

Spirituality: Development's Forgotten Soul

Written Statement of the

BRAHMA KUMARIS WORLD SPIRITUAL UNIVERSITY

for

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CIVIL SOCIETY DIALOGUE ON CRITICAL DEVELOPMENT ISSUES
BEING ADDRESSED BY THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM**

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The broad aim of development, in the sense of social progress and achieving better standards of living for all people, is one that has been at the heart of the work of the United Nations family of organizations and agencies since its foundation. A narrower concept of development has nevertheless been prevalent in many quarters, often equating development with little more than economic growth or standing alone. In saying this, it should not be forgotten that many people have experienced tremendous improvements in their living conditions as a result of this focus on economic growth and the opening and freeing of markets and trade. And it is certainly the case that financial capacity is an indispensable resource in combating poverty and achieving security of many kinds. However, high-speed economic progress and liberalisation may itself foster social insecurities and instability if not taking place within the context of a robust and balanced institutional framework. Further, FDI flows understandably look for profit rather than where there may be need, and so can be fickle. Likewise, predatory speculation and one-sided trade transactions point to the uncaring face of market forces – the very visible hand of unenlightened self-interest in an uneven playing-field that leaves many marginalized and excluded. And although financial aid and support can lend a welcome helping-hand, it is not tenable to think that people must mould themselves to the unforgiving contours of imposed economic systems rather than such systems being at the service of and bringing benefit to people. While such systems may work towards ensuring that individuals have the right to enjoy the fruits of their own labour and endeavour in a free world, the processes of globalisation need a human face so that they offer equal opportunities and bring benefit to the whole of the human family. In short, a human being is not a homo economicus and there are wider and deeper aspects of progress and well-being that need to be taken into account than just material ones if we are to honour the whole person and his or her inherent worth and multidimensional capacities.

The early years of the work of the United Nations and its family of organizations and agencies gave expression to injunctions such as that in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which proclaimed that human beings “should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood”. Stunted in their growth, at least partly by the infertile wasteland of the cold war, which hardly nurtured the coming together of the human family, such lofty ideals were for many years little more than an echo of what might have been. The early 1990s saw the shy dawning of a more broad-based and holistic approach as can be seen from governments’ recognition that “individuals should be allowed to develop to their full potential, including healthy physical, mental and spiritual development” and commitment to “social, economic and spiritual development” in Agenda 21. By 1995, social development was the main theme of the UN Summit of that year and signatories to the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development acknowledged that their societies “must respond more effectively to the material and spiritual needs of individuals, their

families and the communities in which they live...". Certainly, there can no longer be any denying the need for development to take account of the nourishment, sustenance, and security of the inner being as well as the outer. So, in asserting that people must be at the centre of development, we must not forget the heart and soul that are at the centre of people.

Trade and development are, at their core, essentially about relationships between people, whether acting as customers, suppliers, partners or beneficiaries. Like all other relationships, these ones too are based on a rationale, code or logic – whether or not written – that determines, expects or predisposes certain patterns or incidences of behaviour. At the root of this dynamic are our fundamental approach to life and the world around us: our principles, perspectives and values. It is the state of this inner world of ours that ultimately determines the state of the outer world. Asymmetries and imbalances within our economic, trade and social systems are symptoms of a malaise deeper within us. Understanding this is the key to all our development endeavours; if we fail to take account of this inner dimension, we lack the foundation upon which the successful outcome of our plans and actions depends. Thus, it is easy to say that ODA levels must be increased to reach agreed targets, that the North must stop selling arms, encouraging wasteful consumerism and building sweatshops, that the South must address issues of governance, lack of transparency, dependency, corruption and entrenched interests. And it is an outrage that in a world of such plenty the basic needs of so many people for food, water, clothing and shelter are not met and their rights with regard to education, health and work are neglected or violated – and all while some of their neighbours indulge their greed. But it is not just legislation that will resolve injustice, and trade alone will never put an end to the LDCs' problems and provide the necessary security, infrastructure and systems. While it is true that political will may be lacking in these areas, that too is merely symptomatic of a deeper problem: the undeveloped human heart and spirit.

A new model of development is thus called for; not just one that recognises that people must be at the centre of development, and its beneficiaries, but one that also recognises that spirituality is at the heart of what it truly means to be human. Such a model will recognise that the deepest level of our identity is a spiritual one; that the dignity and worth of the human person derives not from the body so much as the soul within it. We must define ourselves far more by reference to our inherent spirituality than to wealth, GDP figures or other external physical conditions and circumstances. To do so will bring back to development its forgotten soul and offer meaningful and well-founded principles and standards by reference to which trade, commercial activity and governance may be conducted and assessed.

Welcome progress has been made with the introduction of human development indicators; this process must now be taken a stage further so that our development efforts are assessed by spiritual and ethical criteria and with reference to their impact on humanity's spiritual and moral well-being. To be sure, finalising comprehensive, commonly agreed and assessable spiritual indicators will be a time-consuming task, but such reference points would, it is submitted, provide a reliable compass by which to chart meaningful and long-term development efforts that truly have people as their beneficiaries. In fact, there is already a fairly substantial convergence of thinking in this regard and the signs of the emergence of a global ethic, on the basis of a set of commonly held values, are obvious. Societies, governments and markets that function properly all do so because of a moral basis of qualities such as trust, fairness, respect, equitable treatment of all people, responsibility, solidarity and honesty.

The benefits of such an ethical approach are not just prosaic; equitable income distribution, for example, is likely to be supportive of faster overall economic growth and social stability.

In looking at such an ethic, its underlying principle is the worth of the human person and that each human, regardless of external physical factors, is ultimately spiritual in identity. While we may be traders and businesspeople, we are human beings before being that. To be true to ourselves requires that our actions be an expression of and consistent with the fundamental truth that each of us is spiritual in nature. It is because of this common spiritual identity that we all share universal rights and can claim to be members of the one human family. The spirit of brotherhood that derives from this requires that our relationships – whether personal, commercial, development-related or otherwise – be imbued with ethical values such as mentioned above. Much effort is being made to remove the barriers to trade and investment but we must also tear down the barriers within our minds that restrict or place quotas on the free flow of the milk of human kindness.

A second spiritual principle of fundamental significance is what may be described as the law of reciprocity. In this interdependent world of ours, every cause has a directly proportionate effect and ultimately, we receive whatever, and to the extent that, we give. Trust engenders trust, violence begets violence, and so on. It is not just that we should treat others the way we want to be treated but that we *will* be treated the way we treat others. Thus, accepting a degree of moral responsibility for the welfare of others is not only an ethical imperative but also an issue of long-term personal welfare. In a commercial transaction, as in other exchanges, one party's lack of respect for the other's rights – for example to a fair return from the fruits of that person's labour – will only lead to the same being reciprocated in one form or another. People can lay no claim to be exempt from moral reasoning and fundamental principles just because they are in a marketplace.

A rich blend of legislation, institutional programming and remedial measures has been put in place over the years in relation to a variety of fields of human activity in the interests of trying to secure a poverty-free, more equitable, just and humane society. The United Nations family can proudly claim to have been at the vanguard of many such endeavours. Thus, with regard to trade, for example, liberalisation measures have helped to promote development and boost living standards for many, although much more remains to be done if the benefits of economic and trade globalisation are to reach those who really need it the most, especially women and children in the LDCs. These achievements have in turn given rise to demands for progress with regard to environment, labour standards and legal and social infrastructure. The next stage that must now be taken – and it is the greatest shift that is needed – is in our values and attitudes. Once they change, all other necessary changes will follow easily. But if they don't change, nothing much else will really ever change, and so this must be the first step. To be sure, achieving such inner change is easier said than done. Spirituality is crucial in this regard, providing not just the guiding light for the direction in which we need to change but also a powerful resource to help us make those changes.

All this will require that we place a high priority on learning and education that is not only functional, practical and relevant in content but which also has spiritual, ethical and moral principles and values at its heart and the overall development of the whole person as its aim. In this regard, one of the hidden treasures within LDCs – that purely economic indicators ignore – is the richness of the spirit of the people, their culture, traditions and social codes. The African notion of *ubuntu* is an obvious example of this, referring as it does to a code of ethics which embraces generosity, tolerance, warm-heartedness and selflessness. This non-monetary wealth is both something to be preserved for its own beauty and strength as part of humanity's heritage but also, less tainted by materialistic tendencies and societal ills, a wonderful resource for true human development.

For the past 65 years the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University has been offering to people of all walks of life around the world a very simple, accessible and yet effective education in self-awareness, spiritual principles and values.

The University – together with UNESCO's Basic and Primary Education Sections, and in consultation with the Education Cluster of UNICEF – supports *Living Values: An Educational Programme*. The Programme provides materials and guidance to facilitate the integration of values education into existing curricula and textbooks for children and young adulthood, starting from early childhood. It covers twelve fundamental human values such as respect, tolerance, freedom peace, responsibility, love and co-operation. Already in use at approaching 5,000 schools and other sites around the world, results indicate that the Programme's five award-winning activity books, now being translated into at least 24 languages, constitute an invaluable tool for personal development. Programme coordinators would welcome working with others in this continuing and crucial endeavour.

The next waves in the sea of change that is the story of human development must rise from deep within the human spirit, drawing on the realisation of the fundamentally spiritual nature of our identity. We must see, and develop ourselves as whole human beings, integrating the spiritual into the physical, intellectual and emotional. The time we live in is an age of many changes. The call of the time is to make it an age of spiritual and moral change.



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 over 4,000 branches in some 86 countries worldwide.

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Information about Living Values: An Educational Programme is available from the above and from the LVEP website at:
<http://www.livingvalues.net>