

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL EXTERNAL AFFAIRS ENDEAVOURS OF THE WORLDWIDE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY

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In 1994, a document entitled “External Affairs Strategy” was prepared at the Bahá'í World Centre and sent to all National Spiritual Assemblies. For two decades this strategy has provided the relevant Bahá'í institutions and agencies—notably, National Spiritual Assemblies and the Offices of the Bahá'í International Community—with a vital set of parameters to guide their efforts to promote processes conducive to the realization of world peace and to defend the Bahá'í community from persecution. Indeed, the extraordinary strides that have been taken in the area of external affairs since 1994 owe much to the clarity afforded by that strategy in an often complex and sensitive area of work.

Over a similar period of time, the Universal House of Justice has gradually opened the way for the Bahá'í community to view its own growth and evolution as intimately connected to its involvement in the life of the wider society, whether at the level of villages and neighbourhoods, towns and cities, clusters, regions, or on the national or international stages. Of particular relevance to external affairs endeavours in this connection, of course, is the notion of participation in the prevalent discourses of society. And an increasing number of National Assemblies, along with their external affairs agencies, have found that conceptualizing their external affairs work principally in terms of participation in discourses has served to open many new and promising possibilities.

In light of these points, the House of Justice concluded that it would be timely to share with National Assemblies a document that, drawing on the knowledge generated over the last twenty years, provides a framework for external affairs endeavours in the coming years.

1. Vision

The charge entrusted by Bahá'u'lláh to His followers is stupendous and its implications for the future of humankind far-reaching. His Revelation signalizes the coming of age of the entire human race. Its supreme mission is the “organic and spiritual unity of the whole body of nations”, which is associated in the Bahá'í writings with the achievement of the Most Great Peace, “a peace that must inevitably follow as the practical consequence of the spiritualization of the world and the fusion of all its races, creeds, classes and nations”. Yet the Bahá'í writings anticipate, long before the advent of this keenly anticipated stage in the advancement of human civilization, the emergence of the Lesser Peace, implying in itself “the reconstruction of mankind, as the result of the universal recognition of its oneness and wholeness”. Notwithstanding that it will be established by the nations themselves and will represent but “the political unification of the world”, its attainment is a vital concern of Bahá'ís. Bahá'u'lláh Himself has revealed the following in one of His Tablets:

It is incumbent upon the ministers of the House of Justice to promote the Lesser Peace so that the people of the earth may be relieved from the burden of exorbitant expenditures. This matter is imperative and absolutely essential, inasmuch as hostilities and conflict lie at the root of affliction and calamity.

The Constitution of the Universal House of Justice refers not only to its duty to “usher in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh” but declares that it will “do its utmost for the realization of greater cordiality and comity amongst the nations and for the attainment of universal peace”. Over the course of several decades, the Bahá'í world has been guided to pursue diverse lines of action focused on this sacred imperative. In so doing, it has sought to refine its understanding of the realization of peace as an evolutionary process which, through the interplay of the forces of integration and disintegration, propels humanity towards its destiny.

As the community of the Most Great Name continues to multiply the ranks of its adherents, to develop and consolidate its institutions, to extend a firmly rooted pattern of community life, to explore the implications of the divine teachings for diverse societies, to enhance its capacity to render service to the peoples of the world—in short, as it labours for the fulfilment of the God-given mission with which it has been charged—it finds itself being drawn into a more profound interaction with society for which it needs to become increasingly well equipped. This interaction occurs at all levels, from the grassroots to the international arena. Over time, the society-building power possessed by the Faith becomes manifest, and Bahá'ís can more readily perceive how their own efforts are channelling that power.

The House of Justice has described three interrelated areas of endeavour—expansion and consolidation, social action, and participation in the prevalent discourses of society—which are central to the process of learning in which the Bahá'í community is engaged. Coherence among these three is maintained by ensuring they adhere to elements of the conceptual framework that governs the current series of global Plans. Each area has implications for the Bahá'í community's involvement in the life of society. The one most closely associated with the promotion of the Lesser Peace is the Bahá'í community's efforts to participate in discourses; in this regard, its activities to focus the light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation on the evolution of thought and the exploration of social reality show great promise.

It is, of course, entirely natural that individual Bahá'ís will share with others their personal understanding of the teachings and their application to various spheres of human endeavour—from comments offered in the course of a study circle to contributions to the deliberations of professional associations, from a family's participation in a village-wide discussion about an aspect of its collective life to the publication of an article in an academic journal. As believers around the world gain experience, both individually and collectively, in applying elements of the overarching conceptual framework to their activities in a growing range of circumstances and settings, the community's capacity to participate effectively in the life of society and contribute to its discourses at all levels will continue to rise. In this connection, the House of Justice has indicated that an efflorescence of activity in this field might well entail the closer integration of Local Spiritual Assemblies into the life of communities within the geographical area they serve, where circumstances and the strength of the Assembly so permit. This document, however, is generally limited to consideration of the external affairs efforts of the Bahá'í community at the national¹ and international levels and to the attendant institutional arrangements required to stimulate and coordinate activity—efforts that are the preserve of the Faith's institutions, and which typically involve the participation of a relatively small number of believers who are called to assist in this regard. As such, the paper's

¹ In some territories in which the configuration of cultural and historical factors suggests the need, efforts have been made to bring into being external affairs structures at the regional level. Thus far, such structures are few in number, and learning about external affairs endeavours at the regional level is at an early stage.

scope extends neither to the general participation of Bahá'ís in the life of society at the local level, nor to the exercise of institutional oversight in relation to the efforts of Bahá'í-inspired agencies to contribute to discourses associated with their work, both of which will continue to develop in an organic manner in the coming years. This is not intended to introduce an artificial separation to the work—it is, of course, essential that the Faith's external affairs activities on the national and international stages benefit from insights being gained at the grassroots, and that the work of National Assemblies' Offices of External Affairs and the Bahá'í International Community conduce to the progress of the Bahá'í community's efforts in villages, towns, and cities. It is, rather, to recognize the differences in approach that will be required at each level—that the way in which the Bahá'í community and its institutions are drawn into participation in discourses in localities, for example, is, in important respects, different from the dynamics that govern their interactions with the wider society at the national and international levels.

2. Strategy

The overarching objective of the Bahá'í community's external affairs efforts for the coming years will be to increase the range and depth of its contributions to the life of society at the level of thought in an ever-rising number of social spaces on the national and international stages. This will require the institutions of the Faith to provide for the development and maintenance of relations with governments, institutions of civil society, like-minded groups and individuals, the media, and ultimately the wider public—all for the dual purposes of promoting processes that contribute to the movement towards the Lesser Peace and, when circumstances so require, defending the Bahá'í community from persecution. While the institutions of the Faith will not find themselves playing a major part in the formulation of specific public policies in the immediate future, it is to be expected that a natural outcome of their activities in this area will be to exert a growing influence on the thinking that leads to the formation of public policy and public opinion on subjects relevant to the spiritual and material advancement of civilization.

At the centre of this strategy lie the concepts of capacity building and learning, concepts that are equally relevant to National Assemblies and their Offices of External Affairs and the Offices of the Bahá'í International Community. For, in the final analysis, and in common with virtually every other significant aspect of collective Bahá'í endeavour, there is no simple formula to be followed. Knowledge is generated through a process of learning—of interwoven action, reflection, study of guidance, and consultation.

(i) At the national level

It is to be expected that, as National Assemblies give dedicated attention to the work of external affairs and as human resources increase, efforts in community after community will in time progress to the stage at which a formal structure will be required to systematize and coordinate lines of action. Yet care will be required so that such structures emerge organically and in keeping with the capacity of the community to initiate and sustain activity. Indeed, it is expected that some National Assemblies will wish to defer creating any sort of structure to carry out external affairs endeavours until such time as their respective national communities have developed this capacity. In this regard, National Assemblies will find the advice and assistance of the Counsellors to be indispensable.

When a National Assembly determines that conditions allow it to begin to give thought to the organizational arrangements it wishes to put in place to pursue external affairs endeavours, it often starts by analysing the possibilities for the involvement of the Bahá'í community on the national stage and appraising its current capacity to maintain the associated activities. It will recognize the need to ensure that these efforts do not receive disproportionate emphasis in the context of the community's priorities and its inevitably limited resources. In some countries that have benefited from having previous experience, it has been possible for the National Assembly to establish a formal Office of External Affairs with an extensive mandate relatively quickly, and in such circumstances it is typical for one member of the Office to be asked to act in a coordinating capacity. In other countries, National Assemblies have found it possible to invite a group of believers to form a consultative team and to assign to it responsibility for pursuing efforts in a few related areas of action and for gradually strengthening the Bahá'í community's presence on the national stage. In still others, particularly where little prior experience has been gained and in which human resources are somewhat limited, National Assemblies have sought to identify and request the assistance of a capable individual who can take up one or two relatively simple lines of action. National Assemblies are generally advised that, at least by the time a formal structure has emerged, their members should not be selected to serve in such an entity, notwithstanding that on specific occasions the Office may wish to turn to the Assembly to request the assistance of one of its members in carrying out particular tasks or attending certain meetings or events. Experience has demonstrated that entrusting responsibility for this endeavour to a separate, dedicated agency better enables the National Assembly to focus its efforts on overseeing, at the strategic level, the unfoldment of the external affairs work.

Whatever the organizational arrangements put in place by a National Assembly, it has been found useful to conceive of external affairs efforts at the national level in terms of several closely related components, which can be described as follows:

a) Participation in the discourses of society on the national stage

Efforts to participate in discourses on the national stage are increasingly coming to form the centrepiece of the work undertaken by Offices of External Affairs throughout the world. This is the case not only because of the importance that such endeavours hold for realizing the Office's overall objectives, but also because of the relevance of the approach associated with participation in discourses to virtually all areas of the Office's functioning—a subject which is explored in the section titled “Approach” below.

The House of Justice has, in letters written on its behalf, elaborated on the question of participation in prevalent discourses on the national stage—that is, on the Bahá'í community's efforts to be present and participate in those discussions regarding aspects of social progress that take place in a variety of spaces at the national level and to offer, to the extent possible, the wisdom enshrined in the teachings as a contribution to the advancement of those conversations. The purpose of such efforts is not to press others to accept a specific Bahá'í proposal or to engage in direct teaching, nor should activities be conceived as part of a public relations or academic exercise. Rather, those involved—whether Offices of External Affairs or others assigned responsibility by the National Assembly—are to adopt a posture of learning, seeking to stimulate a consultative process by engaging in genuine conversations in a range of social spaces,

standing shoulder to shoulder with others and offering insights drawn from the Bahá'í writings and from the community's growing experience in applying them. It is a measure of the strides that have been taken since the publication of the 1994 strategy that the themes of the discourses in which national Bahá'í communities participate no longer need to be set globally; such strategic matters are now considered, carefully and thoughtfully, within each national community.

b) Relationships with government and civil society, including efforts to defend the Bahá'í community from persecution

The immediate objective of steps taken to build relations with members and sections of government, as well as with individuals and groups operating in the sphere of civil society, is to strengthen the presence of the Bahá'í community on the national stage and thus enhance its capacity to allow the light of the Faith's teachings to be shed on an increasing number of discussions concerned with social progress.

An adjunct to this area of work is the defence of the Bahá'í community. Regrettably, in a few countries around the world, Bahá'ís continue to face serious opposition, the aim of which is the suppression of their individual and collective endeavours and, in the case of Iran, the elimination of the Bahá'í community itself as a viable entity. So long as such oppression persists, there will remain a need for carefully coordinated activity to enlist the support of governments, non-governmental organizations, the media, and the wider public to defend Bahá'í communities from persecution. Although the inherent complexities and sensitivities in the realm of defence demand that strategies, projects, and plans with an international dimension are ultimately directed from the Bahá'í World Centre, National Assemblies and their external affairs structures will surely find themselves increasingly well equipped to shoulder a larger share of the responsibility for thinking creatively about the possibilities for meeting immediate and longer-term objectives. It should be borne in mind that activity in this area represents a specialized field of work with unique characteristics, and Offices of External Affairs are asked to ensure that methods and approaches which are appropriate for actions undertaken in defence of their co-religionists do not come to define the patterns of activity in the other components of the Office's work. This notwithstanding, there is no need to introduce an overly strict division to the work of an Office. Indeed, experience has time and again shown how effort invested in the field of defence can—directly or indirectly—open new opportunities for other areas of the Office's work, and how efforts to contribute to discourses concerned with social progress can reinforce endeavours intended to defend the Bahá'í community from persecution.

A brief word is in order on the question of the representation of the Bahá'í community. From time to time national Bahá'í communities may find that they are called upon to be present at certain formal events on the national stage—for instance, state occasions or ceremonial gatherings of representatives of religions—for which a suitable representative of the Bahá'í community must be identified. In such circumstances, a variety of options are open to a National Assembly, and it may determine to send one of its own members, assign responsibility to its external affairs structure, or appoint an individual member of the community to perform the task on its behalf.

c) Strengthening the Bahá'í presence on the Web

Taken as an opportunity to articulate the national Bahá'í community's history, activities, convictions, and aspirations, efforts to create or reinvigorate a website for the national Bahá'í community have proven a very fruitful early area of action for Offices of External Affairs of diverse backgrounds and experience. In attempting to carefully describe who the Bahá'ís of a country are and what they do, several Offices have found that their own thoughts on these vital questions have been clarified and that a vocabulary that is highly relevant to other areas of their work moves to the fore. In this connection, national Bahá'í websites have drawn on the approach and concepts underpinning the Bahai.org website and have linked extensively to its content, which provides authoritative information about the Faith, its history and teachings, and the activities of its worldwide community of adherents, as well as serving as the official source for electronic copies of the Bahá'í writings. Once a national website is established, Offices will not only wish to provide for the ongoing development of those parts which require periodic updates but also seek out opportunities to use the site in imaginative ways to support other components of the external affairs work. Finally, some may find themselves able to undertake additional initiatives to further strengthen the national community's presence on the Web.

d) Relations with the media

The responsibilities of an Office in relation to the media represent an area of growing experience. In keeping with the dynamics governing all other aspects of an Office's work, operating in a mode of learning is central. As such, Offices are not merely concerned with the refinement of techniques—for example, improving ways to share press releases or secure coverage for a given announcement, important though such skills are to the successful execution of various tasks. Of greater significance in terms of an Office's substantive progress is the task of learning about identifying sections of the media who share a concern for the well-being of humanity and gradually cultivating relations with them, building mutual trust and respect and exchanging thoughts and ideas as part of a productive and evolving conversation. Particularly promising in this connection are the steps being taken in some national communities to enter into conversation with journalists and others about the possibilities for communications media to contribute to the enrichment of human understanding in various fields and so, too, to the advancement of civilization.

The order in which the above components receive attention from an Office of External Affairs and the emphasis to be placed on each will depend on factors such as the availability of human resources to carry out the work, the nature of opportunities for initiating lines of action, and the level of experience within the Bahá'í community.

In 2013 the Universal House of Justice announced the creation of the Office of Public Discourse at the Bahá'í World Centre and called on it to enhance the efforts of communities to participate in the discourses of society at the national level, facilitate learning in this domain, and ensure that steps taken are coherent with the other endeavours of the Bahá'í community. The Office follows the progress of external affairs activities in an increasing number of national communities and strives to connect each to a growing body of knowledge into which new experiences and insights are constantly being integrated. The Office of Public Discourse thus

assists National Assemblies, gradually promoting and coordinating activities and systematizing efforts in this field.

(ii) At the international level

On occasion, the Bahá'í International Community (BIC) is asked by the Universal House of Justice to function as the official representative of the worldwide Bahá'í community, often speaking on behalf of all National Spiritual Assemblies. In this specific connection, the BIC can be said to act as the public voice of the Bahá'í world community in interactions on the international stage with governments, international organizations and institutions of civil society, certain prominent groups and individuals, and the international media—this, in addition to its interactions with ambassadors, diplomats, and others operating in the realm of international relations. At the Bahá'í World Centre, the BIC Secretariat is tasked with representing the Bahá'í community in interactions within Israel. Wherever it occurs, the aspect of the BIC's work concerned with representation of the Bahá'í community is pursued under the direction and supervision of the Universal House of Justice.

The regular, though no less vital, work of the Offices of the BIC—specifically those outside the Holy Land—can be described in terms of two broad areas of action, which are again pursued under the supervision of the House of Justice. The first relates to participation in prevalent discourses at the international level, including at the various agencies of the United Nations; with the African Union, ASEAN, the European Union, and other supranational organizations and regional groupings; and among international civil society organizations. While the methods and posture adopted by the BIC in this aspect of its work necessarily reflect exigencies peculiar to the international stage, the framework governing its activity in the field of participation in discourses closely reflects that which is in place at the national level. The second area of the BIC's work relates to defence activities that are international in scope. This includes discrete efforts on the international stage and some coordination of the activities of National Assemblies when such activities contain an international dimension—for example, national elements of a global media campaign—both of which are guided from the Bahá'í World Centre.

The Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, through its efforts to raise capacity among young people to participate effectively in the discourses of society and its research in relation to particular issues facing humanity, is an agency that can also be said to play a part in Bahá'í participation in prevalent discourses at the international level. While it pursues its endeavours in distinct spheres of action, it operates within the same conceptual framework as the BIC and shares a common vision of the nature and purpose of its efforts.

3. Approach

Clearly, there is no rigid set of instructions for carrying out external affairs work. Yet, as experience has accumulated over the years, elements of an effective approach have been clarified to the extent that they can be adopted with confidence in a wide range of contexts.

To begin, it is clear that learning about external affairs is an organic process. While goals must be set, strategies adopted, and strenuous efforts made to meet defined objectives, the adoption of a posture of learning requires that plans remain amenable to refinement and change

and that the work is able to evolve with a degree of agility. In practical terms, this requires those agencies pursuing external affairs endeavours, whether Offices of the Bahá'í International Community or entities at the national level such as Offices of External Affairs, to be constantly engaged in refining and enriching their reading of social reality and raising their capacity to identify and analyse social spaces in which they can learn with others and make meaningful contributions. These are not tasks that can be completed and then forgotten. They are central and constant concerns and, as such, should be appropriately prioritized.

Soon after an Office has begun the process of learning about the nature and availability of social spaces on the national stage, it will wish to identify a relatively small number of promising discourses to which it can give sustained attention—recognizing, of course, that as time passes and experience accrues, its initial selection will naturally be subject to refinement and change. In making such decisions, an Office will naturally set aside abstruse and divisive discussions, taking particular care to avoid themes so controversial that consensus appears beyond reach. Further, the Office will consciously refine its ability to distinguish between those discussions on issues or events which, now and then, foist themselves temporarily on the public consciousness and ongoing discourses which are truly relevant to human well-being. In this connection, it is imperative that those called on to serve in the field of external affairs appreciate that the task before them is not to become associated with ephemeral movements and ideas that clamour for attention and periodically drift into vogue, but rather to endeavour to contribute, gradually and deliberately, to social progress through participation in discussions on that range of subjects which have a real bearing on the course of humanity's advancement towards its maturity and the attainment of that "Great Peace towards which people of good will throughout the centuries have inclined their hearts". In this process, Offices often discover that their capacity to create and develop content that can be offered as a contribution to the discourses in which they participate is also raised—content that is likely to be expressed first in the substance of the conversations in which they engage and later also in the form of written statements, talks, documents, and even formal publications. Learning about the generation of content, then, comes to form a significant part of the work of each Office of External Affairs. Yet no Office acts in isolation in this regard; the Office of Public Discourse at the Bahá'í World Centre has an important part to play, sharing insights based on experience garnered in other parts of the world, offering advice and assistance whenever necessary, and coordinating efforts so as to ensure the requisite degree of consistency in contributions to discussions.

With regard to oversight of endeavours at the national level, the National Spiritual Assembly will generally wish to afford its Office of External Affairs a relatively wide degree of latitude to carry out its work. In this way, capacity within the Office is built as its members are able to gain experience and engage in ongoing consultation and reflection on the full range of its areas and lines of action. Nevertheless, from time to time significant and pressing questions will arise—for instance, on matters of strategic direction or in relation to particularly sensitive issues—and these should be referred to the National Assembly for guidance. Beyond these, the Assembly will address itself to the overall progress of the external affairs work on a periodic basis, deliberating on such subjects as the evolution of its external affairs strategy, the availability of human and financial resources to support the Office's endeavours, and the refinement of its own reading of social reality on the national stage, often profiting from new insights generated by the Office itself in the course of its work. In such consultations, the National Assembly will wish to benefit from the advice and assistance of the Counsellors. It might also find it helpful to arrange for the participation of members of the Office of External Affairs.

A final word is in order on the subject of vocabulary. The need for those participating in external affairs endeavours to be constantly mindful of the question of language and, more specifically, the choice of words that might be used to describe the Bahá'í teachings, their application in various contexts, and the activities of the Bahá'í community is self-evident. For example, a measure of care is required in relation to the use of the word “diplomatic” to describe aspects of an Office’s work. The term has a specific meaning in relation to aspects of the Bahá'í International Community’s efforts on the international stage. Yet, in other contexts, particularly at the national level, it may inadvertently convey the impression that the Bahá'í community is somehow an external group that wishes to establish friendly relations with the government of the land, rather than a band of loyal citizens, devoted to the progress of their nation and eager to work with a wide range of like-minded individuals and groups to that end. As such, it has become increasingly clear that the term’s use as shorthand for the component of an Office of External Affairs’ work concerned with building relations with government and the organizations of civil society is generally best avoided.

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The realization of Bahá'u'lláh’s vision for humanity, entailing as it does a profound and far-reaching transformation in the very character of mankind, cannot be achieved through the exertions of Bahá'ís alone. All of humanity participates in the process. Consciousness of this reality lies at the heart of the Bahá'í community’s efforts to become involved in the life of society—efforts that are pursued so as to allow the light of the Blessed Beauty’s teachings to illuminate human pursuits in an ever-increasing number of settings and spaces.

Within this overarching enterprise, to which every Bahá'í individual, community, and institution contributes, are found the external affairs endeavours of the Bahá'í community on the national and international stages. That these represent somewhat distinct areas of action which require the adoption of methods and approaches appropriate to the exigencies of the environment in which they are pursued is clear. Equally so is the need to maintain—indeed to continually strengthen—the coherence that must characterize the various fields of endeavour in which the Bahá'í community is engaged.

The task before National Spiritual Assemblies now and for the foreseeable future, then, is to set about systematically developing their efforts to participate in the life of society on the national stage as a contribution to the advancement of the cause of universal peace and the attainment of spiritual and material prosperity for all peoples.