

SUSTAINING SOCIETIES: TOWARDS A NEW ‘WE’

*Bahá’í International Community’s Statement to the
United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development*

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As nations and civil society gather at the Rio+20 Conference to take the next step in forging a new vision of sustainable development, the momentum generated in the lead-up to the conference has already brought about new levels of inquiry and of collaboration. Preparations for the event have stimulated thinking about economic paradigms, modes of governance, indicators of progress, the role of youth, as well as the very purpose of development. To an unprecedented extent, the United Nations has opened the door to the participation of civil society in the processes of the Conference. While many more voices remain to be heard, a call has been raised for governments to seize the opportunity before them: to demonstrate high-mindedness and resolve, to eschew partisanship and propaganda, and to articulate a visionary and ambitious framework for human flourishing.

The economic and institutional frameworks elaborated in Rio will require a reexamination of the relationships that sustain society: relationships between nation states, within and among communities, between individuals and social institutions, among individuals themselves and between humanity and the natural environment. Sustainable development assumes a relationship between present and future generations—a relationship defined not only by geography but also by time. An earnest exploration of these relationships provides a lens through which to evaluate the merits and shortcomings of any proposed institutional arrangements and, more importantly, helps us to articulate our aspirations for the future. The following thoughts are offered as a contribution to the conference on these themes.

Trusteeship

A critical dimension of the design and implementation of new economic and institutional frameworks is a world-encompassing trusteeship—the idea that each one of us enters the world as a trust of the whole and, in turn, bears a measure of responsibility for the welfare of all.¹ This principle of trusteeship calls into question the efficacy of present-day expressions of sovereignty. It challenges the ethical basis of loyalties that do not extend beyond the nation state. While multilateralism has strengthened and expanded cooperation among nation states, it has not removed the struggles for power that dominate relations among them. The mere collaboration of self-interested actors in a multilateral enterprise does not ensure favorable outcomes for the community of nations

¹ Over the last 40 years, the international community has articulated many ethical principles to achieve objectives and guide implementation in the area of sustainable development. These include, among others, the principles contained in the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992) and those in Article 3 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (1992).

as a whole. As long as one group of nations perceives its interests in opposition to another, progress will be limited and short-lived.

Trusteeship is a concept equally applicable to many other areas of concern to humanity. Human rights, for example, achieve their highest expression when understood in the context of trusteeship: they come to provide a framework for human relations through which all people have the opportunity to realize their full potential, and all are concerned with ensuring the same for others. The shift to sustainable modes of production and consumption is a further expression of this principle: put simply, to consume more than one's fair share is to deplete the resources needed by others.

The principle of trusteeship implies the need for an intergenerational perspective in which the well-being of future generations is taken into account at all levels of decision-making. Proposals such as the creation of Ombudspersons or High Commissioners for Future Generations provide examples of efforts to translate this principle into action. Such institutions would be tasked with considering both the long-term interests of young people and generations to come as well as short-term economic and political interests and imperatives.

Elimination of the Extremes of Wealth and Poverty

Today, over 80% of the world's people live in countries where income differentials are widening. While poverty eradication measures have improved living standards in some parts of the world, inequality remains widespread. Numerous and wide-ranging deficits in human well-being are endemic in both poor and rich countries alike. Consider that nearly 800 million adults cannot read or write, two and half billion people lack basic sanitation, nearly half of the world's children live in poverty, and nearly one billion people do not have enough to eat. At the other extreme, a mere thousand or so individuals seem to control nearly six percent of the Gross World Product. These are symptomatic of structural flaws in the economic system and its institutions, and need to be corrected.

A careful examination of how extreme concentrations of wealth distort relationships within and among nations is timely. Such extremes undermine economic vitality, cripple participation in decision-making and political processes, obstruct the flow of knowledge and information, isolate people and communities, and distort the perception of human capacity. Wealth needs to be acquired and expended by nations in a way that enables all the people of the world to prosper. Structures and systems that permit a few to have inordinate riches while the masses remain impoverished must be replaced by arrangements that foster the generation of wealth in a way that promotes justice. Creating sustainable patterns of economic activity that extend from the local to the global level—covering urban and rural areas—will require a fundamental reorientation of both the principles and institutional arrangements related to production and consumption. Initiatives that encourage the creation and distribution of wealth in rural regions and policies that prevent the forces of economic globalization from marginalizing grassroots initiatives deserve particular attention. Promising approaches include strengthening local

capacity for technological innovation and fostering respect for the knowledge possessed by a community or culture.

The progress and well-being of all humanity requires the development and implementation of economic models, which reflect the central role that relationships play in human life. Resources must be directed away from those activities and programs that are damaging to both the social and natural environment and efforts bent towards the creation of systems that foster cooperation and mutualism.

There is much more to be learned about both extremes of the poverty-wealth spectrum. The voices and lived experiences of the people—including the poorest—must be heard. Beyond economic variables, for example, a much fuller appreciation must be gained of the social and spiritual resources upon which the masses draw in living their lives. Our understanding of extreme wealth is also incomplete. Given the increasingly global nature of wealth and its extremes, much of this wealth escapes national oversight and management, and is not reflected in government statistics. What are the structures that permit the ongoing existence of extreme wealth? How is it perpetuated by economic and political systems? What kinds of identities and qualities are fostered by its continuing presence? A deeper, more widely held understanding of the implications of the global movements and uses of wealth is needed if the actions of governments and the international community are to advance in an informed and constructive manner.

Consultation

The issues associated with promoting a vision for sustainable development are highly complex. As such, it seems most unlikely that they can be solved by the imposition of simplistic theories and reductive formulae. What is needed is an effective process for exploring issues and making decisions that promotes genuine participation, facilitates collective action, and is responsive to the complexity inherent in efforts to forge sustainable systems and structures. In this connection, we offer a model of ‘consultation’—a principle-based approach to collective decision-making practiced by Bahá’í communities around the world.

Of course, the following points are not made in the belief that a simple change to the modes of collective decision-making will, by itself, eradicate poverty and foster sustainability. It is becoming increasingly clear, however, that current decision-making structures which exclude the masses of the world’s people, which perpetuate conflict, which place too much emphasis on the concerns of a powerful few, and which are often subservient to struggles for political ascendancy, have proved inadequate for the task of building a better world in which all are able to prosper.

Participation. A Bahá’í approach to development is based on a conviction that all people not only have the right to benefit from a materially and spiritually prosperous society but also have an obligation to participate in its construction. If consultation is to be effective, it must promote the participation of the people in determining the direction of their communities—whether in analyzing specific problems, attaining

higher degrees of understanding on a given issue, exploring possible courses of action, or making collective decisions. Facilitating the genuine participation of those traditionally excluded from consultative processes, including the poor, is of the utmost concern.

A unifying framework. For progress on the international stage to be sustainable, it must take place within a framework that promotes the attainment of progressively higher degrees of unity of vision and action among its participants. Each forward step—far from representing a momentary triumph of a single person or faction in an environment of competition—becomes part of a collective process of learning by which international institutions, states and civil society advance together in understanding.

In such a framework, ideas and suggestions do not belong to a single person or entity. Nor does their ultimate success or failure rest merely on the reputation, status, or influence of the individual or institution putting them forward. Rather, proposals and insights belong to the group, which adopts, revises, or discards them as needed.

Frank and open discussion will often yield differing viewpoints, particularly given the diversity of culture, history, and experience represented on the international stage. When approached constructively, this range of perspectives can reveal unexamined assumptions and bring to light new concepts and ideas. In this spirit, participants explore diverse viewpoints in a way that promotes higher levels of shared understanding and cultivates unity of thought and action within the group.

Consultation as described here, then, is an approach to deliberation that is unifying rather than divisive. It seeks not only to determine the reality of a given situation but to strengthen the bonds that unite the participants. At the international level, such an approach can assist states to work more effectively together for the common good, and to identify and address the weaknesses in the multilateral system which restrict progress.

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We look to Rio+20 as the next step in an unfolding process by which the people of the world learn to reach solutions together. The bonds of affection, trust, and mutual care that bind individuals together are continually expanding to encompass an increasingly larger share of human society. The new ‘we’ is not an abstraction. It is an awareness that we must persistently challenge ourselves, our communities and social institution to reassess and refine established patterns of thought and interaction in order to better shape the course of human development throughout the world.