



## **BRAHMA KUMARIS WORLD SPIRITUAL UNIVERSITY**

### **Youth: The Treasure of Today and Promise of Tomorrow**

Statement to the

### **United Nations World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth**

August 1998, Lisbon, Portugal

While older people constitute society's link to yesterday's rich heritage, youth are its promise of tomorrow. Role-cast by time as the standard-bearers of the best of our traditions and yet also the agents for the progress that many desperately need, the challenges facing the youth of today are indeed formidable. However, while the future they face may at times seem daunting, the potential and resources they possess, their ideals, energy and creativity, are no less impressive.

Critical to the future of humanity is the ability of society as a whole, youth and elders alike, to improve the situation of youth, settle the problems they face and harness that potential, ensuring that it is integrated and applied constructively to help shape and build a better world.

The first World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth has been convened as a follow-up to the World Programme of Action for Youth, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1995. With young people aged between 15 and 24 still accounting for nearly 20% of the world population, they have long-deserved the higher profile now being accorded to them on the global agenda. The undeniable aspirations of participation, development and peace are the overall themes of the World Programme, carried forward from the United Nations International Youth Year in 1985.

The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University has an active and committed youth constituency in about 75 countries worldwide and its 1985 programme of action for the International Youth Year included a series of educational and awareness-building activities carried out by over 500 youth travelling on foot from village to village in groups throughout twenty states in India before rallying together in Delhi. Regular on-going activities by and for youth around the world ensure that the University remains very much aware of the varying problems afflicting youth in countries in differing stages of development.

Such activities have also enabled the University to see what can be achieved when young people have access to the right opportunities, the means for their own overall well-being, personal development and the expression of their skills and talents in a healthy and

supportive environment. The experience over the years of the Brahma Kumaris indicates that among the most crucial issues to be addressed for the well-being of young people are education, participation and purpose.

## **EDUCATION: ADDING VALUE TO LEARNING**

If young people are to be productive and constructive participants in the life of society, the quality of education that they receive is of critical importance. In this regard it is not enough just to accelerate the very welcome progress already made in extending basic education to all. While boosting the quantity of education, we must not overlook its quality and content if youth are to be fully prepared and equipped for complex and fundamentally changing world conditions. In an increasingly technology-driven world, education can rapidly become outdated and irrelevant; many of the jobs that today's young people will be seeking to take up have not yet been created, the technology for them not yet developed. In stark contrast, for millions of other youth, the sad reality is that the major barrier they face is illiteracy. However, while youth are in many ways vulnerable and often dependent, they are also full of hope and enthusiasm and eager to learn. The overall development and progress of society depends on their development and growth as individuals. A better world certainly requires that all youth receive relevant and useful education and training to help them build and maintain skills and acquire primary healthcare knowledge and environmental awareness. However, it also requires that values such as integrity, respect, responsibility, truth and love must become a way of life rather than just lost ideals forlornly looking down at us from the unread pages of dusty old tomes. In preparing the world citizens of the 21st century, education must have human, moral and spiritual principles and values at its heart, and the resulting expression of them as its aim. Young minds have energy, drive and curiosity but need guidance and road-markers if their journey towards maturity and wisdom is to be secure and successful. Values such as honesty, tolerance and cooperation must not just be thrown down at youth from on-high but also role-modelled and practically experienced if they are to be inculcated and become part of the instinctive and spontaneous behaviour of young people.

## **THE LIVING VALUES EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMME**

The Brahma Kumaris have seen that in a suitable environment, youth can learn, acquire and express such values and attitudes. Indeed young minds are often a more fertile ground within which such values may grow and flourish. In this regard, the University has helped educators from around the world to develop The Living Values Educational Programme, in consultation with UNICEF's Education Cluster, with the support of UNESCO and the sponsorship of the Spanish and French Committees for UNICEF and UNESCO's Planet Society. The Programme features a self-contained training kit which offers practical methodologies and tools for use by teachers and facilitators to enable children and young adults to explore and develop twelve key personal and social values for the 21st century. Its approach is experiential, participatory and flexible, allowing it to be adapted according to varying cultural, social and other circumstances. It also contains special modules for use by parents and care-givers and for refugees, children at risk and children affected by war. The training kit is already in use in nearly sixty countries around the world and the Brahma Kumaris and other Programme coordinators would gladly cooperate with education authorities, schools and other interested organizations working in this field who wish to make use of it as an instrument of youth policy and programming.

## **THE SPIRIT OF YOUTH**

At these turbulent times, education can no longer limit itself, whether by content, gender bias or age cut-off, but must transcend these frontiers and become an inclusive lifelong learning process that embraces the family and community, as well as the classroom, as places of learning. In a world teeming with poverty, deprivation and insecurity of many kinds, the maximization of inner personal resources is essential. Where spiritual needs are not met, low self-esteem, fear and anxiety follow but are themselves only the precursors to a downward spiral of exclusion, marginalization and further deprivation. When the inner being is nurtured, this provides the confidence and inner strength to overcome pre-conditioned self-images of inferiority, increases the capacity to learn and facilitates a purposeful and productive life. The Lisbon Declaration on Youth Policies and Programmes must pay particular attention to extending such learning opportunities to girls and young women, the improvement of whose condition must be a priority of youth policy.

In conjunction with The Living Values Educational Programme, the University's teachings offer a spiritual understanding of the self and a more spiritual perspective of life as a whole. They offer to individuals of all ages an understanding of the essentially spiritual nature of the self: that at the deepest level of identity, each human being not just has but is a soul with inherent goodness and a purity of being as its original nature. To understand the self and experience one's own spirituality through contemplation and reflection leads to the development of self-respect and this in turn is the basis of respect for others.

## **PARTICIPATION**

Self-respect and respect for others are the two foundation stones of greater involvement of youth in decision-making processes and their participation in the development and execution of plans and programmes. Part of the challenge for many youth is recognition of their right to make choices for their own lives and recognition of their ability to make a difference in their own lives and those of others. Youth are able to participate more effectively when their participation is based on a clear understanding of their own worth and potential and respect for the self. Spirituality can help youth understand themselves better and empower them to participate as equal partners in society's continuing journey towards peace and development. Such self-knowledge and self-respect on the part of youth then brings greater appreciation of them and their abilities by their elders and leads to youth being recognized and respected as fellow members of the human family with the same rights to participate in creating its future.

## **PURPOSE**

One of the greatest resources of youth is their ideals and the fact that they have often not yet adopted a way of life that supports and sustains continued exploitation, abuse and marginalization. However their personal qualities, skills and energies must be nurtured and channelled in the right direction if they are to take their rightful place within the human family.

A deeper and clearer understanding of the self and a more spiritual perspective of life will help clarify a purpose for life and so provide a constructive focus and greater meaning to life. With no clear aim or purpose, substance abuse, delinquent behaviour, frustrated

potential and wasted time are but a thought away. Such purpose and meaning, which may vary for each person according to their circumstances and individual identity, provide a channel for self-expression and will include the discovery that no matter how large or small it might be, there is always something that each of us can do to contribute to society and brighten the lives of those around us.

The expression of inner values and a commitment to a purpose beyond the self are the basis of greater participation in and a more meaningful contribution to the life of society. They are also a major step towards the realization of individual potential and the attainment of personal fulfilment and contentment.

## **RESTORING HOPE**

In all regions of the world, the darkness of depression is casting an increasingly long shadow over young people's lives. Depression now ranks as the leading cause of death, illness and disability among young men and women and has led to a tragically rising youth suicide rate. About 85% of youth live in developing countries and many find themselves confronting hunger, poverty, unsanitary living conditions, a deteriorating environment and unemployment. An understandable lack of self-confidence in the face of such seemingly insurmountable problems can lead to a habit of plunging into sinking depths of depression and a self-destructive defeatism. At the same time, in more developed countries, young people are frequently exposed to images of materialistic achievement that depend on fiercely individualistic effort for their fulfilment and feed on consumerist values of acquisition and expenditure, rather than deeper values such as self-reliance, honesty and integrity. In either circumstance, the result can be an existential crisis, a sense of inadequacy, deprivation or guilt, although at the root of depression will often lie a rupture in consciousness, such that victims of it feel alienated not just from those around them but also from themselves. Seeing depression in this way, as a wound in the spirit requiring healing at a spiritual and not just physical level, is an essential step in its prevention and cure. Although drugs to elevate the mood, if available, can sometimes provide a helping hand towards recovery, a spiritual viewpoint will often prove indispensable for complete healing as the victim of depression needs to become more at one with the real self and reinstate a sense of connectedness and belonging to others, if not to something larger than the self. Hope and inner strength, enhanced self-esteem for a more fulfilling relationship with others, and a restoration of the link with God all feature among the fruits that spirituality has to offer, as well as providing powerful support in times of need.

## **REACH FOR THE SKY!**

Just as a mighty tree depends on the foundation of its roots, so too, if the world of tomorrow is to move towards a golden age for human civilization, it also will depend on bottom-up growth - involving youth, society's young roots and shoots, in the decisions that affect today and tomorrow. A grounding in spiritual and moral principles and values will help build and strengthen the capacity of youth to participate as key actors in the unfolding drama of life. A young sapling knows that its task is to reach for the sky and young people need not settle for less. They are the treasure of today and the promise of tomorrow. Valuing this treasure will ensure that they can fulfil that promise.

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## **Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University**

The BKWSU is a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and in consultative status with UNICEF.  
The University was founded in India in 1937 and has branches in over 100 countries worldwide.  
It has been affiliated to the United Nations Department of Public Information since 1980.

[www.bkun.org](http://www.bkun.org)

### **OFFICE FOR THE UNITED NATIONS**

Suite 436  
866, UN Plaza  
New York, NY 10017  
**U.S.A.**  
Tel.: +1-212-688-1335  
Fax.: +1-212-504-2798  
[bkun@bkwsu.org](mailto:bkun@bkwsu.org)

### **HEADQUARTERS**

Pandav Bhawan  
Mount Abu 307501  
Rajasthan  
**India**  
Tel.: +91-2974-238261  
Fax.: +91-2974-238952  
[abu@bkivv.org](mailto:abu@bkivv.org)

### **INTL. COORDINATING OFFICE**

Global Cooperation House  
65-69 Pound Lane  
London NW10 2HH  
**U.K.**  
Tel.: +44-20-8727-3350  
Fax.: +44-20-8727-3351  
[london@bkwsu.org](mailto:london@bkwsu.org)

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