

37. *Prayers and Meditations*, p.197

38. 20 October 1983 message of the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá’ís of the world

2.3 Growth

The concepts of development and growth are, in a certain sense, synonymous. Both can be thought of as involving movement from a lower or simpler to a higher or more complex form or stage. Given the complexity and spiritual reality of human institutions, communities and civilisations, it is instructive to draw on the tool of metaphor in seeking to understand the processes by which they grow.³⁹ The imagery of metaphor, by shaping thought processes, can influence patterns of action.

The source of metaphor underlying much of modern social thought has been the classical, mechanistic tradition of (Newtonian) physics.⁴⁰ However, for all of the insights that they do allow, mechanistic metaphors struggle to cope adequately with concepts that are fundamental to human existence such as knowledge, choice, and irreversible, purpose-oriented social change.⁴¹ Biological metaphors, on the other hand, can facilitate a deeper understanding of human-based phenomena, and the processes of growth associated with them.⁴² 'Abdu'l-Bahá often used examples from the vegetable and animal kingdoms to explain complex social and spiritual concepts.⁴³

The principles of organic growth, for instance, can offer key insights into the structure of civilisation and its development – a process which lies at the heart of the present discussion. They can yield valuable information about fundamental principles of social existence such as the importance of knowledge, moderation, and cooperation as driving forces for social development; the dynamic interplay between individual and collective transformation; the emergence of institutions and patterns of interaction necessary for evolution to progressively more complex stages of social organisation; the inextricable link between individual and societal interests and the need for the subordination of the former to the latter; the impetus to collective advancement and the enhancement of the beauty of society provided by diversity of “customs, manners, habits, ideas, opinions and dispositions”⁴⁴; the critical importance of unity in promoting the maintenance and expression of this diversity; and the transcendence of the purpose and reality of civilisation from the mere existence of society and its elements.

39. Far from being mere literary ornaments, metaphors offer a distinctive mode for achieving deeper understanding, are central to reasoning about the world, reflect our beliefs about reality, and can inspire new patterns of thought (G.M. Hodgson, *Economics and Evolution: Bringing Life back into Economics*, 1996, pp.18-19)

40. For instance, the model of human behaviour upon which economic theories are built, encapsulated by the appellation *homo economicus*, can be thought of as involving agents optimising welfare subject to a combination of forces and constraints, “as if they were mere particles obeying mechanical laws” (Hodgson, 1996, p.23)

41. Hodgson, 1996, pp.21-24

42. Witness the recent comments made by Rupert Murdoch about *accrutive* economic growth (*Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday 9 October, 1999)

43. See, for example, His comments in *The Secret of Divine Civilisation* about the evolution of the political world (pp.107-108)

44. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p.291

Similarly, the growth of the Faith is organic in that it resembles a living organism in its organisation and development. Taken together, the 20 October 1983 message of the Universal House of Justice and several others immediately preceding and following it⁴⁵ highlight the fact – perhaps unappreciated – that the worldwide Bahá'í community has evolved to a stage at which participation in development efforts is a requisite for its continued growth:

*Bahá'í communities in many lands have attained a size and complexity that both require and make possible the implementation of a range of activities for their social and economic development which will not only be of immense value for the consolidation of these communities and the development of their Bahá'í life, but will also benefit the wider communities in which they are embedded and will demonstrate the beneficial effects of the Bahá'í Message to the critical gaze of the world.*⁴⁶

Social and economic development activities should be viewed as an “enlarged dimension of the consolidation process” and, thus, a “reinforcement of the teaching work”.⁴⁷ If, however, Bahá'í communities fail to expand their efforts in this sphere of endeavour, there will be “grave consequences” to their lives⁴⁸, and they will effectively deprive themselves of the chance to build the institutional capacity necessary for future undertakings. Accordingly, it seems clear that there is an ‘organic’ imperative, related to the growth of the Faith, for Bahá'ís to take action in the field of social and economic development.

3. The Australian context

In a country such as Australia, generally considered to be one of the most advanced economies in the world, there still exist a host of social challenges and problems that require attention. Indeed, comments by a leading domestic journalist indicate that even in the midst of a period of apparent economic prosperity, the Australian economy is failing to fulfil most of the basic, traditional goals of economics, and that “we are still far from a Golden Age”.⁴⁹ Perhaps even more poignant is the questioning by a prominent and well-respected commentator, of whether economic growth, as measured by ever-

45. That is, the Ridván 140 and 141 Messages (1983 and 1984); the message dated 2 January 1984 to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in every land (see *A Wider Horizon: Selected Messages of the Universal House of Justice, 1983-1992*, pp.3-13; 17-23); and a letter dated 3 January 1982 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer (published in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986*, pp.513-519)

46. *A Wider Horizon*, p.12 (note: emphasis added)

47. *A Wider Horizon*, p.10. Although they are complementary, it is most important to maintain a distinction between teaching and social and economic development. Guidance from the Universal House of Justice clearly indicates that development activities should not be pursued with the intention of attracting people to the Faith

48. *A Wider Horizon*, p.12

49. Tim Colebatch, *The Age*, Tuesday 15 June 1999

increasing consumption levels, is synonymous with happiness. This writer recently quipped that “too much economics”, with its narrow, materialistic focus, and inability to say anything of much use about ecological, communal, social or spiritual aspects of life, “is bad for your wellbeing.”⁵⁰

This type of comment reflects a growing awareness in Australia that improvement of economic conditions does not necessarily lead to an amelioration of other societal problems.⁵¹ It highlights the real need for local Bahá'í communities to begin to consider what set of actions they might take to demonstrate the potency and efficacy of the spiritual principles revealed by Bahá'u'lláh. A recent communication from the Office of Social and Economic Development contains the following statements in this connection:

*As you set out to stimulate development efforts in the Australian Bahá'í community, you may wish to consider holding a series of consultations ... about the problems currently confronting Australian society. Many of these are readily apparent even from afar: the racial tensions between the Aboriginal community and society at large, the overwhelming challenges facing the Aboriginal people in general, the problems of environmental degradation, the changes in the global economy, the spread of disease, inequities with regard to women, the disintegration of family bonds, the demoralisation of youth, and the pronounced need for moral education ... Whatever the area or areas of concentration chosen, it will be important for activities to begin simply and be allowed to grow in complexity over time.*⁵²

4. Conclusion: imperatives for a global enterprise

Three imperatives for engagement in Bahá'í social and economic development have been identified in this paper:

1. integrative imperative – the foundations of civilisation are disintegrating; social and economic development efforts constitute an integral contribution to the unfoldment of a new, divinely-inspired social order;
2. generative imperative – the creative forces associated with Bahá'u'lláh's ordinances await and demand expression through the efforts of His followers to promote human welfare and development;

50. Ross Gittens, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Wednesday 5 May 1999

51. Indeed, inequitable economic growth is likely to exacerbate social turmoil. Contemporaneous with what is possibly the longest ever peacetime expansion of the Australian economy, there appear to be growing signs not only that the gap between rich and poor is widening, but also that the magnitude of social inequalities in the fields of education and literacy, quality of life, and so on, are increasing along the urban/rural divide, and within larger cities. This can lead to the surfacing of deeper problems such as racism and other forms of intolerance.

52. From a letter dated 8 June 1999 written by the Office of Social and Economic Development to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia. Note the final statement as an illustration of the principle of organic growth as applied to the planning and implementation of development projects.

3. organic imperative – social and economic development endeavours must be incorporated into the regular pursuits of Bahá'í communities to ensure their continued evolutionary growth.

These imperatives are not confined to any particular segment of the Bahá'í World. Within each community, including the Australian one, the vision of Bahá'í social and economic development must be reconceptualised within the context of a broader and richer vision of the purpose of the Revelation, and shaped in accordance with social requirements.

In attempting to incorporate development activities into the pattern of Bahá'í community life, it is important to remember that the worldwide Bahá'í community is, in effect, only sixteen years into a process that is destined to take shape and flourish for centuries to come. With such a monumental task ahead of us, a certain degree of humility is called for on the part of those who arise to promote and take action in this sphere of endeavour. There exists no set of unambiguously 'correct' or definitive methods and practices to be followed. At this early stage, success will, to a very great extent, be measured by the ability of the friends to learn systematically about the increasingly effective translation of spiritual principles into social reality. This will be a process permeated with errors and challenges.

A posture of learning ought therefore to encompass our efforts to consult, act and reflect on the process of applying the healing Message of Bahá'u'lláh to the maladies of an ailing society. In striving to contribute to the building of new patterns of civilisation, we will be expediting the fulfilment of the vision of St. John that "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord."⁵³

53. Rev 11:15