

How Service to Others Can Drive Economic Life

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We live in a world where profit-taking has been placed at the heart of our economies, and where unbridled consumerism and individualism has become the norm.

That condition has led us to an unsustainable economic imbalance between the extremes of wealth and poverty, which Baha'is believe must change:

One of Baha'u'llah's teachings is the adjustment of means of livelihood in human society. Under this adjustment there can be no extremes in human conditions as regards wealth and sustenance.

– Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 216.

In its letter dated 1 March 2017, the Universal House of Justice—the democratically-elected leadership body of the global Baha'i community—encouraged everyone to think about the alternative spiritual values that could shape how we view the material aspects of our lives. They explained that: “... **time and again, avarice and self-interest prevail at the expense of the common good.**” – p. 1.

This state of economic affairs stands in the way of humanity's collective progress. We can, luckily, find inspiration in examples of communities throughout the world where people have instilled within their society values in harmony with the vision of the Baha'i teachings.

Baha'is believe that Baha'u'llah's vision of how society can be reorganized in every dimension of social existence will help bring about a future which can better reflect our true nature and collective capacity as human beings. Let's look, for inspiration, at two examples of communities that have taken charge of their own economies by addressing their telecommunications needs; a service usually completely controlled by large corporations. The experiences of these communities provide a glimpse of what is possible when we place values other than self-interest and greed at the center of our economic lives.

How Remote Mexican Villages and a Beach Town in Argentina Talk to the Outside World

Rhizomatica, a non-governmental organization (rhizomatica.org), helps remote villages build and maintain their own telecommunications infrastructure. Two large companies dominate the

telecommunications industry in Mexico, and they often decide not to provide mobile phone coverage to some remote areas—or if they do, their pricing is not affordable for people in those communities. In these contexts, technical and policy experts from Rhizomatica work collaboratively with the local population to implement and use technology in line with their traditional values of mutualism and sustainability. Community members raise funds to pay for the initial capital investment and ongoing operating expenses of running a mobile phone network. Local people are also trained to operate and maintain the equipment and services. The organization works with the community to enable them to implement a network based on their own assessment of what they need and using their own material and human resources. So far Rhizomatica has helped 16 villages set up and sustain their own affordable mobile network systems, and together they have shown that by prioritizing service and capacity-building over profits, it's possible to establish and maintain affordable mobile services.

Similarly, in Argentina, community cooperatives flourished in the 1960s because the national telephone company deemed some localities as either too remote or too small in population to be profitable. These cooperatives have operated throughout Argentina for many decades, and today serve 30% of the population in the fields of electricity, gas, and telecommunications. Telpin Ltd., one of the first of these cooperatives established in Argentina in 1962, provides telecommunications services to the Pinamar community in the province of Buenos Aires. Pinamar, a coastal town with a long history as a tourist destination, has a telecommunications cooperative that provides services to 18,000 users who represent a diverse cross-section of the locality's population, including businesses that cater to the needs of seasonal tourists. Cooperatives such as Telpin organize themselves so that members of the community participate in the financing of the services and benefit equally from the beginning. Universal service offered at the lowest cost possible is a priority, so much so that community members pay a lower monthly fee if they have low income or suffer from financial difficulties. This is a striking contrast to corporations which try to make as much money as possible. Because cooperatives don't prioritize profits, they are able to provide services at much lower costs. They also provide training and employment opportunities for local people, and reinvest whatever profits they make back into the community instead of allowing it to accrue to a few individuals. The Telpin cooperative not only focuses on service and affordability, its managers also make sure that the community has access to high quality service by keeping up with the innovations that occur in their field.

Argentina has shown that cooperatives are not limited to small, isolated settings, but that they can meet the needs of significant numbers of people across a vast country. The members of the largest cooperative federation in Argentina administer \$3 billion dollars' worth of assets and serve 8% of the population.

The Baha'i teachings praise this kind of mutually cooperative, unified approach, which provides jobs and services to people who couldn't otherwise access them:

The supreme need of humanity is cooperation and reciprocity. The stronger the ties of fellowship and solidarity amongst men, the greater will be the power of constructiveness and accomplishment in all the planes of human activity. Without cooperation and reciprocal attitude the individual member of human society remains self-centered,

uninspired by altruistic purposes, limited and solitary in development like the animal and plant organisms of the lower kingdoms. The lower creatures are not in need of cooperation and reciprocity. A tree can live solitary and alone, but this is impossible for man without retrogression. Therefore, every cooperative attitude and activity of human life is praiseworthy and foreintended by the will of God. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 338.

Service and Empowerment as Driving Forces in Economic Life

These kinds of cooperative efforts, based on egalitarian participation, contribute to social change by upholding values coherent with collective needs, such as universal service at the lowest possible costs, and capacity-building in local people and their communities. The communities involved can easily see the value of these projects, and naturally become aligned with the processes they promote.

It may be more difficult to establish cooperatives in societies where individualism has become deeply rooted in the culture and people do not readily feel the motivation to take part in collective enterprises. At the very least, though, these examples show that the values we place at the center of our economic lives will always bear fruits accordingly. If we can see ourselves as more than just passive users or consumers of goods and services, we can find ways to establish and sustain joint economic efforts that value service and empowerment above a sole desire for profits. As the Universal House of Justice wrote, this kind of cooperation can help us all learn:

... how to participate in the material affairs of society in a way that is consistent with the divine precepts and how, in practical terms, collective prosperity can be advanced through justice and generosity, collaboration and mutual assistance. – The Universal House of Justice, 1 March 2017, p. 2.

While the forces of consumerism assail us and compromise the world's well-being, we can all draw inspiration from examples of people who work together to enrich and sustain their entire community:

... if a judicious and resourceful individual should initiate measures which would universally enrich the masses of the people, there could be no undertaking greater than this, and it would rank in the sight of God as the supreme achievement, for such a benefactor would supply the needs and insure the comfort and well-being of a great multitude. Wealth is most commendable, provided the entire population is wealthy. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 24.