Strengthening *Solidarity*

SOCIAL COHESION
as a driver of DEVELOPMENT

Strengthening Solidarity: Social Cohesion as a Driver of Development

A statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the 63rd Session of the Commission for Social Development

The 1995 World Summit for Social Development reflected a powerful sense of optimism that the international community could come together to address the deepest needs and aspirations of the peoples of the world—to advance "*human prosperity in the fullest sense of the term*," as described in a [statement](#)[1] released by the Bahá'í International Community on that occasion.

The Summit's [outcome document](#)[2] highlighted the critical importance of social integration, alongside poverty eradication and productive employment, in fostering social development. In doing so, it drew attention to a key reality of the contemporary world: that the roots of numerous global challenges lie in how human beings view, value, respond to, and relate to one another. The Bahá'í International Community therefore welcomes the priority theme of this year's Commission for

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1   [The Prosperity of Humankind](#).
2   [Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development](#).

Social Development, including its focus on "*strengthening solidarity, social inclusion and social cohesion.*"

Vital as it is, social inclusion has long been recognized as one of the less clearly defined elements of the social development agenda. An essential need before the international community, then, is to deepen understanding of the process by which the relationships underlying the social fabric can be strengthened—and how such strengthening can assist a community to measurably improve its material and economic circumstances.

Deteriorating conditions across the world today are, in many ways, a testament to the fact that the international community has yet to fully implement the commitments articulated in 1995. As the Second World Summit for Social Development approaches, the international community would therefore do well to look to localities where communities are becoming more resilient, safer, more cohesive, and healthier, to draw lessons about how such conditions can be fostered. Some thoughts on such a process of social transformation are offered below, drawing from experiences of Bahá'í communities around the world.

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Communities can and do, through their own efforts, grow more cohesive and inclusive. But the types of societies we seek do not come about merely as a natural consequence of expanded access to material resources. Were this the case, the world's wealthiest nations would be models of equality, justice, sustainability, and social cohesion. Rather, such qualities must, themselves, be actively nurtured and prioritized. This has been consistently made evident in the grassroots experiences of the worldwide Bahá'í community. Experience also bears out the assertion of the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development, made some 30 years ago, that "*our societies must respond more effectively to … material and spiritual needs.*"

Bahá'í communities around the world are striving to learn about how these two needs—one more concrete, the other less tangible—can be addressed in tandem and in support of one another. The experience of one grassroots Bahá'í-inspired development organization is illustrative in this regard. Devoted to the advancement of rural women, this organization initially provided a variety of services that might be described as relatively conventional in development circles: arts and handicraft training, instruction in environmental and agricultural skills, literacy and numeracy education, and technical training in solar-powered cooking, food dehydration, and water purification.

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The training equipped participants with skills that were undeniably helpful. When participants returned to their home villages, however, an unforeseen tendency emerged. When not

understood within a wider context of contribution to the common good, the acquisition of such technical skills and resources often fomented competition—among participants of the program themselves, and between those participants and others in the village. Disagreements and hard feelings arose over who had access to which new technologies, whose handicrafts were more or less sophisticated, who was more or less confident in reading and arithmetic.

Training offered through a skills-only approach proved prone to inadvertently fostering resentment, division, and assumptions of superiority, instead of solidarity, inclusion, and cohesion. Realizing this, organizers adjusted the program to augment technical and academic training with a robust exploration of spiritual and moral principles: for example, that truthfulness is a vital foundation for healthy social interaction; that collective prosperity can be advanced through justice and generosity, collaboration and mutual assistance; and that prejudice of any kind blights the progress of humankind. Experience has repeatedly shown that as such principles increasingly permeate interactions among individuals, communities not only become more integrated, they also enjoy greater and greater capacity to advance their own social and economic development aims.

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Linkages between the moral principles mentioned above and the aims of social development become clearer as larger proportions of a population begin working to apply such ideals through practical acts of service to others and to society. Bahá'í efforts in this regard[3] have focused on a decentralized, worldwide process of training, education, and empowerment that tends to the moral development of children and young adolescents, and allows increasing numbers of youth and adults to explore the application of ethical and spiritual principles to daily life and to the challenges facing society.

This process has assisted hundreds of thousands of individuals to form and sustain a variety of community-building efforts in their local settings, welcoming the participation, at any given time, of some two million of their neighbors, friends, family members, and co-workers. The scale of this pattern of activity, as expressed at the local level, naturally varies from location to location. But a few areas have developed the capacity to sustain over 5,000 of these community-building activities in a relatively small geographic area, touching the lives of over 20,000 of their fellow community members. Places that can maintain such a pattern of activity offer a window into the many ways that solidarity, inclusion, and cohesion can find tangible expression within a given community.

Youth and older generations, for example, develop new and more collaborative patterns of interaction. Capacity for constructive dialogue grows and new spaces for purposeful consultation emerge. Lively conversations proliferate among parents regarding

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3   See For the Betterment of the World: The Worldwide Bahá'í Community's Approach to Social and Economic Development.

aspirations for their children. Expressions of the equality of women and men become more pronounced. A sense of duty toward the physical environment becomes prevalent. Even the numerous forms of prejudice that plague every society begin to give way to growing bonds of unity.

These are not mere hopes or ideals, but concrete outcomes being documented in a growing number of neighborhoods and villages, in virtually every country of the world. Their emergence serves as an assurance that meaningful transformation is possible and can be consciously advanced. It also stands as a summons for the work of advancing solidarity, inclusion, and cohesion to be furthered in many more places. This includes through the efforts of those at the national and international levels, who can play important roles in removing obstacles and establishing policies and conditions conducive to social development of this kind.

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As preparations for the Second World Summit for Social Development accelerate, it is increasingly recognized that human prosperity is determined as much by social, moral, and relational factors as by technological, material, and financial ones. Growing numbers look to their societies and, in addition to material hardships, they see standards of basic decency waning and capacity for good-faith dialogue ebbing. They see leaders and institutions of all kinds discredited by corruption and inadequacy. They see standards of right and wrong, truth and falsehood increasingly dismissed as irrelevant in favor of the pursuit of self-interest and the struggle for power. And, consequently, many are coming to feel that meaningful social development is ultimately impossible without the cultivation of trustworthiness and honesty, generosity and camaraderie, cooperation and a sense of responsibility for the collective well-being.

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Qualities such as these are building blocks of a stable and flourishing social order. They have proven vital to the task of creating vibrant communities that can more effectively deliver on the high promises of social development. How new patterns of interaction that reflect

these qualities can be built—in the family, the neighborhood, the village, the school, the workplace, the municipality—must therefore become a key focus of development actors at all levels in the coming years. For when we see communities beginning to exhibit the patterns of collective life outlined above, we see communities on the path toward achieving the highest aims of the social development agenda.

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