



Australian Bahá'í Community

Submission by the Australian Bahá'í Community to the Independent Review of Aid Effectiveness

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The Australian Bahá'í Community welcomes the Australian Government's Independent Review of Aid Effectiveness (the Review), and supports the commitment of the Australian Government to assist developing countries to reduce poverty and achieve sustainable development.

The Australian Bahá'í Community was established in 1920 and its membership reflects the diversity of modern Australia. As members of the Bahá'í Faith—a worldwide religion, founded over 160 years ago, with more than five million members around the globe—we work to promote and apply principles derived from Bahá'í teachings which contribute to the solution to current challenges facing humanity. Our efforts are focussed on the development of a united, peaceful, just and sustainable civilisation.

For over a decade, we have been part of the worldwide Bahá'í community's endeavours to systematically transform society by empowering individuals to become agents of change in their communities. The framework for action guiding these activities has been rooted in a dynamic of learning—characterised by action, reflection, and consultation. We have set into motion neighbourhood-level processes that seek to empower individuals of all ages to recognise and develop their spiritual capacities and to channel their collective energies towards service to humanity and the betterment of their communities.

Our submission to the Review is guided by our overall approach to sustainable development¹ and our experience to date in community development at the grassroots.

Taking a different perspective

Our views on Australia's aid program stem from our understanding that the purpose of development is to contribute to a world in which everyone can advance not only materially but also intellectually and spiritually. Bahá'í development activities generally involve tapping the spiritual roots of human motivation to provide the impulse for genuine social and economic development.

The mechanisms of poverty eradication and sustainable development have long been defined in primarily material terms - the transfer of financial resources from one country to another - and structured accordingly. As decades of experience have shown, however, development assistance of a primarily financial kind is not an effective means of assisting a nation or community to lift itself out of poverty and make social and economic progress.

¹ This approach has been clearly articulated in a number of statements by the Bahá'í International Community on which this submissions draws and available at <http://bic.org/areas-of-work/social-and-sustainable-development>

It is now increasingly acknowledged that such conditions as the failure to protect and promote human rights, marginalisation of girls and women, poor governance and failing states, ethnic and religious antipathy, lawlessness, environmental degradation and unemployment constitute formidable obstacles to the progress and development of communities. Such conditions cannot be alleviated by material means alone. They are evidence of a different kind of poverty—one rooted in the values and attitudes that shape relationships between individuals, communities, and nations as well as between the governors and the governed.

Viewed from this perspective, poverty can be defined as the absence of resources – physical, social, and ethical - necessary for the establishment of conditions which promote the moral, material, and creative capacities of individuals, communities, and institutions. Moral reasoning, group decision-making and freedom from racism, for example, are all essential tools for poverty alleviation. Such capacities must shape individual thinking as well as institutional arrangements and policy-making.

We appreciate that the idea of promoting specific morals or values may be a controversial one; too often in the past such efforts have been associated with repressive religious practices, oppressive political ideologies and narrowly defined visions of the common good. Moral capabilities, however, when articulated in a manner consistent with the ideals of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and aimed at fostering the spiritual, social and intellectual development of all persons, represent a key element of the kind of transformation required for a prosperous society to take shape. Moreover, such capabilities must be anchored in the central social and spiritual principle of our time; namely, the interdependence and interconnectedness of humanity as a whole. The goal of moral development, then, is shifted from individualistic notions of “salvation” to embrace the collective progress of the entire human race.

Harnessing and building capacity

Often the target populations of development projects are perceived as masses of undernourished people, overwhelmed by their circumstances and needs, rather than capable agents of change in their communities. It is not enough to conceive of development in terms of creating opportunities for those living in poverty to meet their basic needs. Rather, with the understanding that each individual has a contribution to make to the construction of a more just and peaceful social order, these processes must be arranged in a way that permits each to play his or her rightful role as a productive member of society. Within such a framework, development could be characterised as processes that provide for the material, social and spiritual needs of humanity across generations and enable all peoples to contribute to the ongoing advancement of society.

The challenge for Australia’s development efforts is thus to find methods that allow individuals and communities to solve their own problems, with the ability of a community to take on more complex social issues as a key indicator of progress. One of the essential skills involved is that of group decision-making - bringing together diverse views, searching for the best solution, and generating commitment and solidarity to carry the decision through.

Education

We commend the Australian Government for its commitment to education as a flagship sector of Australia’s aid program. We submit that education is the essential foundation for meaningful participation in the advancement of society and the higher aims of civilisation. If education is to bring about the profound changes in the minds of people and in the structures of society needed to shift towards sustainable development, however, the nature of the educational processes being assisted through the aid program will need to be rethought.

Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that the goal of education is not only “the full development of the human personality and the sense of its

dignity”, but also the promotion of “understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial, ethnic or religious groups”. To accomplish these broad and lofty goals, education must address the whole person. That is, it should seek to develop the full range of human capacities - intellectual, social, physical and spiritual.

In the minds of many, the aim of education is limited to empowering the person to achieve material well-being and prosperity, with little regard for his or her responsibility towards others and humanity as a whole. Such a materialistic approach to education will continue to exacerbate the disparity between the wealthy few and the impoverished many, perpetuating the injustices of social stratification and contributing to the increasing instability in the world. If, however, material education goes hand in hand with spiritual education and moral development, it will be the means for ensuring the well-being and prosperity of humanity as a whole. Instead of emphasising competition, education would do well, at this point in history, to foster the attitudes and skills necessary for cooperation; for the progress of a nation now depends on its ability to cooperate and on its collective commitment to justice and human rights for all. The ability to cooperate with others will also ensure that increasing numbers of people will benefit from the right to education.

The function of moral and spiritual education is to guide the use of human capacities for the good of all. We recommend, therefore, that the Australian aid program recognise that the goal of education should be not only the acquisition of knowledge, but social transformation through the acquisition by individuals of spiritual and moral qualities such as compassion, trustworthiness, service, justice, and respect for all.

A human rights-based approach

The Australian Bahá’í Community acknowledges that the Australian Government has shown commitment to human rights in its aid programs through, for example, support for civil and political rights in its programs and building the institutional capacity of national human rights bodies. For some years, however, Australia has shied away from an explicit commitment to a human rights-based approach to its aid program.

It is our view that a human rights-based approach - as articulated, for example, in “The Human Rights Based Approach to Development Cooperation -Towards a Common Understanding among UN agencies”² - should underpin Australia’s aid program. A human rights-based approach links development to questions of justice and obligation rather than charity. In this way, the moral basis of efforts related to poverty reduction is sharpened and the values underlying such efforts, as embodied in the international law of human rights, are made explicit.

Human rights should infuse development efforts through both promoting adherence to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and promoting discrete human rights, such as the right to education and the right to freedom of religion or belief, in development programs. To effectively contribute to development outcomes, however, the promotion of human rights must be freed from false dichotomies: the concept of “rights” neither justifies a rampant individualism nor an elevation of the state as the sole source of human well-being. Rather, the relationship between the individual and the state is one of trusteeship – each member of the human race comes into the world as a trust of the whole, which includes the family, the community, the nation, and the world. It is this trusteeship that constitutes the moral foundation of most other rights. From this perspective, the entire burden of development cannot fall on the state; a portion of the responsibility needs to be assigned to the people, their family, and their community. While conditions of poverty arise and persist for various historic, economic and political reasons, they are equally exacerbated by human values, such as those regarding

² http://www.undg.org/archive_docs/6959-The_Human_Rights_Based_Approach_to_Development_Cooperation_Towards_a_Common_Understanding_among_UN.pdf

cultural integration, the rights of women, education, and an individual's right to progress. As such, a human rights-based approach to poverty alleviation must consider the appropriate responsibilities of all actors in the community.

Advancing the equality of women and men

We strongly support the Australian Government's commitment to helping promote gender equality and empowering women in partner countries. The central role of girls and women in development has been clearly established. As stated by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, "until women and girls are liberated from poverty and injustice, all our goals - peace, security, sustainable development - stand in jeopardy".³

Women are the first educators of the next generation; their education has a tremendous impact on the family's physical, social and economic well-being; their economic participation increases productivity and drives economic progress; their presence in public life has been associated with better governance and lower levels of corruption. Female literacy, alone, has been shown to play a much more important role in promoting social well-being than other variables related to the general level of wealth in a society.⁴ No country, however, has yet achieved a full measure of gender equality. While women bear the most direct costs of this persistent inequality, the progress of entire communities and nations is hindered as half of the world's population is held back from realising its potential.

The challenge is to create conditions for women and girls to develop their full potential and for all of society to support the changes required. This means not only seeking to change legal, political and economic structures, but also transforming individuals—men and women, boys and girls—whose morals or values consciously or inadvertently sustain exploitative behaviour.

Women are often the poorest and most disadvantaged citizens of developing countries yet many studies confirm that female poverty cannot be conceptualised in the same way as male poverty, given that women's social and cultural roles and their relationship to systems of power and authority differ from those of men⁵. These differences, however, are rarely reflected in official poverty statistics and, consequently, do not inform resource allocation at local, national, and regional levels⁶. In order for development assistance to be most effectively targeted, therefore, it must include a gender analysis - involving women in budget decision-making and assessing the impact of fiscal measures on the status of women in the community. This type of gender analysis helps to identify gender inequalities in budget processes, allocations, and outcomes; and assesses states' responsibilities to address these inequalities. Australia conducted the first gender-responsive budget analysis in 1994 and, since then, the process has been increasingly utilised around the world to assist nations to understand how policies can be adjusted and resources allocated to better address women's needs. In addition to ensuring there is a gender analysis of the Australian aid program, recipient countries should be encouraged and supported if necessary to conduct a gender analysis of their existing budgets.

Engagement of religious perspectives and institutions

Religious organisations constitute some of the oldest and most far-reaching networks in the world. In many conflict-torn countries, they are the only surviving institutions. In the areas of health, environment, debt relief and humanitarian support, it is religious organisations that have often been at the forefront of efforts to reach neglected areas and to influence government

³ UNIFEM (2010), 'Gender Justice: Key to Achieving the Millennium Development Goals', p.4.

⁴ Sen, Amartya. *Development as Freedom*. Anchor: New York, 2000.

⁵ Social Watch Report 2005 Roars and Whispers: Gender and Poverty, Promises vs. Action.

<http://www.socialwatch.org/en/informelmpreso/informe2005.htm>

⁶ Karen Judd, ed., *Gender Budget Initiatives: Strategies, Concepts, and Experiences* (New York: The United Nations Development Fund for Women, 2002).

policy. Given the tremendous capacity of religion to influence the masses—both to inspire and to vilify—the aid program cannot afford to ignore this important sector of society

The engagement of religious organisations will be particularly important in efforts to promote the equality of men and women. Given the tremendous weight of religion and culture in shaping perceptions about the role of women in society, religious organisations and constituencies will need to be meaningfully engaged in efforts to further the gender equality agenda. Policy makers have been generally resistant to addressing the cultural and religious dimensions of attitudes governing the treatment of women—fearing the potentially divisive nature of such an undertaking or lacking knowledge about whom to address and how to proceed. Yet the achievement of gender equality has been painstakingly slow precisely because questions about the roles and responsibilities of women challenge some of the most deeply entrenched human attitudes.

Transfer of technology and development of institutional capacity

Experience has shown that emphasis on the transfer of technology, without accompanying efforts to increase participation in the generation and application of knowledge, can only serve to widen the gap between the rich and the poor—the “developers” and the “users” of technology. Developing the capacity for identifying technological need and for technological innovation and adaptation—in light of societal needs and environmental constraints—will be vital to social progress. The transformation of complex social realities will require the development of institutional capacity within local populations to create and apply knowledge in ways that address the specific needs of that population. This question of institutional capacity, e.g. the establishment of regional centres of research and training, constitutes a major challenge to sustainable development. If successfully met, however, the result will be to break the present unbalanced flow of knowledge in the world and dissociate development from ill-conceived processes of modernisation. “Modern” technologies will be characterised by an orientation towards addressing locally defined needs and by priorities that take into account both the material and moral prosperity of society as a whole.

Adopting a long-term view

In order to maximise the effectiveness of Australia’s aid program, it is necessary for policies to be framed and programs developed with a long-term perspective, unconstrained by the intellectual straitjacket of election cycles. An exclusive focus on short-term goals too often falls prey to minimum standards, narrow orientations and compromise positions. A long-term orientation would allow governments to explore a wider range of policy and programmatic options and to consider a diversity of contributions, including those from non-governmental, business, academic and informal sectors.

A long-term approach requires consensus about the broader goals of development and the outcomes to be achieved. Governments will need to articulate the goals of the aid program in terms of the well-being of society as a whole: its boys, girls, men, women; its peace and security, health and well-being, economic progress, environmental sustainability, and its institutions of governance.

A long-term approach also necessitates the measurement of progress towards long-term stated goals. The development of indicators will be essential to determine the effectiveness of financing any initiatives. Given the diversity of national and local contexts, one-size-fits-all indicators will not be feasible—each region will need to develop tools most appropriate to its circumstances. Certain broad principles can, however, be identified.

The current measures and indicators used to assess poverty and human development—such as Gross National Product and the Human Development Index—largely determine what is valued and, as such, shape development policy and priorities. Given the view, as outlined

above, that the progress of communities and nations requires not only material inputs and legal measures to secure order, but the development of moral capabilities to govern behaviour and decision-making by individuals and institutions, we propose the following set of principles as a basis for the construction of ethically-based development indicators:

- unity in diversity - ie, the extent to which all members of a community are integrated into community life;
- equity and justice - to ensure that opportunity and access to material and social resources are fairly distributed;
- gender equality;
- trustworthiness; and
- freedom of thought, conscience and belief.

These principles could be applied in the areas of economic development, education, environmental stewardship, and governance, for example, to generate development goals and construct new indicators to measure progress towards these goals.

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We thank the Australian Government for this opportunity to make a submission to the Review and look forward to the outcomes of the independent panel's deliberations which we trust will help to achieve the aims of maximising the effectiveness and efficiency of Australia's aid program.

Australian Bahá'í Community
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