

# **Contribution of the Bahá'í International Community in response to the Voluntary National Review of the Islamic Republic of Iran**

## **High Level Political Forum – July 2017**

The principle of ‘leave no one behind’ lies at the heart of the Sustainable Development Goals. It is also an objective that members of the Bahá'í community around the world actively support, as they work shoulder to shoulder with their colleagues, neighbors, and compatriots to bring about progress in access to health (goal 3), gender equality (goal 5), decent work and economic growth (goal 8), and the pursuit of peace and justice (goal 16), among others. Bahá'ís do this with a key emphasis on education (goal 4), believing, as stated in the Bahá'í Writings, that we are to “regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value” and that “education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom.”

In the birthplace of their faith, Iran, Bahá'ís seek to follow this path as well. In the “countless noble-hearted, fair-minded and enlightened Iranians” around them, they see a people who are “resolutely striving to establish a progressive society.”<sup>1</sup> And in reaching out to their friends, neighbors, acquaintances, and colleagues, they seek to “explore together how better to contribute to the material and spiritual welfare of others and to build a society in which the innate talents of every individual can flourish without regard to distinctions of class, creed, gender or ethnicity.”<sup>2</sup>

Such intentions are entirely consistent with those human rights and development ideals publicly stated by the Iranian government. In its Voluntary National Review, Iran notes that it “has already made important steps in recent year[s] to advance principles that are also enshrined in the 2030 Agenda. For example, the government of Iran issued the ‘Charter of Citizenship’s Rights’ in December 2016. The Charter contains 120 substantiated articles covering a wide array of rights ranging from freedom of opinion, expression and press, access to information, judicial justice, minority and ethnic rights, fair trial and women’s rights.”<sup>3</sup>

Sadly, however, Bahá'ís in Iran have been deprived of critical rights enumerated in both the Iranian Constitution as well as the Charter of Citizenship Rights and continue to be systematically blocked from participating fully in their country’s economic and educational life. In keeping with the directives of an official government memorandum on the “Bahá'í Question”, the Iranian authorities have sought “to block the progress and development”<sup>4</sup> of the Bahá'ís and indeed to destroy the Bahá'í community as a viable social entity. Thousands of Bahá'ís have

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<sup>1</sup> 21 March 2011 message of the Universal House of Justice

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Key Messages Iran’s Voluntary National Review (VNR) on SDGs 2017.*

<sup>4</sup> See 1991 government memorandum (English translation),

<https://www.bic.org/sites/default/files/pdf/ran/1991%20Bahai%20Question%20Memo%20ENG.pdf>

been expelled from their jobs and have had their pensions terminated. They have been barred from access to higher education, banned from employment in the public sector, and severely limited in the private sector, solely because of their beliefs. Companies are pressured to dismiss Bahá'í employees, banks are forced to block Bahá'í clients' accounts, and business licenses are either not issued, not extended, or deliberately delayed.

Such actions undermine the spirit of the SDGs and the foundations of their successful implementation, which require the contributions of all members of society in pursuit of the common good. That the government of Iran has an explicit policy to exterminate the viability of the Bahá'í community as an active participant in the economic and social life of the country is of grave concern, from both sustainable development and human rights perspectives. And given that the international community has raised similar concerns time and again, Iran's report cannot in good conscience be permitted to stand unquestioned. The Sustainable Development Goals are enshrined within a "universal agenda", "accepted by all", "applicable to all", and is committed to ensuring "that all human beings can fulfil their potential in dignity and equality." To turn a blind eye to state-sponsored repression of a given population in any context is to thwart the aims of that universal agenda everywhere.

In light of these realities, our recommendations are straightforward. The government of Iran must allow all of its citizens—regardless of race, religion, gender, or any other distinction—the opportunity to participate fully in the social and economic life of the country, and to enjoy full rights of access to education. Such steps would benefit not only the Bahá'í community of Iran, but all citizens of that land. For experience increasingly shows that genuine participation and the free exchange of ideas and perspectives are crucial to achieving the high-minded ideals envisioned in the Sustainable Development Goals.