



Australian Bahá'í Community

Introduction

The Australian Bahá'í Community welcomes the Inquiry into Poverty in Australia by the Senate Community Affairs References Committee.

One of the most striking examples of injustice in Australia today is the grave imbalance in economic and material conditions. A small percentage of people possess immense wealth while a significant number live in poverty. The Bahá'í Community is committed to a vision of the unity of humankind based on principles of justice and equity. The assumption that poverty is an enduring and inescapable feature of the social order must be challenged. Although some will argue that poverty will always be with us, there is no doubt that its worst manifestations can be addressed and eradicated.

The Challenge Facing Australia

It is estimated that at the start of the 21st century, more than one and a half million Australians lived below the Henderson Poverty Line, including approximately one in eight children. Various measures show rising poverty in Australia, with one in five poor Australians in paid work – the “working poor”. Such poverty, an immense challenge in its own right, is also a breeding ground for many other problems facing our society, including domestic and other forms of violence, theft and other crime, the use of illicit drugs, illiteracy, and environmental degradation.

Of particular concern is that the gap between the top 10 per cent of wealth holders in Australia, owning 45 per cent of household wealth, and the bottom 50 per cent, owning 7 per cent of household wealth, is widening. The increasing disparity between the rich and the poor is a major de-stabilizing influence in Australia and a manifestation of injustice in our society. A future of increasing social stratification and exclusion is a future against which the Australian psyche rebels.

A Different Approach to the Eradication of Poverty

It is time to re-examine our beliefs about the nature of human beings and economics, indeed the basis of modernised society itself. It is no longer possible to maintain the belief that the approach to social and economic development to which the materialistic conception of life has given rise is capable of meeting humanity's needs.

The Bahá'í Community believes that effective and enduring solutions to poverty need to be founded on an unshakable conviction of the oneness of humanity. Discussions aimed at solving problems related to poverty that are based on the premise that all Australians, rich and poor, are part of one human family naturally expand beyond the current vocabulary and paradigms of economics. When the challenge of poverty is

approached from this starting point, a wider context emerges, one which anticipates a system of relationships resting on the principles of equity and justice. Such an approach challenges the adversarial way our society currently works and the notion that conflict is fundamental to human nature and society.

Acceptance of the premise that we are all members of one human family requires us to view every individual member of our society as a trust of the whole, and to see that the interests of the individual and those of society are inextricably linked. If we are all part of one human family, how can we countenance that some Australians live in opulence while others have only the barest means for living? Each member of our society should be able to expect that he or she will have adequate food, shelter, health-care, leisure and security and the opportunity to earn the means to provide these for self and family.

If we are to eradicate poverty in Australia, then it is time for government and its agencies, business organisations, agents of civil society, religious organisations, representatives of the poor and leaders of thought to come together and, with a new mind-set that sees cooperation as the basis of social organisation and each human being as a trust of the whole, address the challenge of the eradication of poverty in Australia.

Women and Poverty

The over-representation of women in conditions of poverty is a concern that naturally directs our attention to the issue of the equality of women and men. The inequality promoted by poverty is reinforced by structures that limit opportunities for women. The differing employment opportunities and family responsibilities for each sex, as well as their assumed roles in society, play a significant part in the shaping of Australia's economic state.

Inequalities between men and women sharpen the challenge of eradicating poverty, but at the same time, a commitment to the establishment of full equality, in all departments of life and at every level of society, will be central to the success of efforts to conceive and implement strategies to address poverty. When women are welcomed as full partners with men in all fields of endeavour, conditions that promote real justice and equity will prevail.

Indigenous Australians and Poverty

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia vividly illustrate the consequences of the lack of justice and moderation inherent in existing economic practices and patterns. It remains the case that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, on virtually every index, are the most underprivileged group in Australian society. Historical prejudice and discrimination have created a disparity in standards of living, providing some Australians with excessive economic advantage while denying others the bare necessities for leading healthy and dignified lives.

A change in attitude which recognises and develops a mutual regard between indigenous and non-indigenous people, and which is founded on acceptance of the spiritual kinship between them, is fundamental to progress. Racism remains a baneful

force in our society. The solution to the problem requires the achievement of unity between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians; a unity which values our diversity and establishes a partnership of commitment at individual and community levels for the healing of our relationships and the achievement of a better future for all.

If any discrimination is to be tolerated, it should be discrimination in favour of, not against, the disadvantaged minority. This is a Bahá'í principle that our community's administrative practice tries to uphold. Without affirmative action, socio-economic change will be too slow and the privileges of the dominant majority will continue to eclipse the rights of those from minority or oppressed sectors of society. Programs of affirmative action are temporary measures to balance the ills that contemporary society and a history of injustice have produced.

Unemployment

The problem of unemployment, which is particularly acute among our youth, is another area in which a different response is required of our society. Viewing unemployment as an unavoidable feature of an economic system amounts to an unacceptable admission of human impotence. Each and every Australian must be given the opportunity to work in dignity and be socially productive. Social and economic resources must be redirected to ensure that no one is deprived of employment opportunities.

The work done by the individual in trade, craft, art or profession is the core of his or her life and not merely the source of his or her living. As necessary as temporary unemployment benefits are where employment is not available, they can never satisfy the yearning of those denied employment to have a valued and useful role in society. This yearning is a deeply human one. Too often it is ignored because it cannot be measured in material terms, and because satisfying the human spirit requires a far more complex response than merely feeding the body. Unemployment is a denial of human dignity and its eradication should be a key social and economic priority of our nation. Progress in achieving full employment would not only reduce material poverty - it would reduce the spiritual deprivation associated with denial of the opportunity to work and the many social problems that arise from it.

Education

Education is the key to releasing the financial, technical, human and moral resources required to eliminate poverty in Australia.

Social change begins with the individual. Sweeping social changes to bring about the eradication of poverty may be proposed or worked for, but no plan will have a lasting effect unless it is built upon an inner revolution, a dramatic change in the attitudes of the individual. It is possible to bring about such transformation through education.

One form of education that, over time, can bring about inner change of the individual is moral or values education for children. Raising children who are imbued with self respect, conscious of the needs of society and, within the limits of their capacities, willing to behave altruistically towards others, is one of the most effective long-term

remedies to a range of social and economic problems, including poverty. Educational programs such as “The Virtues Program” equip children with the skills to be self-sufficient in making morally-based decisions in their lives. Such programs explore and develop virtues such as kindness, honesty, love, service and courtesy, which may be seen as the building blocks of character and society. They should be part of the curriculum of all schools in Australia.

Another form of education with the capacity to change the functioning of our society is human rights education. In the final analysis, an individual’s human rights, including economic rights, are respected or violated by other individuals, even if they are acting in an official capacity. Accordingly, it is essential to touch the hearts and elevate the behaviour of all human beings, if human rights are to be transformed from the expression of abstract norms to the reality of the social, economic, cultural and political conditions experienced by people in their daily lives.

The *Plan of Action* prepared by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights for the UN Decade for Human Rights Education defines human rights education as “training, dissemination and information efforts aimed at the building of a universal culture of human rights through the imparting of knowledge and skills and the moulding of attitudes which are directed to:

- the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms;
- the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity;
- the promotion of understanding, tolerance, gender equality and friendship among all nations, indigenous peoples and racial, national, ethnic, religious and linguistic groups;
- the enabling of all persons to participate effectively in a free society; and
- the furtherance of the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.”

Only change in the fundamental social outlook of every individual can bring about the universal observance of human rights principles, including those pertaining to economic and social rights, in the daily lives of people. Accordingly, processes of human rights education already taking place within Australia should be further developed and expanded.

Conclusion

In the second half of the 19th century, Bahá’u’lláh, the Prophet/Founder of the Bahá’í Faith, stated, “The poor in your midst are My trust; guard ye My trust and be not intent only on your own ease”. The elimination of poverty is a moral imperative that we cannot ignore if we wish to shape Australia as a just and equitable nation. Eliminating poverty in Australia constitutes a challenge to most existing concepts and assumptions currently governing social and economic life, requiring a new mind-set among all protagonists. The Australian Bahá’í Community believes that acceptance of the oneness of humanity will in the end prove the most powerful force for the eradication of poverty in Australia.

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