

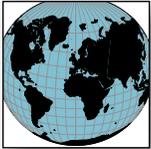


ONE COUNTRY

“The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens” – Bahá’u’lláh

INSIDE

Newsletter of the Bahá’í International Community
January-March 2008
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2

Perspective:
Eradicating poverty will require moving forward as one.



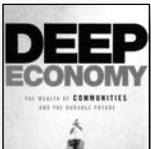
4

In Zambia, young teenagers pull together in service program.



10

In Canada, a conference on global warming focuses on impact on the Arctic.



16

Review: *Deep Economy* — Bill McKibben calls for a new emphasis on local economies to stop climate change and promote happiness.

At the United Nations, a closer collaboration with religions

From the Alliance of Civilizations to resolutions passed by the General Assembly, the UN is forging new partnerships with religions and religious communities

UNITED NATIONS — With words like “peace,” “dialogue,” and “cooperation” salted through its agenda, the program for a special hearing of the General Assembly last autumn might have been any of a thousand meetings here.

But what made the 4-5 October 2007 “High-Level Dialogue and Informal Interactive Hearing with Civil Society on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace” different was the degree to which a new actor was spotlighted before the UN’s most globally representative body.

That new actor was religion — or, rather, people who directly represent religious communities from around the world.

“What is new is that the president of the General Assembly was calling for this kind of a hearing on religion and intercultural cooperation for peace,” said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá’í International Community to the UN. “You’ve never really had the General Assembly reach out to this sector of global civil society before.”

The General Assembly, however, is not the only UN body that is reaching out to religious groups. Spurred in part by the threat of religion-inspired violence that was so starkly demonstrated in the 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, and also by an increasing recognition of the power of religious belief to inspire social action, the UN and its agencies have recently launched a number of initiatives that involve ever closer collaboration with

UN and religion, continued on page 12



Srgjan Kerim (left), President of the 62nd session of the General Assembly, presides over the High-Level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace, at UN Headquarters in October 2007. At right is Muhammad Shaaban, under secretary-general for General Assembly Affairs and Conference Management. (UN Photo)



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Eradicating Poverty: Moving Forward as One

[Editor's note: The following is adapted from a statement recently issued by the Bahá'í International Community. The full version can be read at: <http://bic.org/statements-and-reports/bic-statements/08-0214.htm>]

The crisis of global poverty has, at long last, been accorded a high priority on the international agenda. Yet as renewed pledges for action pour in from governments, a feeling of rudderlessness looms.

The mechanisms of poverty eradication have long been defined in primarily material terms. Indeed, the central pillar of the international community's poverty alleviation efforts has been the transfer of financial resources. Approximately \$2.3 trillion has been spent on foreign aid over the last 50 years. Tragically, far from ushering in greater self-sufficiency, such aid has often had a detrimental effect, leading to increased dependency on foreign assistance, subservience to externally dictated priorities, misappropriation of funds, and decreased pressure for reform.

It is now increasingly acknowledged that such conditions as the marginalization of girls and women, poor governance, ethnic and religious antipathy, environmental degradation, and unemployment constitute formidable obstacles to the progress and development of communities. These evidence a deeper crisis — one rooted in the values and attitudes that shape relationships at all levels of society.

Viewed from this perspective, poverty can be described as the absence of those ethical, social and material resources needed to develop the moral, intellectual and social capacities of individuals, communities and institutions.

Much like the physical principles that govern the material world, the social world is governed by moral principles, which underlie the functioning of an ordered society. Principles such as gender equality, trustworthiness, access to education, human rights, and freedom of religion, for example, tend to correlate positively with measures of socioeconomic well-being and stability. The interrelatedness of challenges stemming from

poverty calls for the articulation of principles capable of guiding analysis, decision-making and the development of indicators to measure progress. The essential merit of a principle-based process is that it guides individuals and institutions away from a focus on isolated, short-term concerns to consider problems from a systemic and long-term perspective.

Two principles stand out as guides for efforts towards poverty eradication: justice and unity. These principles underlie a vision of development in which material progress serves as a vehicle for the moral and cultural advancement of humanity. Justice provides the means capable of harnessing human potential to eradicate poverty from our midst, through the implementation of laws, the adjustment of economic systems, the redistribution of wealth and opportunity, and unfailing adherence to the highest ethical standards in private and public life. Unity asserts that progress is systemic and relational, that a concern for the integrity of the family unit and the local, national, and global community must guide poverty alleviation efforts.

The question of poverty places particular responsibility on elected leaders. Central to the issue of governance is the question of character — the values that a leader brings to office largely define the direction and fruits of his or her work. Trustworthiness is foremost among these, as it fosters credibility, builds support for government initiatives and engenders stability and security.

Efforts to link poverty eradication efforts with international human rights norms are a positive step in aligning the work of governments with the principles of justice. Human rights norms in our common heritage — encompassing the rights of the individual and of the family; the freedom to know and to believe; the equality of men and women; racial equality; and the right to work and to education, among others — embody the most significant moral accomplishments of the human race. Human rights, as endorsed by most governments of the world, must now be systematically incorporated into domestic legislation.

A large share of the responsibility for poverty eradication rests with the individuals themselves. While poverty is the product of numerous factors — historic, economic, political and environmental — there is also a cultural dimension, which manifests itself in individual values and attitudes. Some of these — such as the subjugation of girls and women, the lack of value assigned to education or of individual's right to progress — can exacerbate conditions of poverty.

The relevant human qualities such as honesty, willingness to work, and cooperation can be harnessed to accomplish enormously demanding goals when members of society trust that they are protected by standards of justice and assured of benefits that apply equally to all. The human rights approach, with its emphasis on the individual's entitlement to a set of rights, however, may prove challenging to implement without an accompanying moral influence to inspire changes in attitudes and behaviors.

The issue of gender equality is one such example. Over the last two decades nations have come together to acknowledge the critical role of women in advancing development imperatives. The natural and social sciences have laid to rest any bases for discrimination; most countries have enacted laws to afford women the same opportunities as men; conventions have been signed and ratified; new measures and social indicators have been put in place. Yet women's agency in the arenas of law, politics, science, commerce and religion, to name a few, is still grossly deficient.

In areas where women have gained access to education, employment, and ownership opportunities, there have been dramatic effects. These include more equitable division of food, resources, and health care among girls and boys; higher rates of literacy among children; lower rates of fertility leading to better economic conditions and maternal health. Yet, the transformation of attitudes has required much more than legal measures; it has required a fundamental change of belief about roles of men and women.

The economic theories of impersonal markets, promoting self-centered actions of individuals, have not helped humanity escape the extremes of poverty on the one hand and over-consumption on the other. New economic theories must be animated by a motive beyond just profit. They must be rooted in the very human and relational dimension of all economic activity, which binds us as families, as communities and as citizens

of one world.

Economic considerations underlying poverty alleviation efforts have generally focused on the creation of wealth but have not yet fully considered the parallel problem of the over-concentration of wealth, exemplified by a world where the wealth of some individuals exceeds the economic output of entire nations. This urgently needs attention.

A core element of sustainable development is the reform of agricultural policies and processes. Food production and agriculture is the world's single largest source of employment; the livelihood of some 70 percent of the poor in developing countries is tied directly to the land. Although farming has been devalued by manufacturing and a rapidly expanding urban population, agriculture still represents the fundamental basis of economic and community life: malnourishment and food insecurity suffocate all attempts at development and progress. The farmer must be accorded his or her rightful place in the processes of development.

Education is also a bulwark of poverty eradication. While many programs have focused on increasing enrollment in primary and secondary education — which is the first step — the long-term goal must also be to create a society in which the production, diffusion and application of knowledge infuses all facets of human activity.

Poverty alleviation efforts must also address the poverty of spirit. Material resources are essential, yet they alone cannot generate a vision of the full measure of human prosperity; they cannot provide answers to the deepest questions about human nature or the purpose of our existence. Most important, the material and technical dimensions alone will not bring about the fundamental changes in human character and belief needed to overcome the destructive behaviors which have led to present-day conditions.

We are experiencing nothing less than the birth pangs of a global civilization: new modes of thought, new standards and new legal and institutional arrangements are struggling to take hold. As our understanding of the problems and their possible solutions expands, an unprecedented global consensus and accompanying capacity for international cooperation will undoubtedly pave the way for an outcome far greater than we have been able to achieve. To generate the knowledge and commitment needed to overcome poverty, the full spectrum of human spiritual and intellectual potential will need to be summoned for the task.*

The economic theories of impersonal markets, promoting self-centered actions of individuals, have not helped humanity escape the extremes of poverty on the one hand and over-consumption on the other. New economic theories must be animated by a motive beyond just profit. They must be rooted in the very human and relational dimension of all economic activity, which binds us as families, as communities and as citizens of one world.

In Zambia, young teenagers pull together in service program

Young teens join to recite a poem at the launch in October 2007 of 38 new “junior youth” groups in Sinazongwe District in southern Zambia.



More than 2,000 “junior youth” of all backgrounds are involved in a new program that teaches both cognitive skills and moral development. Community leaders say an emphasis on service to others is yielding tangible results.

SINAZONGWE DISTRICT, Zambia — The Tonga tribe has lived in southern Zambia for hundreds of years, and members are proud of their long-standing traditions and strong social codes. But leaders say some of the customs are eroding — young people, for example, no longer seem to respect the elderly.

A new program involving hundreds of young teens of all backgrounds working in small groups may help change that — and simultaneously help the youngsters get along better with each other.

“The groups have started with helping old people in the community,” said Siankuku Sabantu, a local fisherman. “This is something that sometime back was normal but in recent years has stopped. Now the youth have again started helping old people by drawing water for them, gathering firewood and cleaning their homes.”

The groups are participating in a program sponsored by the Bahá’í community here, which is itself part of a worldwide effort, to help young people aged 12 to 15 — “junior youth” — make good moral choices in their daily lives.

Thirty-eight “junior youth” groups have formed in the Sinazongwe District, and they had their official launch in October 2007.

They thus joined another 130 groups in other parts of Zambia that comprise as many as 2,000 participants across the nation. Some are members of the Bahá’í Faith, but as many as three-fourths are not.

Chief Sinazongwe, a Tonga tribal leader and also a Bahá’í, believes the program — which emphasizes not only study but direct service to others — helps give the young teens a “sense of nobility.”

“The youth are better behaved,” he said, “and a lot of people are noticing it. This program is helping them to see what values are important. They are finding a sense of self worth, and realizing that they are important.”

Chuungu Malitonga, a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Zambia, has been monitoring the development of the junior youth program for the last two years. What’s happening in Sinazongwe is not unusual, he said.

“From the beginning the program asks the junior youth to look at themselves in the context of their societies,” he said. “It encourages them to take ownership for the conditions of those societies.... It doesn’t take too long for the program to produce the type of results we are seeing in Sinazongwe.”

In Zambia, the youth groups meet at least

once a week, often on the weekend. Most groups have about a dozen members, and they usually meet in their village, under a tree or in a small hut, for study sessions of two hours or so, using workbooks that present moral principles in the form of short stories.

For example, the first text, “Breezes of Confirmation,” tells the story of a young girl and her older cousin who comes to visit for the school holidays. Together the girls discuss their hopes and possibilities for the future. Each chapter of the story is followed by discussion questions that stimulate not only literacy and cognitive skills but also moral development and intuition.

The program also emphasizes that such study should lead to service. In some villages, for example, the youngsters go to rural hospitals, visit patients and help clean. Spontaneous acts of service are also encouraged.

“Recently there was a funeral in the village and the members of the group gathered all the firewood and drew all the water for the bereaved family,” said Mr. Sabantu. “Another good service they are offering is to maintain a clean environment around the borehole which is the only source of water in the village.”

The entire Sinazongwe District is rural, with most villagers making a living by fishing — the area abuts Lake Kariba, the largest man-made lake in Africa — as well as farming and herding.

Olivia Hamoonga, 15, a Christian, is one of the participants in the junior youth program in the Sinazongwe District. “I feel that my reading and comprehension skills have improved since I joined the group,” she said. “Also, in our group, we pay a lot of attention to respecting yourself and respecting adults, and to offering service to society.”

Each group is helped by trained tutors, also known as animators or facilitators. Many are young themselves.

Tobias Siavwapa, 21, a goat trader and a Christian, said he became an animator in the program because he sees the world changing rapidly and worries about the youth.

“I see many youth doing things that are not beneficial to them such as smoking and drinking,” he said. “I heard about the junior youth idea, and I knew that it is at this age that a difference can be made.

“Being part of the group helps the youth learn to do things that are good for their lives and learn to serve the community. I see this when they help people, fetching water and wood for old people,” said Mr. Siavwapa.

“At first some of the youth were very

naughty and a little disruptive. Others had serious reading and writing difficulties,” he said. “But even after a month of work, I can see behavior improving and their reading and writing becoming better.”

Chief Sinazongwe said the program helps the young people develop a sense of responsibility. “This is their land, their country, their environment,” he said. “They are now learning to take care of these things. They are the future leaders. If they do not learn to do these things, who will do them when we are gone?”

Mr. Malitonga said one reason for the program’s success is its promotion of interaction between the older youth who serve as animators and the younger ones, who look up to them. The careful balance between study and social action also is a key to success. “It is not enough to just give the participants the theory,” he said. “The program really encourages them to put this theory into practice and be of service to their community.”

Mr. Sabantu — who is a Bahá’í and has lived in southern Zambia his whole life — said since the program started he is noticing more harmony among the youngsters. Boys in the area, he said, spend most of their time in small groups tending cattle — groups that sometimes behave like small gangs and get into fights with each other.

“An immediate change that came from these classes has been the cessation of the fights among the herder boys who have joined the groups,” he said. “There is also more interaction among them, more harmony. The boys and the girls are also working together in the community, not just in school.”*

— Reported by Kerii Hange Tjitendero

“This is their land, their country, their environment. They are now learning to take care of these things. They are the future leaders. If they do not learn to do these things, who will do them when we are gone?”

— Chief Sinazongwe, Tonga tribal leader, Sinazongwe District

Young people perform a traditional dance at a gathering in southern Zambia celebrating a new program organized by Bahá’ís for youngsters aged 12 to 15.



In Canada, concern about the impact of global warming on the Arctic

Those living in the Arctic have “bonds to the earth [that] are extremely close... [Their] coping capacity is strained and community infrastructure and ecosystems are becoming far more vulnerable.”

— John Stone of Carleton University

OTTAWA — By many accounts, global warming will have the greatest impact on the Arctic. In summer 2007, for example, scientists announced that the Arctic ice pack had retreated further than in any year since satellites began tracking the ice sheet.

So it was quite timely when the International Environment Forum (IEF) gathered on 12-14 October 2007 to discuss the moral implications of climate change on the Arctic and its inhabitants.

“This is happening in a part of the world whose contribution to climate change has been small,” said John Stone of Carleton University, a member of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), who learned during the three-day conference that he would share the Nobel Prize with other members of the IPCC this year.

But, added Dr. Stone, those living in the Arctic have “bonds to the earth [that] are extremely close ... and [their] coping capacity is strained and community infrastructure and ecosystems are becoming far more vulnerable.”

Co-sponsored by the Canadian Bahá’í International Development Agency and the Bahá’í Office of Governmental Relations on behalf of the Bahá’í Community of Canada, the Forum’s 11th annual conference explored the ethical issues related to climate change

from a variety of different angles, discussing everything from the need for global governance to practical examples of innovative ways in which individuals can contribute.

But an initial focus of the meeting was on how climate change will affect the Arctic.

John Crump, Polar Issues Coordinator of UNEP/GRID-Arendal, said that while the Inuit people have a long history of resilience and adaptation, “the question is how much adaptation is possible and how much adaptation can the world expect.”

The problem will not be solved by simply relocating communities at risk, said Mr. Crump. “It will take concerted, collective, and coordinated action at the international level” to meet the requirements of the Kyoto Protocol and much more “to work our way out of climate change,” he said.

“The cost of inaction is much higher, and the most vulnerable regions will pay the most first. But in the end we will all pay,” Mr. Crump added, suggesting that there is a high moral and cultural cost for potentially displacing an entire people.

A visual presentation prepared by Robin Anawak, environmental researcher for the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), Canada’s National Inuit Organization, gave the audience a glimpse of how climate change impacts the Inuit. Due to a last-minute illness, Mr. Anawak’s presentation was read by the convener of the session.

Mr. Anawak’s slides discussed the breadth of issues affected by global warming, including food security, housing, the rise of invasive species, coastal erosion, and sea level rise. Other areas of impact mentioned were wildlife and diet, culture, language, traditional knowledge, community infrastructure, hunter safety, new diseases, and security in the Northwest Passage.

Heather Eaton of St. Paul University in Ottawa examined the ethical dimensions of climate change from a theological and socio-cultural perspective. “We live in a sea of cultural ideologies,” she said, “that nurture notions of social well-being in terms of progress,

John Stone and John Crump answering questions after their presentations.



economic growth, unlimited materialism, industrialization, and technology contributing to climate disruptions.”

Dr. Eaton said that religions have much to offer in providing an ethical framework for addressing climate change.

“Religious teachings are concerned about interior human dynamics,” she said. They teach us how “to educate our desires.”

Dr. Eaton also said that “religion teaches us about our will and thoughts. It teaches us about solidarity with others, and the Bahá’í tradition has much wisdom on this.”

“It is urgent for religions to reclaim that the beauty and elegance of the natural world have been inspirational and revelatory of the Divine since time immemorial,” said Dr. Eaton, noting that, “human beings never destroy that which they consider to be sacred.”

Dr. Arthur Dahl, president of the IEF, said the intimate connection of the Inuit to the earth might offer important insights for meeting the challenges of global warming. Not-

ing that the Bahá’í teachings state that “the country is the world of the soul, the city is the world of bodies,” Dahl suggested cultures closest to this reality have significant spiritual insights to offer the industrialized societies.

“We have built civilizations away from nature. We have trapped ourselves in an unnatural system.” The problem with this system, said Dr. Dahl, is that it is based on fossil fuels, causing global warming.

“There is a kind of inertia and momentum to continue on this path,” said Dr. Dahl. “Look at how vulnerable our civilization has become to the changes [likely] to come in one or two decades [from now].”

Overall, 125 people participated in the conference from over 13 different countries across North America, Europe, and Africa. To reduce the ecological footprint of the conference, 25 out of the 125 participants from nine different countries joined through a simultaneous video and text feed.*

— Canadian Bahá’í News Service

“It is urgent for religions to reclaim that the beauty and elegance of the natural world have been inspirational and revelatory of the Divine since time immemorial. Human beings never destroy that which they consider to be sacred.”

— Dr. Heather Eaton,
St. Paul University

HUMAN RIGHTS

UN General Assembly expresses “deep concern” about human rights in Iran

UNITED NATIONS — For the 20th time since 1985, the United Nations General Assembly has adopted a resolution expressing “deep concern” about human rights violations in Iran.

Passed on 18 December 2007 by a final vote of 73 to 53, with 55 abstentions, the resolution took note of “ongoing systematic violations of human rights” aimed by the Iranian government at groups ranging from women and women’s rights defenders to the news media and labor groups, as well as various ethnic and religious minorities, including Bahá’ís.

“We are happy that the General Assembly, the most globally representative body of United Nations, has seen fit once again this year to call attention to the dire situation in Iran, where Bahá’ís and other groups continue to face oppression and persecution by the government,” said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá’í International Community to the United Nations.

“Our hope now is that the Iranian government will heed the opinion of the international community and stop the systematic violation of human rights directed against its own people,” said Ms. Dugal.

The resolution, put forward by Canada

and co-sponsored by 41 other countries, describes the deteriorating human rights situation in Iran, expressing “serious concern” about “confirmed instances” of “torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, including flogging and amputations”; public executions, including stoning, and “arrests, violent repression, and sentencing of women exercising their right to peaceful assembly, a campaign of intimidation against women’s human rights defenders, and continuing discrimination against women and girls.”

The resolution also notes “increasing discrimination and other human rights violations against persons belonging to religious, ethnic, linguistic or other minorities” including Arabs, Azeris, Baluchis, Kurds, Christians, Jews, Sufis, Sunni Muslims, and Bahá’ís.

Regarding Bahá’ís, the resolution notes particularly that there have been “attacks on Bahá’ís and their faith in State-sponsored media, increasing evidence of efforts by the State to identify and monitor Bahá’ís and prevention of (Bahá’ís) from attending university and from sustaining themselves economically; an increase in cases of arbitrary arrest and detention.”*

In Iran, three are unjustly imprisoned for helping underprivileged children

A social service project launched in Shiraz four years ago by Bahá'ís and some Muslim friends leads to mass arrests in 2006 — and four years in prison for three Bahá'ís.

Haleh Rouhi, Sasan Taqva and Raha Sabet, below, left to right, were taken into custody in November 2007. They are each serving a four-year sentence on charges connected entirely with their belief in and practice of the Bahá'í Faith.



GENEVA — The idea was to help poor children, not land in jail.

But prison time was the result for three Bahá'ís in the Iranian city of Shiraz after they helped start social service projects to help underprivileged children and youth.

Haleh Rouhi, 29, Raha Sabet, 33, and Sasan Taqva, 32, were each sentenced to four years in prison and then suddenly taken into custody on 19 November 2007.

The crime the three were charged with, according to a government official, is “propaganda against the regime.” That’s what judiciary spokesman Ali Reza Jamshidi told the Agence France Presse at a press briefing in Tehran on 29 January 2008.

Accounts that have emerged from Iran tell a far different story. According to Diane Ala’i, a Bahá’í International Community representative to the United Nations in Geneva, the three were in fact engaged in social service projects that most governments would praise.

“Far from working against the government, the Bahá’ís who were arrested in May 2006 were engaged in humanitarian projects aimed at helping underprivileged young people in the city of Shiraz,” said Ms. Ala’i.

“Charges by the government that suggest otherwise are nothing less than an attempt to repress Iranian Bahá’ís generally and to deflect international criticism of Iran’s human rights record,” she said.

The projects were launched in 2004 by a group of Bahá’ís — including Ms. Rouhi, Ms. Sabet, and Mr. Taqva — who were concerned

about low literacy rates and other problems facing poor children in and around Shiraz.

They began discussing what kinds of social action they could take, anxious to act on the humanitarian impulse found not only in the Bahá’í Faith but in all religions.

In fact, it was a Muslim friend of one member of the group who suggested that the program be instituted to help school children in Katsbas, a poverty-stricken suburb of Shiraz. The project aimed specifically at tutoring children to help them prepare for their end-of-term school examinations.

Those that served as tutors, who included Muslims, met with the children every Friday morning for four hours. In the project’s infancy, the tutors would lay out rugs in front of the houses of the parents so that the families could see that their only intention was to serve the children and therefore be put at ease. The mothers would stand nearby to observe the lessons and exercises the tutors were delivering. Many expressed interest in learning their methods.

The tutors started working with 20 children, but the number quickly swelled to 120. At the end of the school term, the parents of the children asked whether the activities could continue. At that point the group decided to extend their services to include assisting the children to acquire social and moral skills so that they themselves could become the agents of advancement in their own lives and in the society.

By summer 2005, the number of children involved in the program had increased so significantly that it was necessary to divide them into two groups, each group comprising more than 100 students and 30 tutors.

At the same time, at the suggestion of a Muslim friend, a similar project was started in another locality, Sahlabad, where children and their families had voiced keen interest in such an undertaking. That project involved 100 children, also tutored by both Bahá’ís and Muslims.

Concurrently with the project in Sahlabad, the group commenced a further initiative involving 100 children and young teens being assisted by 14 tutors at an educational

center in Shiraz. That project was carried out within the ambit of the program “Protection of the Rights of Children” in Shiraz, which was registered with the Ministry of the Interior.

In addition, the group organized a weekly program offering art classes to young cancer patients at a hospital for children and youth in Shiraz. This program, which had been enthusiastically received by the head of the hospital, also ran for a year until it was halted because of the arrest of the Bahá'ís. During that same period, members of the group made regular visits to orphanages and facilities for physically and mentally challenged children.

These efforts continued for another year. Then, on 19 May 2006, tutors and project leaders in six locations were simultaneously arrested by the police. In all, 54 Bahá'ís and about 10 Muslims were taken into custody.

The Muslims (and one Bahá'í) were released immediately; the remaining 53 Bahá'ís were released over the course of the next few days and weeks. Ms. Rouhi, Ms. Sabet, and Mr. Taqva were held for nearly a month.

In August 2006, the 53 were notified by a local court that they had been convicted of “offenses relating to state security.” Statements made in court also seemed to indicate that their real offense was “teaching the Bahá'í Faith.”

This is a charge that Bahá'ís have often faced, despite the fact that Iran has signed international human rights covenants that protect the right to “teach” one’s religion.

“While teaching the Bahá'í Faith cannot be considered a crime of any sort, given that freedom of religion is protected by international law, the fact is that the Bahá'ís who were arrested almost two years ago in Shiraz were not working to spread Bahá'í teachings — rather they had initiated and were participating in a number of literacy and youth empowerment projects in various locations in and near Shiraz.

“Moreover, the group had introduced the projects to the Islamic Council of the city of Shiraz in 2005 and had subsequently received a letter from the Cultural Commission granting permission to continue their activities,” said Ms. Ala'i.

Ms. Ala'i also discussed charges, made in court documents, that the use of a workbook titled “Breezes of Confirmation,” which focuses on teaching language skills and basic moral principles, constitutes part of the evidence that Bahá'ís were teaching the Bahá'í Faith.



“The fact is,” said Ms. Ala'i, “‘Breezes of Confirmation’ makes no direct reference to the Bahá'í Faith — and its lessons reflect moral lessons common to all religions.”

In November 2007, Ms. Rouhi, Ms. Sabet, and Mr. Taqva were told by telephone to go to the Ministry of Information office in Shiraz to retrieve items that had been confiscated in the May 2006 arrests. Instead of receiving their belongings, however, they were immediately imprisoned.

In January 2008, Amnesty International and the US State Department protested their incarceration, followed in February by a statement of concern from the Presidency of the European Union.

“We urge the regime to release all individuals held without due process and a fair trial, including the three young Bahá'í teachers being held in a Ministry of Intelligence detention center in Shiraz,” said Sean McCormack, a spokesman for the State Department, on 23 January.

Amnesty International issued its appeal on 25 January. It calls for human rights activists around the world to write directly to Iranian government officials on behalf of the Bahá'í prisoners, asking why they have been detained and calling on authorities not to ill-treat or torture them.

Ms. Ala'i said in January that the Bahá'í International Community is gravely concerned for the welfare of the three Bahá'í prisoners, noting in particular that Mr. Taqva has an injured leg from an automobile accident. “The problem with his leg is extremely serious and painful,” said Ms. Ala'i. “It is understood that he requires surgery to remove a metal pin that had been inserted previously.”*

Tutors and children gathered for class in Sahlabad, outside Shiraz, Iran. Such classes were shut down by the government in 2006.

“We urge the regime to release all individuals held without due process and a fair trial, including the three young Bahá'í teachers being held in a Ministry of Intelligence detention center in Shiraz.”

— Sean McCormack, spokesman, US Department of State

Egypt lower court rules in favor of Bahá'ís, opening door to ID card solution

Two lawsuits offer a compromise — a “dash” instead of the word “Bahá'í” — and a court ruling in their favor may be a way out of a much criticized government policy on identification documents that has lately kept Egyptian Bahá'ís in a virtual state of non-citizenship.

CAIRO — In a victory for religious freedom, a lower administrative court has ruled in favor of the plaintiffs in two lawsuits that sought to resolve the government's contradictory policy on religious affiliation and identification papers.

In a ruling on 29 January 2008, the Court of Administrative Justice in Cairo endorsed arguments made in two cases concerning Bahá'ís who have sought to restore their full citizenship rights by asking that they be allowed to leave the religious affiliation field blank on official documents.

“Given the degree to which issues of religious freedom stand at the heart of human rights issues in the Middle East, the world should cheer at the decision in these two cases today,” said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations.

“The compromise offered by the Bahá'ís in these two cases opens the door to a way to reconcile a government policy that was clearly incompatible with international law — as well as common sense,” said Ms. Dugal.

“Our hope now is that the government will quickly implement the court's decision and allow Bahá'ís once again to enjoy the full rights of citizenship to which they are duly entitled,” said Ms. Dugal.

The decisions concerned two cases, both filed by Bahá'ís, over the issue of how they are to be identified on government documents.

The first case involves a lawsuit by the father of twin children who is seeking to obtain proper birth certificates for them. The second concerns a college student who needs a national identity card to re-enroll in university.

The government requires all identification papers to list religious affiliation but has restricted the choice to the three officially recognized religions — Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Bahá'ís have in recent years thus been unable to obtain identification papers because they refuse to lie about their religious affiliation.

Without national identify cards — or, as in the case of the twin children, birth certificates — Bahá'ís and others caught in the law's contradictory requirements have been deprived of a wide range of citizenship rights,

such as access to employment, education, and medical and financial services.

These problems were highlighted in a report issued in November by Human Rights Watch and the Cairo-based Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR).

“Employers, both public and private, by law cannot hire someone without an ID, and academic institutions require IDs for admission,” said the report. “Obtaining a marriage license or a passport requires a birth certificate; inheritance, pensions, and death benefits are contingent on death certificates. The Ministry of Health has even refused to provide immunizations to some Bahá'í children because the Interior Ministry would not issue them birth certificates accurately listing their Bahá'í religion.”

The issuance of birth certificates is at the heart of the first case, which concerns 14-year-old twins Imad and Nancy Rauf Hindi. Their father, Rauf Hindi, obtained birth certificates that recognized their Bahá'í affiliation when they were born.

But new policies require computer generated certificates, and the computer system locks out any religious affiliation but the three officially recognized religions. And without birth certificates, the children are unable to enroll in school in Egypt.

The second lawsuit was filed by the EIPR last February on behalf of 18-year-old Hussein Hosni Bakhit Abdel-Massih, who was suspended from the Suez Canal University's Higher Institute of Social Work in January 2006 due to his inability to obtain an identity card because of his refusal to falsely identify himself as a Muslim, a Christian, or a Jew.

In both cases, lawyers representing the Bahá'ís have made it clear that they were willing to settle for cards or documents on which the religious affiliation field is left blank or filled in, perhaps, as “other.”

This solution is what makes these two cases different from the lawsuit that was rejected by the Supreme Administrative Court last year. In that ruling, the Supreme Administrative Court rejected a decision by the lower court that granted the right of Bahá'ís to be specifically identified on government documents.*

Violence against women needs global attention, says panel at the United Nations

UNITED NATIONS — Government and civil society representatives called for renewed attention to the issue of preventing violence against women in a panel discussion here in December.

Organized by the Bahá'í International Community (BIC) and the Christian Children's Fund in cooperation with the UN missions of France and the Netherlands, the 4 December 2007 panel looked at ways that national and local communities around the world can intensify efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women.

"Despite significant progress, violence against women and girls continues to be a global problem," said Fulya Vekiloglu, director of the BIC's Office for the Advancement of Women. "This discussion is one way to help keep this on the agenda of governments and nongovernmental organizations, and especially to focus on the implementation of recent international agreements to fight and prevent violence against women."

Panelists included Fabien Fieschi, first secretary of the Permanent Mission of France to the UN; Hedda Samson, first secretary of the Permanent Mission of the Netherlands to the UN; Mike Wessells, of the Christian Children's Fund; and Michael L. Penn, an associate professor of psychology at Franklin and Marshall College, who represented the BIC. The discussion was moderated by Carolyn Hannan, director of the UN Division for the Advancement of Women, UN/DESA.

Mr. Fieschi outlined the importance of a resolution passed by the UN General Assembly last year that called for governments and civil society to take stronger measures to eliminate violence against women.

The 2006 resolution was intensely negotiated, he said, but was nevertheless adopted by consensus. "The resolution also recognized the important role of civil society in the fight against violence against women," he said.

Ms. Samson noted that the 2006 resolution places important obligations on states to "prevent, investigate, and punish" violence against women. She noted, however, that it also emphasizes preventive measures, such as training for health workers, teachers, law enforcement personnel, and others.

Mr. Wessells stressed the importance of engaging religious and community leaders in efforts to change social norms that allow violence against women and girls. Communities and prevailing attitudes can be "significant barriers" to reducing violence against women, but "communities can also be vital supports for women," he said.

Dr. Penn talked about the importance of strategies aimed at changing old patterns of thinking in men, boys, and communities.

In particular, he said, legal measures to eradicate violence against women should be accompanied by local, national, and international initiatives that cultivate and inspire the human spirit and promote a consciousness of the "dignity and nobility of all people."

He emphasized that everyone has a responsibility to fight practices and attitudes that lead to violence against women. As an example, he discussed the problem of pornography becoming accepted as a legitimate form of entertainment.

"The trend towards the marketing and commercialization of pornography around the world is one that ought to concern governments, NGOs, and local communities," said Dr. Penn. A number of studies have shown that pornography socializes men into relations with women and girls that are "dangerous for their psychological, social, physical, and moral health."*

"The trend towards the marketing and commercialization of pornography around the world is one that ought to concern governments, NGOs, and local communities."

— Michael L. Penn,
Bahá'í International
Community

Panel members at a UN discussion about violence against women include, from left, Michael L. Penn, Fabien Fieschi, moderator Carolyn Hannan, Hedda Samson, and Mike Wessells.



At the United Nations, a closer collaboration with religions

Civil society participants in the “High-Level Dialogue and Informal Interactive Hearing with Civil Society on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace” gathered on 5 October 2007 at the New York offices of the Bahá’í International Community.



UN and religion, continued from page one

“I believe there is a sea change taking place at the United Nations. Member states are recognizing that religious traditions hold the key to peace and security or alternatively, the misuse and misunderstanding of religion can incite violence and bring chaos to the world.”

— **Joan Kirby, UN representative, Temple of Understanding**

world religious communities. Such initiatives include:

- The Alliance of Civilizations. Established in 2005 at the initiative of Spain and Turkey, under the auspices of the UN, the Alliance aims to improve understanding and cooperative relations mostly among Western and Islamic nations and peoples and “to help counter the forces that fuel polarization and extremism.”

- The Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace. Founded in 2006, the Tripartite Forum is an open-ended consultative group composed of representatives of UN member states, the United Nations system, and non-governmental organizations that aims to foster mutual respect, tolerance and friendship among peoples, cultures, and religions.

- A new collaboration/partnership between the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) to better involve world religions in addressing climate change and

specifically to help religions develop concrete programs of action to slow global warming.

- The “Culture Matters” review by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA). Published in 2004, this report offered a series of case studies from the Fund’s efforts to work with “communities and faith-based organizations.” It concluded, among other things, that partnerships with “religious and faith-based organizations” can help “reach some of the most vulnerable and marginalized communities” in development efforts.

In December, as well, the General Assembly adopted a resolution declaring 2010 the Year of Rapprochement of Cultures, and recommended that appropriate events be organized on interreligious and intercultural dialogue, including, among others, a high-level dialogue and/or informal interactive hearings with civil society.

“I believe there is a sea change taking place at the United Nations,” said Joan Kirby, the UN representative of the Temple of Understanding, in a recent speech in London. “Member states are recognizing that religious traditions hold the key to peace and security

or alternatively, the misuse and misunderstanding of religion can incite violence and bring chaos to the world.”

The UN has always dealt with religions in their capacity as humanitarian-oriented non-governmental organizations. During World War II, religious groups gave input to discussions on the UN Charter. And, after the UN's founding in 1945, many religions entered into consultative status with the UN as non-governmental organizations. The Bahá'í International Community, for example, has had observer status with the UN Department of Public Information since 1948.

And UN agencies have long collaborated with religious NGOs in the promotion of development and social welfare.

“It has always been an assumption that working with faith-based communities is essential for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals,” said Jordi Llopart, program coordinator of the UN Millennium Campaign. “Faith-based communities have been working on the ground for many years. They know malnutrition. They know ill health. They have been working with the poorest of the poor. And in the global south, they are often trusted more than anyone else,” said Mr. Llopart.

But beyond the field of development, the UN has in the past hesitated to become too closely involved with “religious” issues.

“The UN is an intergovernmental mechanism, and governments are wary of directly cooperating with religions,” said Hilario G. Davide, the permanent representative of the Philippine Mission to the UN, which helped found the Tripartite Forum. “On the other side, religions do not believe that they are inferior or subordinate to governments or even to other religions because they function in a world distinct from the secular concerns of intergovernmental cooperation.”

What has changed, said Ambassador Davide and others, is the emergence of a new understanding that closer collaboration with religions is critical to a wide range of UN efforts, not only in development but also to the UN's main mission of promoting peace and security.

“If we are to go over the statements of the more than 80 high-level personalities who attended the High-Level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace [in October],” said Ambassador Davide, “we will note that several speakers alluded to the importance for the interaction between the UN system and the faith communities in the discharge of the three

pillars of the UN goals, namely, the promotion of peace, development and human dignity.”

“One of the conclusions that could be drawn,” he added, “is that the partnership between and among governments, the UN system and religious NGOs or faith communities is no longer an option but a necessity.”

As noted above, new initiatives are emerging from a wide range of issue areas, involving many UN bodies and agencies. One new element is a focus on practical steps beyond mere talk.

For example, at the Alliance of Civilizations' first major meeting, held in Madrid 15-16 January 2008, participants issued a list of “major outcomes” that announced a series of concrete actions. These include a \$100 million Global Youth Employment Initiative and a multimillion dollar Media Fund, both defined as efforts to support the Alliance's focus on the relationship between Western nations and predominantly Muslim populations and, specifically, efforts to reduce factors that contribute to extremism.

The UNDP's new initiative with the ARC on climate change aims also at concrete action. Under the terms of that initiative, Bahá'í, Buddhist, Christian, Taoist, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Shinto, Sikh and Zoroastrian leaders will be invited to commit their communities to projects that address climate change and the protection of the natural environment in “practical ways” — from “forestry conservation to organic farming schemes to introducing, promoting and financing alternative energy sources,” according to the ARC.

The December 2007 General Assembly resolution likewise encourages governments to “identify areas for practical action in all sectors and levels of society for the promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, toler-

“...the partnership between and among governments, the UN system and religious NGOs or faith communities is no longer an option but a necessity.”

— Hilario G. Davide, permanent representative of the Philippines to the UN

Ban Ki Moon, secretary-general of the United Nations, left, and José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, the president of Spain, at the opening plenary of the First Alliance of Civilizations Forum, Madrid, 15 January 2008. (Photo by EFE / Juanjo Martí. Courtesy AOC Forum Madrid.)



“We have the unrivaled opportunity to replace intolerance and discrimination with understanding and mutual acceptance. Open and sustained dialogue, respect for freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief is fundamental to this endeavor.”

**— Srgjan Kerim,
President, UN
General Assembly**

ance, understanding and cooperation.”

The Tripartite Forum, which focuses on dialogue, can also lead to action, said Ambassador Davide. “Before a treaty is agreed by member states, it generally takes a number of years of discussions, negotiations and consultations before consensus is arrived at,” he said. “It is, therefore, not a waste of time for governments to deliberate on how to harness the partnership of religious communities in the achievement of UN goals no matter how long is the process of consultations.”

The discussion at the “informal, interactive” segment of the High-Level Dialogue in October reflected many of the new ideas needed to promote religious dialogue — as well as some of the thorny issues that lie ahead.

The segment brought together some 20 non-governmental speakers representing a variety of cultures and religious traditions, including representatives from the Bahá’í Faith, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, and Judaism.

Participants included Paul Knitter of the Union Theological Seminary, Gamal I. Serour of the International Islamic Center for Population Studies and Research at the Al Azhar Centre in Egypt, Sohan Lal Gandhi of the Anuvrat Global Organization in India, Fatima Ahmed of Zenab for Women in Development in Sudan, Steven Rockefeller of Earth Charter International in the United States, and Mitra Deliri of the Bahá’í International Community.

“The religions are part of the problem,” said Dr. Knitter. “They are a source of conflict and violence among nations and ethnic groups.” The solution, he suggested, lies in “a model of an egalitarian community of communities, in which the unique validity and

value of each community, each religion, are affirmed and engaged, but no religion claims to be superior or dominant.”

General Assembly President Srgjan Kerim said while “cultures and religions are being pulled ever closer together by a web of telecommunications and economic links” these encounters also “reveal deep-rooted misunderstanding.

“However,” he continued, “we have the unrivaled opportunity to replace intolerance and discrimination with understanding and mutual acceptance. Open and sustained dialogue, respect for freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief is fundamental to this endeavor.”

Ms. Deliri focused on the situation in Tanzania, where she resides. There, she said, “large Christian and Muslim populations” have found a way to live together peacefully, “side-by-side,” often intermarrying and attending each other’s religious festivals.

“It is a living example of religious pluralism,” she said. “This coexistence did not come about by accident but rather as a result of the vision and deliberate action of Tanzanian leaders, dating back to the country’s first president...,” she said.

Ms. Deliri also pointed to religious freedom as a key to tolerance, saying that governments must work to create a climate where freedom of religion or belief is clearly upheld in law and in practice.

“Such a climate must be free from incitements to violence or hostility in the name of religion,” she said. “Where contentious opinions about religions are expressed, it is the responsibility of the state to provide for right of reply.”*

I N B R I E F

Bahá’í International Community launches two new Web sites

NEW YORK — The Bahá’í International Community has two new Web sites — one about activities of the BIC’s United Nations Office and another to showcase historic photographs related to the life of Bahá’u’lláh.

The Web site for the BIC’s United Nations Office is at www.bic.org, and “is designed to communicate with our colleagues at the United Nations, with international and inter-governmental organizations, as well as with NGOs,” said Julia Berger, senior writer and researcher at the BIC’s UN Office in New York.

The site features statements to the UN, news, photographs, and audio and video files

that relate to the ongoing work of the BIC UN Office in human rights, the advancement of women, and social and sustainable development. It also has biographical notes about BIC representatives and contact information.

The new site about the life of Bahá’u’lláh is at www.bahauallah.org. It features numerous photographs that have been unpublished or in limited distribution. “The purpose of the Web site is to provide illustration of Baha’u’llah’s life through photographs of places and artifacts and relics associated directly with Him,” said Douglas Moore, director of the BIC’s Office of Public Information.*

Deep Economy

Review, continued from page 16

path, China would consume the equivalent of two-thirds of the world's entire 2004 grain harvest; 99 million barrels of oil a day, which is 20 million more than current world demand; and more steel than all of the West combined.

"Trying to meet that kind of demand would stress the earth past its breaking point in an almost endless number of ways."

Then he asks: has all of the "stuff" provided by the American lifestyle — which the rest of the world desperately wants to emulate — actually achieved its underlying goal of making people happier. For Americans, he writes, the evidence is that it has not. He notes, for example, that studies suggest that while the United States was the happiest country among advanced economies in 1946, now it ranks 10th.

"All that material progress — and all the billions of barrels of oil and millions of acres of trees that it took to create it — seems not to have moved the satisfaction meter an inch."

Mr. McKibben strives to practice what he preaches. His second chapter describes a year spent eating only food grown or produced in his region of Vermont. He says while he may have paid a little bit more and had fewer fresh fruits and vegetables in the winter, he was able to enjoy a surprising variety of foods, from locally brewed beer to venison burgers. Moreover, he says, the exercise meant meeting dozens of new people. "Every meal comes with a story," he writes.

His vision extends far beyond Vermont. He tells of the successes of the New Farming movement in Bangladesh, where a regional experiment in organic farming has been successful at reducing exposure to dangerous pesticides and dramatically increasing the varieties and quality of locally grown grains, fruits, and vegetables.

"Local economies would demand fewer resources and cause less ecological disruption; they would be better able to weather coming shocks; they would allow us to find a better balance between the individual and the community, and hence find extra satisfaction," he writes.

For Bahá'ís, there is much in Mr. McKibben's overall vision to agree with. There are numerous passages in the Bahá'í writings that support the idea that human happiness will never be found in purely material pursuits, but rather in stronger connections with our neighbors — not to mention the Creator.

The Bahá'í writings also emphasize the importance of agriculture and a "human" scale of living. "The fundamental basis of the community is agriculture, tillage of the soil," said 'Abdu'l-Bahá. "All must be producers."

And, certainly, Bahá'ís would say that a successful, sustainable global civilization must be much more deeply rooted in a rich community life at the local level — albeit one that is also tightly connected to the "global village."

On this last point, however, Bahá'ís would suggest that Mr. McKibben's ideas fall short. His plan for creating a more "durable" future is hopeful and inspiring, but he neglects to discuss the kinds of real world changes that must be made to the structure of global institutions if the world is to succeed in any serious effort to eradicate poverty, halt environmental degradation, and create true global prosperity.

The most difficult problems facing humanity today are tightly interconnected and global in nature. While individual lifestyle changes and community-based reforms are surely part of the answer, it seems unlikely that such steps can heal humanity's deeply rooted sicknesses — from global warming to ethnic conflict to hopeless poverty — without strong global coordination. Bahá'ís would say that if humanity were truly unified, with appropriate governance structures, all kinds of new scientific, sociological, and spiritual expertise could be unleashed to address any and all such problems.

The next question is what can motivate such widespread transformations? Mr. McKibben is asking people to give up a huge part of what they currently feel defines the "good life" — whether that means out-of-season fresh fruit or a gas-guzzling luxury vehicle.

Such transformations will be difficult to achieve without a much deeper understanding of the spiritual side of human life. All of the world's religions teach the necessary principles: detachment, sacrifice for the common good, and the fact that true happiness comes from beyond the material realm.

For Bahá'ís, such imperatives are further fortified by a conception of faith that includes the idea that God has sent down a new divine Revelation to knit humanity into a unified entity, with the aim of creating an "ever-advancing civilization."

Deep Economy is a timely and important book. Written in a voice and style that engenders readability, the book is a treasure chest of ideas for how humanity might ameliorate the dark side of consumption. It is, at the least, a positive prescription for how to live more lightly on our small planet.*

"All that material progress — and all the billions of barrels of oil and millions of acres of trees that it took to create it — seems not to have moved the satisfaction meter an inch."

— Bill McKibben,
Deep Economy

Act locally, think globally, revisited

At the heart of Bill McKibben's new book is the contrarian idea that rapid and widespread economic growth is *not* the key to global well-being and prosperity.

Rather, he argues in *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future*, the overarching emphasis on economic growth by governments, corporations, and most consumers is not merely bad for the planet (it leads to global warming) but also mostly unsuccessful at providing the human happiness it seems to promise.

"Growth is bumping against physical limits so profound — like climate change and peak oil — that continuing to expand the economy may be impossible; the very attempt may be dangerous," writes Mr. McKibben.

"But there's something else too, a wild card we're just now beginning to understand: new research from many quarters has started to show that even when growth does make us wealthier, the greater wealth no longer makes us happier."

Compellingly argued with statistics and anecdotes from around the world, Mr. McKibben says humanity must move towards an updated version of community-based economics that emphasizes buying and selling at the local level first.

Specifically, humanity should shift to eating more locally grown food, to using more locally produced energy, and, even, to new local financial arrangements — such as currencies issued by municipalities. The term he coins for these ideas, taken from the phrase "deep ecology," lends the book its title.

Such a shift, he believes, would reduce carbon emissions by reducing the energy used to transport food while at the same time serving to de-couple food and energy production from centralized, oil-intensive sources. It would also, he suggests, open the door to a rediscovery of the joys of community life, which he believes lies at the foundation of human happiness, as opposed to the endless consumerism and "hyper-individualized" approach to life that is currently marketed worldwide as the epitome of civilization.

"Given all that we now know about topics ranging from the molecular structure of carbon dioxide to the psychology of human

satisfaction, we need to move decisively to rebuild our local economies," Mr. McKibben writes. "These may well yield less stuff, but they produce richer relationships; they may grow less quickly, if at all, but they make up for it in durability."

He also believes such an approach can do more in the long run to eliminate global poverty than growth-intensive programs promoted by economists like Jeffery Sachs who argue that "the only way to relieve the planet's grim poverty is to speed up the cycle of economic expansion."

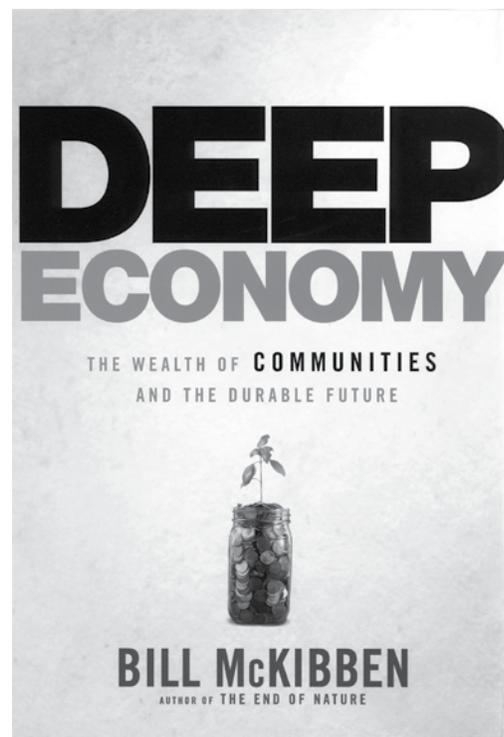
His main argument against the paradigm of endless (and mindless) economic expansion comes when he examines what might happen if the current growth paradigm

***Deep Economy:
The Wealth of
Communities
and the Durable
Future***

By Bill McKibben

**Times Books /
Henry Holt and
Company**

New York



succeeds on a global level. What would happen, he asks, if China and India were able to achieve the economic prosperity currently experienced by Americans.

He lists what China alone would consume by 2031, when its economy at current rates will have theoretically "caught up" with the United States and adopted its lifestyle. On its current

Review, continued on page 15