

Foundations for Baha'i Community Development

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Introduction

Development of basic planning and evaluation skills is in keeping with the primary emphasis of the Four Year Plan, namely the development of human resources using the medium of teaching institutes. The utilization of problem-solving oriented participative methods in developing these skills will assist the Bahá'í communities to move gradually from their current charismatic administrative orientation to a systematic administrative orientation diminishing the community's reliance on a small handful of overworked and generally highly mobile believers. The shift will, at the same time, contribute to increasing universal participation, which is one of the stated aims of community development.

The paper intends to briefly describe key steps of a planning and evaluation framework as a tool for community development. Communities need to undergo some training in planning and evaluation skills in accordance with the basic principles outlined in the House of Justice's 1985 *The Promise of World Peace* message and the letter from the International Teaching Center titled *The Complementary Elements of Teaching*.

Any well-intentioned group can in a general sense devise practical solutions to its problems, but good intentions and practical knowledge are usually not enough. The essential merit of spiritual principle is that it not only presents a perspective which harmonizes with that which is immanent in human nature, it also induces an attitude, a dynamic, a will, an aspiration, which facilitate the discovery and implementation of practical measures. Leaders of governments and all in authority would be well served in their efforts to solve problems if they would first seek to identify the principles involved and then be guided by them. (*The Promise of World Peace*)

The development of approaches and methods best suited for introducing the Faith... and later on, for deepening them needs considered thought and consultation and such a development of individuals and communities requires

- adopt(ion of) the posture of learners
- systematically reflecting upon the results of each endeavour
- incorporating in successive plans the fruits of their experience

- the atmosphere in which this learning can take place is one of trust, unity, humility, submission to the Will of God and consultation informed by experience in light of the wisdom enshrined in the Teachings. (*The Complementary Elements of Teaching*)

The implementation of any approach must be guided by the exercise of wisdom and patience, and the avoidance of an adversarial attitude in relation to the Assembly and the Bahá'í community. In "*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*", (1) p. 343, Bahá'u'lláh counsels the believers to avoid two extremes of behaviour in relation to the Faith. He states:

In this day, We can neither approve the conduct of the fearful that seeketh to dissemble his faith, nor sanction the behaviour of the avowed believer that clamorously asserteth his allegiance to this Cause. Both should observe the dictates of wisdom, and strive diligently to serve the best interests of the Faith.

The Transition to the Fourth Epoch

The transition from the Third to the Fourth Epoch was signaled by the Universal House of Justice when the letter on Social and Economic Development was released to the Bahá'í world on 20th October 1983, thus initiating the process of integration of the spiritual and socio-economic life of the Bahá'í communities and setting the stage for moving towards planning at the continental and national level with participation of the local communities.

Till 1986, the goals and objectives and the key strategies for the global plans were developed at the Bahá'í World Centre level and then distributed to the national levels where these were then adapted to the local situation. Plans of action were developed at the national and regional levels in consultation with the Counsellors and sent to Local Spiritual Assemblies. At this level, with the assistance and stimulation of the Auxiliary Board and their assistants, (who serve as the neuromuscular junction between the appointed and elected arms of the Administrative Order completing the feedback loop,) these plans were implemented in the best way possible within the capacity and resources of the community and its ability to attract the resources from the Concourse on High.

From 1986, the process of developing global plans underwent a significant change and the determination of the actual goals and objectives was done at the continental and national levels with the aims and clear guidelines defined by the various agencies at the Bahá'í World Center and approved by the Universal House of Justice. The Ridvan Messages from 1988 onwards began to set the stage to mobilize and motivate the Bahá'ís communities to acquire an understanding of the role of process in the development of Bahá'í communities and the growth and expansion of the Faith. The messages also emphatically promoted more and more participation of the community levels in the assessment and development of plans, in the selection of locally appropriate strategies and in the formulation and implementation of the activities to achieve expansion, growth and consolidation of the Faith. (Ridvan Message 1990).

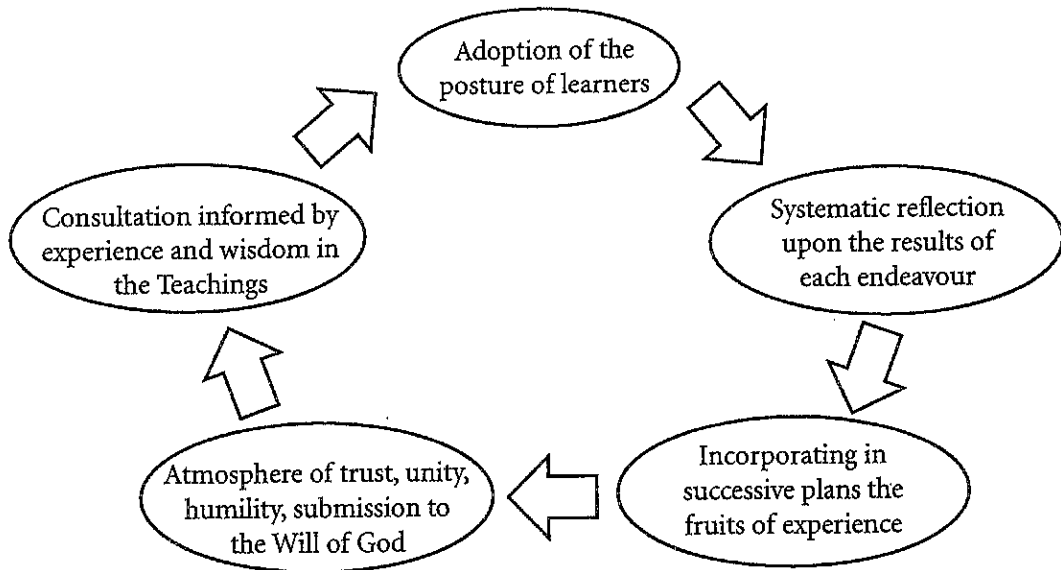
As these plans were developed through employing a variety of participative processes involving the communities and their Assemblies and were catalyzed by the Boards at the continental and community levels, a local sense of collective and individual ownership of the plans became more obvious. Anecdotal evidence of the increasing commitment to these plans began to emerge as communities and individuals began to mobilize and commit resources to the achievement of these objectives and plans at the local level. These plans also raised awareness that development of human resources at the individual and community level and the related planning and community development skills such as needs assessment, planning, coordinating, resource allocation and consultation were essential if the Bahá'í communities were to shift from the charismatic to the systematic approach where charisma would be at the service of a dynamic, evolving and responsive Bahá'í Administrative System instead of the other way around.

During this period of transition from the Third to the Fourth Epoch, three distinct processes began to emerge.

- The development of the Bahá'í World Order through the increased participation of the national and community units in the planning, implementing and evaluation processes,
- The systematic development of human resources through the actions of the Continental Counsellors and their Auxiliary Boards and assistants and
- The acceleration of the individual's spiritual development and closer connectivity to the Center of the Covenant through the worldwide application of the Law of the Huquq.

Development of planning and evaluation skills employing the process of consultation within the context of the earlier statements from the Universal House of Justice and the International Teaching Center, provides the necessary fulcrum to integrate the various individual, community and administration development processes so as to develop the necessary human resources within the context of a developing community to accelerate the process of entry by troops. In light of the above, the following key steps are being offered as the basic framework for community development.

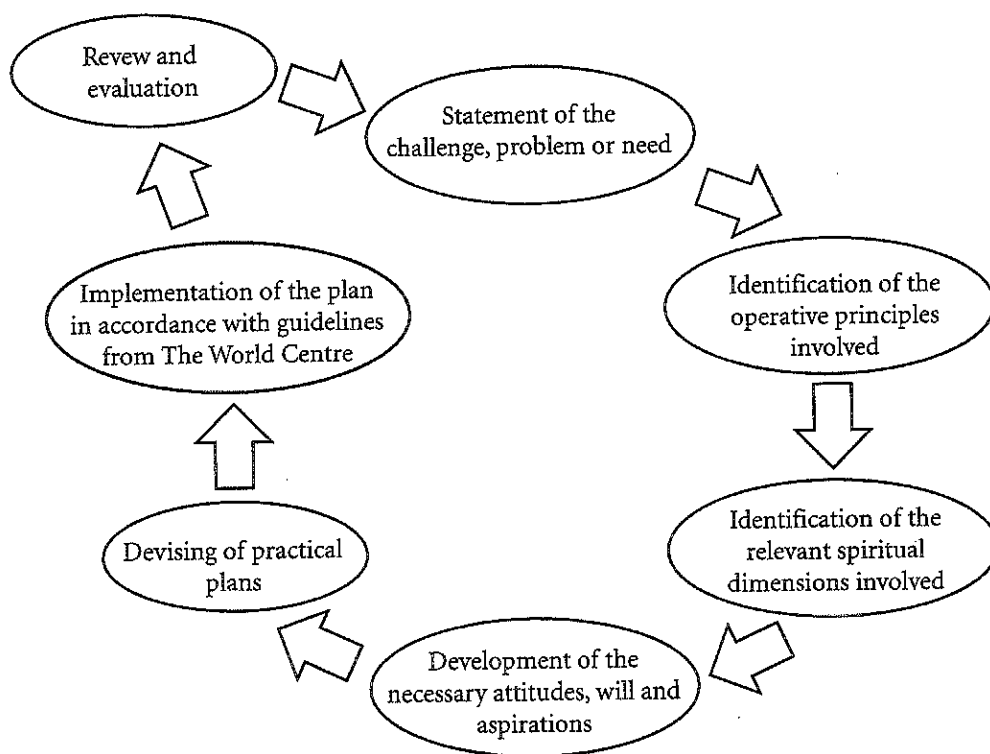
The Planning and Evaluation Cycle



The above illustration shows that evaluation need not be a fault-finding or punitive activity and that it really begins at the individual level by the adoption of a posture of learners. Such an attitude is also operational at the institutional level. Once the right attitude is adopted, the next step that naturally flows from that learning posture is a systematic reflection on what has been achieved, fully or partially. It allows all the protagonists to participate in identifying factors that influenced such achievement, providing the basis for the next step. The next step is the incorporation of the lessons learned from the systematic reflection exercise to gain a deeper understanding about the present situation and what more needs to be done or could have been done. This leads to the succeeding step, which is reliance on God and the generation of an appropriate atmosphere of trust, unity and humility. In such an atmosphere, the lessons learned are examined. From this, additions, changes, adaptations and modifications in plans, strategies, approaches, and other necessary remedial actions required are agreed upon. The conclusions and lessons are then reviewed, using consultation but always in light of experience and the wisdom enshrined in the Writings, setting the stage for the next cycle, namely the planning cycle by which new plans of action are developed.

Following this reflection exercise and the learning that results from such an exercise, the planning cycle is then initiated. This is depicted below. The Planning Cycle operationalizes the review experience and moves learning and intention to action. There are six steps in this cycle.

The Planning Cycle



1. Statement of the challenge/problem/needs.

To achieve this step in the planning cycle the review/evaluation process is crucial as it shifts this step from imagination and speculation, “idle fancies and vain imagining” to lessons learned from fruits of experience and results of each endeavour within the appropriate atmosphere and an attitude of learning.

2. Identification of the basic operative principles involved and determination of the extent of the operation of these principles.

Once there is agreement about the challenges, issues and needs and these are stated in simple and clear terms that all can agree with, the spiritual principles underlying these problems, challenges, needs are identified through a study and analysis of the relevant Writings and guidance from various agencies of the Faith. Next the extent of the operation of these principles in the current situation is determined using the process of consultation and a common vision is allowed to emerge. At this stage a number of aims and goals begin to emerge around which strategies and approaches can be clustered.

3. Clarification and further identification of the spiritual dimensions of the operative principles to get in touch with "that which is immanent within us".

In the *Prosperity of Humankind*, it is made quite clear that until and unless that spiritual within us can be invoked, the motivation based on material incentives alone can awaken the dormant mercenary tendencies with detrimental effects on participation, commitment and sacrifice necessary for the implementation of any plan of action. Hence, during this stage, the spiritual dimension of the operating principles are clearly identified and the spiritual within each fellow worker is invoked.

4. Development of the necessary attitudes and will.

During this step, which is invariably absent in the contemporary planning cycles, building on the third step, considerable effort is made to develop appropriate attitudes that will be required to pursue such an undertaking. Some of these attitudes have been referred to in the evaluation portion of the cycle but other attitudes that affect cooperation, working with people with different backgrounds, working under pressure, and working with people of differing experiences and skills and capacities will need to be developed. Attitudes are crucial for the strengthening of one's will to do something. And will is a crucial ingredient for action. During this stage, consultation, team building, skill development, an intensification of the unifying vision and a development and learning orientation are the tools employed.

5. Devising of practical plans.

After completing the third and fourth steps, the group is ready to develop plans of action using the methods and tools developed by the International Teaching Center, looking at goals, objectives, lines of action and plans of activities and the guidelines provided by the OSED, along with the guidelines provided by the ITC through the ABMs and the assistants about planning at the Spiritual Assembly level. The emphasis of these plans is that they are practical and achievable within the resources (spiritual and material) of the community with built-in indicators to allow the measurement of progress made and when the plans will be reviewed and systematically reflected upon.

6. Implementation of the plans in accordance with guidelines provided by the International Teaching Centre.

This is the action stage where the plans of action are implemented using the guidelines provided by the ITC on project development and implementation and the human resources development materials prepared in January 1992.

Framework for Developing Capacity in Planning: Implementing and Monitoring Community Development and Maintenance Activities

The development of these evaluation and planning skills needs to be nested in a systematic programme framework that, with the approval of the National Spiritual Assembly and the Counselors, could be implemented in receptive Local Spiritual Assembly areas in a phased manner. A draft framework is proposed below:

The key steps of the framework are:

1. A pre-assessment to identify communities that have potential for setting up and sustaining a community development programme in areas such as health, education, women's development, support groups, cottage industry or agriculture. This step should look at the establishment of criteria for the selection of a community where such a programme will be set up. The criteria should assist in determining which of the identified communities are willing and able to undertake such a project. The following should be included at least:

- reports from ABMs, assistants, travel teachers and other visitors about the cohesiveness and unity of the community.
- functioning of the Assembly and the community in terms of the key activities of a functioning as a community in accordance with the guidelines provided by the Universal House of Justice.
- size of the community (this will have a bearing on financial and resource independence so as to sustain the programme).
- distance of the community from strong LSA/community or capital city (this will have a bearing on the support and encouragement the community will receive).
- ability of the Assembly to collect funds and administer them without assistance from national institutions.
- a previous history of self-help activities in the community that was initiated by the community.
- availability of local resources that could be accessed by the Assembly and community for the programme.

2. A community needs assessment. This is a participative activity in which the community is involved in determining its needs and capacities to set up and operate a community development programme. The following areas will need to be looked at:

- community identification of the problems/challenges being faced by the Bahá'í community within the framework of the problems/challenges faced by the community at large.
- prioritization of these challenges by the community and the Assembly with a particular emphasis on health related issues.
- determining the extent, nature and severity of the problem(s) in terms of the community and resources required by a simple baseline assessment of the problem to determine which factors contribute to the problem and which of these factors can be influenced to reduce the extent and severity of the problem.
- validating in collaboration with the community the willingness and ability of the community and the Assembly in light of the criteria drawn up during the pre-assessment phase.

3. The development of a solution(s) to address the priority problem.

- a community meeting to brainstorm on possible solutions involving the LSA.
- a ranking of the possible/feasible solutions to address the problem using a ranking order approach.
- selection of one solution that could be adopted by the community considering the resources available in terms of manpower, materials and money.
- determining the type of community organization that will be required to plan, implement and monitor the activities of the programme.

4. The development of the plan of action: This would involve listing the actions that need to be carried out to address the problem selected by the community.

- a clear declaration of what the community wants to achieve stated in terms of time and resources that addresses the prioritized problem.
- an agreed statement of the approach that is going to be adopted stated in terms of the selected solution and type of organization agreed by the community.

- a sequence of actions that need to be carried out to implement the solution.
- a list of resources required and the source for these resources for each action.
- the person(s) or group responsible for each action listed.
- a deadline or timeframe by which the action needs to be carried out.
- the person(s) of the group that will monitor how the activity is being carried and whether it is on time. (This is to ensure that other activities that depend on one activity do not get delayed)
- a simple measure for each action, achievement of which will tell the person(s) or group whether they have finished the activity or not.

5. The assessment of progress on each action of the plan. This will require the determination by the community and advisers, those who will be responsible, to measure progress and suggest any changes in direction or approach if required.

- who is going to be responsible for achievement of the overall plan of action?
- how will each person responsible for an action assess how much progress has been made and who to ask for assistance if there is a problem.
- regular meetings of the planning team and community to report on progress and check if things are going along as planned.
- checking if all the resources required are available and if not what steps need to be taken to obtain these resources.
- meetings to resolve problems and misunderstandings that may arise during the implementation of the programme.

Summary of the Steps for Evaluation and Planning Based on the Letter *The Complementary Elements of Teaching and The Promise of World Peace.*

- The generation of the appropriate attitudes through the “adoption of the posture of learners.”
- Review of the implemented activities and lines of action through a “systematic reflecting upon the results of each endeavour.”

- Derivation of the lessons learned for “incorporating in successive plans the fruits of experience.”
- Creation of the atmosphere “of trust, unity, humility, submission to the Will of God” to prepare for subsequent planning activities.
- Consultation informed by experience in light of the wisdom enshrined in the Teachings to carry out planning and implementation within the following framework.
 1. Statement of the challenge/problem/needs. (Use of the Project Planning Cycle)
 2. Identification of the basic operative principles involved and determination of the extent of the operation of these principles. (Use of the Project Planning Cycle)
 3. Clarification and further identification of the spiritual dimensions of the operative principles to get in touch with “that which is immanent within us.”
 4. Development of the necessary attitudes and will.
 5. Devising of practical plans. (Use of the Project Planning Cycle)
 6. Implementation of the plans in accordance with guidelines provided by the International Teaching Centre. (Use of the Project Planning Cycle)
- Which then takes us back to the review and evaluation part of the cycle.

Draft Proposal for the Strengthening of the Planning, Implementation and Evaluation Capacity of the Local Bahá’í Administrative Institutions and Their Communities.

Regarding the sequence for the development of the proposal for the strengthening of the planning and evaluation capacity of the local Bahá’í administrative institutions and their communities in Japan, the following are the proposed steps for the consideration of the Counsellor and the National Spiritual Assembly.

Stage 1

The formation of the core group to initiate the planning for the development of a proposal for the consideration of the Counsellor and the National Spiritual Assembly to set up an ongoing programme for the Strengthening of the Planning and Evaluation Capacity of the local administrative units of the Bahá’í Faith in Japan.

Stage 2

The convening of a core group that will go through the project proposal development sequence to draft a proposal for the above programme.

Stage 3

The review, approval and funding of the project proposal by the National Spiritual Assembly. The formation of a task force or other entity to implement the project which would include if possible members of the core group.

Stage 4

Implementation of the project using a pilot approach and then a phased approach. Regular review of progress and the submission of progress reports. Regular monitoring of the project activities using locally developed indicators that will permit self-assessment of progress made supplemented by support and supervision by the implementation entity under the authority of the National Spiritual Assembly.

Stage 5

A post project evaluation with input from Counsellors and other guiding institutions of the Bahá'í Faith in the Asian Regions. (to be determined later)

Conclusion

Development of basic planning and evaluation skills is in keeping with the primary emphasis of the Four Year Plan in several ways: It develops human resources (as in the teaching institutes), and it strengthens both institutional and community functioning. It teaches problem-solving in a way that is based on community participation. In developing problem-solving skills in such a way, it moves individuals and then whole Bahá'í communities away from a reliance on a few key individuals to a systematic use of the full resources of the community. This strongly reduces reliance on a small handful of overworked believers (who not infrequently move to new locations, leaving behind unsolved problems). At the same time, it causes growth toward universal participation, a key goal of community development.

Planning and evaluation are twin processes crucial to community development. Communities wishing to develop may find it helpful to undergo basic training in planning and evaluation skills in accordance with principles outlined in the House of Justice's 1985 *The Promise of World Peace* message and the letter from International Teaching Center titled *The Complementary Elements of Teaching*. The key steps for the planning and evaluation as a part of community development are:

1. A preliminary assessment to identify which communities have potential for setting up and sustaining a community development program.
2. An assessment of the needs of a community. This is best done as a participative activity, i.e., the community should itself determine its needs and capacities to set up and operate a community development program.
3. The development of strategies and solutions to address the high-priority problems.
4. The development of a plan of action. It should list the actions that need to be carried out to address the high priority problems, which the community wishes to solve.
5. A plan to assess progress. For each action that the community decides to undertake it should determine how progress would be measured and who will be responsible for measuring progress. How will changes in direction or adoption of new plans be done?

Consultation bestows greater awareness and transmutes conjecture into certitude. It is a shining light, which, in a dark world, leads the way and guides. For everything there is and will continue to be a station of perfection and maturity. The maturity of the gift of understanding is made manifest through consultation.

(Bahá'u'lláh, in *The Promise of World Peace*, The Universal House of Justice, Section III)