

BAHÁ'Í INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY'S SEVEN YEAR PLAN OF ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE

Founded more than a century and a half ago, the Bahá'í Faith is a world religion whose five million members live in over 100,000 localities and come from nearly every nation, ethnic group, culture, profession, and social or economic background. Bahá'ís believe that the crucial need facing humanity is to find a unifying vision of the nature and purpose of human life. An understanding of humanity's relationship to the natural environment is an integral part of this vision.

The Bahá'í Writings state: *“We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions.”*¹

The Bahá'í International Community has been addressing environmental issues and, more specifically, climate change for several years. It has worked for more than two decades to contribute to discourses on issues related to the environment. This plan describes the approach the Bahá'í community proposes to educate our community about climate change, to raise consciousness about environmental issues and to build the capacity of our members to contribute to the resolution of this global challenge.

The plan reflects certain general principles that are important for the Bahá'í community. Bahá'ís believe that progress in the development field depends on and is driven by stirrings at the grass roots of society rather than from an imposition of externally developed plans and programmes. This plan, then seeks to increase local communities' and individuals' awareness of the needs and possibilities and of their capacity to respond. Different communities will likely devise different approaches and solutions in response to similar needs. It is for each community to determine its goals and priorities in keeping with its capacity and resources. Given the diversity of communities around the world, the plan encourages innovation and a variety of approaches to the environment appropriate to the rhythm of life in the community.

The commitment to preserve the autonomy and diversity of Bahá'í communities does not take away from the unity of the worldwide Bahá'í community. In fact, Bahá'ís all over the world are engaged in a coherent framework of action that promotes the spiritual development of the individual and channels the collective energies of its members towards service to humanity. Thousands upon thousands of Bahá'ís, embracing the diversity of the entire human family, are engaged in certain core activities. These activities promote the systematic study of the Bahá'í Writings in small groups in order to build capacity for service. They respond to the inmost longing of every heart to commune with its Maker by carrying out acts of collective worship in diverse settings, uniting with others in prayer, awakening spiritual susceptibilities, and shaping a pattern of life distinguished for its devotional character. They provide for the needs of the children of the world and offer them lessons that develop their spiritual faculties and lay the foundations of a noble and upright character. They also assist junior youth to navigate through a crucial stage of their lives and to become empowered to direct their energies toward the advancement of civilization. As Bahá'ís and their friends gain experience with these initiatives, an increasing number are able to express their faith through a rising tide of endeavours that address the needs of humanity in both their spiritual and material dimensions.

¹ Shoghi Effendi, Compilations, The Compilation of Compilations vol. I, p. 84.

To carry out such a massive enterprise Regional Institutes have been created throughout the world over several decades. This capacity building process at the grass roots level with individuals assists them to serve as tutors of study circles, teachers of children's classes and facilitators of junior youth empowerment programs. The approach to curriculum development followed by the Institute is not the traditional one of design, field-testing and evaluation, carried out in a linear fashion. The first step in writing any set of materials is taken, rather, when an experience is created at the grassroots in performing some act of service in response to the exigencies of the development of a community. Materials emerge out of this experience and become an expression of it. They are, on the one hand, a record of the learning that occurs in applying the Bahá'í Writings in a particular area of service and, on the other, an instrument for the systematization of that learning. These materials are used and then further refined and revised based on experience.

As suggested by the foregoing, the Institute's courses are not arranged according to a series of subject matters, with the specific aim of increasing individual knowledge. The content and order are based, rather, on a series of acts of service, the practice of which creates capacity in the individual to meet the exigencies of dynamic, developing communities. The enhancement of such capacity is viewed in terms of "walking a path of service". On such a path individuals are assisted first in accomplishing relatively simple tasks and then in performing more complex and demanding acts of service.

The most effective method to raise the consciousness of the worldwide Bahá'í community on the subject of climate change and to engage them in acts of service related to environmental sustainability is for the Institute to develop a course to explore the relationship of humans to the environment as articulated in the Bahá'í Sacred Writings. This course would not simply be aimed at increasing knowledge on the subject but, as mentioned above, would build the capacity of participants to engage in acts of service related to environmental sustainability. Similarly, the programs for children and junior youth would include material on climate change and the contribution that the younger generation can make to address the climate crisis.

There are already examples of devotional gatherings in local communities that have chosen as their theme 'care of the earth' or 'the environment'. Prayers, sacred writings and meditations during the devotional have elaborated this theme. Several children's classes offer acts of service to their communities. In some cases this action has been planting a community garden or cleaning up a stream or river. As this program is developed and used in communities throughout the world, such initiatives will be based on a better understanding of climate issues and the relevant Bahá'í perspective. Study, action and reflection on such action will result in a coherent framework for action on the subject of climate change.

Thousands of people worldwide have participated in these core activities. In 2006, the most recent year for which comprehensive statistics are available, an estimated 46,000 people participated in study circles worldwide, 112,000 attended devotional meetings, and some 93,000 were involved in children's classes.² The engagement of the Baha'i community will also benefit from resources which will be generated as the process gains momentum. There already exists a wealth of information on the International Environment Forum's website³ which individuals and communities' can draw upon and surely further resources will be developed and become available.

Providing a program on themes related to climate change and the environment for the general community as well as education for children and junior youth will be an important step in

² Five Year Plan 2001-2006, pp 126-127.

³ <http://iefworld.org>

integrating the spiritual and the practical in a community already committed to the betterment of the planet. Such a description may sound simple but the courses of the Institute and the acts of service associated with it represent a significant transformative process for Bahá'í communities throughout the world. We are confident that the Bahá'í community's commitment to such a course of action in the coming seven years will be a valuable contribution to the work of the world's major religions on climate change.