

Values, norms and poverty
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**RELIGIOUS VALUES AND THE MEASUREMENT OF
POVERTY AND PROSPERITY
A BAHÁ'Í PERSPECTIVE**

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Broadening the conceptual framework of development

The processes of change now shaping human affairs portend an inevitable transition to a global society. A major challenge inherent in this transition is creating conditions of social and economic equity among and within the nations of our global community. Lifting the burden of poverty from the world will require a deep moral commitment and a fundamental reordering of priorities. But perhaps most importantly, the materialistic criteria now guiding development thinking must give way to a new conceptual framework that explicitly acknowledges the spiritual, cultural, and social forces that define individual and community identity. In this regard, the World Faiths and Development Dialogue held at Lambeth Palace in February 1998 and similar initiatives examining the roles of religion and spirituality in advancing human well-being represent important contributions to the discourse on social and economic development.¹

Over the past several decades, workers in the development field have gradually become cognizant of the complexity of the development process. This evolution in development thought can be seen in the shift in focus from capital-intensive programs aimed at promoting industrialization, to programs emphasizing health care, new agricultural methods, traditional technology and environmental preservation, to initiatives promoting participation and community organization. Yet, despite this growing awareness of the many interrelated factors underlying development, the international development agenda continues to be governed by a limited set of assumptions and approaches that fail to take into account much of what has been learned.

It is clear that another dimension of complexity must now be incorporated into the development equation. Attention must now be focused upon that which lies at the heart of human purpose and motivation: the human spirit. In the Bahá'í view, nothing short of an awakening of the human spirit can create a desire for true social change and instill in people the confidence that such change is indeed possible. While pragmatic approaches to problem solving obviously play a central role in development initiatives, tapping the spiritual roots of human motivation provides the essential impulse that ensures genuine social advancement. When spiritual principles are fully integrated into community development activities, the ideas, values, and practical measures that emerge are likely to be those that promote self-reliance and safeguard human dignity, thus avoiding patterns of dependency and progressively eliminating conditions of gross inequality. Broadening the development process to take into account people's spiritual perceptions and aspirations represents an essential step toward creating the conditions necessary for global stability and prosperity.

Role of religious beliefs and values

Through the teachings and moral guidance of religion, great segments of humanity have learned to discipline their baser propensities and to develop qualities that conduce to social order and cultural advancement. Such qualities as compassion, forbearance, trustworthiness, generosity, humility, courage, and willingness to sacrifice for the common good have constituted the invisible yet essential foundations of progressive community life. Recognition and cultivation of

humanity's spiritual nature have ennobled and enriched the lives of peoples everywhere, and have engendered cohesion and unity of purpose within and across societies.² True civilization does not arise merely from material progress, but rather is defined by and based upon the transcendent values that hold society together. Religion, then, in a very real sense provides the bricks and mortar of society – the shared beliefs and moral values that unite people into communities and that give tangible direction and meaning to individual and collective life. "In truth," Bahá'u'lláh avers, "religion is a radiant light and an impregnable stronghold for the protection and welfare of the peoples of the world . Should the lamp of religion be obscured, chaos and confusion will ensue, and the lights of fairness and justice, of tranquillity and peace cease to shine."³

Individual progress and community development, require both spiritual awareness and material resources. Material advancement is, therefore, best understood not as an end in itself, but rather as a vehicle for moral, spiritual, and social progress. Meaningful social change results not so much from the acquisition of technical skills as from the development of qualities and attitudes that foster cooperative and creative patterns of human interaction. In short, the material and spiritual aspects of daily life are inseparably connected and must both be addressed.

This understanding of development anticipates the emergence of communities in which the application of spiritual values such as justice, trustworthiness and kindness will enhance material well-being. At the same time, material resources and advances will make possible new avenues of spiritual endeavor that will promote both the development of individual potential and the collective good.

Religion, Science and Capacity Building

How then can spiritual principles be infused into our understanding, practice and assessment of development? The challenge is not a new one. Throughout past decades, development thinkers have repeatedly encountered issues related to values and beliefs. Too often, however, they have backed away from a thorough examination of the subject.

If the development discourse is to address properly the issue of values, a rigorous dialogue will be required between the work of science and the insights of religion.⁴ Such a dialogue is crucial to the enterprise of building human capacity, an enterprise that is increasingly recognized as the fundamental purpose of development. When viewed as capacity building, development is concerned principally with the generation, application, and diffusion of knowledge. If it is accepted that knowledge is both spiritual and material, religion and science can be understood as two interacting knowledge systems that provide the fundamental organizing principles by which individuals, communities and institutions function and evolve.⁵ Placing the generation and application of knowledge at the center of development planning and implementation makes it possible to study the practical implications of religious values, including the role that such values have in alleviating poverty.

It is generally accepted that the materially poor must participate directly in efforts to improve their own well-being. But the nature of that participation has yet to be fully explored. From the Bahá'í perspective, this participation must be substantive and creative; it must allow the people themselves access to knowledge and encourage them to apply it. Specifically, it is not sufficient for the people of the world to be engaged in projects as mere beneficiaries of the products of knowledge, even if they have a voice in certain decisions. They must be engaged in applying knowledge to create well-being, thereby generating new knowledge and contributing in a substantial and meaningful way to human progress.⁶

The ability of any group to participate fully in its own development process depends on a wide range of interrelated capacities at the personal and group level. Among the most important are the capacities to participate effectively in the planning and implementation of development activity; to use methods of decision-making that are non-adversarial and inclusive; to think systematically about problems and search for solutions; to deal efficiently and accurately with information rather than respond unwittingly to political and commercial propaganda; to take initiative in a creative and disciplined manner; to make appropriate and informed technological choices; to organize and engage in ecologically sound production processes; to contribute to the effective management of public programs and projects; to promote solidarity and unity of purpose, thought, and action; to replace relationships based on dominance and competition with relationships based on reciprocity, collaboration, and service to others; to interact with other cultures in a way that leads to the advancement of one's own culture and not to its degradation; to encourage recognition of the essential nobility of human beings; to put into place and to participate in educational processes conducive to personal growth and to the transformation of society; to maintain high standards of physical, emotional and mental health; to imbue social interaction with an acute sense of justice; and to manifest rectitude in private and public administration.

Incomplete as it is, this list is suggestive of the constellation of capacities necessary for building up the social, economic, and moral fabric of collective life. The list highlights the vital role of both religious and intellectual resources in promoting development. It also points us to the types of indicators that might provide useful insight into the overall well-being of communities.

Measuring Poverty and Prosperity

If development is primarily a process in which individuals and communities become the principal actors in promoting their own physical, spiritual and social well-being, how can it be measured? Is it even reasonable to expect to be able to measure an ongoing process of action, evaluation, and adjustment: one in which communities gradually improve their ability to define, analyze, and meet their own needs? In the Bahá'í view, the answer is *yes*. While concrete action in any project should be directed toward visible, and therefore measurable, improvement in some aspect of life, the capacity of a community to address development issues at increasingly higher levels of complexity and effectiveness can also be measured, although perhaps not by traditional means.

One vital measure of a community's progress is the extent to which participation and cooperative methods of decision-making are used to guide the development process. As an illustration, Bahá'í development activities have, from their inception, emphasized collective decision-making and collective action at the grassroots level. Improvement in the ability of all the members of a community to consult is a primary measure of success in every Bahá'í development project. Both the process and the outcomes are observable and, therefore, in some way measurable. The use of consultative methods of decision making can lead to novel solutions to community problems; they can result in greater fairness in the distribution of community resources; and they tend to involve and uplift those who have historically been excluded from decision making, such as women and minorities. Experience has shown that consultation enables communities to sustain and modify development initiatives, contributing, thereby, to self-sufficiency and a higher quality of life. The ability of people to come together in these new and constructive patterns of participation and interaction is, in some respects, a more important outcome and, therefore, more important to measure than the quantifiable goals traditionally associated with development projects.

Development initiatives might be assessed on the basis of concrete application of a number of spiritual principles to individual and community life: among them, unity in diversity; equity and justice; equality of the sexes; trustworthiness and moral leadership; and independent investigation of truth. While these are by no means the only principles to consider, these five contain a sufficient diversity of concepts to allow a broad overview of community progress. In their full expression, these spiritual precepts capture many of the intangible factors that conduce to social and economic advancement.

For example, the principle of unity in diversity as applied to the area of education could lead to curricula that foster concepts of tolerance, understanding, compassion and world citizenship. The principle of the equality of women and men could lead to policies that unlock capacities of both women and men that have been hitherto suppressed. The principle of the independent investigation of truth as applied to development projects could ensure that problems are correctly identified and defined and that solutions reflect the true needs of the people involved. A detailed discussion on how these principles might form the basis of tangible indicators of development can be found in the concept paper, "Valuing Spirituality in Development: Initial Considerations Regarding the Creation of Spiritually Based Indicators for Development." This paper was presented by the Bahá'í International Community to the World Faiths and Development Dialogue at Lambeth Palace in 1998.

The creation of broad qualitative measures of development progress will have direct implications for the types of projects that get funded. Experience has shown that innovative projects are often deprived of needed funding when evaluation formulas emphasize a few specific economic or physical parameters. For example, before pursuing income generating activities, it may be more important to first engage in goal setting and consultations regarding community needs and well-being. The adoption and application of rigid evaluation criteria cannot be considered scientific especially if they prematurely prescribe optimal outcomes. In a given community or cultural setting, there may, in fact, be a variety of pathways that could achieve the same material ends while promoting other goals such as social cohesion or moral development.

Clearly the design and evaluation of development projects must give consideration to a broad set of parameters that go beyond simple categories of economic performance. Conventional indices of such factors as economic growth, health, or education are capable of conveying only a very narrow snapshot of community well-being. The most important indicators of successful development activity, might well be whether the views and talents of all members of a community are utilized, whether consultative processes are used to formulate and implement community projects, or whether an atmosphere of dignity, optimism and commitment characterizes the lives of the people involved. Although such qualitative factors may, at first, prove difficult to measure, the participants in development endeavors will no doubt be able to assist development specialists in creating meaningful benchmarks that take account of these qualitative variables.

In the final analysis, the measurement of poverty and prosperity, can best be determined by, those who are most directly affected. Certainly, traditional measures can offer valuable insights and can be used to help identify where resources should be deployed, but by themselves they are insufficient. Existing development indices fall far short of bringing into relief the essential spiritual and social dimensions of life, so fundamental to human welfare. Without a way to identify and track these essential elements of prosperity, our development efforts will continue to⁷ be dictated by mainly material considerations and true progress will prove to be illusory. It is, therefore, not only timely but critical that organizations of civil society and religious communities be engaged with development agencies in charting new measures of social progress.

¹ The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) has been exploring the relationship between religion and science and its impact on development. The Centre recently brought together Dr. Farzam Arbab, a theoretical physicist and a Bahá'í; Dr. Azizan Bahraruddin, a biologist, philosopher of science and a Muslim; Dr. Gregory Baum, philosopher, social ethicist and a Roman Catholic; Dr. Promilla Kapur, a sociologist and a Hindu; and Father Bill Ryan, a Jesuit priest working in economics and labour relations, to begin a consultative process to examine the effectiveness of current working models and the possibility that religion is a critical missing factor in the development process. The ideas presented herein are in consonance with the substance of these consultations.

2 It may be argued that, since spiritual and moral issues have historically been bound up with contending theological doctrines which are not susceptible of objective proof, these issues lie outside the framework of the international community's development concerns. To accord them any significant role would be to open the door to precisely those dogmatic influences that have nurtured social conflict and blocked human progress. There is doubtless a measure of truth in such an argument. To conclude, however, that the answer lies in discouraging the investigation of spiritual reality and ignoring the deepest roots of human motivation is untenable.

³ Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitab-i-Aqdas* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988), p. 125.

⁴ That both science and religion have roles to play in the development process can no longer be a matter of debate. Sociological and organizational questions relating to social and economic development must, of necessity, refer to spiritual perspectives and values. However, the manner in which spiritual perspectives are integrated into development activities must involve the same logical and rigorous methods employed by science. This will ensure that development efforts are anchored to tangible and objective outcomes. Indeed, if religion is to be the partner of science in the development arena, its specific contributions must be carefully scrutinized. It is unfortunately the case that established religion is often burdened by doctrines and practices that militate against efforts to improve material conditions. Sectarian teachings that encourage passivity, acceptance of poverty, social exclusion or inequality between the sexes must be weighed against more universal spiritual concepts that emphasize the importance of justice and service to others. Therefore, a new approach to development must also seek to identify traditions of paternalism and other patterns of behavior that serve to undermine development initiatives.

⁵ Collaboration between religion and science in the development field can take many forms. One obvious example is in the area of moral education. Since moral behavior is a concrete expression of humanity's spiritual nature, the formulation of educational theories and methods that systematically promote moral development is of particular importance. Learning to apply moral and spiritual concepts to achieve material progress could, in fact, be regarded as the essential prerequisite of all social and economic initiatives.

⁶ A first important step in this direction is to foster awareness and respect of the existing knowledge base of a community or culture. This will assist the community to develop confidence in its ability to conceive and implement innovative solutions to difficult problems. When such confidence exists, science and technology can more readily be used as tools for preserving and extending cultural identity.

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