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**Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and
the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly:
priority theme: rethinking and strengthening social
development in the contemporary world**

Statement submitted by Baha'i International Community, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Collective Learning, Collective Will: Strengthening the Foundations of Social Development

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has transformed the landscape in which social development is pursued. Challenges and missteps notwithstanding, the body of humanity today is articulating the world it collectively desires to a degree unsurpassed in previous ages. The central task before the international community, then, is building capacity in increasing numbers of individuals, communities, and institutions, with the ultimate objective of promoting universal participation in the construction of that world. Such an objective, the Bahá'í International Community believes, lies at the heart of the Commission's current emphasis on rethinking and strengthening social development in the contemporary world.

Many have noted that the true test of the new global development agenda, in its social, economic and environmental aspects, will be its practical implementation. In this regard, there is no more appropriate place in the UN system to address the social dimension of sustainable development than in the Commission for Social Development. While the particular modalities needed will undoubtedly be refined over time, this space has the potential to serve as an important platform for the sharing of learning and accumulated experience from as wide a range of development actors as possible.

To facilitate steps in this direction, the Bahá'í International Community would like to briefly explore two areas particularly important in strengthening the ability of people to contribute to global development efforts:

Learning and capacity building — the generation, application, and diffusion of knowledge at all levels will be critical in unlocking the human capacity needed to advance social development at the grassroots level, and meet the ambitious 2030 Agenda goals.

Motivation and volition — To mobilize large numbers of people into action for the common good, development efforts must be concerned with the roots of motivation and the generation of individual and collective volition for the betterment of communities, nations, and the world.

Development as Learning

Understood broadly as one component among many contributing to effective action, learning is well regarded in UN circles. However, conceiving of development as learning — approaching it as a process of generating and applying knowledge about the dynamics of social change in specific settings — reframes many familiar aspects of traditional development practice. In the context of such a paradigm, participation in discrete development efforts serves not only as a mechanism to bring about particular outcomes, but also as a means by which the community learns to assess its own needs and mobilize its own resources. Elements of process also assume critical importance, as the ongoing acquisition of knowledge can never be considered “complete”. Within a mode of learning, plans grow organically over time and exist to be modified in light of the ultimate goal of sustainable community development. Visions and strategies are re-examined and modifications are made as

tasks are accomplished, obstacles removed, resources multiplied, and lessons learned. Haphazard change is avoided and continuity of action is maintained.

Such an approach calls for the involvement of growing numbers of participants in a collective process of learning about the practical betterment of society. Efforts of this kind rely on the application of existing knowledge, but invariably involve the generation of new knowledge as well. Much of this takes the form of insights acquired through experience, and here the systematization of learning is crucial. As those working at the grassroots begin to gain experience, initial lessons learned may consist of little more than anecdotes or personal accounts. But over time, patterns emerge which can be documented, analysed, and used to shape subsequent efforts. Conceived in this way, learning concerns not only academic research and formal studies, but also experiential learning, personal insights, and increased capacity to take effective action.

Patterns of learning at the local level, no matter how essential, will remain limited if they are not connected to global processes concerned with the prosperity of humanity as a whole. UN bodies such as the Commission could consider themselves as learning entities dedicated to the systematization of a growing worldwide experience made possible by the participation of increasing numbers of collaborators. Such an approach defies categorization as either “top-down” or “bottom-up”; rather, it is one of reciprocity and interconnectedness.

It is also important to note that while participation in processes of systematic learning builds capacity in individuals, it also does so in communities as a whole. Such collective capacity finds expression in the generation of common will and coordination of actions across real and sometimes challenging social differences. The ability to forge consensus around common values and priorities, to build a shared vision of the future and pursue it through acts of collective volition, to value differences of opinion and build on differences of background, to nurture collective ownership of the methods and direction of community advancement — these are powerful means by which progress can be achieved. Their appearance and strengthening stand as a sure sign of dependable social development.

Development as Volition

Development is a process that must benefit all and draw on the talents of everyone. The universality and spirit of common cause, infusing the new global development agenda reflect a growing commitment to the premise that every member of the human family has not only the right to benefit from a thriving global civilization but also the capacity to contribute to its construction. Capacity of this kind is defined not only by the potential to achieve goals, but also the determination to take needed actions. For this reason, leveraging capacity has to do not only with what people are able to do, but also what they actually choose to do.

Volition is therefore an issue of unparalleled importance. Financial resources are being mobilized at historic scales to implement a wide range of development efforts, but sustainable global progress cannot be achieved through monetary means alone. A central question, is how qualities such as commitment and dedication are generated in large numbers of people. How do individuals and communities become motivated to contribute their efforts toward a cause greater than themselves? How can increasing numbers be assisted to take the vital step from passivity to action?

Faith has proven to be key in this regard. Whether faith in the efficacy of the development process, the capacity of the human race, the virtues of family, community, or a host of other ideals, the combination of conviction and aspiration has been central to generating motivation and action. Among these, religious faith has played a unique and vital role in development efforts. Religion has been a feature of human civilization since the dawn of recorded history and has prompted countless multitudes to arise and exert themselves for the well-being of others. Religion offers an understanding of human existence that lifts the eye from the rocky path to the distant horizon. And when true to the spirit of its transcendent founders, religion has been one of the most powerful forces for the creation of new and beneficial patterns of individual and community life.

The link between commitment to any set of high-minded principles and service to the common good, however, is by no means automatic. When it comes to religion, for example, it is entirely possible to have a congregation of well-intentioned adherents whose actions do little to contribute to the betterment of society. Clearly there is much to learn about how noble ideals become expressed in committed, sustained action. For their part, religious communities might be understood as communities of practice in which spiritual teachings are translated into social reality. But a process of capacity building that enables people of all backgrounds to participate in the transformation of society will be needed in numerous kinds of social spaces. How this process unfolds in widely differing contexts and environments promises to be an area of rich exploration for all involved in social development efforts.

Formulating action within a paradigm of learning and volition is, we believe, a powerful means of rethinking and strengthening social development in the contemporary world. Building new patterns of thought and behaviour is clearly a task of immense proportions. It will require intense learning and the informed, committed participation of ever-growing numbers. But the Bahá'í International Community has no doubt that humanity possesses the capacity to carry out this work, and it welcomes the contributions of all who are interested in exploring the foundations of lasting social development.
