

## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE AND METHODS OF THE RUHI INSTITUTE

The Ruhi Institute is an educational institution, operating under the guidance of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Colombia, which dedicates its efforts to the development of human resources for the spiritual, social, and cultural development of the Colombian people. Although its center is in the town of Puerto Tejada in the department of Cauca, its area of influence extends throughout the entire country. Especially in recent years, its educational programs have been adopted by an increasing number of agencies worldwide.

Like any other institution involved in the process of education for development, the Ruhi Institute has formulated its strategies within a special framework and a philosophy of social change, development and education. In this case, that understanding has emerged from a consistent effort to apply Bahá'í principles to the analysis of social conditions.

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The Bahá'í Faith sees the present state of human affairs as a natural stage in an organic process which will finally lead to the unity of the human race within one social order. Humanity as a whole has gone through evolutionary stages similar to those experienced by an individual; having passed through infancy and childhood, it is now experiencing the difficult culminating moments of a turbulent adolescence. The present state of confusion, doubt, and belligerence is simply to be understood as the condition of an adolescent who strongly desires growth and maturity, but is still attached to childish attitudes and customs. Yet the moment is ripe for this adolescent to take a final step and enter the constructive and dynamic but balanced state of maturity and adulthood.

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In analyzing the rapid changes occurring in the world today, Bahá'ís identify two parallel processes operating at all levels—village, town, nation, and global society. On the one hand, it is clear that human society is suffering from a process of disintegration that manifests itself in wars, terrorism, chaos, physical and psychological insecurity, and a widespread condition of material poverty. On the other hand, forces of integration are moving individuals and groups toward the adoption of new values, new forms of organization, and appropriate structures that can lay the foundation for the establishment of a new social order. The Ruhi Institute defines its basic aim as that of becoming a channel for the spiritual forces of our time to be applied to the

lives of the masses of humanity, empowering them to contribute to the establishment of a new world civilization.

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In its efforts to understand and contribute to a process of social change, the Ruhi Institute tries to avoid two sets of theories that have dominated the discourse on development and change for too many decades. On the one hand, it disagrees with concepts of social change that are entirely individualistic in their outlook, which analyze society only in terms of the psychological make-up, the skills, and the behavior of the individual, and which assume that social structures somehow will change by themselves once the individual is saved or correctly trained through religious conversion or secular education. On the other hand, it also rejects theories that consider the human being entirely as a product of society, and claim that no improvement is possible unless social structures, especially those related to political and economic power, are changed first. There are too many examples of participation by the “righteous” and the “highly trained” in the structures of oppression to allow any objective observer of social processes to accept proposals of change based entirely on the redemption of the individual without direct attention to social forces and structures. At the same time, history has already shown the evils of systems that deny individual freedom and derive their moral and social codes from a perception of the necessity of change in the structures of power, a change their proponents believe should be achieved at any cost.

The Ruhi Institute tries to understand the process of the transformation of human society in terms of a far more complex set of interactions between two parallel developments: the transformation of the individual, and the deliberate creation of the structures of a new society. Moreover, just as it does not view the human being as a mere product of interactions with nature and society, it does not identify structural change only with political and economic processes. Rather, it sees the necessity of change in all structures—mental, cultural, scientific and technological, educational, economic and social—including a complete change in the very concepts of political leadership and power. It is understood that individuals, all of whom possess a more or less developed spiritual nature, may be illumined by divine teachings, even under the influence of the most oppressive social forces. These individuals, then, by no means perfected, try to walk the path of social transformation, a path which, nevertheless, is not one of individual salvation but one which implies a constant effort to create and strengthen the institutions of a new social order. These new institutions, even when designed perfectly, may not function perfectly at first, but they do make it possible for an increasing number of human beings to walk further along the path of spiritual growth and transformation. This continuous interaction, between the parallel processes of the spiritualization of the individual and the

establishment of new social structures, describes the only dependable path of social change, one that avoids both complacency and violence and does not perpetuate the cycles of oppression and illusory freedom that humanity has experienced in the past. According to this vision of social change, the Ruhi Institute directs its present efforts to develop human resources within a set of activities that conduce to spiritual and intellectual growth, but are carried out in the context of each individual's contribution to the establishment of new structures, whether in villages and rural regions or in large urban centers.

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Yet another important element of the conceptual framework of the Ruhi Institute is the concept of participation. Although by now most programs concerned with development and change accept the importance of participation by the local community in its own path of development and most try to avoid imposing their own projects and ideas, there usually is little clarity and agreement as to the nature, the form, and the extent of this participation. The Ruhi Institute, following the ideas presented in the previous paragraphs, asserts that effective participation which will not easily degenerate into political manipulation requires a systematic learning process within each community and region so that the community itself experiments with new ideas, new methods, and new technologies and procedures, rather than being the object of the social experimentation of others. Thus, one of the first steps in establishing participatory development processes in a region is to promote intensive participation by an increasing number of individuals in learning, in a constant effort to apply knowledge to improve the conditions of community life and to create and strengthen the institutions of a new world order.

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Guided by universal participation, both as a principle and as a goal, the Ruhi Institute tries to design and carry out educational activities that combine classroom learning and personal study with acts of service in the community. Each educational activity is to be, in itself, an enabling experience which helps participants develop further the qualities, attitudes, capabilities, and skills of a new type of social actor whose energies are entirely directed towards promoting the well-being of the community, and whose actions are inspired by the vision of a new world civilization which will embody in all its structures and processes the fundamental principle of the unity of the human race.

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At the Ruhi Institute, the design and implementation of educational activities are always guided by a profound conviction in the basic nobility of the human being. The Bahá'í Writings state:

Man is the Supreme Talisman. Lack of a proper education hath, however, deprived him of that which he doth inherently possess. Through a word proceeding out of the mouth of God he was called into being; by one word more he was guided to recognize the Source of his education; by yet another word his station and destiny were safeguarded. The Great Being saith: Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom.

Education, then, is not simply seen as the acquisition of knowledge and the development of skills, but also in terms of the development of vast and powerful potentialities inherent in the very nature of every human being. Again, the development of these potentialities and talents, which is considered a God-given right and responsibility of the individual, attains fruition when it is pursued in the spirit of service to humanity and in the context of creating a new world civilization.

Each participant in the programs of the Ruhi Institute acts as a student in certain educational activities, and as a tutor in others. The institute, then, uses the term “collaborator” to refer to all who take part in its programs. Based on the conditions and the needs of the population served by the institute, courses are designed along a series of “paths of service” which a collaborator follows according to personal interests and capacities. At the beginning of each path of service collaborators mostly learn and develop new concepts and skills. Later on, they participate in courses that prepare them to act as tutors of the earlier courses, thus creating a unique and dynamic environment for the development of human resources.