

## Education and Training for the Betterment of Society

Bahá'í International Community's contribution to the  
55<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women

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That the education and training of women and girls is critical to the well-being and advancement of communities and nations has been definitively established. The benefits of such education have traditionally been framed in terms of economic growth, but material well-being is but one of many conditions that impinge on women's and girls' participation in the shaping of society. Achieving any meaningful and sustainable increase in this participation will require a more fundamental dialogue about the nature of development, 'modernity,' and the organization of knowledge-generating activity.

The human being is not only an economic and social creature but also a spiritual one with free will and a conscience that enables the search for meaning and for truth. Without the freedom to pursue this fundamentally human quest, neither dignity, nor justice, nor development—in its full sense—is possible. The Bahá'í International Community understands development to be a global enterprise of enabling all individuals to develop inherent capacities and spiritual qualities,<sup>1</sup> and to contribute to the advancement of their community. Development is an enterprise that demands the efforts of both men and women working together to construct a social order characterized by justice, equity, reciprocity and collective prosperity. The systems of education, science, and technology, then, must be arranged in a way that reflects both the material and spiritual dimensions of the human being—permitting each person to play her or his rightful role in the betterment of society.

The division of the world into producers and users of knowledge is a deficient characteristic of the current world order—one with deep implications for the quality and legitimacy of education, science, and technology as well as governance and policy-making. If most of humanity continues to be regarded as users of technology created elsewhere, it is unlikely that sustainable and meaningful development will take root.<sup>2</sup> If access to knowledge is the right of every human being, participation in its generation, application and diffusion is a

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<sup>1</sup> Among others, these include the capacity to draw out diverse views and insights, the capacity to consider new perspectives with an open mind, the capacity to see diversity as a source of strength, the capacity to diagnose the situation of a local community and work towards a desired state, the capacity to elevate discourse to the level of moral or spiritual principle, and the capacity for self-expression. Spiritual qualities include trustworthiness, justice, honesty, integrity, selflessness and humility.

<sup>2</sup> Much like the organization of scientific activity in any given culture, technological activity is strongly influenced by cultural, social, economic and political forces. For example, despite the fact that most agricultural work in developing countries is carried out by low-income women, the primary users and shapers of agricultural technologies in these countries have been men. A key challenge then is how to create the conditions and strengthen women's capacities to identify technological needs, and to create and adapt technologies in light of social needs and resource constraints. How can women move from being passive users of technologies developed elsewhere to active agents in shaping technologies that address the needs of their families and communities? How can the processes of technological development be shaped to better reflect the basic needs of the world's people, particularly those marginalized by current market forces? Such questions challenge us to consider 'modern technology' in a different light—as technology that addresses locally defined needs and takes into account the material, social and spiritual prosperity of society as a whole.

responsibility that each individual must shoulder and be empowered to shoulder.<sup>3</sup> Reforming the present flow of knowledge—from ‘North’ to ‘South’; from urban to rural; from men to women—will free development from narrowly conceived conceptions of ‘modernization.’

The experience of the worldwide Bahá’í community in the field of education and community building has shown that several concepts are particularly salient to guiding educational processes, including curriculum development, towards their ultimate goal, namely the transformation of individuals and their communities. These concepts include:

- **Spiritual and moral education.** In the realm of education, spiritual and moral development has often been divorced from intellectual and vocational training. This division has often sprung from high-minded intentions of tolerance and respect. Yet it must be acknowledged that all societies are characterized by political, economic, and cultural interests that promote corrosive patterns of thought and behavior among young people. Imparting the ability to reflect on and apply spiritual, moral, and ethical principles will therefore be indispensable to the task of building a prospering world civilization.
- **Rethinking students, rethinking teachers.** Every educational program rests on fundamental assumptions about human nature. Achieving sustainable development will therefore hinge on rethinking underlying conceptions of both teachers and students. A child—far from an empty vessel waiting to be filled—must be seen as “a mine rich in gems of inestimable value,” their treasures being revealed and developed for the benefit of mankind only through the agency of education. Similarly teachers—their laudable profession far too long overlooked and underappreciated—must likewise acknowledge that if they wish to effect a transformation on the level of character as well as intellect, they must, before all else, embody and model the principles they teach.
- **Systematic learning and participation.** The concept of participation also emerges in a new light. Effective participation requires a systematic process of learning within each community, in a way that enables the community to identify its strengths and its needs; to experiment with new ideas and methods, new technologies and processes; and ultimately, become the primary agents of their development. One of the first steps in establishing participatory development is to promote the engagement of an increasing number of individuals in processes of learning—characterized by action, reflection on action, and collective deliberation—in a constant effort to generate and apply knowledge to improve the conditions of community life.

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<sup>3</sup> The question of how scientific and technological activity is to be organized so as to permit people everywhere to participate in such activity—is a central challenge of development. Much of the world is without access to science, girls and women in particular. For the most part, ‘modern’ scientific knowledge is generated in universities and specialized research centers of industrialized countries, increasingly owned by private corporations. While institutions at the frontiers of modern science play an invaluable role, the application of knowledge for the purpose of improving human well-being in an equitable manner, requires the participation of an ever greater diversity of minds. We need to consider: What are the implications of the predominance of male-led research in the sciences? Would women ask different questions? Would they fund different research? Given that 95% of the new science in the world is created in countries comprising only one-fifth of the world’s population, what are the implications of the absence of the large number of countries and culture in the production of scientific research?

- **Individual and social transformation.** The transformation of human society requires both the transformation of the individual and the deliberate creation of new societal structures. Individuals must be educated and empowered, but attention must be given to the cultural, scientific and technological, educational, economic and social conditions that shape them. The continuous interaction between the development of the individual and the establishment of new social structures provides a path of social change and avoids both complacency and violence.
- **Global solidarity.** The challenges associated with removing obstacles to education and training for girls and women will require a global governance system that promotes collective security, the promotion of human rights, environmental sustainability, and an equitable and just economic order. Among its distinguishing features will be adherence to the principle of collective trusteeship and the understanding that the advantage of any of its parts can best be secured through the advantage of the whole.

Enabling an increasing number of girls and women to access education and training, to play an active role in the production and application of science and technology is not solely a matter of technology or economics. Rather, it requires nations and communities to address a far wider range of assumptions about development, human nature, processes of knowledge generation and sharing, progress and modernity. Political agreements alone will prove insufficient, as will the strategies and tactics of pure pragmatism. Only when the equality of men and women—working side by side for the betterment of their communities—is raised to the level of principle can the true potential of the human spirit begin to be tapped. As principles of equity, justice, and generosity become the metrics of program evaluation, and human nature in its totality, rather than just its material dimension, is considered, will true development begin.