

# Begin with the Village

## The Bahá'í Approach to Rural Development

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**D**uring the past two years, the global Bahá'í community has witnessed the dedication of the first two local Bahá'í Houses of Worship in the world—the first in Battambang, Cambodia, on 21 September 2017, and the second in Norte del Cauca, Colombia, on 22 July 2018. Thousands gathered in each location to celebrate the completion of these temples, signalling the emergence of an institution that will one day be constructed in every village and town in every country.

The House of Worship is the central edifice of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* (the Dawning-place of the Praise of God), a new development inaugurated by Bahá'u'lláh and described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as “one of the most vital institutions in the world.” In addition to a temple welcoming people of all faiths, races, and ages to share in prayer and meditation, unencumbered by ritual, the temple complex will eventually include service-oriented dependencies dedicated to social, humanitarian, educational, and scientific pursuits.

Eight continental Bahá'í Houses of Worship have been constructed as “Mother Temples” for Africa, the Indian subcontinent, North, Central, and South America, Europe, Australia, and the Pacific. The announcement in 2012 of plans to build local Houses of Worship in Battambang, Norte del Cauca and three other areas, as well as the first two national Bahá'í temples, was extraordinary in a number of ways. One is that in a rapidly urbanizing world—city people outnumbered rural people for the first time in 2007—the first local and national temples will be constructed in countries with largely rural populations. The first two national temples will be built in Papua New Guinea (87% rural) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (57%). The local temples are planned for Cambodia (79%); Matunda-Soy in Kenya (74%); Tanna in Vanuatu (74%); and Bihar Sharif in India (67%). Colombia, with a majority urban population, is the exception, but Norte del Cauca is a largely rural region.

Siting the local Houses of Worship in these areas is by no means random. In each case, the spirit of worship and service integral to the institution is already evident: each community hosts multiple devotional gatherings open to all, and large numbers of children, youth, and adults are engaged in an educational process that builds capacity for service to humanity. Thus, the House of Worship is a physical manifestation of a spiritual reality already present in these rural communities.

In 1891, in one of His most important writings, the Tablet of Carmel, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'u'lláh, expressed His longing “to announce to every spot on the surface of the earth” the glad tidings of His Revelation. Since then, His followers have made consistent efforts to take the Bahá'í teachings to all peoples, including those in the most remote rural areas. It has often been found that rural people are

drawn to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh in large numbers and have been among the first to respond to their transformative influence and to put them into practice.

## Why Rural?

The Bahá'í Faith was the first major religion to emerge in the modern period. Although the 19th and 20th centuries are characterized by non-agricultural industrialization and urbanization, the Bahá'í teachings on social and economic issues placed great importance on agriculture, farmers, and village life.

In the Tablet of the World, also revealed in 1891, Bahá'u'lláh outlined “that which is conducive to the advancement of mankind and to the reconstruction of the world.”<sup>1</sup> He identified several principles that would contribute to achieving social order, including international cooperation and disarmament; a new ethos of universal fellowship, epitomized by the adoption of a common auxiliary language; the training and education of children; and agricultural development. Bahá'u'lláh stated that “special regard must be paid to agriculture,” as “unquestionably” it precedes the other principles in importance. Perhaps this is why Bahá'u'lláh also stated that agricultural work is “identical with worship.”

In keeping with this principle, Bahá'u'lláh's son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who led the Bahá'í community after His Father's passing in 1892, later stated that “the fundamental basis of community is agriculture,” that “the peasant class and the agricultural class exceed other classes in the importance of their service,” and that the “farmer is the primary factor in the body politic.” Given the importance placed on agriculture, attention to the needs and aspirations of rural populations has been a priority going back to the early history of the Bahá'í Faith, when Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá showered their love on farmers and villagers, offered them tangible support, and contributed significantly to the discourse on rural development.

While religions have always had an association with agriculture, the Bahá'í teachings on this topic are considerably more elaborate than those of most previous faiths. Why would the Founder of the first modern religion place so much emphasis on agriculture?

In the time of Bahá'u'lláh, farmers comprised the vast majority of the world's population. In 1875, 91% of the global population lived in rural areas, but a major shift was already underway: in 1800, 5% of the population was urban; by 1900, the urban share of population grew 2.6 times, to 13.3%. In industrializing areas such as Europe, the shift was more dramatic, from 7.3% urban in 1800 to 26.1% in 1900. Citification was picking up steam: humanity was 30% urban by 1950, 50% urban for the first time in 2007, and is 55% urban today. By 2050, a 66% urbanized population is projected.

We are migrating to cities *en masse*; however, 3.4 billion people still live in rural areas. And the statistics obscure the nature of urbanization: Close to half of the world's urban population lives in towns and small cities. Many of these towns retain strong rural connections and are populated by people connected to agriculture.

While places like North America now have a tiny farm population living on large mechanized farms, throughout much of the world, especially Asia and Africa, smallholders produce most of the food on farms averaging one to two hectares in size.

There are some 500 million farms worldwide, 200 million pastoralists, and an estimated 450 million farm laborers, many working in the plantation sector. In addition, large numbers of casual and temporary workers are engaged by small and

large growers. Roughly one third of humanity, some 2.5 billion farmers and their families, derive their livelihoods from agriculture; thus, farmers remain the largest single occupational group. Rural people also work in forestry and fisheries. The International Labour Organization reports that as many as 1.75 billion people derive at least some of their subsistence or income from forests, including 60 million Indigenous people who depend on natural forests for their livelihoods. Another 58 million people are engaged in fisheries and aquaculture. It should also be noted that as many as 800 million people are involved in urban and peri-urban food production.

Today, we speak of the “consumer” or “information” or “post-industrial” economy, giving the impression that the global economic order is decoupling from traditional resources extracted from the hinterlands. In fact, the consumption of practically every renewable and non-renewable resource is rising. Agricultural ecosystems cover nearly 40% of the terrestrial surface of the Earth. Human beings, one of an estimated 8.7 million species that cohabit the planet, now use 20% of Earth’s Net Primary Production (the total plant material produced) on land. Consequently, rural producers remain critically important players in the global economy.

Urban and rural populations are mutually dependent. In fact, as the number of rural producers decreases as a portion of the total population, their relative importance increases. Rural people are largely responsible for meeting the rapidly expanding urban demand for food, including fish, natural fibres, and forest products. Importantly, they are also increasingly important as providers of a wide range of essential ecological services associated with the management of soil, watersheds, forests, and fisheries.

Despite their essential services to society, the situation of rural people is often precarious. The historian Eric Hobsbaum points out, for instance, the anomaly that “on the whole, the countries with the highest percentage of agricultural population are the ones which have difficulties in feeding themselves, while the world’s food surpluses come, on the whole, from a relatively tiny population in a few advanced countries.”<sup>2</sup>

A vast majority of the global poor live in rural areas—half in Sub-Saharan Africa—and more than half are under 18 years of age. The hunger that these people experience is a consequence of poverty, and while the causes of poverty are complex, they are often associated with power dynamics that marginalize rural people.

Fortunately, the number of people living in extreme poverty has declined over the past several decades. According to the most recent World Bank estimates, while about 35% of people lived below the extreme poverty income threshold of \$1.90 a day in 1990, adjusted for inflation, that number is closer to 11% today. While this is a positive trend, rural poverty remains deeply entrenched and the situation of the rural poor remains tenuous. Simply moving above the threshold of \$1.90, to \$1.91 or to \$2 or \$3 a day in income does not solve the problem. The World Health Organization has reported that global hunger, which has tended downward along with extreme poverty, is rising again. In 2016, 815 million people, more than one in ten people, were chronically hungry.

For those who have been able to move out of poverty, progress is often temporary: economic shocks, food insecurity, and climate change threaten to rob them of hard-won gains. It becomes increasingly difficult to assist those remaining in extreme poverty, according to the World Bank, especially those in fragile contexts and remote areas. Access to good schools, healthcare, electricity, safe water, and other critical services remains elusive for many people, often determined by socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, geography, politics, and, increasingly, environmental and

climate factors. We see, for instance, the recent dramatic rise in the number of social and environmental refugees—some 65 million people cut off from their communities and families, willing to risk their lives to find a more secure life.

All this points to the continued relevance of the Bahá'í teachings on agriculture and the importance of supporting rural people in their efforts to achieve a better life and to contribute to the just and sustainable world order envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh. Perhaps this is why 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in his extensive discourse on the reorganization of society, stated that the transformation of economic systems “must commence with the farmer and then be extended to the other classes.”<sup>3</sup> He said that the solution to the economic problem “begins with the village, and when the village is reconstructed, then the cities will be also.”<sup>4</sup>

## Commence with the Farmer: Bahá'í Principles for Rural Development

What are the Bahá'í teachings on rural life and agriculture? Since they are extensive, and there is insufficient space to go into detail here, four main themes will be summarized.

### Centrality

As mentioned, Bahá'u'lláh stated that agriculture should be considered first among the fundamental principles for the administration of human affairs. While agriculture and rural populations have in many ways been marginalized in the modern world, the fact remains that civilization is entirely dependent on farmers. Both agriculture and non-agricultural industry are needed to support civilization, but in the final analysis, agriculture is primary and other industry secondary.

Agriculture (which includes forestry and fisheries) is fundamentally different from other economic activities in that agriculture's products result from life processes and its means of production are living systems. Beyond providing food and other products, as well as incomes, agricultural activities provide key ecological services and have a global impact, including an impact on climate. This is why no sustainable human future can be conceived unless and until the centrality of agriculture is recognized.

Corollary to this is a “farmers first” approach, in which agricultural development is focused around the requirements and concerns of farmers and farm laborers, especially those who are impoverished. Currently, the agrifood system is built around the needs of consumers rather than producers. Similarly, we concern ourselves with cities and neglect the village and countryside. Instead, efforts must be made to prioritize and strengthen agriculture, starting at the farm and village level with the needs of rural people foremost.

Raising the centrality of agriculture to the level of spiritual principle is key to ensuring that adequate attention and resources are given to its proper development.

### Prosperity

Bahá'u'lláh's vision for the future is one in which *everyone* will enjoy the benefits of civilization. “Wealth is most commendable,” said 'Abdu'l-Bahá, “provided the entire

population is wealthy.”<sup>5</sup> The pivotal Bahá’í principle of the oneness of humanity implies that a minimum standard of well-being is an inalienable human right.

“Every human being has the right to live; they have a right to rest, and to a certain amount of well-being,” said ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. “The arrangements of the circumstances of the people must be such that poverty shall disappear, and that every one as far as possible, according to his position and rank, shall be comfortable. Whilst the nobles and others in high rank are in easy circumstances, the poor also should be able to get their daily food and not be brought to the extremities of hunger.”<sup>6</sup>

Today this principle is widely recognized as the Right to Food. “The realization of the right to adequate food is not merely a promise to be met through charity,” according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. “It is a human right of every woman, man and child that is to be fulfilled through appropriate actions by governments and non-state actors. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development prioritizes scaled up, transformational action to eradicate poverty and end hunger and all forms of malnutrition, recognizing that permanent eradication of hunger and the realization of the right to adequate food for all are achievable goals.”<sup>7</sup>

Establishing equitable and effective means to redistribute wealth is a necessary element in the redesign of the food and agriculture system to ensure an adequate supply of food and access to food producing resources. Oxfam reports that in one recent 12-month period, the wealth of the world’s billionaires increased by \$762 billion, an amount sufficient to end extreme poverty seven times over.<sup>8</sup> Eliminating extreme poverty necessitates the elimination of extreme accumulation of wealth in the hands of a tiny elite. Overcoming such imbalances will involve more than policy change. It is also a moral issue.

The Bahá’í teachings offer a number of spiritual principles and practical measures designed to redistribute wealth and eliminate poverty. Bahá’u’lláh frequently admonished the wealthy and powerful to give generously to the poor on a voluntary basis. The Bahá’í teachings also call for policies such as progressive taxation, limits to wealth accumulation and monopolies, fair wages, profit sharing, and moderate interest on loans. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also proposed a local institution he described as the “village storehouse” which would administer and regulate the economic affairs of the village to ensure that all members of the community are protected.

One of the most significant measures Bahá’u’lláh created to eliminate extremes of wealth and poverty is a law known as *Huqúqu’lláh* (Right of God). According to this law, 19% of net wealth is given to the Universal House of Justice, the international governing body of the Bahá’í world community. This law is now being put into effect in the worldwide Bahá’í community. As the Bahá’í community grows, this fund will become substantial and will ultimately be used to assist the poor and for other philanthropic purposes.

Another important principle is the understanding that material wealth is not an end in itself. Bahá’u’lláh urged His followers to moderate their wants, with the understanding that material wealth is a means to support people in their pursuit of spiritual development. This involves a new understanding of prosperity in which wealth can be seen in terms of health, positive relationships, meaning, and the capacity to serve.

## Sustainability

According to Bahá'u'lláh, “All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.”<sup>9</sup> The term “ever-advancing” implies that the process of human development must progress from one generation to the next. Consequently, to fulfill the purpose of our creation, the processes of civilization must be sustainable and our ability to manage natural systems must be informed by the fact that civilization ultimately depends on their long-term viability.

Bahá'u'lláh's statement raises sustainable development to the status of a spiritual principle that is central to the purpose of our existence. Since agriculture is fundamental to civilization, a sustainable food and agriculture system is intrinsic to the world order prescribed by Bahá'u'lláh. Future agricultural systems will benefit from a profound understanding of the responsibilities of our species to maintain the equilibrium of the ecosphere. In this regard, the Bahá'í teachings describe a new conception of the relationship between humankind and the natural world, in which the ecosphere is conceived as the extended human body.<sup>10</sup>

A number of specific principles found in the Bahá'í writings support the sustainable development of agriculture.

## Capacity

The Bahá'í teachings can be seen as a roadmap for a methodology to build capacity in individuals, communities, and institutions to achieve the above objectives. Building capacity is a primary goal of the Bahá'í community throughout the world at this stage of its development. The chief means of doing this is a grassroots educational system that both emerges from and fosters a process of community development. This process was first used in rural Colombia starting in the 1970s and is now taking root in thousands of Bahá'í communities around the world.

The training institute is a participatory public educational process that aims to build foresight, wisdom, and a capacity for moral choices that favor collective well-being over self-interest. It is coordinated and focused, while also being inclusive and open to diverse approaches. Moral capacity is being developed at the village and neighborhood level among a growing cohort of people who begin to build service-oriented communities capable of reading and responding to current realities. This approach has been particularly successful in rural areas, where the institute has contributed to the empowerment of children, youth, women, and men.

The processes of community development also enhance the spiritual life of the community and advance the moral and material education of children and youth. In many ways, this approach can be seen as the embryonic form of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, the institutional complex that combines worship and service in every community. And as mentioned, the new local temples are taking shape in communities where an advanced process of growth involving the training institute is in place.

The diagram below shows the elements of a village transformation process based on the training institute and a set of core activities pursued in Bahá'í communities. Building capacity ultimately leads to the ability to engage in effective public discourse, which in turn facilitates social action. In the case of the village, this capacity can be directed to analyzing and solving the problems faced by farm families.

## Begin with the village

The Bahá'í teachings offer a theoretical approach to rural development, but this approach is not a formula. It is meant to be tested in the real world and adapted according to local conditions.

From the early days of the Bahá'í revelation, Bahá'í communities in rural areas have striven to uplift themselves materially and spiritually through a wide range of initiatives in different contexts and fields. It must be emphasized, however, that Bahá'í communities around the world are still at the very early stages of learning about the question of village prosperity.

As they move forward into this area of experimentation and learning, they can look to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's activities in the field of rural reconstruction for an extraordinary example of the application of Bahá'í principles to rural development. It is instructive, then, to consider in some depth how He applied these development processes and to reflect on their current relevance.

Among His innumerable labors as head of an emerging world religion, including His extensive writings and communications (an estimated 30,000 tablets), international travel to spread the Faith, and administering to the daily needs of the poor of His own community, Akká, 'Abdu'l-Bahá found time to put into practice many of the Bahá'í principles of rural development in a village about 100 kilometers from His home.

In 1901, 'Abdu'l-Bahá purchased the lands of 'Adasiyyah as a whole village estate, paying 400 Turkish gold lira. The village is situated southeast of the Sea of Galilee and south of the River Yarmuk at the north end of the Jordan River, very close to the current border between Israel and Jordan. The original area purchased was 920 hectares; however, 'Abdu'l-Bahá immediately gave away 230 hectares, leaving a total of 690 hectares.<sup>11</sup>

The village was developed in several phases. At first, 'Abdu'l-Bahá made arrangements for several farmers to begin the work, but they found it very difficult due to the poor condition of the land and the heavy labor required. What is more, they were subject to raids by thieves who stole whatever meager crops they were able to produce. In 1907, recognizing these obstacles, 'Abdu'l-Bahá contacted the Bahá'ís in Persia and asked them to send experienced farmers to settle in 'Adasiyyah.

Over the next couple of years a group of farmers from around Yazd began to arrive and commenced farm operations. 'Abdu'l-Bahá informed these farmers that they were coming to one of the most inhospitable places on Earth. In the Jordan Valley, the heat is stifling from June to September, with an average daily temperature around 38°C. Malaria was a significant problem. While the land had once been fertile and supported a large population, agriculture in the region had fallen into decline under Ottoman rule. A great deal of effort would be required to prepare the land, which was overgrown with scrub bush, much of it thorny. However, 'Abdu'l-Bahá had told them that God would gradually make the climate of 'Adasiyyah more comfortable, merely for the sake of the Bahá'í farmers from Iran!

These farmers would overcome many obstacles to implement the project planned and directed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. At first, hand labor with simple tools was used to prepare the land, but gradually draft animals and plows were added. They also had to build homes to provide for the basic needs of their families, and these and other buildings were initially made from mud brick.

Before the farmers started cultivation, 'Abdu'l-Bahá instructed them to meet, consult, and then divide the land among themselves. Every farmer was to take charge of a certain area of farmland in proportion to the size of his family. The average

allotment was based on units of 2.5–3 hectares, plus 3–6 hectares to grow food for their family and fodder for their livestock.

Precipitation was sufficient to support rain-fed grain production and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá recommended that the farmers begin by planting wheat and barley. Often the farmers visited Haifa or Akká to seek ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s advice. He would make a specific recommendation for that season, assuring them of a bumper harvest and great bounty. At times, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would form a partnership with a specific farmer for a certain crop, sharing expenses. These partnerships would often result in extremely high yields.

An important characteristic of the Jordan Valley is a year-round growing season, making double cropping feasible. Over time, the farmers were able to become quite productive and to produce surplus grain. Although some raiding continued to occur, security was improved by building bonds of friendship in the wider community, an activity ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had insisted on.

During the First World War, when drought conditions added to the disruption caused by the fighting, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá foresaw famine. He went to the farmers in ‘Adasiyyah and asked them to empty their granaries, excepting the amounts needed for their own use and for reseeded. He also asked them to purchase grain from farmers in the area. A train of 200 camels was dispatched to Haifa and Akká, where the grain was distributed among the local population, preventing starvation. This humanitarian effort resulted in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá being knighted by the British, who had gained control of Palestine during the war. He accepted the honor as the gift of a ‘just king’ but never used the title.

The farmers’ initial success opened new horizons. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá encouraged them to diversify their crops, and as early as 1910, they expanded into vegetable production for their families and for the market. In the beginning most farmers grew eggplant, which is easy to grow, requires little cultivation, has few pests, and produces an abundant crop. It is said the Bahá’í farmers were the first to introduce eggplant to the northwest of Jordan, Palestine, and the Golan Heights. Soon, wheat, barley, chickpeas, lentils, and broad beans were produced side by side with a wide variety of vegetables.

Next, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá encouraged the farmers to add fruit trees. He specifically instructed them to grow table grapes, oranges, lemons, tangerines, grapefruits, and limes. Fruit crops were more productive and fetched much higher prices than other farm products, especially the large yellow lemons and sesame seeds. It was customary to plant broad beans between and around pomegranate trees. Some were used fresh or dried for human consumption, but a large part of the crop was plowed into the soil while still green to improve soil texture and fertility.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá also introduced bananas to the region. During the last years of His life He received seven suckers from India. Without having ever grown bananas, He guided the farmers in ‘Adasiyyah in planting and caring for the new crop. He instructed the farmers to use the basin system of planting instead of the row system commonly used in other countries. The soil around a number of closely spaced trees was ridged up to form a small rectangular basin. The main advantage of the basin was that it held irrigation water for a longer time and allowed a gradual and slow infiltration of water into the soil.

Until that time no one in the region knew anything about this crop, let alone how to grow it. At first, the villagers were even unsure how to eat it, finding it quite unpalatable and hard to swallow—until they were shown that the outer skin must be



removed. Within a few years many farmers in the region were growing bananas and profited greatly from this relatively lucrative business.

Gradually, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's prediction of improving conditions came true. In the early years, malaria was rampant. Some of the Bahá'ís developed the disease and even succumbed to it. To address the problem, 'Abdu'l-Bahá instructed the community to plant a certain type of eucalyptus around the lagoon in the middle of 'Adasiyyah. This variety produces quinine in its leaves and branches, which acts as a deterrent to the malaria parasite. The trees grew quickly, sucking up large quantities of the mosquito-infested water. Gradually the incidence of malaria declined and disappeared. The trees also had a cooling effect on the surrounding area. An added benefit was the lumber, which was purchased by builders for use in ceiling trusses.

Along with the diversification of crops, 'Abdu'l-Bahá encouraged additional methods to improve the productivity and sustainability of the farms, such as crop rotation. The normal rotation practiced by the farmers in 'Adasiyyah for rain-fed crops was a succession of wheat, lentils, barley, chickpeas, vetch, and white maize. Clover and alfalfa were also included in rotations, and as green manure plow downs. Since the farmers used an intensive system of crop production, fields were rarely left fallow.

In addition to the use of nitrogen-fixing legumes in rotation, manure was added to increase the yields of crops. 'Abdu'l-Bahá encouraged the friends in 'Adasiyyah to diversify into livestock, and in due course every farm household reared cattle, sheep, goats, poultry, and pigeons, which, in addition to meat, milk, and eggs, produced the required amounts of manure. Pastoralists who lived in the vicinity also sold manure to the farmers of 'Adasiyyah.

The Bahá'í farmers were almost self-sufficient, in terms of their own food needs. However, 'Abdu'l-Bahá advised them to increase their income by selling products in markets beyond the immediate boundaries of Jordan. When the Bahá'í farmers sold their products in Akká, Tiberias, Haifa, or Damascus, they purchased some of their needs from the markets in these towns. This approach contributed to the regional economy.

A key to increasing the diversity of crops and improving yields was irrigation. The community worked together to build a small dam across a portion of the River Yarmuk and collaborated to dig and maintain irrigation channels. Eventually, tractors and electric lighting were introduced. 'Abdu'l-Bahá advised the villagers to engage in crafts and small industries. Many farmers were also artisans and a good number of them worked as part-time carpenters, while most of the women were engaged in needlework, dressmaking, and millinery.

Along with the gradually improving farming operations, 'Abdu'l-Bahá encouraged spiritual and social aspects of village life. Problems such as those related to tenancy, transfer of the right of production, and share of irrigation water, as well as interpersonal conflicts, are bound to arise in any village setting. When the Bahá'í farmers sought 'Abdu'l-Bahá's advice regarding these matters, He would smile and suggest that they should sit down and pray together, consult on the resolution of the problem, and ensure that the unity of the community was maintained no matter what.

The conditions of peasants, sharecroppers, and small farmers in 19th-century Jordan under the rule of the Ottoman Empire were wretched. The peasantry was liable to rapacious profiteering by landlords. 'Adasiyyah was a different story. The system of crop and animal production was based on a special type of sharecropping tenancy that was both innovative and fair. While the land was owned by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and those who farmed were sharecroppers, all phases of production were planned and executed

by the farmers, and seed, water, manure, and labor were provided by them. Initially, one third of the returns from farming were paid to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, but after World War I, 'Abdu'l-Bahá reduced His own share, so that 80% of net income would go to the farmers. 'Abdu'l-Bahá recommended that the farmers pay their laborers a portion of their profit, in addition to wages. He told them that if they did not do so, one day these day farm laborers would come and take their share by force!

'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasized the application of moral and spiritual values in day-to-day life and farm work. These values had a significant influence on the production and marketing systems of the farmers, improving their fortunes. Furthermore, He strongly recommended that they establish warm bonds of friendship with the people they met or had business dealings with and conduct all their affairs with high rectitude of conduct.

In view of His great interest in rural and agricultural development, 'Abdu'l-Bahá would occasionally visit the village. The Bahá'í community would then hold 19-Day Feasts and other Bahá'í meetings in His presence. His first visit was in 1914 and lasted for almost a month. During his last visit, in 1920, Shoghi Effendi accompanied him,<sup>12</sup> and they both inspected the area on horseback. Shoghi Effendi continued to advise the community throughout his ministry.

At its peak there were around 1,000 people in the village and surrounding area. The first Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of 'Adasiyyah was elected in 1924 to direct the affairs of the community. All matters relating to farming and animal production, including allotments of land, were discussed and conducted by a farming committee working under the auspices of the Assembly. A spacious two-story building erected and completed in 1931 was dedicated for use as a local Bahá'í administrative center, or Haziratu'l-Quds.

In the early days, the education of the children took place at home. It was the task of the parents and older members of the family to educate the younger ones. In this respect, the mother of the family played a significant role. In the evenings, the Bahá'ís, irrespective of age, attended literacy classes. At a later stage, a school was set up for classes from grades one to nine, with a higher grade for those wishing to advance further. Teachers were selected from the community and outside, and education was provided free of charge.

It is reported that Shoghi Effendi repeatedly emphasized that since 'Adasiyyah was in the midst of an Arabic-speaking population, it was important that children were taught Arabic so that they could easily mix with the local people and establish friendships with them. In 1934, the Spiritual Assembly hired a graduate from the Kulliyah School in Beirut to teach Arabic and English.

Much of the curriculum was based on the Persian and Arabic writings of the central figures of the Bahá'í Faith, and most children could easily recite by heart some thirty tablets of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Girls attended a different class from the boys. Normally the boys would be in the school in the mornings learning Persian, Arabic, and Bahá'í laws and teachings, while the girls were learning English, geography, history, mathematics, and sciences. This arrangement was reversed in the afternoons.

Shoghi Effendi used to recommend that the farmers, as well as their sons and daughters, study agriculture and learn about appropriate methods and techniques so that they could enhance the development of agriculture and spearhead rural change in their area.

During the lifetimes of both ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, agricultural development and implementation of rural development programs attracted the attention of many people near and far. ‘Adasiyyah soon became an agricultural showplace for the whole of Jordan. If the government wished to show how advanced it was in agricultural production and farming techniques, it would bring foreign guests and dignitaries to ‘Adasiyyah, a brilliant star in an otherwise semi-arid scrubland. Even members of the royal family visited the village.

Ultimately due to Jordanian land reforms in the 1960s, the Bahá’ís were not able to continue to live in ‘Adasiyyah and moved to other areas, or even other countries, to support the worldwide growth of the Bahá’í faith. However, the principles and practices of village life and farming initiated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the village still offer a relevant example of just, productive, and sustainable rural development applicable to one third of humanity, the smallholder farmers who produce much of the world’s food. In fact, the development principles followed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá addressed a range of social and ecological concerns that have since intensified. The redevelopment of ‘Adasiyyah accomplished three things that, if replicated, would greatly contribute to the development of rural areas and the world:

## **1. Ecological and climate services**

With the encouragement of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the community of ‘Adasiyyah restored degraded, eroded, and deforested land, improved soil quality, improved water use efficiency, and increased crop diversity, including the use of perennial tree crops and forages. Today, this approach, which requires minimal external inputs, is known as agroecology, an effort to farm in a manner that mimics the functions of the natural ecosystem.

The distinguished soil scientist Rattan Lal has estimated that the technical potential of a range of measures to increase carbon sequestration in croplands, forests, and grasslands—not unlike those adopted in ‘Adasiyyah—is greater than the net annual increase in atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>.<sup>13</sup> If smallholder farmers were paid for climate and ecological services, this would be a low-cost approach to climate change mitigation. It would also increase food production and raise the living standard of farmers. The potential of this approach is large. Lal estimates that 3.5 billion hectares, close to one quarter of Earth’s land surface, are degraded and desertified lands. Applying low-input farming methods such as those used in ‘Adasiyyah to these lands could provide opportunities for rural people, especially rural youth, to restore ecosystem services, increase biodiversity, mitigate climate change, and increase the food supply.

## **2. Social-economic development**

The initial capital investment by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was the catalyst that allowed families in ‘Adasiyyah to prosper. They were able to transform scrubland into a productive farm that eventually supported hundreds of residents and contributed to the local and regional economy. The farm provided high-quality food for the village and urban areas. The generous sharecropping arrangement and profit sharing improved the standard of living of residents and non-resident farm laborers.

Small investments in smallholder farms and villages could eliminate extreme poverty while improving productivity, assuring a sustainable food supply for a

burgeoning world population. Rattan Lal estimates that green investments of as little as \$25 per smallholder farm would facilitate the adoption of sustainable methods.<sup>14</sup>

### **3. Moral capacity**

Material self-reliance brings a sense of dignity. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá went further, encouraging the residents of ‘Adasiyyah to pay equal attention to their moral development. This was achieved through education, both material and spiritual, for the children, youth, and adults, and through regular devotional meetings. Education supported a dual moral purpose: to develop the potentialities of the individual and to enhance their capacity to be of service. Building this capacity helped community members to live harmoniously. A local governing institution was elected to administer the material and spiritual needs of the community. In this way, the moral capacity of the individual, the community, and its institutions increased.

## **Bahá’ís and Rural Development Today**

Through the years, the Bahá’í world community has made significant efforts to put the Bahá’í teachings on rural development into practice. As previously mentioned, these efforts are still in the early stages; however, the holistic development process is now intensifying in thousands of communities around the world, in several ways.

### **Establishing Communities and Institutions**

From the early days of the Bahá’í dispensation, Bahá’ís began to travel and relocate to communities around the world in order to fulfill the wish of Bahá’u’lláh to bring the faith to every spot in the world. During the First World War, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote a series of letters, known as the Tablets of the Divine Plan, urging Bahá’ís to fan out throughout the world to deliver the Bahá’í message. Later, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice devised a series of plans that saw Bahá’ís locate in every country and territory in the world, even in the most remote regions. Today, Bahá’ís live in more than 100,000 communities throughout the world and have formed 15,000 Local Spiritual Assemblies.

The thousands of Bahá’í communities in rural areas are slowly but surely developing institutions and capacities to create a new world order based on Bahá’u’lláh’s vision. Throughout the Bahá’í world, establishing an effective training institute is a priority and a key to sustained growth. By 2016, 1,500 intensive programs of growth associated with the training institute were established in clusters of communities throughout the world. The goal for 2021 is to have intensive programs of growth in 5,000 of these small geographic areas. In the most advanced, transformation at the level of culture is already occurring. What does this process look like?

The training institute is an inclusive, grassroots educational movement that is free or low-cost for participants. It is particularly active in places like Bihar Sharif, India—the site of one of the new local Houses of Worship. In Bihar, more than 50% of the population live on an income below US\$1.25 a day. The illiteracy rate, at 60%, is one of the highest in India. Village schools typically have one teacher per hundred students spread across eight grades. The strong influence of caste and religious prejudice often leads to social tension and violence, and women are particularly

disadvantaged and at risk. Such conditions result in receptivity to constructive change and openness to opportunities for learning.

With some 6,000 people in Bihar Sharif participating in the four core components of the institute's program, significant transformation is under way in several areas. The training institute has helped not only to reinforce positive elements of traditional culture but also to renew certain common cultural practices. In light of the Bahá'í teachings on the oneness of humankind, caste prejudice is being set aside. Perhaps the most significant changes have occurred in relation to the status of women. In this community, women's activities were mainly restricted to the home, but with the institute program, women began to leave the home to study and were soon tutoring programs themselves and facilitating children and youth groups. Girls were encouraged to participate along with the boys. The practice of arranged marriages of girls at a very young age has declined, and women are now able to choose their partners with their parents' blessing. Costly marriage ceremonies and substantial dowries often resulted in families having to sell land to raise money, undermining their ability to make a living. In keeping with Bahá'í principles, simpler ceremonies and reduced dowries have relieved pressures on families with girls. Efforts are also being made to include youth in decision making, which was traditionally done only by elders.

Efforts to improve the status of women are very important for rural development and poverty reduction. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, supporting women to achieve an equal status with male farmers, and equal access to resources, can lead to increases in farm yields by 20 to 30%.

These improvements also contribute to a richer life for villagers, especially youth, and can reduce rural to urban migration. Importantly, all these factors also contribute to lower birth rates, helping to control overpopulation.

Ultimately, sufficient capacity can be developed to make it possible to engage in significant social action to address problems identified in local communities.

## Social action

Over the years, many Bahá'ís have taken action as individuals, through their professions or as participants in non-governmental organizations, to foster rural development.

A pioneer in this field was Richard St. Barbe Baker, known as the Man of the Trees, one of the most notable figures in the conservation movement in the 20th century.<sup>15</sup> As assistant conservator of forests in Kenya and later Nigeria, Baker developed sustainable farming methods that would today be described as agroforestry and incorporated then-unknown concepts like fair trade and cultural and ecological tourism in his development model. He is also considered one of the fathers of the organic farming movement in Britain. The conservation organization he started in 1922 with Chief Josiah Njonjo, the Men of the Trees, was among the first international environmental non-governmental organizations, with members in more than one hundred countries. It is estimated that billions of trees were planted during his lifetime and since then by people he inspired and by organizations he founded or advised and assisted. Dr. Baker became a Bahá'í in the 1920s and was profoundly influenced by his contact with the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, Shoghi Effendi, who was the first life member of the Men of the Trees.

Baker mentored many people who continue to realize his vision today. Hugh Locke, for example, founded the Smallholder Farmer's Alliance in Haiti, with Timote Georges. The SFA applies a social enterprise model to help feed and reforest a renewed Haiti by establishing farmer cooperatives, building agricultural export markets, creating rural farm businesses, and contributing to community development. With 3,200 farmer members, 46% women, the SFA has established 19 tree nurseries and planted close to 6 million trees since 2010. Farmer members have achieved 40% estimated average increase in crop yields and 50% estimated average increase in household incomes.

Some 3,400 additional children of farmer-members are now in school as a result of improved incomes. The SFA has equal but separate membership for husband and wife farming partners, in addition to a micro-credit program, which includes leadership and business training, that is exclusively for women. What began as externally applied rules has begun to change cultural norms regarding the status of women, one community at a time.

Many Bahá'ís have made significant contributions to rural communities as individuals. For example, in Fiji, Austin Bowden-Kirby, a marine biologist, is director of the Coral Gardens Initiative. Coral reefs are among the most endangered ecosystems in the world. Their erosion in turn leads to the depletion of fisheries, undermining the economies of fishing communities. Bowden-Kerby, whose methods for restoring coral reefs received a National Geographic Ashoka Changemakers Award for environmental protection, now operates the 35-acre Sustainable Environmental Livelihoods Farm. The farm combines traditional permaculture with new methods and species that aim to reduce land-based threats to coral reefs, such as deforestation and poor agricultural practices that result in muddy, polluted runoff.

Bahá'í-inspired institutions have also launched development projects. The Barli Development Institute for Rural Women, for example, was started in 1985 by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India. In 2001, it became an independent NGO. Based in Indore, the Institute has completed 105 residential training programs for more than 6,700 young women from 600 villages of Madhya Pradesh and other parts of India. Twice a year, women make the institute their home for six months and learn about farming, health care, hygiene, and business. Back in their villages, 95% of participants have used their new skills to generate income and many share their learning with the community. This has led to important improvements in living standards, including health. For example, Guinea worm disease has been eliminated from 302 villages through the efforts of Barli graduates working in collaboration with government agencies.

Another Bahá'í-inspired organization of particular note is FUNDAEC, possibly the most systematic effort yet in the Bahá'í world to generate knowledge about effective rural development processes. FUNDAEC, the Spanish acronym for "The Foundation for the Application and Teaching of the Sciences", is a not-for-profit, non-governmental organization dedicated to fostering processes of learning, training, and development in the rural areas of Latin America.

FUNDAEC started in Colombia in the early 1970s with the aim of incorporating science, technology, and education in rural development. Using a balanced approach to the material and spiritual dimensions of development, it aims to raise the capacity of rural communities to define their own development paths and priorities. It does this through training programs—honed through action research—in alternative agricultural production, agroindustry, community organization, and formal education.

Its two main programs are the Tutorial Learning System (better known by its Spanish acronym, SAT), an innovative secondary level educational system used by more than 25,000 students throughout the Americas, and the University Center for Rural Well-Being (CUBR) for advanced training. One objective of these programs is to reduce rural-to-urban migration by creating more meaningful opportunities for youth and families in rural communities.

FUNDEAC's development has been closely associated with the Ruhi training institute, which also started in Colombia. Together, the two were instrumental in creating conditions that led to the construction of the local Bahá'í House of Worship in Norte del Cauca, Colombia.

## Participation in public discourse

Bahá'ís also engage in public discourse on the subject of rural development. The Bahá'í International Community (BIC), for instance, works with the United Nations in focus areas such as Realizing the Equality of Women and Men, Development and Community Building, Youth as Protagonists of Constructive Change, Religion in the Life of Society, and Human Rights and the Wellbeing of Humanity.

The BIC has issued a number of statements relevant to the theme of rural development. For example, *From Deficit to Abundance: Seeing Capacity for Meaningful Contributions in all Populations and People* was contributed to the 55th Session of the UN Commission for Social Development in 2017. It argues that the global community tends to look at issues of development from a position of deficit—that, for example, there is insufficient wealth available to finance development, while in fact there is an abundance of wealth. However, it becomes inaccessible when it accumulates in the hands of the wealthiest segment of society.

The statement goes on to argue for a new approach to development, involving an expansion of conceptions of expertise and sources of solutions. International fora often seek solutions from a relatively narrow set of sources. Research academics and policy specialists offer contributions that are valuable, but over-reliance on such resources can impoverish a discourse, leading to fixation on technical recipes and policy fixes. The BIC points out that insight is generated also by communities working to nurture more humane patterns of social interaction, by individuals striving to build capacity in others and by institutions seeking to apply traditional knowledge to contemporary challenges. Expertise of these kinds must be consciously sought and included in global discourse. Along these lines, the statement recommends that development agencies seek solutions from low-income populations themselves.

A major thrust of the Bahá'í contributions to the discourse on rural development and other global issues is an argument that the international community needs to review the framework for collective thought and action. Deep reflection, woven into the ongoing functioning of the entire United Nations system, will be needed. Notable progress was made over the course of the Millennium Development Goals, but the Sustainable Development Goals demand even wider vision and more creative thinking. “It is time, then, to reassess foundational beliefs about ourselves, the nature of our relationships, and the realities shaping the world we live in,” states the BIC. “Only in this way can the groundwork for true and sustainable progress be laid.”

In addition to the contributions of the BIC to the discourse on rural development, Bahá'í-inspired organizations such as the International Environment Forum (IEF) and Ethical Business Building the Future (EBBF) participate in various fora, large and small,

dealing with preservation of the natural environment, agriculture, and “rurality”. In the United States, the Wilmette Institute has sponsored three courses on Bahá’í perspectives on agriculture and food. The courses have drawn participants from a number of countries, who study the Bahá’í teachings on these topics in depth, share their understanding, and often carry out projects to share their learning with others or initiate action.

## Contributing to The Process of Rural Reconstruction

As previously mentioned, Bahá’u’lláh stated that agriculture and other work done in the spirit of service are considered forms of worship. This connection between service and worship is central to the function of the local Bahá’í Houses of Worship beginning to appear in rural communities around the world.

The Universal House of Justice points out that worship, though essential to the inner life of the human being and vital to spiritual development, must also lead to deeds that give outward expression to that inner transformation. The principle remains, however, that the spiritual precedes the material. First comes the illumination of hearts and minds by the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh and then the grassroots stirring of the believers wishing to apply these teachings to the daily life of their communities.

We can see this process in operation in the lead up to the construction of the local House of Worship in Norte del Cauca. Parallel to its involvement with the temple, the community undertook a reforestation project, creating a “Bosque Nativo,” or native forest, on an 11-hectare piece of land adjacent to the Temple site. The aim of this service project was to reintroduce native vegetation that has been decimated by years of monoculture plantations of sugarcane.<sup>16</sup>

In the years since the reforestation project began, a number of plants have been recovered, some of which had been thought to be almost entirely lost to the northern region of Colombia. Local traditional farmers have supported the initiative, because they want to guarantee that future generations will know about these species that made up Norte del Cauca’s rich ecological diversity until recent decades. As one local farmer put it, “This native forest that we are going to grow should be a school, should be a place of learning.” People from neighboring villages donated seeds and plants for the land around the Temple, including the near-extinct “Burilico” tree, and local volunteers constructed a greenhouse.

These processes that ran in parallel with the construction of the House of Worship have already served to carry out its purpose, developing in the children, youth, and adults who live nearby an appreciation for the importance of a life centered on worship of God and service to humanity.

In this combination of service and worship we see an example of the reconstruction of rural life envisioned by Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá taking shape. As programs of growth expand in Bahá’í communities throughout the world and conditions are created for the establishment of Mashriqu’l-Adhkár in thousands of locations, the Bahá’ís are building capacity to make a meaningful contribution to the renewal of rural life worldwide.

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## Notes



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