

Are Bahá'ís Active in Improving the Socio- Economic State of the World?

The Bahá'í Faith combines the mystical and the practical. It teaches world-mindedness and concern for all members of the human race. Love is not just a feeling. True love, like electricity, generates powers called service and self-sacrifice:

That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race.¹

Bahá'u'lláh

A report by UNICEF indicates that one fifth of the world's population lives in abject poverty. The disparity between rich and poor nations offers abundant opportunities for socio-economic service. This prophecy is about our time:

Open your eyes and look at the fields. They are ripe for harvest!

Christ (John 4:35)

Bahá'ís currently manage over 1,300 development projects. The majority of them are the result of grassroots efforts operating with little or no outside support.

Activities in health, social services, communications, agriculture, forestry, and community development

encourage work in the spirit of service to humankind. The emphasis in Bahá'í teachings on the necessity of universal education has inspired the establishment of more than 900 tutorial schools and training centers in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Bahá'í communities operate 29 formal primary and secondary schools. The figures will continue to increase in the years to come.

Social and economic development projects world-wide also include medical centers, programs for women, cooperative savings programs, building renovation, arts and theater groups, communal farms, cooperative fishing projects, homes for refugees and for the aged, and computer education to assist low income families.

Seven educational radio stations currently operate in Liberia, Panama, Chile, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador and the United States, to serve the local populations. Programs in native languages offer information on health care, crop management, animal husbandry, child development, the elimination of prejudice, and the equality of men and women.²

The spiritual teachings of Bahá'u'lláh emphasize self-reliance and self-sufficiency, and they promote a holistic and world-embracing approach in understanding social problems and their underlying causes...For

example, efforts to alleviate poverty cannot be divorced from activities that promote full equality for women. The vast majority of the world's poor are women and children. In many developing countries, especially in Africa, women farmers grow much of the food. Bahá'ís believe that efforts to ensure food security in these regions depend largely on improvements to the status of women. Issues of development and environment are equally dependent on finding solutions to problems of racism, under-education and religious strife.³

The recent trend in the distribution of wealth in many industrial nations, if continued, will lead to grave consequences. It is contrary to one of the most fundamental teachings of Bahá'u'lláh: an equitable distribution of wealth. To get a clear picture of what is happening in our time, read *America: What Went Wrong?* by two Pulitzer Prize-winning authors. For their book they did two years of research and assembled over 100,000 pages of documents to create "a gripping portrayal of the painful dismantling of the American middle class." This brief excerpt from the book gives a glimpse of the economic trends:

Between 1980 and 1989, the combined salaries of people in the \$20,000 to \$50,000 income group increased 44 percent. During the

same period, the combined salaries of people earning \$1 million or more a year increased, 2,184 percent.

Viewed more broadly, the total wages of all people who earned less than \$50,000 a year—85 percent of all Americans—increased an average of just 2 percent a year over those ten years. At the same time, the total wages of all millionaires shot up 243 percent a year. Those figures are not adjusted for inflation, which cuts across all income groups but hits the lower and middle classes hardest.

Between 1980 and 1989, the number of people reporting incomes of more than a half-million dollars rocketed from 16,881 to 183,240—an increase of 985 percent.⁴

According to *Nightline* (October 27, 1995), since 1973, the yearly income of the poorest people in America has dropped by \$1,300, while the yearly income of the richest has climbed by \$66,000. The shift in wealth, the report stated, began in 1973.

One way Bahá'ís try to improve the socio-economic state of the world is through the United Nations:

The Bahá'í International Community has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council and with the United Nations Children's Fund. It is also affiliated with the United Nations Environment Program and the UN

Office of Public Information. It has representatives with the United Nations in New York, Geneva, and Nairobi. Local Bahá'í communities are encouraged to support the UN's various humanitarian projects. The Bahá'í International Community participates in meetings of UN agencies concerned with human rights, social development, the status of women, the environment, human settlement, food, science and technology, population, the law of the sea, crime prevention, substance abuse, youth, children, the family, disarmament, and the United Nations University.⁵

Sometimes, poverty persists because of a lack of motivation to work and earn a living. In God's sight, idleness diminishes our worth:

O MY SERVANT!

The basest of men are they that yield no fruit on earth. Such men are verily counted as among the dead, nay better are the dead in the sight of God than those idle and worthless souls.⁶ Bahá'u'lláh

Bahá'í Writings elevate work done in a spirit of service to the rank of worship. The true purpose of working is not to make money but to serve others. "A wealthy man in Mexico was in the habit of buying two tangerines daily from a woman who operated a fruit stand near his house. One morning he told her he wanted to buy her entire

stock of tangerines. Much to his surprise the lady refused to sell him more than a few. 'But why?' the buyer asked. 'If I sold you all of my tangerines,' she answered with dignity, 'what would I do the rest of the day?'"

1. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 250.
2. *The Bahá'í Faith and its World Community*, U.S. Bahá'í Office of Public Information, June 1992, p. 2.
3. "Fresh & Hopeful Models," *Herald of the South*, Oct.-Dec., 1994, pp. 8-9.
4. Barlett, Donald L. and James B. Steele. *America: What Went Wrong?* Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1992, p. 4.
5. *The Bahá'í Faith and its World Community*, U.S. Bahá'í Office of Public Information, June 1992, p. 2.
6. *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh* (Persian), no. 81.



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