

OCTOBER 2020

PARTICIPATING IN SOCIAL DISCOURSE

**SOME CONCEPTS AND
REFLECTIONS FOR SPECIAL
INTEREST GROUPS**

Prepared by the Association for Bahá'í Studies UK

www.abs.bahai.org.uk

abs@bahai.org.uk

02

WHAT IS A "DISCOURSE"?

A discourse can be understood as the evolving way a community of people are thinking and talking about a given topic.

Discourses exist at many levels. They can range from informal contributions of Bahá'ís in neighbourhoods and clusters, to more formal contributions of Bahá'í agencies, such as Offices of Public Affairs or the Bahá'í International Community, in national and international forums.

Another level is that of discourses related to professional and academic disciplines or fields of interest, which is the primary focus of the Association for Bahá'í Studies.

03

WHAT IS A SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP (SIG)?

A special interest group (SIG) is typically created by a number of individuals interested in a specific theme or field. Together, they study, consult, share insights and experiences, and engage in discourses in diverse spaces. They may also develop new projects or initiatives as they advance together.

SIGs allow people to learn together about how to effectively and coherently contribute to discourses in their fields of interest. All SIGs in the UK fall under the aegis of the Association for Bahá'í Studies.

SIGs can choose to focus on one or a number of different discourses. For example, a hypothetical SIG on 'Migration' could choose to focus on the discourse of the causes of migration, or instead choose to focus on the responsibility of states and how they should deal with migration and migrants - or even both, depending on the status of the discourse, and the interests, time and capacities of the group.

There are currently SIGs on mental health, the environment, technology, economics, religion, the arts, education, law, and philosophy. There is scope for plenty more!

04**WHAT SHOULD AN SIG DO?**

SIGs are encouraged to read the prevalent discourses in their field and develop questions, responses, and vocabulary to contribute to the advancement of those discourses in light of the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith.

How? By developing capacities to read the reality of a given discourse, identify constructive and thoughtful ways to contribute to it, and by drawing on insights from the Revelation of Baha'u'llah as well as the collective experience and learning of the Bahá'í Faith around the world. Although, we should be mindful not to overstate the significance of such experiences.

Capacities to develop include:

Reading the prevalent discourses in a given field or discipline;

Understanding its development and the different currents of thought within it;

Identifying or articulating the most important questions and concerns within the discourse;

Assessing whether the discourse, or any given spaces associated with it, can be engaged with in thoughtful and constructive ways; and

Learning alongside and from other like-minded individuals and/or groups similarly engaged with a given discourse.

05

HOW DO WE KNOW IF WE'RE DOING THE RIGHT THING?

WE DON'T!

This is an area of service we are all learning about together.

By operating in a learning mode, the aim is to better understand and contribute to the advancement of a given discourse through insights from the Writings. There is no prescriptive way of undertaking this task.

A key objective of an SIG is to be *outward oriented*, which involves constantly striving to connect with others and being involved in spaces where discourses are taking place.

An SIG should avoid the tendency to be inward looking but rather be actively trying to work shoulder to shoulder with like-minded individuals and groups to constructively contribute to a discourse.

In order to advance understanding over time, it may be helpful for SIGs to collate its learning in a shared document, such as key ideas and concepts that arise from your study and consultations as well as any actions you have taken together and their outcomes.

06

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- What are some of the formal and informal spaces where your chosen discourse is taking place?
- What are some of the key questions, concerns, assumptions, and approaches of your given discourse?
- How can your SIG engage with and work together with individuals in those spaces to identify ways of advancing the discourse in constructive ways?
- How can the Teachings of the Faith give understanding, clarity, and constructive insights to current methods and trends in your chosen discourse?
- How can we avoid having a mentality that we have to give solutions or that we have answers?
- How can we ensure we maintain a humble posture of learning?
- How might you become a protagonist, and begin to take initiative, within these nascent learning processes?

07

GUIDANCE

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What is important is for Bahá'ís to be present in the many social spaces in which thinking and policies evolve on any one of a number of issues [...] so that they can, as occasions permit, offer generously, unconditionally and with utmost humility the teachings of the Faith and their experience in applying them as a contribution to the betterment of society.

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(On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 4 January 2009)

Sincerity in this respect is an imperative. Moreover, care should be exercised to avoid overstating the Bahá'í experience or drawing undue attention to fledgling efforts, such as the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme, which are best left to mature at their own pace. The watchword in all cases is humility. While conveying enthusiasm about their beliefs, the friends should guard against projecting an air of triumphalism, hardly appropriate among themselves, much less in other circumstances.

(Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 2010)

The purpose of participation in the discourses of society is not to persuade others to accept a Bahá'í position or to engage in direct teaching. Nor should it be understood as a public relations activity or academic exercise. Rather, those involved adopt a posture of learning and engage in genuine conversations in which they can offer insights drawn from the writings and from their experience in applying them, as a contribution to the advancement of a given discourse.

(On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 22 February 2011)

Its efforts in this regard have been directed towards engaging in conversations in a widening range of spaces... working shoulder to shoulder with like-minded organizations and individuals, seeking, where possible, to stimulate consultative processes and draw out underlying principles around which agreement and mutual understanding can be built.

(Universal House of Justice, 27 December 2017)