

Community Development Using Spiritually Based Indicators in The South African Baha'i Community

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Abstract

In this paper we focus on the importance of creating measures to assess development progress through the perspective of ethical, moral and spiritual principles. We first begin by outlining a new perspective on development. We then describe the use of development indicators that make use of the concept of *spiritually based indicators* for development. These indicators were first introduced by the worldwide Baha'i community in a collaborative work with the World Bank. We examine five foundational principles of (i) unity in diversity; (ii) equity and justice; (iii) equality of the sexes; (iv) trustworthiness and moral leadership; and (v) independent investigation of truth. We examine how the development goals in a local community can be defined in terms of these foundational principles. These same principles can be used to define new measures to assess progress towards the goals. When these principles are applied to development policy areas new approaches can be formulated. For instance considering the area of education, if we use the third principle from above, programmes and policies can be formulated which will increase the participation of girls in formal education in rural communities. If this same principle is used for measurement we may discover that a local community with gross disparity between the literacy levels of boys and girls, but one which is otherwise materially wealthier is actually "less developed" as compared to a poorer community which is farther along the path of development by providing equal educational opportunities to both sexes. Naturally resources are directed towards rectifying those areas that are actually measured and found inadequate. Therefore measuring the correct parameters is highly significant. The Baha'i community has been making steady progress in establishing a distributed network of Institute courses that provide knowledge, skills and insights in educational settings. We will present examples from our own efforts at educational development in these Institutes for both rural and urban Baha'is throughout South Africa.

1. Introduction

The Baha'i community of South Africa has been concerned with issues of development from its inception in the early years of the 20th century. As the number of Baha'is has steadily grown, local Baha'i communities have come into existence. Several of these communities have established development projects for educational, social, and to a lesser extent, economic advancement. Baha'i teachings strongly discourage idleness, and raise work - performed in the spirit of service - to the level of worship. These teachings also forbid monasticism, asceticism, and mendicancy. Baha'is are encouraged to adopt a profession, and to excel in their chosen field through merit and hard work. Ideas of enlightenment and spiritual progress are closely linked to service to fellow human beings. Rather than renouncing the world or adopting reclusion, the "salvation" of a Baha'i is said to be in engaging in social life with rectitude of conduct. Age-old virtues of honesty, truthfulness, and moral integrity, which are of course taught by all the major religions of the world, are then taken to be attributes of our actions in the conduct of daily business. The mission of one's life is said to be to help carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.

Prayer and meditation are seen not as getting away from the world, but as cleansing instruments to provide purity of motive and ensure ethical behavior during our business transactions with others. Taken together these teachings point to a “worldly”, or social, interpretation of religion, one in which growth and social harmony is more important than notions of individual salvation.

To be sure, the Baha’i view of development emphasizes the spiritual, and ethical as the central core, and material development as the outcome of actions that follow properly identified spiritual principles. The three concepts of oneness of God, oneness of religions, and oneness of mankind are particularly relevant here. They propose that all the major religions worship the same God, even though by differing names. Different religions are viewed as several stages in the same overall process of revelation of truth from the same source. The Great Teachers of mankind, founders of major religions, are seen as united in their various missions. Different religions are therefore not seen as merely alternative paths that one may choose from, but rather as progressive and complementary parts of a comprehensive whole. This concept is all-embracing and includes traditional African or other local and regional religions. In this sense it is believed that while many superstitions may have crept into oral belief systems, the underlying impulse comes from the same invisible source.

There is an underlying oneness in all of humanity, and the goal of social development is the unification of all mankind. Biological sciences recognize only one human species, and the notion of race is mostly a social construct. The diversity among the various peoples should be a cause of celebration rather than mistrust. This vision is unifying and its acceptance lays the foundation for cooperative and collective development.

Local Baha’i communities historically first emphasized the development of this vision of unity. Those communities that achieved a fairly stable membership with some regular devotional gatherings then started to implement some form of educational programme, initially focused on spiritual education, but increasingly adopting other supplemental materials. A few communities went well beyond this initial stage and have formal and systematic courses with well defined curricula and some form of an administrative structure. While Baha’is are small in number they are very wide spread. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, the Baha’i Faith worldwide is the second most widespread religion. This diversity can also be seen in Southern Africa where there are several hundred local Baha’i communities in villages and towns.

Partly because of the high importance attached to development issues, the Baha’i International Community has issued several position statements released at various international development forums.

In the following sections we will describe the dynamics of interaction between spiritual values and development, and explore policies that can be derived from the application of these values to developmental goals. We will conclude by examining some examples from the Training Institute in South Africa.

2. Spiritual values and development

To begin with we hope to gain a fresh perspective on development by considering new criteria for

defining development. In a paper to a joint conference sponsored by the World Bank, the Baha'i community pointed out the value and use of development indicators, and introduced spiritually based indicators for development. Here we give a summary of these ideas.

We consider civilization as a spiritual process, and development as an organic process leading to the efflorescence of civilization. Human nature is fundamentally spiritual and there are universal principles and common values that are shared by all people.

Some of these spiritual principles include a common core of ethical teachings in religions. The golden rule of treating others as we wish to be treated is an example. A new principle articulated by Baha'i teachings is the harmony of science and religion.

The spiritual is expressed and carried out in the material. In this exercise we need to balance conflicting requirements such as the needs of the individual and the society. Our vision is that of an emerging world community. The fundamental spiritual principle is the oneness of humanity. To achieve this goal calls for restructuring social systems and to apply this principle in practical ways.

For example consider the following five foundational principles:

1. Unity in Diversity
2. Equity and Justice
3. Equality of the Sexes
4. Trustworthiness and Moral Leadership
5. Independent Investigation of Truth

Unity in diversity does not imply uniformity. There is beauty in diversity, and planners must be mindful of preservation of cultural, ethnic, and language diversity. Such unity in diversity is similar to the gene pool and implies harmony, but not centralization.

Equity and justice implies fairness in all one's dealings, and is the cornerstone of building trust. Trustworthiness and moral leadership are essential for creating buy-in for development participants.

In almost all parts of our old-world communities equality of sexes is an unrecognized truth. As a result of long held beliefs by both men and women one half of our population is deprived of equal opportunities. While in the old economic models physical strength was the dominant factor, in this age of information and service industries the women's natural strength in intuition should serve them well. The development of girls then is not seen as an element of class struggle, but as unfulfilled capacity. Many Baha'i communities have specific projects aimed at women's development. For instance the first Baha'i high school in Zambia was an all girl school, deliberately established to bring some gender balance to educational opportunities.

The principle of independent investigation of truth implies overcoming a long tradition of imitation from

forefathers. It should be recognized that truth / reality is one, with multiple facets. Scientific insight and moral commitment are not only in agreement, but in fact true science and true religion are in harmony.

Another tendency that needs to be overcome is a long tradition of hierarchical decision making. In traditional African societies both elements of autocratic rule as well as collective decision making exist. The challenge is to support and nourish these underlying democratic tendencies and gradually eradicate the power based tendencies. The fact that many religions were also run in hierarchical fashion with a class of people acting as clergy has actually been harmful to a sense of empowerment at the grass roots. The Baha'i communities do not have any clergy and are organized by elected Assemblies. These elected bodies operate in consultative manner to arrive at collective decision making. Since there is no negotiation, the group learns to operate using tools of consultation to arrive at decisions for the good of the whole community.

Rural or urban Baha'i communities in South Africa, as elsewhere in Africa and the world, have been participating in local elections, for the membership of these Assemblies, that are devoid of all campaigning and electioneering for decades prior to the end of Apartheid. Members of both races would participate as equals. These principles together with service-oriented leadership and a commitment to the good of the whole have profound stabilizing effects. They stand in sharp contrast to the prevalent climate that encourages petty power struggles, constant push for leadership, and settles affairs by negotiations that are all too often unsatisfying to all parties involved.

The above principles can be applied to development priority policy areas such as (i) economic development, (ii) education, (iii) environmental stewardship, (iv) meeting basic needs in food, nutrition, health and shelter, and (v) governance and participation.

For instance the application of the principle of unity in diversity to educational policy would result in the goal of fostering in students global consciousness. The associated programme would be the appreciation for the richness and importance of the world's diverse cultural, religious and social systems; nurturing a feeling of belonging to and responsibility toward the world community, and study of world heritage sites. Progress towards this goal can be assessed by content analysis, the time allocated to this subject in the curricula, and finally by using attitude surveys.

As another example the application of the principle of independent investigation of truth to governance and participation would result in the goal of effective use of broad-based consultation in formulation of development policy. The associated programme would include mechanisms for participation. Progress towards this goal can be assessed by measuring participation rates, surveys for meaningfulness of the participation, and its effect on minority participants.

3. Measuring the right indicators

Development indicators are used to measure and monitor both the absolute values and trends over time. These indicators however don't just monitor progress, they make it happen. Increasingly development planning must move away from top-down process and consider non-economic factors, non-technical issue, and a growing list of cultural indicators. The goal of development has to focus on both individual

and social well-being. Development deals with the social capital and is increasingly people-centered.

To illustrate this at the outset let us choose the quality of being fair minded. If we define a well-developed community as the one that has successfully and effectively cultivated fair-mindedness, we can then measure and rank various communities on this metric. It is easily imaginable that this list will not necessarily correspond to the same rank order as if we had chosen for instance income per capita. To the extent that we define and measure development indicators, we will influence what gets priority in funding or other support. In essence the goals of development are inherently spelled in its measurement tools.

4. The community experience

The experience of the Baha'i communities in Southern Africa is a start in long term empowerment at the grass roots. Mindful of the fact that the spiritual appreciations must be the core and material advancement should come later, any development project that may involve external funding are only contemplated in local areas with well established Baha'i communities. In this way development is never seen as an instrument of attracting people to the spiritual ideas. Additionally since all development must have local grass root support in all phases including the initial determination of need and the planning phase, the first priority is development of capacity at the local level. The most natural first stage is then educational projects. Any economic development must be undertaken after the local participants have been raised to a level of operation that they can support group decision making and effective participatory management.

Individual communities are naturally at different stages of this path to growth. While some communities have formal schools at the secondary, primary or pre-primary levels, others may only have informal tutorial schools, and others are experimenting with various initiatives to test the sustainability of each project. In all cases however the guiding principles are uniform. In order to increase the capacity to support various projects all the countries in Southern Africa started a series of formal and systematic programmes known as Training Institutes. The primary goal of these Institutes is to help individuals in towns and villages to study on a sustained basis. The highly participative curricula are designed to increase the knowledge, skills and insights of the individuals. In addition to moral education, the course content addresses such common social ills as aids prevention, and care for its victims. The art of effective and dispassionate consultation is practiced in these Institutes. The facilitators are trained often in some physical facilities or central buildings in major provincial centers. The efforts by both the participants, the tutors and the administrators are seen as part time voluntary service, and therefore no salaries are involved. Expenses associated with literature are supported through internal Baha'i funds which are contributed anonymously by the rank and file of the adherents. While this mode of operation is obviously considerably slower than the alternative of infusing large external funds, it is abundantly clear that it makes for sustainable long term support with grass roots leading involvement in the projects.

One clear result that has been achieved to date is the very rapid increase in confidence, self-reliance, self-esteem, and courage of the participants particularly the youthful ones. An analysis of the factors contributing to this result indicates that the primary element is the transforming power of the ethical teachings, when it is presented in such a participative way that the individuals truly believe that they are in direct contact with the source of the divine inspiration. In other words the effect of removing the barriers imposed by religious teachers has a salutary effect. Individual participants are empowered to assess their current circumstances, to identify the spiritual principle involved in any situation, and to act

with integrity and confidence.

From this preliminary result we take hope that future efforts at development can be built on solid foundations to support an ever evolving path to growth in all its dimensions.

5. Conclusions

There is evidence that the development community is slowly recognizing the need to address all aspects of human development. While a few short years ago development was exclusively defined as economic and technological, it is clear that the spiritual aspects of development need equal attention. Various documents from the UN agencies or international conferences have begun referring to this dimension. As part of agenda 21 governments committed to “social, economic and spiritual development”, and the Habitat Agenda refers to habitat that is “built on ethical and spiritual vision”. The Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development states that governments recognize that “individuals should be allowed to develop to their full potential, including healthy physical, mental and spiritual development,”

The old method of development planning prescribed that we should adopt a policy based on interests of the dominant sector and then to develop measurement indicators to assess the progress of the development effort. The goal of development was implicitly assumed to be economic or technological and the measurement tools would measure only this dimension.

In this proposed new methodology we start with a vision, identify the underlying spiritual principles, adopt a goal explicitly based on the desired outcome based on these principles, develop policies and programmes, that are not only participative, but that are initiated and driven at all its stages at the grass roots. The measurement indicators should be either created or chosen to express progress along the clear path towards the stated goals. The experience of the Baha’i communities in South Africa include a cycle of consultation, action and reflection for all projects. While the goals and principles are universal, the practical means and specific tasks are local. Individuals who have previously participated in the Institute courses and have gained experience in articulating their ideas, and in consultative and collective decision making are in unique positions to initiate, plan and support local development initiatives, and any outside help is in the form of catalysts for sustained development.

6. References

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