INSTITUTE
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GLOBAL PROSPERITY

Reflections on Governance

21 July 2012

At this critical juncture in history, the development of more just, responsible, and effective forms of governance has become a vital imperative at all levels of society. At the level of the state, even the most advanced forms of democratic governance are losing legitimacy as a result of their cooptation by powerful interests groups and their inability to address the increasingly complex challenges facing all societies today. At the level of the market, corporate governance is viewed with growing suspicion and distrust as increasingly powerful corporations pursue narrow self-interests at the expense of broader social and ecological concerns. At the level of civil society, the governance of diverse organizations and movements is increasingly undermined as ideological forces and identity politics become sources of increasing division and anarchy. Furthermore, as a result of the complex interactions among all of these levels of governance, the management of human affairs is fraught with increasing difficulties even as the need for coordinated governance has never been greater. In short, in an age of ever-increasing social and ecological interdependence, inherited models of governance are unable to meet the immediate challenges, and guide the long-term progress, of human civilization.

The purpose of this document is to invite dialogue and reflection on the common challenges that face all people who are actively working to advance the cause of good governance. The thoughts offered here arise from the Institute's decade-long efforts to generate systematic learning and gain new insights, in collaboration with others, about issues of pressing global concern — including the issue of governance. Many of the insights conveyed in this document are drawn from the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith as well as the accumulated experience of the world-wide Bahá'í community. For over a century, the Bahá'í community has been systematically developing and implementing new approaches to governance, rooted in a recognition of the spiritual dimension of human existence, and drawing on the methods of systematic learning. The insights generated so far, we believe, invite a fundamental rethinking of many popular assumptions regarding governance. In addition, these insights suggest that advancing the goal of just, responsible, and effective governance will demand profound changes not only in the minds and hearts of people but also in the structures of society. Therefore, the following discussion attempts to identify some of the challenges associated with such change, and to raise corresponding questions for further exploration.

1. Promoting unity and justice

The defining characteristic of this stage of human history is intensifying global interdependence. Under these conditions, many inherited forms of social organization are proving anachronistic. Among these are forms of governance that divide people against one another in contests of power that are becoming increasingly dysfunctional and oppressive. Attempts to advance human prosperity and well-being can no longer ignore this reality. The unification, harmonization, and coordination of human activities on local, national, and global levels is now imperative for human progress. Approaches to governance at all levels must therefore be informed by a recognition of the organic unity and interdependence — or the oneness — of humanity.

The insight that humanity constitutes a single people, with shared interests and aspirations, appears deceptively simple, yet it constitutes a fundamental challenge to inherited assumptions and practices in the field of governance. Much like the human body, the interdependent body of humanity is composed of diverse elements whose well-being can only be achieved through integration and coordination. No cell or organ lives apart from the human body, and the well-being of each derives from the well-being of the whole. At the same time, it is the unity and interdependence of the body's diverse cells and organs that permits the full realization of the distinctive capacities inherent in each.

The organic unity suggested by this analogy does not imply uniformity. On the contrary, the diversity of the component parts of an organic body permits the full realization of its collective capacity. Within human societies, diversity is a source of inspiration, creativity, productivity, resilience, innovation, and adaptation. Only when diverse segments of society are able to contribute appropriately to the governance of human affairs, within a framework characterized by unity and integration, will real prosperity and well-being be achieved.

Such unity can only be achieved, however, as justice becomes the guiding principle of governance at all levels. An essential expression of justice is the desire to ensure that every individual and group has the opportunity to develop their full potential in order to contribute to the betterment of society. A concern for justice is thus an indispensable compass in collective decision making. In the design and implementation of plans, programs, and policies, justice is the sole means by which unity of thought and action can be achieved and sustained among diverse peoples.

These broad principles of unity and justice are only a starting point for dialogue and inquiry regarding governance. How can these principles — and the organic conception of society they reflect — inform new approaches to governance at all levels? What are the implications for state agencies and institutions? What are the implications for market corporations? What are the implications for civil society organizations? And how can these same principles inform the increasingly complex interactions among entities at all of these levels? Surely these rank among the more urgent questions facing humanity at this critical juncture in history, as it grapples with conditions of increasing social and ecological interdependence on a global scale.

2. Redefining power and authority

If we view humanity as an interdependent social body, we can recognize that every human being is a trust of the entire body. In this sense, governance can be understood as an exercise of collective trusteeship, informed by the principle of justice. However, in order for this collective trusteeship to be exercised effectively, prevailing conceptions of power and authority will need to be rethought.

Contemporary forms of governance are often characterized by self-interested and competitive expressions of power. Historically, such expressions may have played a role in advancing aspects of human development among powerful social groups whose interests they primarily served. Yet these expressions of power are proving maladaptive under conditions of heightened global interdependence, in which the welfare of every individual and group is increasingly dependent on the welfare of the entire social body. These conditions call for the development of new modes of governance at all levels — modes characterized by unifying, cooperative, and mutualistic expressions of power.

When governance is cast as a contest of power it tends to be divisive and dysfunctional at best, oppressive at worst. For instance, when state governance is organized as a contest of power it invariably invites the corrupting influence of money; it diminishes the inclusion and participation of historically marginalized individuals or groups; it reduces complex issues down to simplistic slogans; it ignores the well-being of people who are geographically distant; it disregards the interests of future generations; and it has a generally corrosive effect upon the human spirit. As a result, the authority that is wielded by those who prevail in such contests is suffering from a universal crisis of legitimacy.

If such contests of power served any useful purpose in the past, they have surely reached the limits of their effectiveness in this age of increasing interdependence. Hence there is an urgent need to develop systems of governance based on unifying and mutualistic expressions of power. In this regard, the experience of the Bahá'í community offers some tentative insights.

The Bahá'í community is developing a unique system of governance based on alternative conceptions of power and authority. One aspect of this system is an electoral process that is eminently democratic in spirit but is entirely free of competition. Within this system, every adult has a responsibility to vote, is eligible to be voted for, and has a duty to serve if elected. Yet there are no nominations, no campaigning, and no partisanship. Rather, ballots are cast without any prior discussion, in an atmosphere of reverence and personal contemplation. Voters have complete freedom to vote for any adult member of the community that, in their assessment, has demonstrated the maturity, integrity, and capacity for elected service to the community. Those who are named most frequently on ballots are called to service on elected councils or assemblies — even though they never sought this. Moreover, as members of elected institutions they exercise no individual authority within the community. Rather, authority is exercised only by the institution when it makes a decision, as a body, through a unifying and principled process of consultative decision making.

The Bahá'í system is, itself, continually evolving as the community approaches governance in a learning mode. However, based on a century of accumulated experience so far, the basic outline

of the electoral system discussed above has proven itself effective among people from all cultural backgrounds on earth. It has also proven its efficacy at local, regional, national, and international levels. But the system only works if it is adopted in a supremely voluntary manner. It cannot be imposed. In addition, the functioning of the system depends on the cultivation, over successive generations, of requisite values, norms, and commitments. In this regard, the Baháʼí community is, itself, still learning and maturing.

The purpose of this brief example is not to offer the Baháʼí model as a formula or a universal prescription. Rather, the purpose is to suggest that systems of governance need not be conceived as contests for power. What is required, at this critical juncture in history, is a willingness to search for alternatives, to innovate, to experiment, and to generate new knowledge and insight about more unifying and just approaches to governance at all levels. In this context, how can power and authority be reconceptualized within the structures and processes of state governance? How can they be reconceptualized within corporate governance? How can they be reconceptualized within the diverse organizations of civil society? And how can more mature conceptions of power and authority inform the complex interactions among entities at all of these levels of society? Again, these surely rank among the more urgent questions facing humanity today.

3. Developing new models of collective decision making

In an interdependent social body, prosperity and well-being are also dependent on effective processes of collective decision making, which are a vital component of governance at all levels. Conventional models of disputation and debate, which are often driven by ego, ideology, or interest-group competition, are proving inadequate to the complex challenges now facing humanity. More mature models are clearly needed.

Mature and effective processes of collective decision-making require the sincere, systematic, and collaborative investigation of complex issues. Such processes are enriched by the participation of individuals who bring diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and insights to the table, in a spirit of service to the common good, with a humble posture of detachment from their own preconceived ideas. In this context, unity, impartiality, and mature judgment can best be achieved when decision making is guided by the identification and application of moral or spiritual principles — such as the principles of justice and collective trusteeship discussed above. In addition, such processes must also be responsive to input and feedback from the wider community, even as the processes must be shielded from the manipulation and pressures of powerful and self-serving interest groups.

Decision-making processes characterized by these traits enable organizations and communities to achieve coherence and focus, to formulate common goals, to manage collective resources, to promote development strategies, to mobilize diverse talents and capacities, and to foster a spirit of initiative and enterprise. However, such decision-making processes are not easily achieved in practice and their attainment requires patience, maturity, and a developmental perspective. How, then, can such patience, maturity, and perspective be fostered and developed in the sphere of governance?

Again, the experience of the Bahá'í community offers some tentative insights. The Bahá'í community is learning to employ a unifying and constructive model of consultative decision making that stands in stark contrast with prevailing models of disputation and debate. Within this consultative process, participants solicit one another's views in an atmosphere of mutual respect and collective inquiry, based on the assumption that reality is complex and multifaceted, and diverse views can illuminate multiple facets of a complex issue. Participants also strive to offer their own views with humility, and in a spirit of personal detachment, so that every view can be carefully and critically examined in a frank and open manner. By this means, participants attempt to conceptualize the issue at hand in the most well-informed manner possible at any given time. While consulting in this way, participants also strive to raise the context to the level of moral or spiritual principles that align decision-making processes with the well-being of the entire body of humanity.

Though the Bahá'í community is still maturing in its application of this model, the model has already proven remarkably effective in diverse contexts, formal and informal. It is universally employed within the governing institutions of the Bahá'í community and it is also widely employed within Bahá'í families, businesses, non-profit ventures, and other endeavors. Moreover, it has taken root within every cultural background on earth.

As this example illustrates, governance at all levels of society need not be characterized by the divisive modes of disputation and debate. More mature approaches are possible — and urgently needed. What is required, again, is a willingness to explore, develop, and refine new models of collective decision making. How can more mature approaches to collective decision making be fostered within the structures and processes of state governance? How can they be fostered within corporate governance? How can they be fostered within the diverse organizations of civil society? And how can more mature approaches to collective decision making inform the complex interactions among entities at all of these levels of society?

4. Approaching governance in a learning mode

As the preceding discussion suggests, there are no simple formulas and no singular models for effective governance. The diversity of human societies, their ever-increasing complexity, and the growing interdependence of historically distant populations, means that systems of governance must continually evolve. This can only be accomplished if we can overcome the tendencies to idealize established organizational or institutional structures and to uncritically perpetuate familiar norms and processes. Instead, we need to approach governance, like every other human endeavor, in a mode of continuous learning.

The major challenge, in this regard, is not a lack of capacity on the part of most people. Rather, the major challenge is that established forms of governance frequently serve the narrow interests of powerful individuals or groups. Therefore, change is only possible as consciousness is raised among the masses of humanity and increasing numbers of people are empowered to reconstruct systems of governance based on principles such as unity, justice, and collective trusteeship. How, then, can we foster consciousness raising and empowerment, on an ever-expanding scale, along these lines? And how, in this regard, can a constructive sense of purpose and agency be characterized by a posture of continuous learning?

Beyond these broad questions regarding the empowerment of masses and the reconstruction of organizations and institutions, it is also important to consider the function that a posture of learning will need to play within decision making processes themselves. Even the most enlightened collective decisions only reflect the best insight and information available at a given moment. Ultimately, all decisions, plans, and policies need to be tested against reality in an ongoing manner, so that they can be revised or refined as knowledge and insight advance or circumstances change. In this regard, decisions can be understood as points on a path of learning. In order to advance along such a path, people must be capable of reflecting on decisions in light of experience, so the decisions can be adjusted accordingly. This reflective mode of learning from experience is an essential feature of effective governance.

Regrettably, this process of reflective learning from experience is constantly sabotaged or undermined by the culture of opposition that is so prevalent in the world today. Factions at all levels of society frequently sabotage one another's plans and policies in attempts to prevail in contests of power. Such actions make it impossible to implement decisions in a learning mode. This problem is exacerbated, in turn, by the culture of protest that increasingly surrounds governance at all levels. This culture of protest is a predictable reaction to the dysfunction, corruption, and injustice that frequently characterize contests of power. But the consequence of this reaction is that it becomes even more difficult to implement decisions in a collective learning mode. Collective learning is only possible if authority is exercised in a just and legitimate manner, and if a degree of unity can thereby be established in the implementation of plans and policies. Otherwise the relative merits of those plans and policies cannot be disentangled from the consequences of efforts to undermine or oppose them.

In this context, not only do we need to develop more just and legitimate systems of governance that are capable of winning the trust and support of the populations they serve, we also need to foster a spirit of unity that enables governance to operate in a learning mode. These are, of course, no easy things to accomplish. But their urgency is difficult to deny at this juncture in history when the challenges facing humanity have become too complex to address through inherited forms of governance. How, then, can such a learning mode be fostered within the structures and processes of state governance? How can it be fostered within corporate governance? How can it be fostered within the diverse organizations of civil society? And how can it be fostered within relationships among entities at all of these levels of society?

5. Building capacities for effective governance

The efficacy of the structures and processes referred to above depends, ultimately, on the values, qualities, and capabilities of the individuals who participate in them. In this regard, we do not hold the romantic view that human beings will spontaneously rise to the high standards that more mature structures and processes of governance require. On the other hand, neither do we accept the view that human beings are incorrigibly corrupt, selfish, and aggressive, and therefore incapable of developing the mature attributes that effective governance requires. Human beings embody the potential for both egoism and altruism, conflict and cooperation. Which aspects of human nature are more fully developed and expressed depend in part on our cultural environment, including the education and training we receive.

In addition, the relationship between individuals and social institutions or organizations is a dialectical relationship. Individuals develop within institutional or organizational contexts, even as the development of those institutions or organizations depends upon the individuals that participate within them. Meaningful and lasting processes of social transformation must therefore attend simultaneously to developmental processes at both of these levels.

The discussion in this paper has, up to this point, focused largely on change at the level of institutions or organizations. However, when considering the role of the individual within processes of social change, one can appreciate the importance of moral, intellectual, and spiritual education that supports effective governance. Such education, moreover, clearly needs to begin during an individual's earliest formative years, when their most deeply held values, attitudes, perceptions and commitments are taking shape. At the most basic level, such processes need to focus, from childhood, on the cultivation of virtues such as trustworthiness, honesty, integrity, selflessness and humility. They also need to focus, at subsequent stages of individual maturation, on the development of essential skills and capabilities, such as the capacity for self-expression; the capacity to listen to others; the capacity to draw out diverse views and insights from those who have not historically been given a voice; the capacity to suspend one's preconceived judgements and consider new perspectives with an open mind; the capacity to see diversity as a source of richness and strength; the capacity to apply methods of systematic inquiry to the investigation of complex issues or problems; and the capacity to elevate discourse to the level of moral or spiritual principle in order to then be guided by such principles in the formulation of decisions. How, then, can programs of education and training along these lines be developed and implemented, on an expanding scale, in a constructive, inclusive, and attractive manner?

Programs of education and training will also need to focus on the many practical aspects of participation in specific processes of governance, such as how to elect or appoint leaders who embody the qualities needed for effective governance, or how to walk with others on a path of learning. In addition, other requisites of effective governance that can be fostered through training and education include a spirit of openness and inclusiveness in one's dealings with others; a work ethic characterized by the spirit of service to the common good; and an attitude of patience, flexibility, and resilience in the face of difficulties and set-backs. Furthermore, unifying and mutually empowering approaches to governance can only be developed when individuals can foster a climate of mutual trust and respect, free of harmful habits such as backbiting, which poison the atmosphere within organizations, institutions, and communities. Again, how can programs of education and training along these lines be developed and implemented, on an expanding scale, in a constructive, inclusive, and attractive manner?

Invitation to Dialogue

This discussion paper has highlighted just a few of the most salient challenges and questions that will need to be addressed in efforts to advance the cause of good governance. While many other challenges can be identified, it is hoped that dialogue and reflection on the issues raised in this document will enrich contemporary discourse on governance and advance practical efforts to bring about a more just, prosperous, and sustainable social order.

About the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity

The Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP) is a non-profit organization, dedicated to building capacity in individuals, groups and institutions to contribute to prevalent discourses concerned with the betterment of society.

Drawing on both science and religion as two complementary systems of knowledge and practice, learning environments are created where knowledge and experience can be shared and systematized. Principles, concepts and approaches that are relevant to the advancement of civilization are explored through a process of study, reflection and consultation.

Founded in 1999 - and working in collaboration with the Bahá'í International Community - the Institute also engages in learning about the methods, approaches and instruments which can best be employed to contribute to the discourses of society.

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