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**Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development
and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly:
priority theme: strategies for the eradication of poverty
to achieve sustainable development for all**

Statement submitted by Baha'i International Community, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Deficit to Abundance: Seeing Capacity for Meaningful Contribution in all Populations and People

“People may individually be poor, but collectively we see a wealth of capacity in the community.” ~ an individual assisting communities in Central Africa to establish locally supported schools.

Poverty eradication has been a goal of the United Nations for decades, yet lasting solutions have proved elusive. As representatives gather to seek “strategies for the eradication of poverty to achieve sustainable development for all,” we must ask ourselves, frankly and honestly, why sizable segments of the global population still lack basic material necessities.

The range of deeply rooted challenges seen today testifies to an economic order growing increasingly dysfunctional. Ills such as extremes of wealth and poverty, growing inequality, and systemic corruption are destabilizing societies and tearing at the fabric of far too many communities. And these challenges highlight, in turn, the scarcity of any true social consensus about fundamental aspects of contemporary economic arrangements, such as the nature of work, the purpose of wealth, and one’s duties to others and to the community. It is only natural, for example, for a society which aggressively lauds material wealth to become grossly unequal, or for moneyed interests, unmoored from a compelling sense of social responsibility, to shape laws in ways that perpetuate intractable forms of inequality.

Addressing structural issues such as these will require innovative approaches from quarters that have not traditionally been seen as sources of answers. In this regard, the Bahá’í International Community suggests that it will be vital for the United Nations system to develop its ability to see capacity and strength in populations that, at times, may have been given labels such as “marginalized.” Put more simply, lasting progress towards the eradication of poverty will require moving from a deficit mentality to a mentality of abundance.

Movement in this direction has already begun, at least at the level of discourse. Discussions in the development arena increasingly affirm that communities with limited financial resources are not silent and devoid of activity until international actors arrive. At the same time, interaction with such populations is frequently framed in terms of needs, challenges, shortcomings, and shortages. The agency of low-income communities is acknowledged at the level of concept. But functionally, they are often approached primarily as recipients of services and assistance — consulted to a degree about their views and preferences, but rarely embraced as capable and equal partners in a collaborative enterprise.

This dichotomy hampers efforts to address the roots of poverty. Assumptions, biases, and prejudices result in productive capacity being squandered and steps forward being overlooked or dismissed. The application of low-tech innovation provides one example. Notable advances in energy efficiency and the production of renewable power are arising in the context of rural patterns of life. These developments are universally significant, as energy consumption will need to become more sustainable in countries at all levels of income. Yet such innovations are often seen as relevant only to the kinds of places in which they app — suitable,

perhaps, for “south-south cooperation,” but irrelevant to the needs and realities of industrialized societies.

Beyond their capacity for technological innovation, low-income populations hold potential for social innovation as well. Ultimately, the eradication of poverty will not be an exercise in the distribution of material resources alone, a matter of mere accounting. To address poverty in real and lasting ways will be to build new patterns of society itself, reflecting moral and spiritual principles such as equity, solidarity, justice, and compassion. It will involve the construction of new ways of being together, new ways of relating to one another, new ways of organizing our individual and collective affairs. And in this, high-income areas have no more knowledge or expertise than low-income ones. The village in the highland steppes is every bit as capable of building cohesive and vibrant patterns of social life as the apartment complex in the metropolis.

The challenges facing those with few material resources are significant. Such populations will need support, education, training, and assistance, the same as any other. What must be plainly acknowledged, however, is that no group or region has the capacity to eradicate global poverty on its own, according to its particular views and guided by its understanding alone. From a practical standpoint, the magnitude of transformation required is simply far too great. But a moral reality comes into play as well — that the advancement of all humanity requires the efforts of all humanity. Just as every member of the human family has the right to benefit from a materially, socially, and spiritually prospering civilization, every member has the capacity to contribute towards its construction.

To embrace the implications of this overarching principle is to acknowledge that no group already has what is needed to bring about the world we collectively desire for ourselves and our children. In this, the financially wealthy are as dependent on the underprivileged as is the reverse. Similarly, the “developed” world will have as much to learn from the “developing” world as vice-versa in the coming years. This might be challenging to some, and runs counter to ideologies of exceptionality or uniqueness. But dependence of this kind, expressed through relationships of mutual support and assistance, is a source of great strength, not weakness. Through it, expression is given to the fundamental principle that social action should operate on the ideal of universal participation. And on its foundation, areas that have long been excluded or discounted can come to be embraced as vibrant sources of ideas, tools, resources, and approaches every bit as effective — and needed — in high-income areas as low ones.

Translating these ideals into practical realities will involve challenges to be sure, not least for multilateral bodies such as the Commission for Social Development. But Agenda 2030 is a universal process, and that very universality provides a powerful means for reconceptualizing the role that various actors — particularly less affluent populations themselves — play in the eradication of poverty.

Embracing the constructive potential of thousands of grassroots communities, each with its own circumstances and realities, will be an intensely local process. As such, progress will come less from finding the “right” policy intervention and applying it everywhere, than coming to a deeper understanding of the process by which effective approaches are determined, implemented, and modified.

What might this look like in practice? Steps that might help the United Nations and the Commission identify and embrace capacity wherever it is found include:

- Expand 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 indeed. But over-reliance on such resources can impoverish a discourse, leading to fixation on technical recipes and policy fixes. 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.
- Seek knowledge from those experiencing policy. Representatives of communities who will be affected by policies need to be included in the formulation of those policies, as a matter of justice. Yet “a place at the table” can easily devolve into tokenism and optics. Decision-makers must therefore be prepared — indeed, eager — to learn meaningful lessons from partners on the ground. Only to the degree that they embrace grassroots collaborators in this way can it be said that their initiatives truly seek insight wherever it can be found.
- Seek universal solutions from low-income populations. Gone are the days when high-income areas were openly exalted as the model of what society should be. No longer, then, can the achievements of some be dismissed as applicable only to those with limited financial resources. If the international community is to sincerely recognize the capacity of low-income areas, it must be ready to acknowledge those areas’ advantages, embrace their accomplishments, and learn from their experience.
- Capture narratives behind successful approaches. Collecting numerical data is important, but 50 people actively contributing ideas and asking questions is much different than 50 passive bystanders. In addition to detailing policies that achieved results, it will be important to capture and tell the story behind successes — how the initiative was developed, how it evolved over time, how objections were resolved, and how features were communicated. Qualitative analysis of this kind helps frame thinking in terms of lessons learned and allows insights to be extracted, aggregated, and applied to future action.