



# In Service to the Common Good



Aligning Development  
with the Forces of Progress



## PREFACE

We commend this third publication in the *In Service* series to the thoughtful attention of the participants in the 2006 Social and Economic Development Conference, sponsored by the Rabbani Charitable Trust. You, the practitioners and students of development, are committed to advancing the prosperity and well-being of all people, to promoting human dignity and to achieving that “dynamic coherence between the spiritual and practical requirements of life on earth” that will, ultimately, bring forth peace and happiness from out of the turbulence of our times.

The pages that follow project the experience of your peers against the backdrop of the great social forces that are impelling mankind toward the destined realization of its oneness. The analysis here seeks to describe the extent to which the work of these Bahá'ís is aligned with, and reinforced by, those same forces, even as the youth and adults who appear in these pages share what they are learning about the application of spiritual principle and practical wisdom to the challenges they have taken on.

For those who encounter the development work of the Bahá'í community for the first time, we offer this document, and the series of which it forms a part, as an affirmation of our partnership with you in this important endeavor.

To all who read this booklet, we acknowledge that the work you have undertaken brings more than its share of difficulties and frustrations—indeed, the Bahá'í writings describe this as the Age of Frustration. We trust, therefore, that the reflections gathered here will provide a measure of encouragement, because although the scope of your projects may at times seem small, the forces arrayed around you multiply the effects of your exertions, just as certain musical notes, when struck, ring with a resonance that excites the heart of even a distant listener.

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## In Service to the Common Good

ALIGNING DEVELOPMENT WITH THE FORCES OF PROGRESS

*"The proclamation of the Oneness of Mankind...implies at once a warning and a promise—a warning that in it lies the sole means for the salvation of a greatly suffering world, a promise that its realization is at hand...(I)t has...come at last to be regarded...not only as an approaching possibility, but as the necessary outcome of the forces now operating in the world."*

~ The Bahá'í Writings



In the last fifty years, the governments of the Western industrialized nations have spent \$2.3 trillion on foreign aid<sup>1</sup> to try to end poverty and disease, build infrastructure, promote literacy, enlarge the scope and capacities of grass roots organizations, and foster better governance. Likewise, scores of public and private institutions have invested substantial resources. World Vision, for example, spent \$752 million on its programs in 2005. The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria has awarded nearly \$5 billion in grants, disbursing \$2.8 billion of that money in just the last four years.



Despite these huge investments, success has been sporadic at best. Multilateral agencies and the private sector have set appealing goals but have been unable to reach them. Specific actions and the sacrifices of many of those involved have been impressive, but poverty and disease still claim countless victims hourly. Infrastructure decay in many countries makes development nearly impossible. Organizations of and for the disadvantaged find their progress blocked by governments that know neither shame nor constraint on their rapacious behavior.

A growing number of organizations have focused their attention on community based programs, but the proliferation of different models and approaches has so fractionalized the work that neither strategic coherence nor momentum can be realized. Some economists have turned to statistical analysis and opinion research to try to find ways of assessing the comparative merits of various interventions. This research is clarifying important questions, but the essential assumption, that material well-being is the only feasible goal, is rarely challenged.

A wider perspective on development must connect work in the field with the vast changes taking place at the foundations of the current social order: A growing sense of global solidarity, and a search for models that integrate moral values with the achievement of material benefits, signal an awareness that all people, members of a single human family, are now ready and able to take responsibility for their own material and spiritual advancement.

It is this perspective that informs the development work of Bahá'ís. During these same fifty years, the global Bahá'í community has painstakingly constructed an administrative network that extends from the World Center of the Faith in Haifa, Israel to more than 116,000 localities throughout the world. Using a process of experimentation and reflection, Bahá'ís are learning from their successes, setbacks and mistakes to enhance the quality of life of those in a community, often working in close collaboration with like-minded partners. Underlying Bahá'ís' commitment to their work is the belief that the divine intent for this era of mankind's history is the accomplishment of peace, justice, and spiritual and material prosperity for everyone.

The following report looks at certain aspects of present day development theory and practice; seeks, through a brief review of current scholarship and Bahá'í writings, to find glimpses of that larger perspective; and examines how the motives, principles and methods Bahá'ís apply in their service align with the forces shaping society to achieve "a dynamic coherence between the spiritual and practical requirements of life on earth."<sup>2</sup>

## Current Issues in Development

A central issue in development today is whether it is working. After spending more than \$2 trillion on aid (including military outlays), or nearly \$50 billion yearly for the last five decades, it is reasonable to ask what progress has been made toward the stated goals of the development endeavor.

No clear answers emerge to this controversial question. One study<sup>3</sup> analyzed per capita income growth and inflation and found that countries with the highest number of World Bank and IMF “structural adjustment loans” tended to have low or negative growth and high inflation. Niger received 14 adjustment loans between 1980 and 1999, and experienced a 2.3 percent negative growth rate for the period and an average inflation rate of 2 percent. Ghana had 26 loans, a 1.2 percent growth rate and 32 percent inflation.

Ukraine, which had ten loans, has seen its personal incomes drop 8.4 percent and inflation soar to a yearly average of 215 percent.

Other studies, using these and other measures, reach different conclusions, or frame the question differently. Research on social choice and development economics, for example, goes beyond the metrics of incomes and economic trends to examine indices of human freedom. The researchers recognize that people need to have a voice and real choices regarding decisions that shape economic outcomes.<sup>4</sup> The United Nations Development Programme’s “human development index” is another advance, although indicators are still needed that capture the subtle moral and social determinants of collective life. Development outcomes, however, by these or any measure have been disappointing.

***Despite continued investment and sacrifice, three billion people still live on less than two dollars a day; nearly a billion are still hungry; and one billion adults are still illiterate.***

A persuasive case can be made that grand gestures, however well or nobly conceived, do not work, in part because they consistently fall prey to divisive political processes. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), adopted with great fanfare in 2000, are merely the latest in a series of such global plans: A UN summit in 1990 set the goal of 2000 for universal primary-school enrollments; a summit in 1977 called for universal access to clean water and sani-

tation by 1990. Both deadlines have been extended to 2015 to coincide with the MDGs. Such plans are attractive, and they have produced some successes—the eradication of small pox, for example, in support of which there was remarkable unity of purpose. But despite the continued investment of enormous resources, an estimated three billion people still live on less than two dollars a day, adjusted for

purchasing power; nearly a billion are still hungry; and one billion adults are still illiterate.<sup>5</sup>

A better approach, many observers suggest, is to promote grass roots initiatives with realistic goals and accountability to ensure that those affected can themselves gauge programs’ success. But is this strategy an improvement?

To answer this question, some practitioners have introduced randomized studies that use surveys, control groups and statistical tests to shed light on common assumptions and assess the relative merits of various kinds of inputs.

A study on efforts to combat HIV/AIDS in Kenya, for example, examined the comparative efficacy of three intervention strategies: teacher training, student debates on the benefits of condom use, and increased funding to reduce school drop-outs. The study tracked teen pregnancies,

which are associated with unprotected sex; self-reported condom use and sexual activity; and drop-out rates, since longer school attendance has been shown to decrease the incidence of high-risk behaviors. Researchers found that “after two years, girls in schools where teachers had



been trained were more likely to be married in the event of a pregnancy, but the teacher training program,” in which most teachers participated diligently, “had little other impact on students’ knowledge, attitudes, and behavior, or on the incidence of teen childbearing. The condom debates and essays increased practical knowledge and self-reported use of condoms without increasing self-reported sexual activity. Reducing the cost of education by paying for school uniforms reduced drop-out rates, teen marriage, and childbearing.”<sup>6</sup> Some interventions, in other words, affect only specific behaviors. The larger point of this study, though, is that it is possible to unbundle the effects of different approaches, measure their impact and gain a fuller understanding of the processes at work.

Another puzzle for program designers and field workers alike has to do with improving the quality of village health care. Interventions are designed to bring more qualified health care providers into villages, to increase their attendance at village clinics, to build more and better clinics, and to reduce the cost of medicines, among other goals. A randomized study which looked at health care delivery in rural India, however, reported that “Villagers’ health is poor despite the fact that they heavily use health care facilities and spend a lot on health care.”

“The quality of the public service is abysmal,” the report continues, “and unregulated and private providers who are often unqualified provide the bulk of health care in the area... Controlling for age, gender, distance from a road, and per capita monthly expenditures, lung capacity and body mass index are lower where the facilities are worse.” Here was the surprise, however: “(V)illagers seem pretty content with what they are getting. 81 percent report that their last visit to a private facility made them feel better, and 75 percent report that their last visit to a public facility made them feel better. Self reported health and well-being measures... appear to be uncorrelated with the quality of the public facilities. The quality of the health services may impact health but does not seem to impact people’s perception of their own health or the health care they are getting, perhaps because they have come to expect very little. Improving the quality of health care in an environment where the clients themselves are not particularly interested in complaining about (the care) they are getting, will not be easy.”<sup>7</sup>

Sustainability, a key development goal, was shown in another study to have its limits. Local attitudes and perceptions were undermining a program aimed at getting de-worming drugs into the hands of villagers in Kenya. The randomized

study revealed that despite efforts to educate parents and schoolchildren on worm prevention, which requires twice-yearly medication for life, the populace were not persuaded to take the necessary drugs if they had to buy them. The study concludes that “the pursuit of sustainability may be an illusion, and that in the short-run, at least, external subsidies will remain necessary.”<sup>8</sup>

Working through community based or grass roots organizations often appears to be a more successful approach than attempts to impose change from the outside. “Foreign donors are increasingly funding local community organizations for the poor and disadvantaged in developing countries (Smillie and Helmich, 1999),” reports an April 2004 working paper documenting

another randomized study. “For example, from 1996 to 2003, World Bank funding for community-driven development increased from \$700 million to \$2 billion.” This quantitative analysis attempted to test the intuitively appealing proposition that “... organizations of the disadvantaged create positive externalities, and in particular strengthen the position of these groups in society. A natural inference is that these organizations should be subsidized.”

Researchers evaluating a program to strengthen rural women’s groups in western Kenya, though, discovered what they dubbed the “Rockefeller Effect:” “(T)he program did not improve group strength or functioning as measured by participation rates, assistance to members, and assistance to other community projects. The funding did, however, change the very characteristics of the groups that made them attractive to funders in the first place. Younger, more educated women and women employed in the formal sector joined the groups, and men and better-

educated and wealthier women moved into key leadership positions.”<sup>9</sup> At a minimum, then, donors who wish to support community based groups should, based on this research, plan for the changes that increased outside funding can introduce.

Additional studies of this kind may prove valuable in discovering more effective approaches to improving the quality of life of disadvantaged populations. Paradoxically, while none can “deny that the long-term results of development projects have been heartbreakingly disappointing in their failure to close the yawning gap between the rich and the poor”, encouragement can nonetheless

*Encouragement can be found  
in the sense of common humanity  
underlying development initiatives.*

be found in the “sense of common humanity in (development) objectives that spoke perhaps most eloquently in the response (humanitarian

initiatives) evoked from an army of idealistic youth of many lands.”<sup>10</sup>

Despite pouring a wealth of resources into programs of all kinds, and despite the important learning that has occurred, development institutions and practitioners have yet to evolve a systemic understanding of the problems to be solved. In the absence of such an understanding, interventions serve as piecemeal improvisations at best and local advances seem insignificant in the face of such enormous problems. “Something must be done; anything must be done, whether it works or not,” said one prominent aid fundraiser in a statement “born of frustration and the instinctive knowledge that we cannot simply stand by and watch this horror and expect to be unchanged by our inaction.”<sup>11</sup> But people deserve better. In a world where terror and extremism feed on mankind’s despair, the stakes have never been higher, the need to “get it right” never greater.

## Toward a Larger Perspective

What must be recognized is that the foundations on which society has long been based are shifting; society is today in a state mathematicians call “far from equilibrium,” where old laws no longer apply and new forms of organization and social adaptation re-arrange themselves with startling speed. Gaining a better perspective on development requires an understanding of the shift under way; awareness of the underlying forces at work makes possible the creation of new models that are more likely to address both the root causes of poverty, disease and injustice, and their symptoms, so tragically evident in the daily lives of millions of people.

Seventy years ago, the Bahá’í writings described this new social reality that, as it emerges, upsets the world’s equilibrium: “Unification of the whole of mankind is the hallmark of the stage which human society is now approaching. Unity of family, of tribe, of city-state, and nation have been successively attempted and fully established. World unity is the goal towards which a harassed humanity is striving. Nation-building has come to an end. The anarchy inherent in state sovereignty is moving towards a climax.”

Just as society can see “the marvelous progress achieved in the realm of physical science, by the world-wide expansion of commerce and industry,” which has “contracted and transformed the world into a single highly complex organism,” it also sees the many threats to its well-being: the persistence of age-old animosities between nations and the threat of terrorism; an extraordinary rise in organized crime and violence; swelling numbers of the displaced; a widening economic divide between the rich and the poor; the indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources; and a relentless pursuit of material goods and benefits that crowd out human values such as happiness, fidelity, love.<sup>12</sup>

### Development and the Tipping Point

Most Bahá’í projects are still small in scale, but their potential, in a world far from equilibrium, should not be underestimated.

“(N)online events can have effects disproportionate to their causes... the dynamic interactions among individual elements of the system generate global events that require a holistic description, which cannot be reduced to an account of the individual elements. ... (A)t the tipping point, the effect of individual events is unpredictable... it is never possible to be sure which particular grain of sand will tip the balance. (*Moment of Complexity*, 149)

“As networks become more heterogeneous and interconnected, they begin to act as a whole in surprising ways. What distinguishes the current moment of complexity is the emergence of a network culture that is truly global... ‘Like it or not, some form of global civilization will emerge. We are at that particular time in history when population, technology, economics, and knowledge spin us together.’” (ibid., 194)



Bahá'ís see the often painful “simultaneous processes of rise and of fall” as conducive to the next and final stage in mankind’s social evolution. Integration and disintegration, order and chaos, “with their continuous and reciprocal reactions on each other, are but aspects of a greater Plan, one and indivisible, whose Source is God, whose author is Bahá’u’lláh,<sup>13</sup> the theater of whose operations is the entire planet, and whose ultimate objectives are the unity of the human race and the peace of all mankind.”



Even if one rejects the premise of divine involvement in today’s turbulent scene, it cannot be denied that a growing sense of world solidarity is evident in the grass roots response of people, who, galvanized by a vision of a new global order, have created “countless movements and organizations of social change at local, regional, and international levels.” The “urgent advocacy of organizations supported by growing numbers in every part of the globe” can be seen in the areas of “human rights, the advance of women, the social requirements of sustainable economic development, the overcoming of prejudices, the moral education of children, literacy, primary health care, and a host of other vital concerns.”<sup>14</sup>

To Bahá'ís, these advances represent a spiritual response to the challenges of the age in which we live. Indeed, history has shown that religion has been perhaps the most potent force for

change, whether for good or ill. Conversely, the lack of religion, according to the Bahá'í writings, is partly responsible for the world’s current troubles: “[When] the light of religion is quenched in men’s hearts... a deplorable decline in the fortunes of humanity immediately sets in, bringing in its wake all the evils which a wayward soul is capable of revealing.... Human character is debased, confidence is shaken, the nerves of discipline are relaxed, the voice of human conscience is stilled, the sense of decency and shame is obscured, conceptions of duty, of solidarity, of reciprocity and loyalty are distorted, and the very feeling of peacefulness, of joy and of hope is gradually extinguished.”

Linking religion and development may seem to raise the specter of ideological or doctrinal conflict. And although there is an element of truth in the argument that spiritual and moral issues, because of their potential for discord, should remain outside the framework of development, setting such issues aside has had the effect of delivering “the shaping of humanity’s future into the hands of a new orthodoxy, one which argues that truth is amoral and facts are independent of values.” This orthodoxy has its own set of assumptions, which are “essentially materialistic. That is to say, the purpose of development is defined in terms of the successful cultivation in all societies of those means for the achievement of material prosperity that have, through trial and error, already come to characterize certain regions of the world. Modifications in development discourse do indeed occur, accommodating differences of culture and political system and responding to the alarming dangers posed by environmental degradation. Yet the underlying materialistic assumptions remain essentially unchallenged.”<sup>15</sup>

The alternative to equating materialism with prosperity is to give due regard to religious

## Rural Development in Zambia

"We never asked them if they wanted our kind of program," the local worker for a Zambian non-governmental organization (NGO) said. "When you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail. We brought our hammer to the villages, but we've spent a huge amount of time trying to get them to use it and they don't."

Trust turns out to be the missing bedrock value. The program should work: It is logical; everyone has seen family incomes increase; the incentives all point in the right direction; and the NGO has an expert, dedicated staff.

But the dominant families in the area also make up the cooperative boards and run the co-ops for their own benefit. The farmers know this, so they don't buy co-op shares or pay dues, and many of them never come to meetings. This is not laziness or ignorance; it is rational economic behavior on the farmers' part.

As a result, the NGO is now devoting more attention to building trust as a complement to its skills training.

teachings, which have taught people "to make great sacrifices for the common good, to practice forgiveness, generosity, and trust, to use wealth and other resources in ways that serve the advancement of civilization. Institutional systems have been devised to translate these moral advances into the norms of social life on a vast scale."<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps it is not too great a leap to see the setbacks to many development initiatives as resulting from a lack of trust, forgiveness and generosity, and to see an antidote in cultivating such moral qualities as the capacity and willingness to sacrifice for the common good. Given the limited benefits development has yielded, it is "no longer possible to maintain the belief that the approach to social and economic development to which the materialistic conception of life has given rise is capable of meeting humanity's needs. Optimistic forecasts about the changes it would generate have vanished into the ever-widening abyss that separates the living standards of a

small and relatively diminishing minority of the world's inhabitants from the poverty experienced by the vast majority of the globe's population."<sup>17</sup>

It is highly encouraging to note that the World Bank, recognizing that religion and religious organizations have a role to play in development, has created the Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics, whose stated purpose is "exploring a more 'comprehensive,' 'holistic,' and 'integrated' vision of development." Other individuals and organizations also are striving to implement "integrated models" that "incorporate the multiple dimensions (biological, psychosocial and spiritual) of human nature."<sup>18</sup>

Bahá'ís believe that development, at its deepest level, is about applying the principle of the oneness of mankind to improve people's physical well-being, access to education and the means of generating wealth, while at the same time upholding their dignity as cherished members of one human family.

Historically, this has not been the case. The masses of humanity have been “seen not as protagonists but essentially as objects of the... much vaunted civilizing process. Despite benefits conferred on a minority among them, the colonial peoples existed chiefly to be acted upon—to be used, trained, exploited, Christianized, civilized, mobilized—as the shifting agendas of Western powers dictated.”<sup>19</sup>

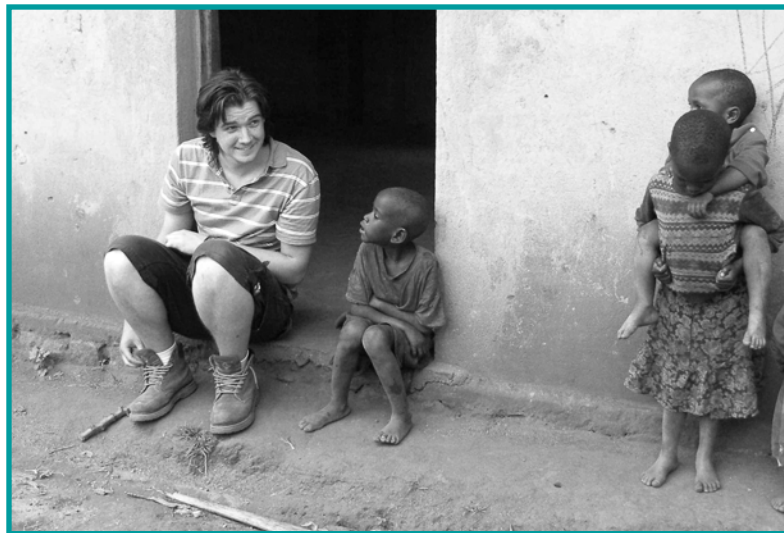
This dynamic still exists. For example, in a 2004 National Public Radio report, residents of northern Nigeria said they refused to be victims of an agenda that favored the “disease of the moment in New York.” In this case, that disease was polio, which the World Health Organization wanted to eradicate in Nigeria through inoculations. The issue, the Nigerians said, was that malaria and measles, not polio, were killing their children. As one experienced development practitioner notes, the problem with eradicating disease is that it “requires getting every last case and of course a village in Nigeria does not see this as a priority if nobody has the disease. The problem is failing to believe that people in a village could understand this if they were seen as partners, not just as subjects to be vaccinated.”

Similarly, Cameroonian journalist Jean-Claude Shanda Tonme wrote that “it was not for us, for Africa,” that the musicians at a 2005 Live 8 “End Poverty in Africa” fund raising concert were singing. “It was to amuse the crowds and to clear their own consciences,” Tonme said. “They still believe us to be like children that they must save, as if we don’t realize ourselves what the source of our problems is.”<sup>20</sup>

But “Bahá’u’lláh has come to free humanity from this long bondage, and the closing decades of the twentieth century were devoted by the community of His followers to creative experimentation with the means by which His objective can be realized.”<sup>21</sup> Fidelity to the principle of oneness

implies that the masses of mankind are ready and worthy of assuming their proper role as protagonists in their own development, rather than spectators looking on from a distance.

This larger perspective is making some headway. One example can be found in recent news: The Norwegian Nobel Committee, in awarding the 2006 Peace Prize to Muhammad Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank, declared, “Every single individual on earth has both the potential and the right to live a decent life...



even the poorest of the poor can work to bring about their own development.... Development from below also serves to advance democracy and human rights.”<sup>22</sup>

If it can be accepted that the spirit of the age is moving mankind, consciously or not, toward the oneness of humanity and that this dynamic involves mobilizing the spiritual strength of each person, then it follows that approaches which ignore or resist this tectonic societal shift must, sooner or later, fail. On the other hand, approaches aligned with the social and spiritual reality of our time must eventually prosper and produce lasting results. The Bahá’í experience in development illustrates an attempt to achieve such an alignment.

## Toward Alignment

The two previous publications in this series<sup>23</sup> illustrate that American Bahá'í youth and adults are actively engaged in development and are animated to improve the life of society by such basic precepts of their Faith as the principle that work and service are forms of worship. Their commitment to this process is thus an "expression of faith in action;" their approach consists of five main elements:

- **Consultation:** A process of collective decision-making and action through which individuals and communities strive to become the principal actors in promoting their physical, spiritual and social well-being; improvement in the ability of participants to consult is therefore a primary measure of success in any Bahá'í project.

- **Participatory Learning:** Consultation is used to promote participatory learning within the framework of many Bahá'í projects. Positive change in society directly springs from the generation, application and diffusion of knowledge, which has both material and spiritual dimensions, and which can flow from both rational inquiry and spiritual insight.

- **Organic Growth:** Successful social initiatives often begin with simple actions at the community level and grow in complexity as the community learns to identify its needs and take on more complex issues, with residents defining, pacing and assessing the projects that affect their lives. Outside entities also may play a catalytic role in helping communities realize their aspirations.

- **Moral Development:** In a community that operates in a peaceful, prosperous and fair way, its members adhere to ideals of human honor, duty and integrity; create an environment where these ideals are consistently demon-

strated; and build institutions that engender trust, and uplift and encourage all whom they serve. To attain these goals, specific moral capabilities must be developed so that individuals and institutions can make appropriate moral choices.

- **Unity, Equality and Justice:** Fostering unity of purpose within and outside the Bahá'í community is an essential characteristic of all Bahá'í development activity. It is a unity that embraces diversity and refuses to categorize people by race, creed, class, gender or color. Unity, however, requires conditions of equality and justice, when every member of the community can trust that they are protected by standards and assured of benefits that apply to all. As Bahá'u'lláh explains, *"The purpose of justice is the appearance of unity among men."*

The current report includes information gathered from recent interviews of participants in projects that were studied in the two previous rounds. Participants were asked why they feel their work has value; which principles they found applied most directly to their work; what practical lessons they learned about sustainability; and what they might have done differently in light of their experience. The implicit goal of the interviews was to determine how these projects integrate spiritual awareness with practical action and how they are aligned with the forces moving mankind toward the realization of its oneness.





### Relationships and Commitment

Promoting oneness shapes the way field workers think about and develop relationships: Are local residents really encouraged and supported in becoming full partners, for example? When asked about the value of their work, nearly all this year's interviewees echoed the words of one young person involved with Orien Aid, which sends youth to Rwanda to work in villages on local projects: "It's the relationships, no question. We have made a commitment to the people, and we intend to fulfill it, and they know that. They know we will come, they look forward to it, and each time our relationships grow deeper."

The primary reason for going on the project, said another Orien Aid volunteer, "was not to give a nutrition class. It was to make a connection and to show love to people. This way, I also learned far more than I gave." Speaking about conditions in Rwanda, where Orien Aid has just completed the third year of its five-year commitment, this participant said, "The biggest part of the project for me was the service: It's about showing the people we visited that someone still cares about them. Who spends \$3,000 to go sleep three nights, five nights in a village in Africa, or to walk three hours to get to that village? They don't see many outsiders. I don't recall seeing any, or any aid workers from other organizations, although I did see more of those in the city."

A businesswoman in New Jersey, one of the adult organizers of the Karen Wallace Service Project (KWSP), which has worked for eight years with an AIDS orphanage in Yasothon, Thailand, said, "I think the big difference is the relationships that form between the volunteers and the local

people, the kids. They really connect; it's real." Other organizations work for two or three months, she said, "and then they go, and the kids know they aren't part of those visitors' lives

anymore. We have committed, and even when we're not there, we're focused on these children and the next stage of the project, so they know we're thinking of them all the time and that we will come back, as we've promised. That brings a level of trust and confidence that is very real."



One of the founders of the Children's Theatre Company (CTC), whose home base is in lower Manhattan in New York City, agrees that constant and consistent involvement is key to the success of a program. "I spend several days each week visiting families and relatives of the kids, in their homes, building the community that's needed to support each child, showing them we're there, we're involved," she said. "We have a dialogue with parents about how they want to raise their children and how we can support those goals. We definitely take advantage of the cultural richness that's around us in our communities."

A retired educator who helped found the Women On the Move Network, which works with young girls from low income backgrounds, put it succinctly: "We go to them; we don't make them come to us. I am *not* 'Lady Bountiful.'"

### From Spectator to Protagonist

To achieve unity, individuals must make the shift from being spectators to becoming actors in their own lives. The young people involved with Orien Aid, for example, are proudest of the fact that during their most recent stay they

saw how the confidence of local people had reached a level that enabled them to take the initiative: "In earlier visits, we had offered so many things, and the people kind of felt bad about how little they had to offer," said an Orien Aid volunteer. "This year, our work stressed nutrition and cleanliness, at the request of some of the local organizers. Our classes and other activities mixed children and adults, but the parents took more control. We saw they were ready to do whole classes, so we stepped back and just supported them, and the whole feeling changed. They felt really good about themselves. I think everyone on the team felt this was the best moment; we were all proud to have gotten to that point."

KWSP has, in effect, built its entire project around the shift from spectator to protagonist, using consultation as the means. The young participants, whose opinions are so often discounted in American society, take responsibility for most of the logistical preparations in the U.S., while program-planning starts fresh each year with input from counterparts in Thailand. There is a constant flow of communication among program participants in the United States as they get ready for their trip, and between the U.S. and Thailand over themes, priorities and itineraries. "All year we are consulting about the goals and needs of the people locally," said one participant. "They tell us what issues are relevant to a place they want our team to go, then onsite we make the final decisions with the local people. The whole project is shaped through consultation with the people who live there."



### *Integrating Spirit and Method*

In the projects that have been studied between 2004 and 2006, the emerging trend is greater clarity among participants about the spiritual foundations of their work. They see their motives as more explicitly related to the teachings of their Faith; they have a stronger sense of mission, which stems from those teachings; and their methods of operation are more directly linked to a sense of the spiritual.

When asked why, out of all the activities they might do as Bahá'ís, they have chosen service

through development, the volunteers say, "We have a clear conviction of equality as a spiritual principle;" "We believe that when girls and women receive equal education with their male peers, and reach decision-making arenas, war will cease;" "Unity

in diversity is not only about race, though that is an issue in our area, but it is also economic—it is in the gifts people have to bring, even if they themselves don't see their importance—and it is about religion;" "Our approach is really derived from the (Bahá'í) teachings, so we take seriously the notion of relieving extremes of wealth and poverty." The retired teacher again put it concisely: "You see three tired old girls like me, huffing and puffing around, trying to do this instead of taking it easy. There has to be something more going on here!"

One young person saw the difficulty that arose when his team departed from the high spiritual standards it espoused: "I would make it more spiritually focused, so that the group would progress more, spiritually, as a group. This doesn't have to do with the mission; it has to do

with the way we do the mission. The group was already very unified, but I think if we had spent more structured time praying together, studying together, bringing consultation to all the opportunities we had to really use it, then everything would have been better, deeper. There was one person who was not very happy during this visit, and I think it had to do with expectations and not taking time to deepen our spiritual unity.”

The Children’s Theatre Company uses art to promote moral development, which has resulted in participants’ spiritual growth as well as expansion of the company’s programs and outside support. “We use professional artists to work with the kids, and we combine drama, music and ethical education to produce full-scale plays and musicals. This is very different, and the parents and kids recognize this. Say you are a high school teacher and you have the luxury of a small budget for theater or music. You have very few choices in what to do, so you do ‘Guys and Dolls,’ which is about gamblers and prostitutes. What kind of role models are these for kids?

“The parents see their children developing all these skills, having fun and learning to dramatize the words and lives of important, noble people, so the program speaks to their spiritual development, too. Instead of learning a popular song about sex and stuff, they learn about Gandhi, Martin Luther King and world peace. Who wouldn’t choose that for their child?”

### **Practical Lessons**

Participants in the projects that were revisited in 2006 report having learned important practical lessons in addition to the larger spiritual ones. A member of the Women on the Move Network (WOTMN) said, “We were intrigued by the story of the Tahirih Justice Center that we read in the first ‘In Service’ booklet (2004). We contacted them



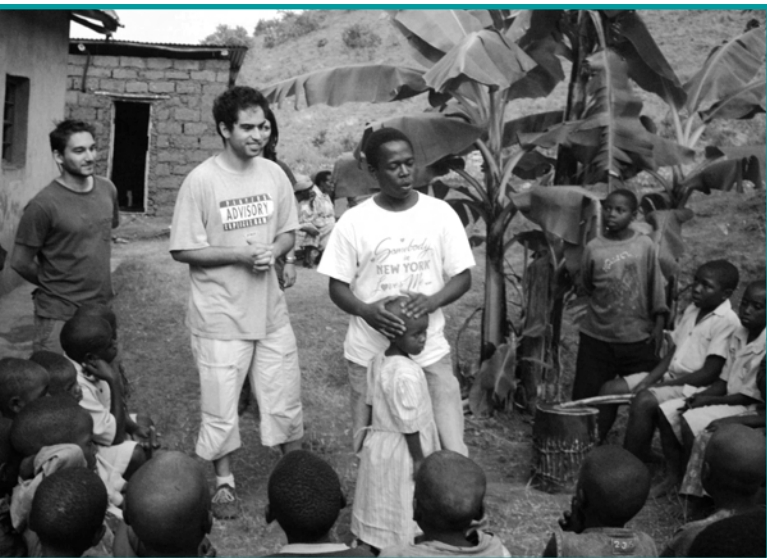
and they helped us very generously to re-think our approach. We realize now we should have applied for our 501(c)(3) non-profit status much earlier.” That sentiment was echoed by a participant in another project: “What would we do differently? Get our 501(c)(3) early.”

The WOTMN participant said her group learned other practical lessons: “We started doing too many things at once, and most of them involved only costs, not income. Now we focus more on our mission statement, and evaluate what we do in relation to the mission, the resources available and the costs involved. Now our semi-annual conference, which used to be an end in itself, supports the girls and the pilot project directly through fundraising, publicity, as a laboratory where the girls practice what they are learning and as a source of connections for our future growth.”

“Focus and devote more time to the projects than we have currently allotted,” said a representative of Women for International Peace and Arbitration (WIPA), which for the last 20 years has

sponsored girls' education in various parts of the world. "We would also devote more time to our chapter network to ensure they are successful, to fan the spark of interest that attracted them and to ensure the timely receipt of their financial reports."

Other projects learned lessons on the importance of training and orientation, particularly where cross-cultural issues come into play. "I'd have a briefing book of some kind," said a coordinator for KWSP, "and probably some kind of contract covering behavior, because I don't want to have to be a parent for the group, which takes something important away from the whole feeling of



the thing. Thai culture is very modest, for example, and we had one instance of very inappropriate dress—normal in the U.S., but not right for Thailand. I would try to avoid that."

Orien Aid, which ran short on time to train for its 2006 season, cited the same need: "You have to train at least four months in advance, so that if there are problems, you have some options," said one participant. "Training in-country is important, and there has to be a balance, but once you have gotten there, it's kind of too late if there's a problem, if expectations are too different from the reality on the ground."

### **Sustainability—More Than Funding**

Members of the projects that were revisited also reflected on the spiritual and practical implications of sustainability in their work. On the practical side, the WIPA representative highlighted a lesson participants learned about fundraising: "It is more appealing if you have a clear vision with a manageable, targeted outcome that actually changes the lives of those you are serving. We were struggling to raise funds until we discovered that we had to describe our mission in ways people could identify with; then we found they give both time and money."

CTC has found that "you have to surround yourself with people you want to hang out with in a meaningful way. And we find we need to go in short spurts of activity—we have two 15-week sessions, with a break in between. We need to create a culture of service so everyone feels a part of this, and everyone feels his or her contribution is valued. We do this in relation to our tuition and fees, for example. In most settings, people who can afford to pay full tuition get special treatment; we don't do that. We have worked hard to make sure that everyone contributes what they have, and that diversity is valued so no one thinks any less of the parent who pays by cleaning up instead of writing a check."

Members of the Bahá'í community have many demands on their time, because there is no clergy to do many of the tasks an active community requires. Project members were asked why they had chosen development over some of the other possibilities. "We looked at letters from the Universal House of Justice (the world-wide governing body of the Bahá'í community), where they talk about certain activities that require expertise and that must continue," said one participant. "We felt WOTMN was one of those. We have something unique to share, and a population of young women who are at



risk, and whom we have to reach. We're concerned about the waste of those lives if they get caught up in all the things that pull them into dysfunctional attitudes and actions."



The CTC coordinator said, "I had to look at what I can do, where I have some expertise and I asked myself, 'What can I do with the little time I have available to impact the largest number of people?' I saw my friends, starving artists, and realized we could nourish our own growth by using our art. This is as much about the artists themselves as it is the children. We're not 'rescuing' anybody."

"This isn't really something that worries me," said a member of Voicemail for the Homeless, a San Francisco area project, "this competition for attention among all the activities I 'should' do. This is my passion. Service through development is just doing what comes naturally to me."

"Making service a part of your life, even if you're not in the field," is a part of sustainability in the KWSP. "Partly that's going back every year, and partly it is the ongoing work that has to happen in order to be able to go back into the field," a project member explained. "The continuity of effort also makes for stronger relationships with the people in Thailand and a better reception when we arrive each time."

Making development and service a part of their lives is a common thread running through the comments of those interviewed. Consider the WOTMN representative who served the Bahá'í community in Costa Rica for 16 years until economic reasons forced her to return to the U.S., where she taught English until retirement, and then helped to form the Network.

One of the founders of the interfaith Jeffco

Partners, which collaborated with Habitat for Humanity to build 10 houses for refugees in the Denver area, lived in Bolivia in the 1970s, returned to a college teaching job and later

became involved in Jeffco. Now that Jeffco has completed its task and moved in a different direction, he and his wife are retiring to Bolivia to participate in other community development projects.

Young people are also making service a central focus of their lives and career choices. One of Orien Aid's 2006 team members expressed his passion for service by saying, "I grew up in Africa and want to return there. The project helped to refine my goal of being a visual journalist, but I realized I needed to go to graduate school to build my skills. I want to bring awareness to the plight of disadvantaged people; I want to take my skills back to Africa and do that."

"Participating in activities of social change should not be restricted to traditional service endeavors," said a graduate school student who devoted several summers to various projects. "One of the greatest tasks of Bahá'ís is to effect change in their everyday interactions; we are charged to be the embodiments of our religious beliefs, advocating for the regeneration of humanity.... I cannot believe that our task is solely to sit back and watch, do our prescribed sequence of training courses, say our prayers and hope for hearts to change...the spirit (of the early Bahá'ís) must be infused in our everyday actions. We have to be of service in our everyday activities, within our own communities, because this is the only way to be true champions of social justice."



## A Life-Time Quest

Mathematicians who study complexity theory might describe these stories in terms of complex adaptive systems. They might point out that when a grain of sand finally pushes the system past its tipping point, setting off an avalanche of events that create wholly new patterns, it is possible only in retrospect to know which grain of sand it was that triggered the advent of a new reality.

Others might describe these projects in terms of organic growth: Each project and its participants, consciously or not, are adapting to the social evolution underway as mankind struggles toward the realization of its own oneness. New alignments and opportunities emerge, and these individuals and the initiatives they have set in motion organize themselves accordingly. A remarkable characteristic of self-organizing systems is that one finds the same patterns emerging at every level of detail or magnification; the parts mirror the whole, down to the molecular level. As global society moves toward oneness, so do all of its component parts.

Program participants who are Bahá'ís know that Bahá'u'lláh has urged them to be *"anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in,"* and to *"center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements."* They also know that he has urged all people to work for the progress of civilization by integrating the spiritual and the material. Each of the participants in these projects has committed to that process, often for a lifetime, and they never stop searching for better ways to serve the common good.

### Photo Credits

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### End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Easterly (2006), p.4
- <sup>2</sup> Universal House of Justice, October 20, 1983 to the Bahá'ís of the World.
- <sup>3</sup> Easterly, pp. 66-7.
- <sup>4</sup> See, for example, *Development as Freedom* (Dr. Amartya Sen, 2001).
- <sup>5</sup> Easterly, op. cit., p. 8.
- <sup>6</sup> Duflo, E; Dupas, P; Kremer, M; Sinei, S. (2006)
- <sup>7</sup> Banerjee, A; Deaton, A.; Duflo, E. (2004)
- <sup>8</sup> Kremer, M; Miguel, E. (2004)
- <sup>9</sup> Gugerty, M.K.; Kremer, M. (2004)
- <sup>10</sup> Bahá'í World Center, (2001), *Century of Light*, p.75
- <sup>11</sup> McCusker, James, referring to Bob Geldof in "G-8 Countries Need To Wake Up" (Everett, WA Herald, July 10, 2005)
- <sup>12</sup> See The Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2006 Message to the Bahá'ís of the World, p. 2 and *passim*.
- <sup>13</sup> The Prophet Founder of the Bahá'í Faith (1817-1892)
- <sup>14</sup> Bahá'í World Center, *Prosperity of Humankind*, 1995, para 11.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., para. 6.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., para. 42.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid. , para. 7.
- <sup>18</sup> Duly, Greg, "Creating Violence-Free Society: The Case for Rwanda," in *The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*, 2000; downloaded from <http://www.jha.ac/greatlakes/b002.htm>
- <sup>19</sup> Bahá'í World Center, (2001), *Century of Light*, p. 4.
- <sup>20</sup> "All Rock, No Action," *New York Times*, July 15, 2005
- <sup>21</sup> Bahá'í World Center, op. cit., p. 110.
- <sup>22</sup> Quoted in *New York Times*, October 12, 2006.
- <sup>23</sup> *In Service to the Common Good: The American Bahá'í Community's Commitment to Social Change* (Evanston, 2004); and *In Service to the Common Good: Bahá'í Youth in their Own Words* (Evanston, 2005).



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