



that boost the income of the bottom 40 percent of its population, then it is moving toward shared prosperity. So the goal combines the notions of rising prosperity and equity.’ ‘Ending extreme poverty’ is defined by him as ‘the percentage of people living with less than \$1.25 a day to fall to no more than 3 percent globally by 2030’. Promoting shared prosperity means ‘fostering income growth of the bottom 40 percent of the population in every country.’ He went on to say that ‘Ending extreme poverty within a generation and promoting shared prosperity must be achieved in such a way as to be sustainable over time and across generations. This requires promoting environmental, social, and fiscal sustainability. We need to secure the long-term future of our planet and its resources so future generations do not find themselves in a wasteland.’

The same theme was taken up by the UK Government, among other governments. In its Corporate Report: Economic development for shared prosperity and poverty reduction: a strategic framework<sup>4</sup> published on 31 January 2014 by the Department for International Development (DfID), it stated:

Economic development is key to eradicating poverty. Accelerating progress is essential if the goal of zero extreme poverty by 2030 is to be achieved. The evidence is clear that this will require much higher growth rates in many countries, more inclusive growth — in particular for girls and women, and actions to tackle the structural barriers that deny poor people the chance to raise their incomes and find jobs.

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The UK government can do more to help partner governments address the causes as well as the symptoms of poverty. This involves putting in place the building blocks that are crucial for countries to exit poverty: peace, the rule of law, property rights, stable business conditions, and honest and responsive governments, accountable to their citizens.

The Department for International Development’s (DFID) economic development strategic framework highlights the importance of the institutions that encourage private investment and export growth: free and fair markets; sound macroeconomic management; clear and consistently applied policies, regulations and laws; secure property rights; and functioning commercial courts.

The private sector is the engine of growth. Successful

businesses drive growth, create jobs and pay the taxes that finance services and investment ...

The concept of shared prosperity as explained by the organizations above stands in contrast to a view held by much of civil society, an example of which is the left-wing New Economy Working Group<sup>5</sup> whose agenda is to ‘Promote public values and policies that support an equitable distribution of money and real wealth to meet the needs of all.’

‘Extreme inequality in the distribution of wealth, income and opportunity,’ it says, ‘undermines and distorts all that we care about — democracy and civic life, economic health and vitality, ecological balance, and physical health and culture. Moving toward greater equality is critical to building healthy, democratic, and economically sustainable communities. The solution is not simply raising the floor and alleviating poverty, but directly addressing the overconcentration of wealth. Our team promotes a broad analysis of the impact of 202

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extreme inequalities and advocates for far-reaching policy interventions that broaden prosperity and redistribute dangerous concentrations of wealth.’

It frames its key proposals for sharing prosperity thus:

According to market fundamentalists, equality is not an issue. Dismissing the issue of a finite ecosystem, they believe that poverty is best ended by growing the economy to bring up the bottom. If we lived in a world of endless resources and open frontiers, this might be a possibility. This, however, is not our reality. In the absence of a strong commitment to policies that maintain an equitable distribution of income, conventional economic growth increases the wealth gap even as it destroys the environment.

Effective corrective action will require a number of approaches, including:

- o Income policies that assure every person access to an income adequate to meet basic needs and favour those who produce real value through productive work for example teachers, entrepreneurs, factory and service workers, family farmers, agricultural labourers, and hospital attendants — over those who profit from financial speculation and passive financial returns.
- o Progressive taxation and public spending policies that continuously recycle wealth from those who have far

more than they need at the top to those at the bottom who lack access to the basic essentials of a secure and fulfilling life.

- o Equitable development policies. Land use and regional development policies that limit sprawl, support multi-strata development, and prevent geographical division by class and race and between affluent and blighted neighbourhoods.

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- o Broad participation in ownership and access to commonwealth. Work and ownership policies that minimize the class divide by encouraging every person to engage in productive work and to share in the benefits and responsibilities of ownership. Broad access to the shared wealth of the commons is also essential.

The key concepts I derive from these reports and statements are:

From World Bank:

- o the key elements of shared prosperity are economic growth and equity
- o without sustained economic growth, poor people are unlikely to increase their living standards
- o living standards are linked to economic growth and that growth must be sustained
- o promoting shared prosperity means ‘fostering income growth of the bottom 40 percent of the population in every country’

From DIFD UK:

- o economic development is key to eradicating poverty
- o this will require much higher growth rates in many countries, more inclusive growth — in particular for girls and women, and actions to tackle the structural barriers that deny poor people the chance to raise their incomes and find jobs
- o The private sector is the engine of growth. Successful businesses drive growth, create jobs and pay the taxes that finance services and investment.

From New Economy Working Group:

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- o moving toward greater equality is critical to building healthy, democratic, and economically sustainable communities
- o the solution is not simply raising the floor and alleviating poverty, but directly addressing the over-concentration of wealth
- o it advocates for far-reaching policy interventions that

broaden prosperity and redistribute dangerous concentrations of wealth

Thus for all these agencies, prosperity is defined almost exclusively in terms of having enough money, or being enabled to find a way to access enough money, to buy enough goods and services to provide for one's and one's family's needs.

Shared prosperity is about money and enabling those without to have it or to have more, either by baking a bigger pie so that everyone can have a big enough piece to provide for his needs (economic growth) OR by transferring a proportion of the pie from those who have a large proportion to those who have none or hardly any. In both instances it is about getting money into the hands of people so that they can purchase the things they need to live, including basics such as food and shelter and healthcare, and the less tangible but still important 'secure and fulfilling life', 'democracy and civic life', 'economic health and vitality', 'ecological balance' and 'culture'.

Poverty is similarly defined as a lack of money or the things money can buy: as the Oxford Dictionary says, 'The condition of having little or no wealth or material possessions; indigence, destitution, want (in various degrees)'. 'Extreme poverty' is defined as 'living with less than \$1.25 a day'.

Using these definitions, the Save the Children report stated that 'The Millennium Development Goals have lifted 600 million people out of poverty ... the number of under-five deaths worldwide declined from nearly 12 million in 1990 to under 7 million in 2011, and an additional 56 million children

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enrolled in primary school from 1999 to 2009'. For these institutions, the goal of shared prosperity is:

- o increasing the welfare of the poor and vulnerable
- o raising living standards
- o building healthy, democratic, and economically sustainable communities

The ways to achieve these goals are:

- o sustained economic growth
- o sustainable growth that achieves the maximum possible increase in living standards of the less well-off (World Bank)
- o economic development
- o accelerated economic growth (DFID)
- o redistribution of wealth (NEWG)

These institutions identify the building blocks that are crucial for countries to exit poverty as:

- o peace
- o the rule of law

- o property rights
- o stable business conditions
- o honest and responsive governments, accountable to their citizens

They posit that the key elements that are required to eradicate poverty are:

- o social, economic, and institutional arrangements that foster welfare and income growth of the less well-off
- o generating jobs and economic opportunities

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- o an investment in people, to promote growth and equity over time and across generations with the aim of creating an ‘opportunity society’
- o implementing policies that create equality
- o creating conditions that enable women to contribute to their fullest potential
- o fostering an inclusive society
- o engaging and developing the private sector
- o developing institutions that encourage private investment and export growth
- o improving international rules for shared prosperity

These institutions consider that the instigators, or protagonists, of development are:

- o government
- o the private sector
- o investors
- o policy-makers

The Bahá’í approach

Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and centre your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements. [GWB 213]

Identifying the issue

While there is much congruence between the approach to shared prosperity of these organizations and that of the Bahá’í community, there are some key differences. Perhaps the most significant difference is in identifying what the core issue, or problem, actually is. The agencies described above, and many Shared Prosperity

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others like them, identify the core problem as poverty itself, which needs to be remedied urgently with a variety of measures including policy changes; transfers of wealth; educational, training and job opportunities; and economic growth. Bahá’ís, however, identify the core problem as something else entirely, requiring a completely different remedy:



which exists for many people who live in the wealthiest parts of the world.

#### Material and spiritual measures required

The Bahá'í International Community (BIC), the international NGO representing the worldwide Bahá'í community in global fora such as the United Nations, has for decades researched the Bahá'í teachings that inform Bahá'í thinking on current issues, including the economy, the prosperity of humankind and the eradication of extreme poverty. It has identified a number of principles and themes from the Bahá'í writings that bear on these complex issues. Far from being a set of theoretical, noble ideas, the insights offered by the Bahá'ís are born out of their experience of applying Bahá'í principles and teachings to their own reality. Bahá'ís are still in a 'learning mode' concerning these issues and are cautiously applying their learning and understanding to their own communities at the neighbourhood and local levels. What they have learned so far is that both material and spiritual measures are required to create shared prosperity.

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The Bahá'í community sees all the issues of the day as interrelated and requiring a holistic approach to their resolution, including 'an organic change in the structure of present-day society' [WOB 42]. It does not accept what it considers to be the 'erroneous belief that those with power and resources already possess everything needed for society to thrive' [BIC Document #12-1412]. It takes a nuanced approach to shared prosperity and poverty, does not seek simplistic answers nor does it offer any. It takes into account not just the physical and material aspects of human life but also the cultural, the emotional, the psychological and the ineffable. Viewed from this perspective, the current world situation is 'rooted' in the destructive 'values and attitudes that shape relationships at all levels of society', while 'poverty can be described as the absence of those ethical, social and material resources needed to develop the moral, intellectual and social capacities of individuals, communities and institutions' [BIC Document #08-0214].

The Bahá'í International Community confirms that a lack of material wealth creates personal suffering, damages individuals and communities and is a major obstacle to peace: 'To be sure, material wealth is of critical importance to the achievement of individual and collective goals; by the same token, a strong economy is a key component of a vibrant social order' [BIC Document #12-0201]. At the same time, as noted above, it

considers that the materialistic world view does not capture the totality of human experience and that the real causes of poverty cannot be conceived terms of a lack of material wealth alone.

The Bahá'í Office of Social and Economic Development points out:

To seek coherence between the spiritual and the material does not imply that the material goals of development are to be trivialized. It does require, however, the rejection of approaches to development which define it as the transfer to all societies of the ideological

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convictions, the social structures, the economic practices, the models of governance — in the final analysis, the very patterns of life — prevalent in certain highly industrialized regions of the world. [OSED, Social Action]

Thus the Bahá'í approach to shared prosperity is not the transfer of ideas or things from one community to another but a complete rethinking of the nature of prosperity, of the human being, of development and of civilization itself. That rethinking is to be informed by the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith.

#### Rethinking Prosperity

The Bahá'í community casts the concept of prosperity as a matter of justice and the realignment of values:

Divine justice will become manifest in human conditions and affairs, and all mankind will find comfort and enjoyment in life ... in the aggregate community there will be equalization and readjustment of values and interests. In the future there will be no very rich nor extremely poor. There will be an equilibrium of interests, and a condition will be established which will make both rich and poor comfortable and content. [PUP 132]

Prosperity is seen as an aspect of the 'ever-advancing civilization' which Bahá'u'lláh indicates 'all men have been created to carry forward'. [GWB 215] Such a civilization requires:

... the articulation of a vibrant and compelling vision of human prosperity at its widest and most inclusive. Such a vision must address the need for harmony between varying aspects of development (cultural, technological, economic, social, moral, spiritual), and must give rise to

a widely-shared sense of common purpose. This approach, based in a recognition of the capacity and responsibility of all to contribute to a better world transcends us/them patterns of thought that divide the world into ‘haves’ who grant opportunities for participation to the ‘have nots’. [BIC Document #12-1412]

The task of creating such prosperity is more than ‘appeals for action against the countless ills afflicting society. It must be galvanized by a vision of human prosperity in the fullest sense of the term — an awakening to the possibilities of the spiritual and material well-being now brought within grasp.’ [BIC Document #95-0303]

### Rethinking the nature of the human being

Fundamental to an understanding of the Bahá’í approach to shared prosperity and development is its concept of the nature of the human being. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the son Bahá’u’lláh, affirms that ‘there are two natures in man: the physical nature and the spiritual nature’ [SAQ 118] but that the enduring, eternal, essential reality of the human being is spiritual [‘Abdu’l-Bahá in BWF 262-3], that ‘Man is, in reality, a spiritual being’. [PT 72] Bahá’u’lláh asserts that the human being a ‘mine rich in gems of inestimable value’ that are to be dedicated to the service of humanity. [GWB 260]

Thus any vision of shared prosperity and development must be responsive to the reality of the spiritual nature of the human being. The prevailing theories and practices of development, however, tend to promote the satisfying of people’s material ambitions over their spiritual goals. It is the purpose of Bahá’í development processes to achieve shared prosperity to reverse this balance.

### Rethinking Development

Bahá’ís believe that ‘Every member of the human family has not only the right to benefit from a materially and spiritually prosperous civilization’ but also that such a civilization will ‘not emerge through the efforts exerted by a select group of nations or even a network of national and international agencies’. Rather, Bahá’ís understand that ‘the challenge must be faced by all of humanity’ and that every person has an ‘obligation to contribute’ towards the construction of that civilization’. ‘Social action should operate, then, on the principle of universal participation.’ [OSED, Social Action]

Bahá'ís see the purpose of development as contributing to the foundation for a new social and international order, capable of creating and sustaining conditions in which human beings can advance morally, culturally, and intellectually.

This purpose is rooted in the understanding that the transformation of society will involve profound changes in the individual as well as the deliberate and systematic re-creation of social structures.

Social change is not a project that one group of people carries out for the benefit of another. Enduring change depends upon coherent efforts to transform both the individual and society. Social change is neither the result of 'upgrading the individual' nor is it the result of an exclusive focus on reforming social and political structures. [BIC Document #11-0422]

### Rethinking Capacity-Building

Thus a key component of development is capacity-building within a population so that local people can develop the attitudes, knowledge and skills that will enable them to address the issues that affect them and then apply the most appropriate  
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measures to effect change for themselves. Central to the Bahá'í concept of capacity-building is that 'activities should start on a modest scale and only grow in complexity in keeping with available human resources' [Social Action]. This is very different from the practice of outside agencies providing communities with services such as water systems and schools, or individuals with loans and clothing. When viewed from a popular perspective, the Bahá'í approach of gradually building the capacity within a local community to create its own services and systems seems painfully slow and almost unfair, apparently depriving people from the very things that will enable them to progress quickly or to save lives. Yet it has often been seen that by focusing only on providing people with goods and services, the very people who should be the protagonists of development are disempowered and become dependent on outside agencies. While the goals of improving people's lives and their living conditions are important, to sustain that improvement by enabling people 'to contribute significantly to their own progress' [Social Action] is the fundamental goal of development for Bahá'ís.

For Bahá'ís, the sequence of courses provided by the Ruhi Institute has proved to be a most effective way to build

capacity gradually in individuals and in communities and to transfer these capacities to institutions.

### Rethinking Work

The concept of work, too, is recast by the Bahá'í approach such that it is not merely a means towards material ends:

Work needs to be seen not only as a means to securing an individual and family's basic needs, but also as a channel to developing one's craft, refining one's character, and contributing to the welfare and progress of society. Work, no matter how humble and simple, when performed with an attitude of service, is a means

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to contribute to the advancement of our communities, countries and global society. [BIC Document #07-0211]

Bahá'u'lláh Himself lifted work to the station of worship:

It is incumbent upon each one of you to engage in some occupation — such as a craft, a trade or the like. We have exalted your engagement in such work to the rank of worship of the one true God. [KA v. 33]

The significant of this concept for shared prosperity is enormous, with implications for the economy as a whole; how business operates, recruits and trains employees, and deals with all stakeholders in a community; the shape of work within an enterprise; and who the key players are in an enterprise and how they are to be remunerated.

### Rethinking civilization

As we have seen, Bahá'u'lláh states that humanity has been created to advance civilization and lists the attributes that people are to have in order to accomplish this:

All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization. The Almighty beareth Me witness: To act like the beasts of the field is unworthy of man. Those virtues that befit his dignity are forbearance, mercy, compassion and loving-kindness towards all the peoples and kindreds of the earth. [GWB 215]

The nature of the civilization that is to be carried forward, however, is not merely a material one, as many might think. Bahá'ís recognize that many aspects of today's civilization do not benefit people and are even dangerous and harmful to individuals and humanity as a whole. 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote:

... until material achievements, physical accomplishments and human virtues are reinforced by spiritual perfections, luminous qualities and characteristics of mercy, no fruit or result shall issue therefrom, nor will the happiness of the world of humanity, which is the ultimate aim, be attained. For although, on the one hand, material achievements and the development of the physical world produce prosperity, which exquisitely manifests its intended aims, on the other hand dangers, severe calamities and violent afflictions are imminent. [SWAB 283-4]

Further, what Bahá'ís anticipate is what Shoghi Effendi, head of the Bahá'í Faith from 1921 to 1957, identifies as the 'birth and efflorescence of a world civilization' [CF 6, emphasis mine], not the extension of a western, Asian or other regional one, a civilization that is 'the child' of the Most Great Peace. Such a civilization is, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes, a product of the spiritual quality 'love':

Love is the spirit of life unto the adorned body of mankind, the establisher of true civilization in this mortal world, and the shedder of imperishable glory upon every high-aiming race and nation. [SWAB 27]

The birth of such a civilization is a far-distant expectation for Bahá'ís, who consider its establishment 'as the furthestmost limits in the organization of human society' along with the 'emergence of a world community, the consciousness of world citizenship' and 'the founding of a world ... culture'. [WO 163] Nevertheless, Bahá'ís claim that it is the efforts that humanity makes today to realign its values, morals and the material welfare that derive from these that will begin the process of building that civilization.

The goal of shared prosperity

For Bahá'ís the goal of shared prosperity is: 'a just, peaceful and sustainable society', which provides a 'harmonious dynamic between the material and non-material (or moral) dimensions' of human life, which has at its base the fundamental truth of the equality of women and men and which incorporates 'the generation of knowledge, the cultivation of trust and trustworthiness, eradication of racism and violence, promotion of art, beauty, science, and the capacity for collaboration and the peaceful resolution of conflicts'. [BIC Document #10-0503] Bahá'ís believe that ways to achieve these goals are, on the

- o one hand,
- o to incorporate ‘all people, regardless of material wealth, into the advancement of civilization’
- o to articulate ‘a vibrant and compelling vision of human prosperity at its widest and most inclusive’
- o to ensure the ‘harmony between varying aspects of development (cultural, technological, economic, social, moral, spiritual) so as to embed ‘a widely-shared sense of common purpose’ [BIC Document #12-1412]
- and, on the other,
- o to recognize that ‘a flourishing society cannot be built by the materially wealthy on behalf of the materially poor’
- o to reexamine and redesign social and economic ‘structures, which have contributed to the exclusion of the materially poor’
- o to genuinely reassess ‘the distribution of power and wealth’, and to recognize and recast ‘the inherent relationship between the extremes of wealth and poverty’

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- o to reframe ‘progress’ in ‘terms of the harmony between the moral and material dimensions of human life’ [BIC Document #12-1412]

Bahá’ís identify the building blocks that are crucial for countries and people to exit poverty as:

- o peace
- o unity
- o trustworthiness [BIC Document #05-1002]
- o the freedom of conscience, thought, and religion [BIC Document #05-1002]
- o justice as the organizing principle of society [BIC Document #95-0303]
- o the elimination of the extremes of poverty and wealth [Shoghi Effendi, ‘The Faith of Bahá’u’lláh’] through such measures as taxation, fair pay and education
- o the establishment of human rights and responsibilities, with a balance struck between the preservation of individual freedom and the promotion of the collective good [BIC Document #12-1012]
- o the equality of women and men [BIC Doc #12-0227]
- o the rule of law
- o constitutional and democratic government
- o the protection of human rights
- o economic development

- o religious tolerance
  - o the promotion of useful sciences and technologies
  - o programmes of public welfare [all the above, The Universal House of Justice, 26 November 2003, citing ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, SDC] 218
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The Bahá’ís posit that the key elements for the eradication of poverty are:

- o a recognition of the oneness of humanity [BIC Doc #05-1002]

- o a coherent relationship between the material and spiritual dimensions of human life [BIC Doc #12-0201]

- o recognition that every individual has a contribution to make to the betterment of society [BIC Doc #12-0201]

- o the ethic of reciprocity: an understanding that the interests of the individual and of the wider community are inextricably linked [BIC Doc #11-0118]

- o voluntary sharing [‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Tablet to the Hague]

- o consultation as the basic tool of decision-making and learning [BIC Docs #12-0620 and #10-0503]

- o deliberate and conscious changes in individual choices and in institutional structures and norms [BIC Doc #10-0503]

- o universal education [The Universal House of Justice, 26 November 2003]

The Bahá’ís consider that the primary instigators, or protagonists, of development are:

- o ‘the people themselves’

- o communities

- o institutions

as ‘the responsibility lies with society — its communities and social institutions — to make it possible for all people to contribute their energies and talents to the construction of a more just and equitable global community. [BIC Document #:12-1412]

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For Bahá’ís, the beneficiaries of shared prosperity, of development, are not just the materially poor or those already wealthy who wish to capitalize on new markets, exploit an emerging workforce or patent traditional resources for their own gain:

Its beneficiaries must be all of the planet’s inhabitants, without distinction, without the imposition of conditions unrelated to the fundamental goals of such a reorganization of human affairs. [BIC Document #95-0303]

## Conclusion

From the Bahá'í perspective, shared prosperity is more than the amelioration of material deprivation, profound as that is. It is not the transfer of goods, services, finances, knowledge, technology and ideas from one community to another, nor is it a project that one group of people carries out for the benefit of another. It requires the development of a new mindset, one that does not polarize people, making one set victims and another the rescuers, but instead sees the whole world as one community, one family. Every person is a participant in the establishment of shared prosperity, which develops as individuals, communities and their institutions acquire the capacities, attitudes and skills that equip them to tackle the main drivers of poverty and human suffering: 'the corruption of human morals and the prevalence of prejudice, suspicion, hatred, untrustworthiness, selfishness and tyranny among men'. Shared prosperity, then might be defined as a global condition in which every person contributes to the building and maintenance of an ever-advancing, new civilization in which their collective creativity, energy, love, compassion, knowledge, intellects, spiritual and moral values, talents, learning and resources are pooled to provide a just, peaceful, equitable, safe, united, fulfilling, stimulating, beautiful, intelligent, nurturing and learning environment which benefits

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everyone, protects and sustains the planet and enables them to live long, healthy, happy, productive lives in service to one another, in love for humanity.

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