

# Punto de encuentro



# CREENCIAS PARA LA ACTUACIÓN Y EL DEBATE. LA EXPERIENCIA DE LA OFICINA DE ASUNTOS PÚBLICOS Y LA PANDEMIA DE COVID-19 FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION AND DISCOURSE. A CASE STUDY OF THE SPANISH OFFICE FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS BEFORE THE COVID-19 CRISIS

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## RESUMEN

*Este artículo explora algunos de los resultados que la Oficina de Asuntos Exteriores de la Comunidad Bahá'í de España obtuvo en su esfuerzo por participar activamente en el debate público nacional desde 2014. Y ello a la luz de dos planteamientos interconectados: primero, cuanto más alineada con la marco de acción se hallan los agentes, más eficaces serán sus esfuerzos por contribuir al cambio social; y, segundo, las organizaciones comprometidas con el aprendizaje, el desarrollo de capacidades y el progreso a largo plazo, están en una mejor posición para responder a condiciones de incertidumbre y crisis repentinas e inesperadas. En 2008, el International Governing Body de los Bahá'ís –la «Casa Universal de la Justicia»– dijo que, a medida que la comunidad incrementara su base, se involucraría cada vez más en la vida de la sociedad circundante. Así se ha comprobado que sucede en la práctica, a lo que ha contribuido la experiencia de la Oficina de Asuntos Públicos de la Comunidad Bahá'í de España, tanto en su funcionamiento cotidiano como en otros campos de actuación y, muy particularmente, para perfilar su respuesta a la COVID-19.*

## PALABRAS CLAVE

*Debate público, cambio social, sistema de creencias, COVID-19.*

## ABSTRACT

*This paper explores some of the learnings that the Office of External Affairs of the Baha'i community of Spain gained in its efforts to contribute to public dis-*

course in national spaces since 2014 under the light of two interconnected hypothesis: first, the more aligned with the framework for action agents are, the more effective they will be in their efforts to contribute to social change; and second, organizations committed to learning, building capacity and long term progress are in a better position to respond to conditions of incertitude and to sudden and unexpected crisis. In 2008, the International Governing Body of the Bahá'ís –the Universal House of Justice– said that, as the community expanded at the grassroots, it would be drawn further and further into the life of the surrounding society. Thus, the experience of the Office of Public Affairs of the Bahá'í community of Spain will be harnessed to illustrate the operation of the framework in another field of action and, more in particular, to shape its response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## KEYWORDS

*Public discourse, social change, framework, COVID-19.*

**SUMARIO:** 1. Introduction. 2. An attempt to learn systematically on the Bahá'í contribution to Spanish National discourses. 3. Deploying experience to respond to COVID-19. 4. Conclusions.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The efforts of the Bahá'í community to contribute to social progress are guided by a particular evolving conceptual framework. This framework can be conceived as a result of over a century of collective endeavours to translate the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh into reality. The framework is not the Revelation itself, but is grounded in it. As it is a complex entity, there are different ways to describe it. One way is that the framework gathers the concepts, guiding principles, convictions and approaches that experience showed that seem to be more relevant for the quality and effectiveness of transformative actions. The framework, on the one hand is the result of the learning acquired up to a certain point and, on the other, enables collective learning, as it provides with shared notions, establishes priorities and generates a collective language. Although the nature of the framework is collective, individuals try to align themselves with it in order to become more effective agents of social change. Like-

wise, communities and institutions try to adjust their functioning and mode of operation to the perspectives offered by the framework.

The overarching framework guiding all Baha'i community efforts to contribute to the advancement of civilization became more visible after a decade of intensive learning about the growth and development of the Baha'i community itself from 1996 to 2006. However, its main features are applicable to other spheres of action. The notion of oneness and justice, with their manifold implications, the belief on the human potentialities and the power of education are some convictions informing the framework. The special role assigned to knowledge and its generation for social change, which includes a profound understanding on the way science and religion interact in the social realm as well as the importance of experience to foster further insights, is a fundamental principle of the framework. Regarding the category "approaches", learning in action, building capacity, working simultaneously at the level of the individual, the community and the institutions, operating systematically, maintaining focus, to name a few, are some methodological tools that are also part of the framework. It might be said that even the very way the nature of the work is conceptualized currently, in terms of various spheres of action –being the most salient ones expansion and consolidation, social action and contributing to public discourse– or the consideration of the individual, the community and the institutions as the main protagonist of the civilization building process are two concepts related to the framework.

Although one can say that there is a single framework guiding all efforts, the way it manifests in different areas may differ. This distinction began to be stronger after 2010, when Baha'is started to become more familiar with the language used by the House of Justice in the message of Ridvan of that same year. That message built upon the notion posed in a previous message to Australia, where the efforts of the Baha'i community to contribute to the advancement of civilization were described in terms of three interrelated spheres or areas of action: growth –expansion and consolidation–, social action and public discourse. Although that conception does not exhaust all activities that Baha'is do for social progress, it captures more precisely than previous descriptions the nature of the work in motion. Thus, after years of action and experience under the light of that new guidance, two documents were released containing the particularities of the

framework in the field of social action<sup>1</sup> (2012), on the one hand, and in the area of discourse, on the other<sup>2</sup> (2014).

Concerning the mandate for National Offices of External or Public Affairs –the case will be examined in the following sections–, a few considerations appear to be timely before proceeding with the analysis of Spain. The first one is that, even though the involvement in the life of society at the grassroots is organic and will happen naturally as the community building processes gains momentum and grow in scope at the cluster level –a small geographical construct to decentralize the work in this sphere of action–, national offices of public affairs need to deliberately plan their involvement in national spaces. Otherwise, this involvement will not (most probably) occur naturally. The second one –connected to the previous– is that the main purpose of these(s) offices is to foster a systematic learning process on how to effectively contribute to public and prevalent discourses linked to peace and social betterment running at National social spaces where (a) thinking evolve, (b) policies are defined and (c) public opinion is shaped. The meaning of the concepts of discourse<sup>3</sup> and social space, together with the ideas of “social thought”, “public opinion” and “policies” are not given and Offices strive to deepen their understanding of them in order to enhance the quality of their work. The third consideration has to do with the fact that, in order to operationalise the functioning of the Office, four components or departments must advance progressively: relations with the government and civil organizations –including

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<sup>1</sup> OSED, “Social action”, 12 November 2012: [https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20121126\\_001/1#716186515](https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20121126_001/1#716186515).

<sup>2</sup> National and International External Affairs Endeavours of the Worldwide Baha’i community, 20 October 2014. A document approved by the House of Justice and prepared by an *ad hoc* committee.

<sup>3</sup> There are various documents that describe the nature of the discourses to focus on Nationally. These discourses are linked to communities of people who want to improve a specific practice and so establish a dialogical relation in different kind of social spaces. In addition, the discourses chosen by National Offices should meet certain requirements, such as being concerned with peace and progress, not being controversial, being underpinned into action, being Nationally and more less permanently prevalent, not being too narrow or specialized to allow different actors to partake and not only experts or being somehow associated with the experience of the Bahá’í community. This last requirement will allow the Office to draw on science, the writings of religion, but also to the collective experience of the Bahá’í community in that specific field, which constitutes a very valuable and unique source of insight because both the size of the community (over 7 million extended through all countries) and the over 170 years of experimentation.

defence efforts—, relations with media, web presence and discourse. However, from another perspective, it might be said that the area of discourse permeates and shapes the totality of the work of the Office. Finally, a fourth observation has to do with the capacities required to foster this somehow specialized task (although not dependent exclusively from experts). These capabilities or focus areas for learning and action entail (a) the capacity to participate in a growing number of social spaces with higher levels of impact and sophistication, (b) establishing relations with like-minded social actors, such as politicians, journalists, intellectuals or activists, (c) the generation of content for the Office participation in the spaces, (d) sharpening the sight to discern the National political, social, economic and spiritual dynamics and (e) raising capacity in a limited but significant number of collaborators from the Baha'i community to expand the scope of the work of the Office.

The last capability or focus area deserves a last comment. Building capacity or engaging collaborators in a long-term learning process on how to effectively contribute to public discourses at National spaces is not an easy task. In addition, the number of collaborators cannot be very high, as the focus of the worldwide Bahá'í community is placed on community building processes at the grassroots. However, in order to generate a stable and systemic learning, the Office needs to be able to enlarge the number of people engaged in its work. Depending the size of the community the number might vary; however, the number of National collaborators may need to be reduced to 15-20. This means that, although the learning of the Office and the nature of its work is of vital importance and has connections with other processes of the Faith—for instance, the contacts made with the government may open doors for public venues or the higher public recognition of the Faith might facilitate the work of teaching—, there is not a simple direct link between the Office and the majority of the believers. The Office gains insights from the grassroots and conceptualizes the learnings generated there to inform the contents for specific discourses, and the believer can read the news and reports that highlight what the Office has learned and achieved. However, beyond that connection is not easy to refer to the impact that the learnings of the Office has on the three protagonists of the Plan.

Therefore, the next two sections will, firstly, try to gather the insights of the Office of Spain in its attempt to apply the above orientations and framework—given that the first hypothesis prevalent within the Baha'i

world poses that the more clear the framework is and the better it is applied, the higher the quality of transformative action is— and, secondly, describe the nature of the response before the COVID-19 crisis under the assumption that the response was shaped by both the framework and the accumulated experience of the Office in the area of discourse—in light of the second hypothesis that proposes that commitment with long term progress and learning generate the conditions to respond before unexpected impacts more effectively.

## 2. AN ATTEMPT TO LEARN SYSTEMATICALLY ON THE BAHÁ'Í CONTRIBUTION TO SPANISH NATIONAL DISCOURSES

After having explored some of the key aspects of the framework guiding the Bahá'í community efforts to contribute to social change and the particular orientations for the work in the field of public discourse at the National level, the experience of the Office of External Affairs of the Bahá'í community of Spain will be examined in an attempt to illustrate the expression of the framework in this specific case. However, a few words about the interplay between discourse and social change might be necessary.

The relation between public discourse, social thinking, practices and social change has been a traditional area of interest for social sciences and philosophical inquiry. Authors such as Hegel, Marx, Foucault, Habermas, Gramscy or Kant, coming from different traditions and moved by different motivations, highlighted the fact that ideas, perspectives, common sense notions—thinking in general— affects social order and change, whether to justify *status quo*, to mobilize people to call into question dominant ideologies or simply to inform practices. The Bahá'í community, in its facet of a religious organization committed to positive social change, has paid attention to the relevance of thinking and discourse for social change since its inception and in a wide array of forms: fostering conversations at different levels on issues of social concern, publishing books, papers and statements, establishing relations with prominent thinkers, journalists and policy makers, creating academic associations to contribute to academic debate and vanguard thinking and offices of external affairs, promoting institutions to raise capacity in the next generations for this purpose, to name a few. The assumptions has been that, in order to accelerate and to contrib-



ute more effectively to the noble and higher aims of the Faith –such as setting an alternative and global pattern of social, economic and political organization grounded into the principles of oneness, ecological and cognitive sustainability, justice, peace and collective generation of knowledge, where local and national identities and governance is respected–, important efforts to change thought need to complement other areas of action related to fostering community building activities, practices, structures, Temples, institutions, development projects and programs.

Despite the fact that this area of endeavour has been a “constant” along the whole existence of the Bahá’í community, over the last decade its approach has become more systematic and probably focused. Initially, the notion of “discourse”, as a specific sphere for action, as it was mentioned in the introduction, has been prevalent. This notion tries to make more operative actions to change patterns of thinking and to promote thinking in general. By discourse it is meant the number of conversations that different actors, committed to a particular practice and distributed in different parts, hold to improve and refine that practice. The global dialogue of that community contributes to shaping practices, policies on that singular topic. Secondly, there are different modalities of actions in the field of discourse that are linked to different specific aims. The broadest mid long-term aims can be named as advancing thinking, shaping public opinion or informing policies in order to contribute to the lesser peace. In addition, another wide aim is to set new intellectual foundations for civilization, transforming current knowledge arrangements - advancing disciplines in such a way that contemporary problems –generated in part but that same arrangement– may be resolved. Within that broad context, national Offices of External Affairs or Offices for Public Affairs’ new and most important mandate might be described as contributing, on behalf of the Bahá’í community of a particular country, to national discourses connected to the betterment of society that operate in national social spaces where thinking, public opinion and policies evolve.

The Bahá’í community of Spain had an historical Office of External Affairs to establish relations with the government, on the one hand, and to contribute, on the other, to human rights related international campaigns coordinated by the Bahá’í International Community, in most cases to defend the Bahá’ís in Iran. However, in 2012, after receiving

some guidance from the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, that Office started to work under a new mandate in the hope to become a structure to foster and systematize learning on effective participation in National spaces where discourses associated with peace and social progress were taking place. The aim was to contribute, progressively, to National discourses in spaces where thinking evolves, policies are defined and public opinion is forged. The Office' denomination, to set a bridge with the wider society, changed from External Affairs –that evokes an inner and an outer reality– to Public Affairs. It took some time and multiple consultations before the Office could operate in this mode, but it might be said that hosting a conference on good governance in May 2014 at the Ministry of Presidency's Centre for Political and Constitutional Studies represented the starting signal of this new period.

Since 2012, however, a committee was appointed to study some guidance sent by the World Centre, to choose a discourse to focus on and to start exploring National spaces related to policies, thinking and public opinion. Multiple consultations were held; however, many questions kept opening over and over again. Out of those questions two were particularly problematic: which discourse had to be the focus of the Office and where such things called national spaces are. Along that path, various international meetings took place, where representatives of the Bahá'í World Centre (BWC) shared insights about this new area of learning. A couple of people from Spain attended those meetings. Nonetheless, after a meeting in Italy, it was clear that, unless someone moved to the capital city of Spain (Madrid), and engaged intensively in action, those questions would remain unanswered and progress would be limited. Thus, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Spain (NSA) –the National governing body of the community–, decided to send a person to Madrid to devote full time for some years to this task. Another individual, who was already living in Madrid and worked as an assistant of the NSA's secretariat was also appointed, together with another lady from Madrid to serve in the coordination team. From that point on, a lot of action took place to make appointments with politicians and public figures, to participate in conferences in Madrid and to identify a prevalent discourse of National interest and relevance where the Bahá'í community had experience. Equality, moral leadership, collective security, development and governance were some of the potential topics to focus on. Given the experience of deciding a discourse

with a group of collaborators of the Office and the institutions and changing it before much experience because new ideas emerged, various spaces and themes were explored –instead of deciding the discourse beforehand–, in the hope to find in practice a particular discourse. Finally, after a couple of months of intense action, the topic of governance was chosen.

As it can be perceived from the previous paragraph, the initial discourse chosen by the Office was the discourse on good governance. The reasons why that discourse was selected were various: Spain was experiencing a renewed interest on politics in the broader sense; the notion of governance lent itself to address deeply both the transformations in motion and the institutional and civil responses needed; the Bahá'í community had a historical experience with its own alternative system for inner governance; and some contents generated by the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP) were already available. After the topic was clear, the conversations with like-minded actors were shaped by it.

Since 2014, the coordination team of the Office, whose members had been deeply involved previously in the community building activities and the educational programs of the Bahá'í community, has intentionally tried to apply the mode of functioning distinguishing that sphere of action. Thus, they started made plans with clear objectives, strategies and indicators to monitor progress. The three main goals initially were participating in as many and as diverse National social spaces as possible; to generate contents for the discourse on governance; and to raise capacity in a small number of collaborators that could engage in a long term process of learning about contributing to public discourse. The vision was also clear: to make an impact and to contribute not only to public discourse but to the lesser peace. This last point, although not so specific, increased the motivation of the team. Some tools were also devised to advance the task: a field diary, lists of contacts categorized by area (journalists, activists, politicians, intellectuals), a form for plans and a form for trimestral reports...

A close dialogue was also established with the BWC's recently created Office for Public Discourse (OPD). The NSA of Spain gave latitude to the Office to experiment and try things without much preconceived ideas and expectations and considering previous experience. These two facts, the connection with OPD and the latitude to explore were

quite relevant to learn about its work. Whereas the former provided the Office with confidence and the certainty to be in the right path, although global experience was short and the terrain had to be broken –and to drink from the aforementioned incipient but growing global experience–; the latter served as and stimulus to work hard and generate the atmosphere to avoid the fear of making mistakes. This last point was not easy, as past External Affairs experience in Spain had been notorious. However, the approaches were different: there had been an Office of Public Information with a specific mandate, there had been a kind of diplomatic team in charge of defending the rights of the Bahá'í in Iran which engaged in dialogue with the government, there was a committee to promote the legal recognition of the Faith... These experiences were sound and fruitful, but the purpose, general approach, language and methods were not the same; they looked similar though. Finally, fostering an appropriate understanding amongst the different institutions of the country on the connection between the external affairs work in public discourse, the plan and the main concern of the community in the field of expansion and consolidation required time and special attention.

After identifying the discourse on governance and while momentum was being gained, two strategic decisions were made that affected profoundly the evolution of the Office. The first one was to organize in collaboration with other actors an event on good governance at a symbolic and renown public venue: Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales. It was thought that the process to organize the event would propel both focus areas –content generation, social spaces and contacts and raising collaborators– and the different components or departments of the Office –relations with the government and civil organizations, relations with media, web presence and discourse. That expectation came true: content had to be generated for the event, some collaborators engaged in the organization, many contacts from different sectors were made, etc. The event represented a milestone in terms of capacity and recognition. Over the process, an academic editorial became interested in publishing the presentations made by politicians, economists, activists and Bahá'ís. Thus, a publication was prepared and an agreement was signed up to publish other future contents. From that point on, the way the Office presented itself to the public changed, as the event was of significant importance and many important actors belonging to the field of governance knew about it. The Bahá'í community, after that

point, started to be considered as a relevant actor for the discourse on governance or, at least, that is the interpretation that multiple like-minded people made. The event was also covered by media and a video was prepared so it received some diffusion.

Beyond the specific event, this action provided the Office with insights on an approach and a pattern of action that seemed to be successful and that could be replicated. In addition, the Office would turn to the event when introducing itself to new actors and to government officials who did not know about the community. The confidence of the Office to make new contacts and to related, humbly, but in equal conditions, grew.

The approach was replicated in Barcelona, the second biggest city of Spain where National events are often held. A two day Congress on religion and governance was celebrated. The Bahá'í community of Catalonia had nurtured strong relations over the years with civil organizations working in the field of interfaith dialogue, the government and some academicians related to religious studies and diversity management. Hence, this assert was seen as an opportunity to go further. The OPA worked with 10-12 collaborators, settled there, visited key actors from different sectors, prepared a concept paper, found a public and symbolic venue, etc. The event drew relevant actors, media coverage, etc.

While these developments were taking place, the Office opened another important line of action that resulted crucial to raise capacity, generate content and reinforce the Bahá'í presence in public spaces: the transformation of the web page. A team of friends, coordinated by a collaborator designated as "project manager", started to meet regularly to reflect on the identity of the Bahá'í community and the best way to present itself to the public. Designing a new web was a good way to materialize this reflection. There is not much space for details, but this work involved not only friends with expertise but friends with design and writing capabilities and a few friends with programming skills. After about a year of collective efforts, a new web was launched that on the one hand feeded from the experience of the Office at presenting itself to the public and on the other contributed to the generation of contents for that public interaction. After that great achievement related to the web presence, a permanent group was established, which changed over the years, to address other lines of action to refine the web, opening other webs, reflect on digital communication and use social networks.

The planning of the Office tried to look at the four components of the work. However, to advance in the different departments, more collaborators were needed. The relations with the media were especially relevant, but over the following months could not be afforded intensively. Once a couple of collaborators could commit to that work, much progress was made in terms of refining lists of journalists, generating contents for conversations, making calls and appointments and systematizing a news service, to name a few areas. This progress was not linear, as it was not easy to maintain the dedication of the collaborators without liberating them. Thus, during some periods, there were not many appointments and calls. After four years of work, though, other lines of action could establish in relation to the media. Attending social spaces related to journalists, organizing specific events for journalists, finding permanent spaces in media, humbly open a line of conversation on the role of media in society, managing a TV program on governance and economy through a collaborator professional of the field or launching a radio program embedded into a community radio station were some of the main features of the work after a few years of fore and back movement.

Those two first years probably were of vital importance to set a pattern of work and establish the basis for the future. That is why the work tried to be meticulous and attentive to the details. The very model of functioning of the Office was a recurrent topic of reflection in order to improve it. Another element of the work that apparently was groundbreaking, was the first reports and conceptualizations. Inspired, whether by conversations with OPD in the BWC or by international meetings, by the need to write the report for the National Convention or to inform the National Assembly, some documents were prepared trying to capture the learnings on the different focus areas or on the different components of the work. There was a first report in 2014 on the leanings about social spaces that probably conditioned the next ones. After over six months of very intense action, time was devoted to reflect on the nature of those spaces, the kind of actors involved, the categories of spaces, etc. Something similar was made to reflect on the manner the OPA tried to raise collaborators and to generate contents collectively. Reports on the relations with media and journalism, on the one hand, and on the web presence, on the other, were of particular importance. This sort of regular reflection after periods of intense work and attempts to systematize the learning is a cultural feature that has been conveyed to the new staff and collaborators of the Office. Ulti-

mately, the vision behind the team was to establish collective systems that go beyond the individual members and that could inform the work of future teams.

Progressively –to make the story shorter and although much could be said on the learnings on each focus area–, as more spaces were explored, contents were generated, publications were prepared, relations were established, the web presence of the community was strengthened, capacity was built in collaborators, the capability to read National political, economic and social reality was sharpened, the Office grew institutionally to respond to higher challenges and to contribute to the evolution of thought more significantly. Although the initial discourse chosen was that on good governance, after six years, the number of topics addressed is much wider. However, the Office conceptualized the discourses where is engaged around three big areas: governance –which includes sub themes such as governance and economy, diversity management, spirituality and public policy, food sovereignty, and governance and social cohesion–, religion and society –that entails specific topics such as preventing radicalization, religion and State, refugees and social cohesion, overcoming prejudice or migration– and human rights –a topic that has not received active attention from the Office, beyond attending, after invitation, spaces, offering some talks and generating a particular understanding of the human rights discourse from a kind of Baha’i inspired perspective.

The sub discourse on radicalization deserves special attention. This topic allowed Office to enter high level spaces that were closed before. Agreements were made with Universities, some media, specialized centres, Non Governmental Organizations (NGO) dedicated to this area and editorials, in order to prepare courses, offering conferences, coordinating publications and producing audio visual contents. Around ten national spaces within 2018 and 2020 were created by the Office, in collaboration with other actors, where most important institutions, experts and policy makers of the field attended. The work in this area is probably one of the main reasons why the Bahá’í community of Spain received various public recognitions from public institutions, being the most relevant an invitation from the very Ministry of Justice to be part of an institutional movie whose aim was to highlight the evolution of the human rights situation in the country on occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the Spanish Constitution. A Bahá’í was one the four pro-

tagonists of the documentary which was publicly released in the seats of the Ministry in front of a variety of government officials.

Two other events symbolize the progress made over these years and the increase of the capacity of the Office to respond to higher challenges. In the first case, the OPA co-organized a University Summer School for three days in July 2018. Key National figures participated: the president of the National Constitutional Court, a member of the European Court of Human Rights, recognized professors, mayors, the head of the National Police and the *Guardia Civil* (a militarized police), two top mediatic journalists, politicians from various political parties, national civil servants, professors, to name a few. The course was on preventing radicalization and over 30 students attended. The course was broadcasted and the videos can be watched through [Amaranta.tv](https://amaranta.tv)<sup>4</sup>. The OPA made another agreement with an academic editorial, *Sindéresis* (the previous one for governance had been with DELTA), to publish a collection on that same topic. A first volume was published in December 2019 and a second one is being edited in light of the Summer University School.

Finally, the last achievement that might indicate the progress over this period is a Conference on radicalization that was supposed to be held in the National Parliament last May. Some members of the Parliament, various Universities and the Freedom of Religion and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) had expressed the desire to hold a conference on topics related to freedom of religion and belief, security and radicalization. The OPA decided to lead a process to hold in the National Parliament a conference on the interrelationship between freedom of religion or belief and security in the context of preventing violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism. Before the Covid crisis everything was ready for that: the seat and parliament support, the speaker, the logistical arrangements, media agreements... However, it had to be postponed.

The narrative presented so far, although descriptive, tried to underline the idea that, when agencies or institutions (also individuals), align their mode of functioning with the concepts, principles and approaches of the conceptual framework for action that guides the efforts of the

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<sup>4</sup> <https://amaranta.tv/curso-de-verano-de-la-uam-sobre-la-radicalizacion-violenta/>.



community –to fulfil its mission as a force for positive social change and that serves as the matrix to organize thinking and learning–, the effectiveness grow. Although short and despite the fact that there is no formal assessment of impact nor a comparative analysis of this case with others that might not be so committed to the application of the framework, the narrative includes a record of achievements that were not even imaginable for that same Office in the past, where the framework was not so clear.

### 3. DEPLOYING EXPERIENCE TO RESPOND TO COVID-19

This section will elaborate on the second hypothesis, a kind of grounded intuition posed at the beginning of the paper, namely: organizations committed to learning, building capacity and long-term progress are in a better position to respond to conditions of incertitude and to sudden and unexpected crisis (like Covid). This capacity seems crucial as one of the main transformations that society has experienced over the last decades is related to the conditions of stability and certitude upon which political decisions were made (Bauman, 2013; Innerarity, 2012; Coen and Roberts, 2012). These conditions, mainly as a result of an exponential acceleration of time driven by technology and communication, new and unknown risks and threats and interconnectedness, have made the world a place where what is most common is what is unpredictable. Furthermore, the influence of heightened competition, political marketing and short term aims in the realm of politics, has reduced governance capacity to anticipate, to long term planning and to address complex, unknown and sudden problems such as Covid.

Because of the above mentioned reasons, there is a growing interest in organizations and political systems that, while maintaining legitimacy, are better equipped to respond and to come to decisions before the current context of uncertainty. Political stability and learning organizations, thus, have been two areas of promising study that try to shed light unto these dynamics. The experience of the Spanish Office for Public Discourse might fit into this debate too.

Along these years, the capacity to generate contents, to read social reality, to draw on collaborators, to establish relations, to explore spaces and to conceptualize the experience of the Baha'i community under

the light of specific discourses grew. When the COVID-19 associated crisis emerged, the OPA was immersed in finalizing the details associated with the Conference at the National Parliament. It took some time before the whole country was confined at home. When that happened, the coordinating team of the Office started to read the situation in terms of lacking good governance. Thus, the Office prepared a Naw Ruz news for media and for its own Bahá'í News Service ([bahai.es/noticias](http://bahai.es/noticias)) interpreting the situation in terms of both the opportunity to make long time needed adjustments in the governance mechanisms and the economic policies and the risk of not doing that.

That news set the tone for the Office collaborators to publish news and opinion pieces in National newspapers as well as in divulgation journals. This was the beginning of a collective response that revolved around various strategies: a) contributing to public opinion through publications in mainstream media, b) promoting a manifesto<sup>5</sup> or statement for good governance in collaboration with other actors and entities, c) participating and exploring forefront spaces where conversations about the future after COVID-19 were taking place and d) collaboration with the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity initiative to assist participants, facilitators and coordinators to engage in meaningful conversations.

Concerning the publications, Baha'is with expertise and with capacity to reach national media were stimulated to prepare pieces grounded into the reading of the OPA to be released. About ten pieces were published in newspapers and magazines such as *ABC* (top 4 in printed press) and *Periodista Digital* (top 9 in digital press), and in important scientific dissemination platforms, such as *The Conversation* and *Traductor de Ciencia*. Some articles were read by over 5000 people and one of them was reprinted in 19 newspapers. This line of action was also an opportunity to closely follow the national conversations on this topic and to refine and widen the contents for its participation in further spaces.

Efforts made by individuals to reach national spaces related to the media was not considered enough. The OPA felt a strong concern for the

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<sup>5</sup> Manifesto was the name used in Spanish to refer to the "Statement" as the notion of manifesto includes more clearly a call for action.

future. The Bahá'í community was trying to adjust to the situation, to maintain the community building activities in virtual spaces, to multiply the collective spaces for prayers, to support the neighbours through simple and sometimes complex actions, and to generate hope in those around. However, the reading of the Office was (a) that a window of opportunity never experienced in the last decade was opening for fundamental changes in both patterns of behaviours and relations and institutional arrangements; and (b) that, unless this opportunity is seized, further and stronger hardships will be experienced. Hence, a collective plan was devised to draw on the powers of joint action, to reach the government and to contribute more decisively to public debate. The plan revolved around a manifesto that gathered prospective measures in the form of a proposal for the government. The manifesto had to materialize a reading of current situation including an interpretation of the main causes of the crisis and to point out to practical lines of action<sup>6</sup>. In addition, the manifesto had to capture the attention of national media; and, finally, the manifesto's ultimate end was to recommend the government to a certain path so it had to attain high level decision making spaces.

Once the manifesto was written by a group of collaborators, efforts were made to gather the support of thinkers, politicians and likeminded social actors. The support meant either signing up or signing up and appearing in a documentary that was going to be elaborated to promote the manifesto and to reach higher audiences. Another group of people worked

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<sup>6</sup> The manifesto suggested five lines of action. The first one was advancing towards more cooperative international action to respond to global crisis. In this line, the president was encouraged to lead an international movement to reshape current global institutional architecture. The second one had to do with economic policy. The spirit was to use this opportunity to invest in a circular economy and sustainable local models of development. The third one emphasized the need to strengthen collaborative mechanisms within Spain and to "feminize" public life. The fourth one was proposed to rescue a missing social space, the local community, as the most fundamental area to organize social life. However, the notion of community had to be reshaped in order to avoid the oppressive nature of traditional communities. The principle of interdependence was presented as the guiding notion to reshape the relation between the community, the individual and the institutions. Finally, a fifth point posed the possibility to structure social life around systems of collective intelligence and learning. This proposal required both, replacing economy by the generation of knowledge as the central process of social existence, and creating learning structures where expert knowledge, traditional knowledge and experience could interact within consultative dynamics.

on the documentary and everyone involved tried to get signatures. The platform to convene the initiative was *gobernanza.es*, a platform created by the OAP in collaboration with other Baha'i inspired organizations two years before to become a digital reference for those wanting to deepen into the discourse on good governance. Over 300 hundred signatures were gathered and almost 10 public figures (scientists, professors, politicians...) accepted to be part of the video accompanying the manifesto. In addition, a promotion campaign was devised and launched using social networks, traditional means such as telephone calls and messages, and publications in national media. Finally, the manifesto, the video and an introductory letter were sent to the presidency and five ministries. Members of the parliament and government officials close to the President were also reached by indirect means to make sure that the message received appropriate attention. An assessment of the results will not be exercised here, but it can be said that this initiative apart from building on previous work and capacities, helped the Office to develop more capacity for action in different fields related to its focus areas.

A third sort of response to the crisis was the examination of spaces to engage in high level conversations about the future after COVID-19. First, most important social spaces where public debates were taking place were identified. Then, these spaces were explored both at the individual and institutional level. And finally, efforts were made to become part of the organizing committees as well as of the main discussing public panels. Three important spaces opened for this kind of participation and the OPA is actively involved: a) Youth for Change, b) Nesity Forum, c) National Observatory for Food Rights. However, it took some time before these spaces opened, so the OPA decided to use the expertise of some collaborators to convene direct spaces and to invite key public figures to discussions. A collaborator of the Office organized a set of conferences on the future after COVID-19, in collaboration with *gobernanza.es*<sup>7</sup>. A Baha'i inspired organization convened another forum broadcasted in *Amaranta.tv* about economic governance, where a city mayor, an economist, a professor and journalist took part<sup>8</sup>. Finally, the Public University of Navarra's Scientific Dissemination Chair convened a live online conference where three signatures of the manifesto were invited, including the probably most impor-

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<sup>7</sup> The green events are those organized by one collaborator: <https://gobernanza.es/ eventos/>.

<sup>8</sup> [https://amaranta.tv/tertulia\\_online/](https://amaranta.tv/tertulia_online/).

tant Spanish scholar in the field of governance, Daniel Innerarity<sup>9</sup>. This conference's audience overpasses by three the other programs of the series: "Conversations after COVID-19"<sup>10</sup>.

A movie maker from Argentina settled in Madrid, who had been recently in Cannes Festival, also wrote to the Office to invite a representative to be part of a documentary on the meaning of the crisis. He was interviewing key international figures such as Noam Chomsky, and was interested in showing the perspectives about the causes of the crisis of some religions and groups with spiritual worldviews, including some South American aborigines.

A fourth line of action related to the crisis that received significant attention from the Office was an initiative coordinated by the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP). This institution sent a letter to the regional (mainly continental) coordination teams to be studied with unit or National coordination teams, facilitators and students. The letter invited us to collectively reflect on the COVID-19 multifaceted crisis, to look for opportunities to engage into constructive dialogues with fellow students, professors and committed actors and to think on the application of some of the concepts studied in the different courses to prevalent conditions. The unit coordination team of Spain convened an initial meeting with facilitators. Staff from the Office was invited to it. The participation of the OPA members was not very active, but they shared some of the initiatives of the Office during the pandemic in case it was considered appropriate to share them with some students that might be interested in contributing to them. Members of the Office also attended some of the meetings with students. This connection between ISGP students and the OPA has been a concern of the Office since its new mandate, as ISGP natural sphere of action is public discourse, despite the aims of the undergraduate program being broader.

There is more work in progress currently. However, the few experiences showed up of here might be enough to convey the sense that, given that the Office had been since 2014 trying to work and learn systematically, with a long term vision and the determination to raise capacity in others and to create a permanent system somehow independent from

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3s4fvTUMD7o>.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCwxpWn2TI04Zk70kT1Dj-w>.

the changing members, the abrupt crisis associated with the pandemic, was used as an opportunity to make an even more important contribution to social change: the urgency of the moment demanded an urgent response. Although the impact has been moderated, it might be affirmed that the resolution was high. This response, if looked from the perspective of the moment the Office itself was experimenting, is more surprising. When the Covid emerged, the OEA was in the middle of a staff transition. Three people who had been part of the core coordination team of the Office for years, were leaving Madrid so new staff was coming. A new convener had been appointed and adjustments were being made to the way the functioning of it. However, this fact did not affect meaningfully the OEA institutional capacity to grasp the nature of the crisis and assess the risks and opportunities linked to it. Probably, the most feasible answer for that is that the collective and institutional commitment to building capacity and long term learning and progress assisted the Office to navigate in that turbulent and challenging moment.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

After over a century of efforts to translate the Bahá'í teachings into action, but especially after ten years of intense learning on its own growth and development, a conceptual framework for action crystallized within the Bahá'í community in 2005-2006 to be exploited<sup>11</sup>. This evolving framework gathered most relevant principles, approaches and notions out of experience to be an effective agent of social progress. Since 2008, there has been a call to apply the framework to address a growing range of issues, especially as the community building activities become stronger and there is more penetration into the life of society. After the Universal House of Justice conceptualized the work of the Bahá'í community in terms of three interrelated spheres of action, the area of discourse received focused attention in some countries. From among the many activities falling into the area of public discourse, efforts of National Offices of External Affairs to contribute to National discourses and to participate in an increasing number of social spaces linked to social thinking, public opinion and policies, were of particular importance.

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<sup>11</sup> The Universal House of Justice, "Message to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors", 27 Dec. 2005, p. 1.

This paper tried to build upon two intuitions, two proposals related to that framework. Whereas the first hypothesis proposed that the more precisely the evolving framework is understood and applied, the more effective transformative actions are; the second posed the idea that long term commitment to progress, learning and raising capacity, generate the conditions to respond more adequately to sudden and unexpected impacts. The Office of External Affairs of Spain is an entity that seems to have been trying to do both things: applying the framework and committing to long term learning, capacity building and progress. In addition, its experience has been used to analyse the specific shape that the framework may adopt or find expression in the specific sphere of public discourse at the National and collective level.

The learnings and achievements in this case, although incipient and provisional, might illustrate the potentialities of the framework to enhance the quality and impact of efforts to transform society. Finally, the last section briefly examined the way that accumulated learnings, past experience and the capabilities built over five years of intense action assisted the Office of Spain to respond to some of the multiple requirements and challenges associated with the coronavirus crisis. Given current juncture, one of whose features has to do with uncertainty, that capacity to anticipate and adapt to changing conditions seems to be crucial. Organizations committed to long term learning, progress and capacity building may be in a better capacity to respond, within this environment, to the nature of complex problems affecting humanity nowadays. The problems the Spanish OEA tried to address so far (beyond the great vision) are extremely small compared to the problems other organizations, such as governments, have to deal with. However, the pattern of action might be illustrating of the new approaches and patterns required for the problems of today.

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