Inter-Agency Expert Group Meeting on Employment and Decent Work for Poverty Eradication, in Support of the Second UN Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (2008-2017)

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Presentation Theme: "UN – Civil Society partnership to strengthen the implementation of the Second Poverty Decade"
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The value of making noble plans and implementing them to the best of ones ability cannot be understated. However, this is only but a portion of what is necessary. Imagine a child who makes a plan to stack blocks: she does her best, but the tower falls. If this is the end of her endeavor, if she did not learn from what occurred, re-calibrate and try again then, of course, the same result would be expected. This is what brings us together now. The tower of sustainable peace and development that humanity has worked to build since the end of World War II is advancing fitfully, but key components continue to crumble and fall – and we come together, under the auspices of the United Nations, to try and learn: what has worked? What caused the fall? What should be replicated and what should be discarded? What I propose in this paper is an incremental re-thinking of not only the prevalent model of development, but also the processes by which we aim to achieve our noble aspirations. These proposals come from my personal experience working at the grassroots, my understanding of the nature and purpose of our brief time on earth, and of what I have heard – time and again – as the primary call from those living with a dearth of opportunities: the call for being treated with dignity.

This paper is organized in three broad themes, though, like the pillars of Agenda 2030, they are mutually reinforcing and interlinked. Part I will look at the underlying assumptions that guide the development model. What are some examples of growth in terms of our understanding of development, and in what ways does it remain trapped in a counterproductive paradigm? Part II aims to explore the sources of change and the different roles of various actors in society in encouraging progress in those sources. And, lastly, with those two precursors established, Part III will aim to share various thoughts and perspectives on how the UN/Civil Society partnership can be improved in service to the implementation of any global plan, including the implementation of the Second Poverty Decade.

Part I: Underlying Assumptions

Efforts to disengage physical and material well-being from humanity's spiritual and moral development have ended by forfeiting the allegiance of the very populations whose interests a materialistic culture purports to serve.[1]

Advancements in scientific knowledge and rapid technological progress have brought to light the capacity of the human race to scale heights undreamt of only a few short decades ago. On the other hand, the much-vaunted civilization has failed to deliver on its promise to usher in an age of peace and prosperity for all. Why? For over a century, humanity's conception of progress has disproportionately lauded economic development and its capacity to motivate and shape social improvement. To be materially wealthy is to be successful; a culture of consumerism permeates all dimensions of our lives; laws are written which mandate decision-making primarily on the basis of material profit, ignoring the multi-dimensionality of what it means for a company, for example, to be successful. For the most part, differences of opinion that do exist are focused on different methodologies towards achieving material

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[1] One Common Faith, pp. 10-11, Baha'i International Community, 2005. Found at http://reference.bahai.org/en/t/bic/OCF/ocf-3.html.

ends, but do not challenge the world view itself. In this sense, Agenda 2030 – with its focus not solely on economic, but also environmental and social dimensions of development – represents at least a discursive advance over previous conceptions of development.

And yet, the United Nations continues to use outmoded terms like "developed" and "developing" on the basis of material wealth or economic output alone. Can we consider a country developed if it is polluting to a degree that is untenable to the sustainability of the planet? Can we consider a country developed if domestic violence is still pervasive within its borders? What are the appropriate crime and incarceration rates in a developed country? How do historically marginalized groups fare within the borders of a developed country? And, on the other hand, is a country necessarily relegated to the status of developing if it does not have sufficient economic resources? Can we consider a country undeveloped if retains a strong sense of cultural heritage and uses that shared legacy to maintain strong ties of community and social bonds? At the very least, the terminology we use should correspond with Agenda 2030. According to its standard, only when a country is "economically prosperous," "socially cohesive," and "environmentally sustainable" should it be considered developed.

However, this definition limits the human experience. Those qualities of character that distinguish us from other forms of life on the planet find no expression in how development is currently conceived of. The capacities to love, to forgive, to create, to dare greatly, to overcome prejudice, to sacrifice for the common good, to consult effectively and develop unity of vision – not to mention to discipline the impulses of animal instinct which, unchecked, wreak havoc – are vital elements of development. For the vast majority of people around the world, these are the qualities that distinguish the human experience and endow life with meaning. It is these very qualities that represent the authority of civil society. Under this umbrella fall organizations dedicated to the betterment of mankind, religious organizations and institutions, as well as charities and philanthropic institutions. The authority that these actors represent is one of moral standing and of values-based advocacy. It is, in many respects – though certainly not exclusively – these non-material dimensions make the Civil Society voice so valuable in the policy discourse.

Of course, materialism's error lies not in the laudable effort to improve the conditions of life, but in its unjustified self-confidence and the limited probing of its assumed veracity. For more than half a century, we have worked to advance human flourishing – yet the passing of each day yields ever-widening gaps in access to education, financial resources, and health care. Even the modern democratizer – technology – runs the very real risk of deepening divides rather than bridging them. Each of the great advances of humankind at once demonstrate our capacity for creativity and progress, but also our struggle to realize the rhetorically understood notion that humanity constitutes a single people.

This perspective – difficult to describe, let alone quantify – is but one example of the contributions Civil Society can make to a system that is, unfortunately, self-reinforcing in its very structure. The United Nations Secretariat is filled with some of the most sacrificial, caring people in the world. Yet, they are constantly reminded that their bosses are the Member States. The Member States, to a degree that should cause us deep introspection, are beholden to various forms of narrow thinking and short-termism, largely as a result of election cycles. As a delegate once said during a multilateral meeting: at the UN, we often focus on what is urgent, not what is important. And the private sector, emboldened by the degree that measures of success have been monetized and the attendant policy favoritism that accompanies it, is to a large degree having an outsize influence on policy decisions. Who is left, then, to speak for the long term, hard-to-measure qualities of life that are rarely discussed in policy debate or in budgeting? It is civil society: many are unapologetically religious, with contributions coming from a values-based analysis. Many are hyper-critical, which is a natural product of the culture of competition we all function within. And many are working – day in and day out – with those truly at the margins to learn what really matters to them. As a result, their underlying assumptions are different, particularly with respect to where change comes from and how it can be sustained.

Part II: What is the source of change?

It is people who enforce regulations or ignore them, who uphold positions of authority or abuse them.[2]

These Expert Group Meetings are justifiably policy focused, seeking to learn about the policies that result in social progress in one dimension or another. However, it must be acknowledged that there are a number of shortcomings to such a one-sided approach. Without undermining the critical role that policy plays, I hope here to offer a counter balance to look more closely at the role of people and communities in effecting change. The examples I gave at that time focused on three shortcomings: (1) authorities who refuse to implement good policy, (2) good policy that is not well communicated to the people so they can abide by it, and (3) good policy that is well communicated and well-intentioned, but discarded as unimportant.

This section will look critically at a few of the objectives and key questions articulated in the Aide Memoire. After a brief analysis of these examples, I provide a few questions that may be helpful for future consultation. While this may seem tangential to a paper on the UN/Civil Society partnership, each of the examples speaks to how the UN can better engage Civil Society actors.

> *Meeting objective iv: "come up with policy recommendations that can ensure that no one is left behind, particularly social, economic and environmental policies that foster social inclusion, promote empowerment of women, the poor and people in vulnerable situations."*

Let us imagine a perfect policy – one that accomplishes all that is mentioned above. Can we assume that such a policy enacted in Brazil or Botswana will work equally well in Russia or Rwanda? Each of these countries have unique cultures and histories. The developmental holy grail of replicability and scalability of policy needs to be questioned. Maybe, for example, it is the means that need to be replicated, rather than the ends. Take, for example, the construction of a well in a village. Imagine that this well was built after community-wide and community-led consultation. Once the community decided a well was necessary, they reached out to partners to support their initiative. Through the process, all community members sacrificed their time and energy to contribute to the project. Now imagine that a donor, noting the success of this project – that it built solidarity, included all, was respectful of environmental needs, etc. – decides to build another well in a second community. In this case, the decision to build the well is imposed from the outside because the ends are replicable and the project has been proven to work. Also imagine the not unlikely scenario that the community consultation has been treated as a project by the donor to acquire "buy-in". Which well would you think more likely to be functioning in a few years? Which community is characterized by stronger social bonds? They are both, after all, wells, but are the results going to be the same?

Another element that raises concerns is the degree to which the latter approach is reinforcing a model that is increasingly being seen as outmoded in terms of how development is done. We are all influenced by our culture, and the culture of development discourse over the past century has focused on those with material resources giving to those without: "we" develop "them".[3] However, those with limited material means far outnumber those living in abundance, and no longer can it be realistically

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[2] Unlocking Human Capacity as a Means of Achieving Social Development, Baha'i International Community, 2015. Found at https://www.bic.org/statements/unlocking-human-capacity-driver-social-development#WVyYHYUefdvG7C7P.97

[3] This is not limited to the development field. The Peace and Security Funding Index states "The vast majority of peace and security funding goes to organizations headquartered in the Global North … These organizations also received close to 75 percent of peace and security grant dollars. However, much of this funding was focused on global peace and security or projects relating to the Global South." Found at http://peaceandsecurityindex.org/wp-content/themes/peaceandsecurity/images/PSFG-report.pdf.

imagined that a small segment of humanity will, on its own, be able to bring about the advancement of all the rest. At this point in the development of the global community, such a proposition is neither feasible, nor desirable. The aggregate talents of several billion individuals represent a phenomenal reservoir of resources for constructive change – in numerical terms if nothing else – that has so far gone largely untapped. Efforts to rethink and strengthen social development in the need to ensure that the contributions of those who have traditionally been treated largely as passive recipients of aid are meaningfully integrated into global processes of development.

A rich and deepening consciousness of the oneness of humankind is the only way that the obstacles inherent in dichotomies like rich/poor, north/south, developed/developing can be overcome. Designations of this kind are not without basis, for some countries *do* have more financial resources than others. But while such realities are not to be denied, neither should they be allowed to paralyze constructive action. Rather, they should be incorporated into the perspective that an integrated, sustainable and prosperous world will not be built by "us" working with or for "them", but simply by all of us working for the collective good.

Perhaps an objective for a future meeting could read more like the following: "Learn from examples of success and see what recommendations could be derived from them. What policies were decided upon, and how were they arrived at? What qualities of the community decision-making processes were evident, and what skills should we seek to build with other communities so they can ensure that no one is left behind? How did the community approach differences of identity in ways that were constructive (or problematic)?"

> *Experts key question ix: "What policies have been shown to be more effective at addressing longer-term structural issues faced by people living in rural and remote areas, women, youth, persons with disabilities, older persons and indigenous groups?"*

While this question approaches some of the critiques of the theory of change discussed above, it is worth noting the important element of culture in this respect. A helpful analogy in this case is traffic habits and rules. In looking at the variety of traffic patterns around the world, it might be difficult to determine which is the most conducive policy to achieving the ends desired. In Germany, for example, driving expectations are characterized by order and following clear rules. In Egypt, the order is vastly distinct and rules are generally treated more as guidelines. And yet, in both places drivers have found ways to effectively get from one point to another. Even absent these cultural distinctions, the technical approaches to traffic vary and one may be no better than another – just different based on history: are roundabouts or stop signs better at intersections? Or, is driving on the left or on the right a better policy? Again, none of this is meant to undermine the role of policy, just to say that there is more to it. There are social contracts and cultural norms that may inform how effective a good or bad policy will be. Merely this is to demonstrate that treating policy as a catchall solution, discounting the cultural or historical elements of a society or what encourages citizens to buy in and support a given policy, is one that should be reevaluated.

By way of another example, in speaking with a taxi driver in Colombia recently, I asked about the change in Colombian society as a result of the negotiations between the government and the FARC. He said that while this change is important and will likely benefit the whole country, especially in the rural areas, its ultimate success – much like the reduction in drug use in the cities – will need to be driven by a deeper understanding of human dignity and the source of satisfaction in life. The culture of Colombian society, he said, has shifted to one where drug use is no longer socially acceptable. This, more than anything else, he explained, is what has reduced the drug trade in Colombia and limited the violent rivalries between the narco-traffickers. In the discussion with him, it was clear that the policy shift is responding to the cultural shift, and not the other way around.

This kind of analysis is vital to leaving no-one behind. This perspective should be valued and, to the degree possible, heard at the table when discussing policies that can help achieve the ambitious plans

we lay out. It is an important contextual element – again, hard to measure, but important to understand – that serves as the canvas on which a policy is played out.

Many of the questions central to the emergence of a prosperous global civilization will need to be answered at least in part at the level of culture. Viewed in this light, social action and poverty eradication may well take the form of raising collective consciousness in a village or neighborhood about vital principles such as oneness, justice, and the equality of women and men; demonstrating the value of cooperation as an organizing principle for activity; and fortifying collective volition. This change may not see the desired results on short time scales. But, like the delegate referred to above said, we need to focus on what is important just as much as what is urgent – even if the former is more nuanced and longer term. Perhaps further questions for exploration would focus on culture, history and context as much as policy.

> *Expert key question xiv: "How can the UN system address the causes and challenges of poverty eradication through integrated, coordinated and coherent strategies at the national, intergovernmental and inter-agency levels in accordance with the outcomes of the major UN conferences and summits in the economic, social and related fields?"*

Many have noted that the true test of Agenda 2030 will be its practical implementation. Particularly important will be the degree that its efforts are able to secure the commitment, support and labors of the peoples of the world. Structural reform, largely the purview of Member States and the United Nations – the focus of the question above – will be crucial in numerous areas. But it is people who enforce regulations or ignore them, who uphold positions of authority or abuse them. The ability of people, individually and as members of communities and institutions, to achieve something they collectively value is therefore an indispensable means of achieving lasting progress.

Like the other questions above, this one is very important but I might suggest incomplete. Addressing the age-old malady of poverty might well require the redistribution of financial assets, the refinement of systems of taxation, and similar measures. But at a deeper level, eradicating poverty will require the construction of a global civilization characterized by generosity, solidarity, compassion, equity and a sustainable relationship of human beings with their environment. Corruption will ultimately be eradicated not solely by penal codes or sophisticated tracking systems, but by the establishment of a society in which honesty and trustworthiness are socially expected moral norms.

All of the above speaks to varying dimensions of a deeper inconsistency in the development paradigm. Agenda 2030, for example, asserts that "eradicating poverty in all its forms … is the greatest global challenge." But this could be likened to saying that a sneeze is the greatest concern of the flu. It is but a symptom, whereas the underlying problem is more complex and deeply rooted. The challenge of poverty stems from an even more fundamental issue: namely those personal and collective values that allow poverty to exist in a world with sufficient resources for all. In this light, poverty reflects not simply a scarcity of resources, but a deficiency in the way human beings perceive, relate to, and value one another.

Part III: UN – Civil Society Relationships

While many of the recommendations for strengthening the UN/Civil Society relationship going forward are embedded throughout the text above, here I will try to distill the recommendations in a few key points:

- We have to explore, examine and expand our notions of poverty and development. The models of the past are proving deficient and ill-fitting to these times. We must explore, together, descriptions of reality that are beyond a strictly materialistic frame.

- We should look at process as much as substance. While quantitative goals and statistics are important indicators, they must be accompanied by qualitative analysis. (the quality of a consultation cannot be described in number of attendees or interventions, for example)
- We must look critically at the roles and responsibilities – the competitive advantage, so to speak – of the various segments of society and learn how to hear those various perspectives in ways that are reflective of our holistic nature as human beings. In other words, we must continue to encourage robust Civil Society participation at the table in a spirit of mutual and constructive learning. Furthermore, we must acknowledge that Civil Society, the United Nations, most Member States, and even most private businesses are ultimately working for the same objectives. This should be the guiding principle as we engage together. Civil Society invitations to Expert Group Meetings as well as United Nations' humble exploration of various Civil Society meetings are a great effort in this regard.
- We must be creative in bringing diverse voices into spaces of analysis and decision-making and asking them to speak to the experiences they know best – and this includes people who have overcome poverty: the "beneficiaries" of these policies. (I would, however, posit that we are all beneficiaries of a world where more and more people are able to partake in advancing society).
- Civil Society, too, will need to revisit and rethink its organizational structure. There is a hierarchy of preference for ECOSOC status on the one hand, and there is a struggle to find 'representative voices' of global groupings on the other. These struggles are important, and the UN and Civil Society should consider engagement with proper reflection.
- Lastly, process is often more important than substance. Transparency goes a long way. Consultation goes even further. The more Civil Society is involved, and the more it is treated as a legitimate actor, the better will its product and collaboration be. Partnership – the thrust of goal 17 – requires from all (including Civil Society) a willingness to listen to the other, to modify plans, and to genuinely build mutual relationships and, ultimately, trust.

I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this EGM. I hope these reflections on the nature of our underlying assumptions and theories of change offer insights into the value of including Civil Society in the spaces where decisions are made and policy is shaped. We are, in the end, all working towards the same goals: greater opportunity, universal participation, and prosperity for all. And with this spirit of mutual endeavor as our starting point for engagement, there is no goal we cannot meet.