

Mona Foundation Handbook

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Who we are, what we do, and how we do it

Introduction

This document provides a brief overview of Mona Foundation's history, mission, core values, approach, guiding principles, and outcome measures.

Who We are

Mona Foundation is a non-profit organization that partners with grassroots initiatives around the world to educate children, empower women and girls, and enable them to transform their own communities.

Our goal is to alleviate global poverty and contribute to creating a just and prosperous world so that no child ever goes to bed hungry, is lost to preventable diseases, or is deprived of education for lack of resources. We believe that universal education, gender equality, and community building are the keys to achieving this goal.

Mona was founded in 1999 by Mahnaz Javid and a small group of people who drew inspiration from the Baha'i principles of oneness, gender equality, universal education, and selfless service to humanity. We seek to work with like-minded organizations around the world to demonstrate in action that people of all backgrounds can come together in service to the common good.

In 2021, Mona Foundation provided access to quality education, empowerment programs, and training for nearly 801,311 students, teachers and parents through 23 partner projects in 14 countries. Since inception, the foundation has awarded more than \$16 million to 51 initiatives in 23 countries.

The foundation is named after Mona Mahmudnizad, a 17-year old girl who was executed in 1983 in Iran for her beliefs as a Baha'i and for teaching children's classes. Mona loved children and volunteered in an orphanage from the age of 12. She was also an outspoken defender of human rights. Her youth, courage, and commitment to education, service, and social justice inspired us to name the foundation after her.

Our Core Valuesⁱ

Mona Foundation integrates the following universal values in all aspects of its operations:

Oneness of humanity - We recognize the oneness of the human family. We believe all people are created noble with capacity to learn, explore, create, and contribute to building a prosperous and just society.

Unity in Diversity - We build collaborative relationships and serve all people regardless of gender, race, religion, ethnicity, nationality or economic status. We value and preserve the diverse cultural heritage of the people we serve.

Integrity and transparency - Our operations and partnerships are guided by trustworthiness and commitment to excellence. Our plans, actions, and results are openly and clearly shared.

Consultation – We search for truth in decision-making, seek and respect a diversity of views, and rally around the group decision.

Continuous learning - We are a learning organization. Our mode of operation is characterized by ongoing cycles of consultation, study, action and reflection to learn from experience and improve.

Our Guiding Principles

Our approach to development is guided by principles and beliefs about the nature of human beings. These are Bahá'í-inspired and universal in nature.

Oneness of the world of humanity – that all people are created equalⁱⁱ and that each person, regardless of economic status, has the right, the capacity and the responsibility to be the protagonist of their own development and to contribute to the betterment of their communities.

This view of human beings does not permit us to regard people as helpless victims nor as passive recipients of aid. Rather, we strive to tap into the vast capabilities of the local people and organizations and in partnership support their capacity building to become the protagonists of their own development.

Coherence of material and moral/spiritual dimensions of human reality – that development should not only be defined by materials goals (e.g. the building of infrastructure or academic achievement) but also, and perhaps more importantly, by the spiritual and moral capabilities (such as integrity, trustworthiness, commitment to service and justice) that participants in the process need to improve their own lives and contribute to the betterment of their communities.

Coherence between the material and spiritual does not imply that the material goals of development are to be trivialized. It does reject, however, the definition of development as the transfer to all societies of the ideological convictions, the social structures, the economic practices, or the models of governance prevalent in certain highly industrialized regions of the world. When the material and spiritual dimensions of the life of a community are kept in mind and due attention is given to both scientific and spiritual knowledge, the tendency to reduce development to the mere consumption of goods and services is avoided.

Equality of men and women – that community development is only possible and sustainable when men and women enjoy equal rights and opportunities and participate as equals in all aspects of the process.

Our Approach

Mona Foundation partners with community-led organizations that educate people of all backgrounds, raise the status of women and girls, and catalyze individual and community transformation.

Our approach to development is in clear contrast to traditional views that divide the world into “developed” and “underdeveloped” countries, and that consider development to be a product that is delivered from those in one part of the world to the peoples in another.

In traditional models, a government or donor in an economically prosperous country provides funds to a local agency so that it can, in turn, implement a pre-defined effort somewhere in the “developing world.” The recipient agency then finds ways to set up its activities either directly, or in collaboration with local counterparts. In such cases, development activities are often not managed at the grassroots but by the funding agency that is far removed from the real work being carried out at the local level.ⁱⁱⁱ

At Mona Foundation, development is seen as a process in which the main protagonists are the people themselves, irrespective of the degree of their material prosperity. We believe that development activity emerges from within a community and belongs to the people and institutions that are implementing the effort.

While all social action is directed towards visibly improving some aspect of life, we believe its primary goal is to develop people’s capacity to make decisions about their own development and then to implement them at increasingly higher levels of complexity as they learn through their own experiences.

At the level of practice, this approach translates into the following essential requirements for sustained social and economic development^{iv}:

Organic growth — We understand development to be a long-term process that begins simply and organically grows in scope and complexity over time. Any development effort must originate at the grassroots by members of the local community. Over time, through a process of consultation, action and reflection, the community builds its own capacity to implement projects of increasing complexity.

Capacity building - We believe that sustainable development is a process in which individuals, communities and institutions build capacity and are the protagonists of their own development plans. Every person has a part to play in building a prosperous and just society. Capacity building is directly related to learning how to work towards goals in a disciplined way, to make decisions through consultation, to build relationships based on collaboration and service to others, to generate insights based on experience, and to apply lessons learned to future actions.

- At the level of the individual, capacity building implies developing a number of interrelated capabilities—scientific, artistic, technical, social, moral, and spiritual and the ability to understand not only concepts, but also master the methods, and have the skills, attitudes, and qualities required to lead a productive life.
- At the level of the community, capacity building implies creating an environment in which individuals come together in collective action to serve the best interests of their communities and involve a growing number of people in more complex and sustained ways.
- At the level of organizations, capacity building implies acting as channels through which the talents and energies of individuals and groups can be expressed in service to humanity.

Local ownership, local solutions - Every community has their own set of unique challenges and solutions. For every community and every country, development needs to be responsive to local aspirations and initiatives. Development ideas and projects should not be imposed from outside the local community. National or international knowledge about proven and well-conceived development approaches can be shared as long as the local community remains owner and creator of their own solutions.

Action learning - As with any new skill, engaging in learning through a systematic and ongoing process of consultation, action and reflection designed to bring about consistent patterns of change is essential to developing the capacity and skills we need to build a better world together.

Service - Development is sustainable when selfless service to others is the core value that drives our everyday actions as individuals and as community members. Service to others helps us be the best we can be and exponentially increases our impact in whatever step we take to better ourselves, our communities, and our nations.

Our Focus

All Mona Foundation activities focus on universal education, gender equality, and community transformation.

Universal education: Learning is intrinsic to human reality and everyone deserves the opportunity to receive a quality education. Educated communities are healthier, more sustainable, and less vulnerable to economic volatility.

Gender Equality and women and girls' empowerment: Providing equal educational opportunities to girls and women yield a higher rate of return than any other investment that can be made in our communities. Equality not only guarantees basic rights, it is also vital to promoting the robust, shared growth needed to end extreme poverty. World Bank data demonstrates that gender equality and economic development are inextricably linked and increasing education specifically for girls and women has a direct effect on a nation's economic development.^v

There is also a multiplier effect to educating girls and women. More educated women tend to be healthier, participate more in the formal labor market, earn more income, have fewer children, and provide better health care and education to their children, all of which eventually improve the well-being of all individuals and lift households out of poverty. These benefits also transmit across generations, as well as to communities at large. (World Bank report on education of girls, 2016.)

Community building: All people have the right and the responsibility to lead their own lives and to contribute to the betterment of their own communities. The individuals most affected are the ones most ready to affect change.

Supporting communities in their own self-advocacy promotes empowerment, rather than dependency. Many students we support work with their communities to establish literacy programs, women health centers, parental trainings, cleanliness drives, tree plantations, and many other programs that stimulate harmony and community building in their communities.

Our Philosophy of Education

We view education as an ongoing process of learning that develops three inherent and interconnected capabilities of a human being:

- **The capability to reason** (the rational faculty) learn, think, explore, innovate, and discover
- **The capability to acquire attributes** such as justice and empathy, and to create beauty as in music or fine arts
- **The capability to love**, care, serve the social good, and search for meaning beyond the obvious,

This view of education, informed by our understanding that human beings are multifaceted and endowed with hidden potential, has been repeatedly proven through the experience of our partner projects to be a key lever in creating and sustaining more just and equal communities.

Our Reach

In 2021, we supported the education and empowerment of 801,3110 students (both in-class and online) and partnered with organizations in Brazil, Czech Republic, China, Haiti, India, Mongolia, Panama, Sierra Leone, The Gambia, Vietnam, Uganda, and the United States. Since inception, Mona has granted \$16 million to 51 organizations in 23 countries.

Channeling Financial Resources

Our relationship with the organizations we support is naturally governed by the core values that inspire us and the principles that guide our work. As such, we believe that responsibility for managing all aspects of the programs we fund rests with the organizations themselves.

We see our role as the representative and voice of our partner programs, and act as their advocate before our donors. We do so while honoring and meeting our full fiduciary responsibilities to our donors: following grant proposal submission, approval, and reporting guidelines, and providing full transparency and accountability for all our actions and decisions.

Our [program selection criteria](#) ensures that Mona Foundation only supports community-led organizations with proven capacity to effectively utilize funds and interact with outside donors.

- ✓ The program is founded and operated by local residents.
- ✓ The program addresses a vital and significant deficit in the basic needs of children which prevent the full development of their capacity as productive members of their society. These needs must include education, but may also include housing, food and basic health care.
- ✓ The program serves children of all backgrounds, regardless of age, gender, race or ethnicity, religion, or economic status.
- ✓ The program has a focus on educating girls and women.
- ✓ The program seeks to develop human resources for the community.

- ✓ The program has been established and functioning for a significant period (not less than three years) and has a historic rate of success.
- ✓ The program enjoys the support of the local community.
- ✓ The program administrators have shown a long-term commitment to the development of the program.
- ✓ The program administrators have the capacity to effectively receive and manage funds from external agencies.
- ✓ The program administrators are active participants in developing and implementing plans and require and enjoy the participation of the community in the process.

To foster collaborative relationships with our partner organizations, we carry out site visits prior to adopting new programs either by members of our Board, or designated representatives of the Board. Such visits aim to establish and strengthen relationships of trust and mutual reciprocity with our partners; facilitate an ongoing process of learning; enable us, as the voice of our partners in the United States, to tell their stories and share the context of their service with integrity and transparency; and engage donors in learning about development and maintain their trust in our work.

In selecting projects founded by Baha'is, we rely on the Bahá'í International Development Organization (BIDO), previously known as the Office of Social and Economic Development (OSD).¹ BIDO helps to strengthen institutional capacity in countries where Bahá'í-inspired development efforts exist by fostering and supporting the learning process through community consultation, action, study and reflection, and through the systematization of experience and training.

BIDO (and OSD before it) has been a guide and advisor to the Mona Foundation since its inception. It is in touch with local grassroots NGOs implementing the development projects and knows when these NGOs have the experience and the institutional capacity to receive and manage funds from external sources. With their guidance, we therefore have the benefit of working with proven local partners who have a positive track record, have demonstrated trustworthiness and reliability, and have the capacity to collaborate with external funding agencies.

What Distinguishes Mona

- ✓ We focus on education and gender equality as the root causes of poverty and the key levers of progress.
- ✓ We are a bottom-up organization. We believe that development happens when the local community owns and leads change by analyzing, diagnosing and addressing their own issues to catalyze sustained community transformation.
- ✓ We partner with local organizations that build capacity at the grassroots, and establish long term relationships with them to sustain community-led positive impact.

¹ Baha'i activity in the field of social and economic development seeks to promote the well-being of people of all walks of life, whatever their beliefs or background. It represents the efforts of the Baha'i community to effect constructive social change. Its purpose is not to teach the Faith nor convert, rather, as an expression of a deeply held set of beliefs, to engage in indiscriminate service to humanity for the betterment of our collective world.

- ✓ We support character education & ethics to develop citizens who contribute to the betterment of their own communities and ultimately their nations.

How We Measure our Effectiveness

Mona Foundation has worked extensively with an advisory committee and many of our partners to identify relevant indicators of sustained positive change and develop a framework for field-generated evaluation and monitoring. Based on their experience and input, Mona measures the progress of the programs we support by looking at:

Program Outcomes

Improving access to education as indicated by improved infrastructure and sufficient supplies; increase in number of students enrolled; and increase caregiver and community engagement in education.

Student Outcomes

Improving teaching and learning as indicated by increase in teachers' skills and knowledge; increase in number of students who pass national exams and increase in number of students who transition to the next level of education or into work.

Social Outcomes

Transformed communities, as indicated by most significant change stories as qualitative examples of sustained change, realized a result of improvement in students' character development, life skills and service to community.

These indicators align with the 2018 World Bank report on "LEARNING to realize education's promise". Evidence to-date shows that change is sustained when:

1. The development process enables Individuals to become change agents in the development of their own communities;
2. Women and men enjoy equal rights and opportunities; and
3. Resilient grassroots organizations catalyze social change.

Our Exit Strategy

We believe our uncommon strategy of supporting our partner projects long-term is essential to sustained positive community change at the local level. The effect of this strategy has been dramatic. Several of our partner projects have been grown from quite humble beginnings to become effective and well-recognized educational institutions.

Our exit strategy is equally grounded in a relationship of trust and mutual respect and is arrived at in collaboration and consultation with our parnters to optimize their continued growth to the next level of development.

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- i Mona Foundation's core values, guiding principles and approach to development are Baha'i inspired, universal in nature, and informed by the lived experience of thought leaders and practitioners in field of development.
 - ii Reiterated in the Declaration of Independence of the United States, "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights...."
 - iii OSED, Channeling Financial Resources, February 2009
 - iv OSED, Social Action 2012
 - v Brookings Institute, Center for Universal Education, December 2016