

**Bahá'í International Community's Oral Statement to the
48th Session of the Commission for Social Development**

Transforming Collective Deliberation: Valuing Unity and Justice

Thank you, Honorable Chair.

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies & Gentlemen,

1. In this time of transition to a new social order, processes of social integration gather momentum alongside related processes of disintegration such as collapsed moral foundations, outworn institutions and a sense of disillusionment.
2. These integrative processes are for example, growing social networks facilitated by information technology; collective approaches to knowledge generation and dissemination; the spread of education; and the evolution of new mechanisms of international cooperation.
3. It is in this context that the Bahá'í International Community would like to offer its experience with a process of collective deliberation called *consultation*.
4. Consultation is an approach that is unifying rather than divisive. It is guided by the following key principles:
 - a. Participants express themselves freely in a dignified and courteous manner.
 - b. Once an idea has been shared, it is no longer associated with the individual who expressed it, but becomes a resource for the group to adopt, modify, or discard.
 - c. Great value is placed on the diversity of perspectives.
 - d. Active solicitation of views from those traditionally excluded from decision-making fosters the trust, inclusion and mutual commitment needed for collective action.
 - e. And finally, all participants support the decision arrived at by the group. If the decision proves incorrect, the group will learn from its shortcomings and revise the decision as needed.
5. This approach, unlike those of partisan confrontation or debate, seeks to shift the deliberation towards a new center, maneuvering away from competing claims and interests to the arena of principle. Collective goals and courses of action are thus more likely to surface and prevail.
6. The experience of the worldwide Bahá'í community, residing in 188 countries and 45 territories, suggests that consultation has universal application and does not favor any one culture, class, race or gender.
7. It is founded on the understanding that human beings are essentially noble—we possess reason and conscience as well as capacities for inquiry, understanding, compassion and service to the common good. In the absence of this perspective, labels such as 'marginalized', 'poor', or 'vulnerable', which emphasize on needs and deficiencies, often obscure these human qualities and capacities.

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8. The understanding that we are all part of an indivisible human family is becoming the standard by which our collective efforts are judged.
9. The most compelling model for the integration of the world's cultures and peoples may lie in the complexity and coordination that characterize the human body. Within this organism, millions of cells, with extraordinary diversity of form and function, collaborate to make human existence possible. Every cell has its part to play in maintaining a healthy body.
10. In conclusion, we invite you to join in a collaborative process of inquiry, by considering the following questions:
 - a. What is the role of leadership and authority in fostering unifying processes of deliberation and decision-making?
 - b. How can we foster deliberative processes that encourage freedom of expression and build unity in diversity?
 - c. What social structures are needed to support more inclusive deliberation and decision-making?

Thank you.