OFFICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS
OF THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF INDIA

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Youth as Constructive Agents of Change

This concept note seeks to provide an analytical framework for examining the role of youth in processes of social change and to stimulate dialogue on how families, institutions, and social structures can be reoriented to enable youth to act as constructive protagonists in the life of society.

Concept Note

The period of youth can be best described as a springtime in the life of the individual. Leaving behind the immaturity and dependence of childhood, it is a time when the individual is at the peak of physical vitality and strength. Unwilling to blindly obey or imitate, the mind of a young person asks searching questions about the world and seeks to understand reality for itself. Morally, this is the time in life when the individual is most sensitive and receptive to moral causes and to high ideals. Look at any social movement or cause for justice anywhere in the world across time, and one is sure to find at its heart a host of young people who fuel its advancement with their energy, idealism, and sincerity. It is these characteristics that make youth the most promising source of hope that any society has for a better future.

This potential of youth, however, can only be realized if young people are given the space to think, consult, and contribute as respected and responsible actors in the life of society. Unfortunately, prevalent attitudes towards youth, and the institutional structures in which they are embedded, do not create an atmosphere that fosters such mature participation. Young people are, on the one hand, patronized and treated paternalistically by authority figures in the family, in educational institutions, or in the workplace, where their views or initiatives are not taken seriously. On the other hand, in the name of empowering youth and freeing them from paternalism, political and economic structures seek either to manipulate them to serve political agendas or, in the name of freedom, to draw them into an endless cycle of consumerism in which fulfilment is equated with the pursuit of ever-multiplying desires.

Despite such constraining forces, the world is full of examples of young people, individually and in groups, taking initiative to transform their societies. The spontaneous and energetic arising of youth in response to the dire needs of humanity—whether in health, education, social justice, or the preservation of the environment—bears testimony to their as yet largely untapped potential to "move the world." For the sake of humanity's future, it is imperative that society set aside the narratives and institutional structures that infantilize young people and instead create the conditions in which their immense capacity for constructive social transformation can be realized.

Reflection on how such a vision can be realized raises a number of questions. One of the most obvious ways in which youth are undermined in today's world is through a culture of paternalism.

This finds expression both in overt forms of regulating and controlling the young, as well as in subtler cultural practices where love and concern are expressed in ways that undermine the agency and wishes of youth. In such an atmosphere, young people do not find the space to investigate the truth for themselves, to develop the confidence to make their own decisions, to learn from their own experiences, or to contribute as equals to social and public causes. In some cases, special regard for the elderly and for the wisdom that comes from life experience is mistakenly assumed to imply the undermining of youth. What such assumptions overlook is that respect is not meant to be a scarce privilege bestowed only on a select few as a mark of superiority. Rather, respect is an attitude of heart and mind that arises out of recognition of the nobility and oneness of all human beings, and of the unique contribution that each brings to the human family, regardless of age, sex, race, or ethnic background. The question that such considerations raise is how families, educational institutions, and workplaces would need to be transformed to remove the structural basis of such paternalism.

Equally challenging is the way economic and political structures seek to manipulate and control youth and shape their self-conception. Consider, for example, the way highly sophisticated marketing and advertising campaigns manipulate the feelings and insecurities of children and youth from their earliest years and seek to convince them that happiness lies in a life of constant consumption. Reflect also on how the images that saturate the media environment portray young people as pleasure seekers, as self-centred individualists, as agents of conflict and aggression, or as reckless and rebellious anarchists at war with society. Not only do these narratives shape perception and behaviour through constant repetition, they also lead to cynicism about the potential of youth to be serious and mature protagonists in building a better society. What is obscured through such propaganda is the immense potential of youth for moral leadership—for being peacemakers and bridge-builders, seekers of knowledge and champions of justice, protectors of the environment, and guides to generations younger than themselves.

The question before all of us, then, is how the relentless tide of commercial and political propaganda that conveys distorted conceptions of youth can be countered. How can young people develop a healthy conception of self—one that awakens them to their vast moral, intellectual, and artistic potentialities and instils in them a commitment to use these capacities for the welfare of society? How can young people be helped to see the different aspects of their lives—their education, their commitment to serve society, and their family responsibilities—not as disconnected fragments, but rather as dimensions of a purposeful life, a life that is actuated by a profound sense of mission to uproot injustices, heal disunity, and protect the planet?

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