

Social Justice

Preparing for Public Discourse 2

by Arthur Lyon Dahl July 2022

Deeds, not words

The wrong in the world continues to exist just because people talk only of their ideals, and do not strive to put them into practice. If actions took the place of words, the world's misery would very soon be changed into comfort.

A man who does great good, and talks not of it, is on the way to perfection.

The man who has accomplished a small good and magnifies it in his speech is worth very little.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 1, The Duty of Kindness and Sympathy towards Strangers and Foreigners, 16 October 1911)

Multiple social crises

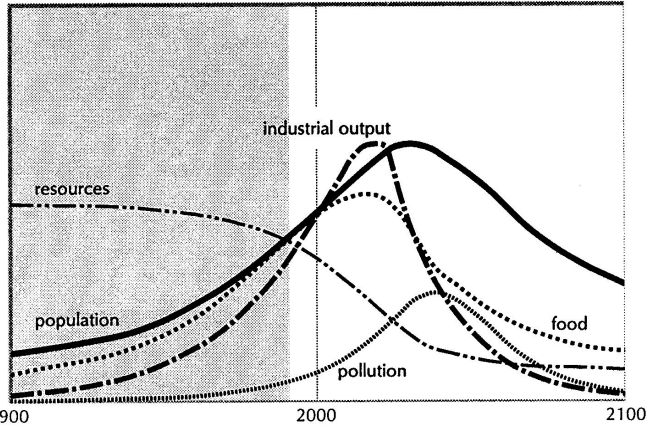
- Xenophobia
- Prejudice
- Consumerism
- Health/Pandemic
- Corruption
- War

Scenarios from World 3

(Meadows et al. (1992) *Beyond the Limits*)

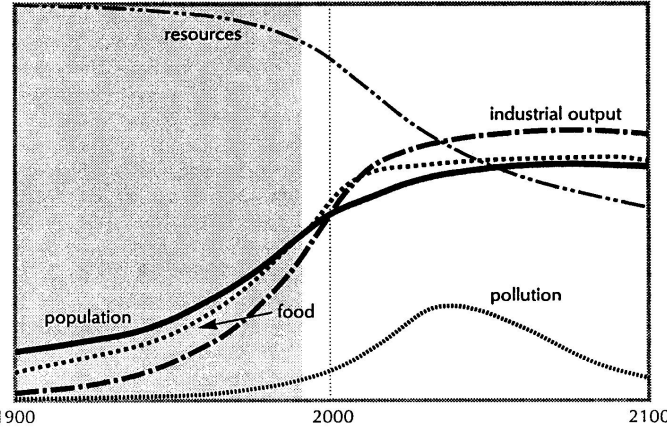
SCENARIO 1

State of the world



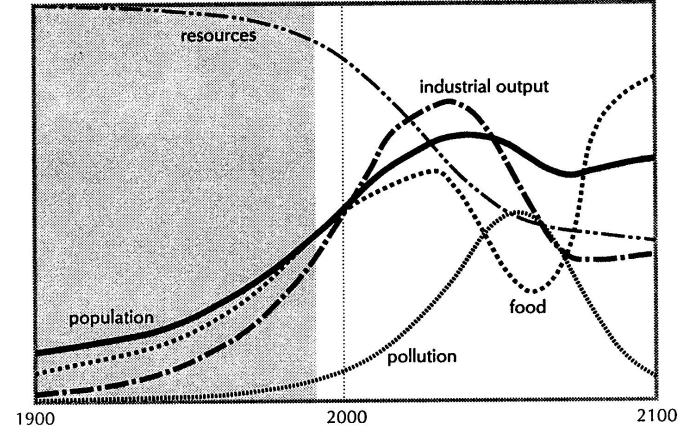
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State of the world

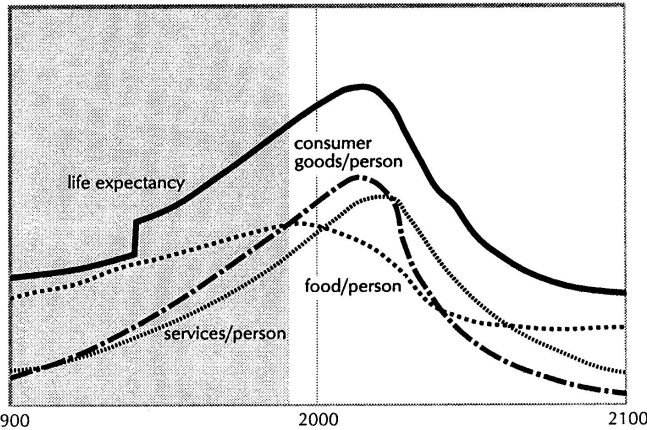


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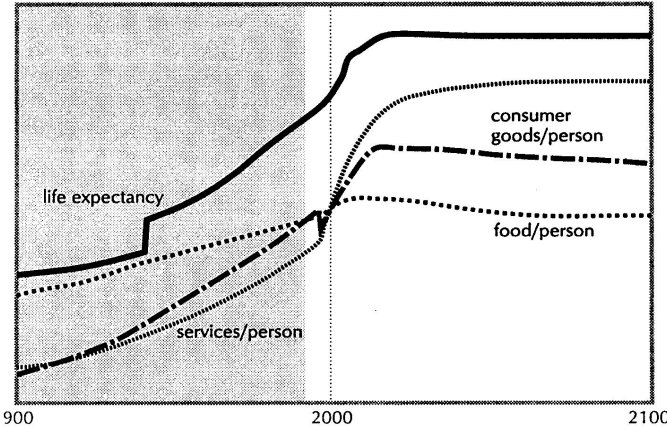
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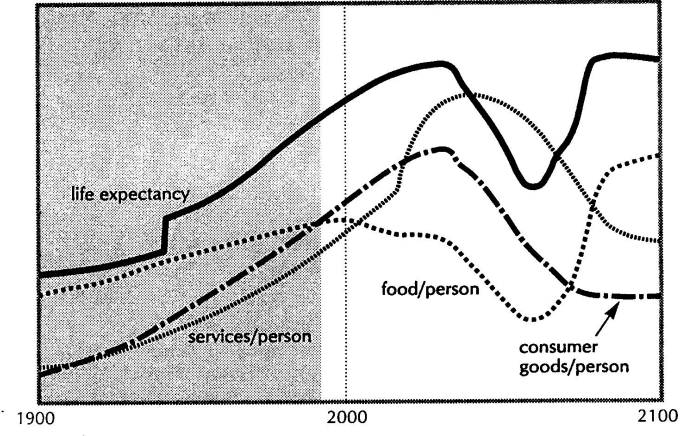
Material standard of living



Material standard of living



Material standard of living



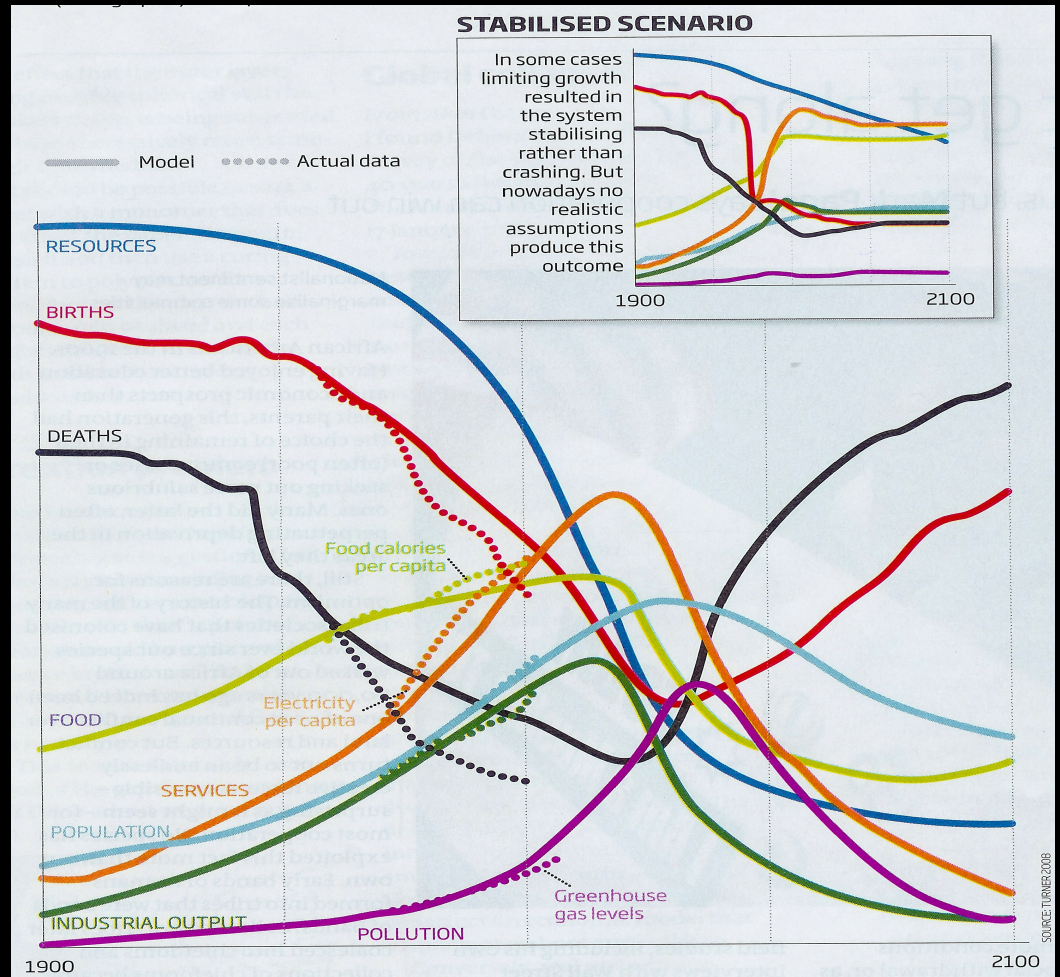
Business as usual

Transition 1995

Transition 2015

Where are we now?

MacKenzie, Debra. 2012 Domsday Book. *New Scientist*, 7 January 2012, pp. 38-41.



This is an ethical challenge

- Population and carrying capacity
- Overshooting planetary boundaries
- Fault of the affluent
- Unjust economic system
- Consumer culture
- Need a fundamental transformation

A population problem?

The population has tripled in one lifetime, but despite the great increase in wealth, half the people struggle to make ends meet.

It is poverty that drives rapid population growth. Reduce inequality and population stabilizes.

Health Threats

- Covid19 pandemic, risk of bird/swine flu pandemic
- Rise of malaria and tuberculosis; no profit in medicines for the poor
- Emerging epidemic diseases (Ebola, SARS)
- HIV/AIDS and access to treatments
- Growing antibiotic resistance from overuse
- Fraud and counterfeit pharmaceuticals
- Unhealthy products: tobacco, alcohol, infant formula, junk foods
- Food system: hunger and obesity 800m

The consumer culture

- Materialism's gospel of human betterment produced today's consumer culture pursuing ephemeral goals
- For the small minority of people who can afford them, the benefits it offers are immediate, and the rationale unapologetic
- The breakdown of traditional morality has led to the triumph of animal impulse, as instinctive and blind as appetite
- Selfishness becomes a prized commercial resource; falsehood reinvents itself as public information; greed, lust, indolence, pride - even violence - acquire not merely broad acceptance but social and economic value

(based on Universal House of Justice, *One Common Faith*, 2005)

Corruption

- The illegal economy from organized crime is now \$2 trillion/year, or twice all the world's defense budgets, including \$870 billion for international crime syndicates
- Bribery \$1.5 tr; counterfeiting and piracy \$520bn; drug trade \$320bn; human trafficking \$44bn; traffic in endangered species \$20bn; identity theft \$1bn
- Political corruption is everywhere; the vast majority of bribes go to people in rich countries
- 10% of all public health budgets are lost to corruption
- Business participates to buy advantages, for efficiency, out of fear
- This results in market failures, capital loss, ignored environmental regulations, failed resource management

Hopelessness

Today the world is assailed by an array of destructive forces. Materialism, rooted in the West, has now spread to every corner of the planet, breeding, in the name of a strong global economy and human welfare, a culture of consumerism. It skilfully and ingeniously promotes a habit of consumption that seeks to satisfy the basest and most selfish desires, while encouraging the expenditure of wealth so as to prolong and exacerbate social conflict. One result is a deepening confusion on the part of young people everywhere, a sense of hopelessness in the ranks of those who would drive progress, and the emergence of a myriad social maladies.

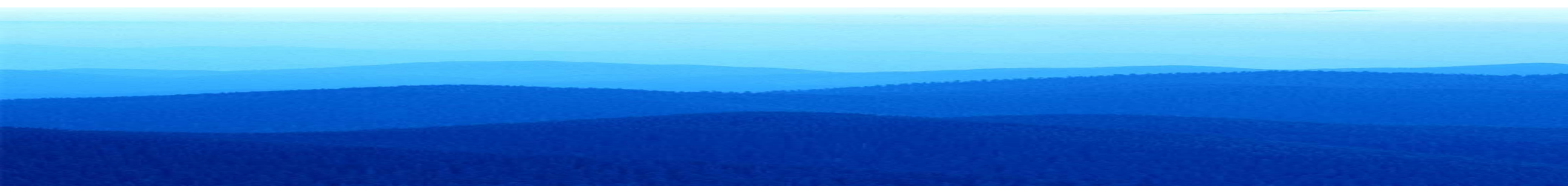
(Universal House of Justice, To Baha'is in the Cradle of the Faith, 2 April 2010)

Refusal of Social Globalization

when climate change will cause mass migrations

- Reinforcing frontiers
- Rejection of immigrants
- Rise of xenophobia
- Fear of delocalizations
- Failure to deal with poor governance

Globalization should include the free movement of people as well as capital, goods and services



Multiple Interacting Crises

Religion was intended to bring love and fellowship, but is used instead to fan hatred.

Now we are plunged into war as well.

All these express fundamental failures in ethics, values, morality and spirituality.

Questioning our assumptions

Are we really inherently aggressive and competitive in the struggle to win out over others?

Is life a zero-sum game where winning means that someone else must be the loser?

What about our gender stereotypes?

Do we have identities based on racism, nationalism and religious bigotry rooted deeply in our subconscious?

What have we inherited without questioning?

At the root
of all this
is what could be
called an ethical
deficit

Constructing a just social order

How... can we resolve the paralyzing contradiction that, on the one hand, we desire a world of peace and prosperity, while, on the other, much of economic and psychological theory depicts human beings as slaves to self-interest? The faculties needed to construct a more just and sustainable social order—moderation, justice, love, reason, sacrifice and service to the common good—have too often been dismissed as naïve ideals. Yet, it is these, and related qualities that must be harnessed to overcome the traits of ego, greed, apathy and violence, which are often rewarded by the market and political forces driving current patterns of unsustainable consumption and production.

(Bahá'í International Community 2010, Rethinking Prosperity: Forging Alternatives to a Culture of Consumerism)

A lack of spirituality

...the chief reason for the evils now rampant in society is a lack of spirituality. The materialistic civilization of our age has so much absorbed the energy and interest of mankind, that people in general no longer feel the necessity of raising themselves above the forces and conditions of their daily material existence. There is not sufficient demand for things that we should call spiritual to differentiate them from the needs and requirements of our physical existence. The universal crisis affecting mankind is, therefore, essentially spiritual in its causes. The spirit of the age, taken on the whole, is irreligious. Man's outlook upon life is too crude and materialistic to enable him to elevate himself into the higher realms of the spirit.

(From a letter dated 8 December 1935 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

A loss of faith

Loss of faith in the certainties of materialism and the progressive globalizing of human experience reinforce one another in the longing they inspire for understanding about the purpose of existence.

(Universal House of Justice, *One Common Faith*, p. 13)

...loss of faith in traditional religion has been an inevitable consequence of failure to discover in it the guidance required to live with modernity, successfully and with assurance.

(Universal House of Justice, *One Common Faith*, p. 16)

A positive vision

A heart that has embraced love for the whole of humanity will certainly be pained when confronted by the suffering that so many endure because of disunity. But the friends of God cannot shut themselves off from the increasing turmoil of the society that surrounds them; they must guard themselves, too, from becoming enmeshed in its conflicts or falling into its adversarial methods. No matter how bleak conditions may appear at any given time, no matter how dismal the immediate prospects for bringing about unity, there is no cause for despair. The distressing state of the world can only spur us to redouble our commitment to constructive action. “These are not days of prosperity and triumph” cautions Bahá’u’lláh. “The whole of mankind is in the grip of manifold ills. Strive, therefore, to save its life through the wholesome medicine which the almighty hand of the unerring Physician hath prepared.”

Baha'i Perspectives on Social Justice

Implications of oneness of humankind

- that the rational soul has no gender, race, ethnicity or class, a fact that renders intolerable all forms of prejudice, not the least of which are those that prevent women from fulfilling their potential and engaging in various fields of endeavour shoulder to shoulder with men;
- that the root cause of prejudice is ignorance, which can be erased through educational processes that make knowledge accessible to the entire human race, ensuring it does not become the property of a privileged few;

(Universal House of Justice, To the Baha'is of Iran, 2 March 2013, para. 9)

Implications of oneness of humankind

- that science and religion are two complementary systems of knowledge and practice by which human beings come to understand the world around them and through which civilization advances;
- that religion without science soon degenerates into superstition and fanaticism, while science without religion becomes the tool of crude materialism;
- that true prosperity, the fruit of a dynamic coherence between the material and spiritual requirements of life, will recede further and further out of reach as long as consumerism continues to act as opium to the human soul;

(Universal House of Justice, *To the Baha'is of Iran*, 2 March 2013, para. 9)

Implications of oneness of humankind

- that justice, as a faculty of the soul, enables the individual to distinguish truth from falsehood and guides the investigation of reality, so essential if superstitious beliefs and outworn traditions that impede unity are to be eliminated;
- that, when appropriately brought to bear on social issues, justice is the single most important instrument for the establishment of unity;
- that work performed in the spirit of service to one's fellow human beings is a form of prayer, a means of worshipping God.

Moderation

Such a chaste and holy life... involves no less than the exercise of **moderation** in all that pertains to dress, language, amusements, and all artistic and literary avocations.... It calls for the abandonment of a frivolous conduct, with its excessive attachment to trivial and often misdirected pleasures.... It can tolerate no compromise with the theories, the standards, the habits, and the excesses of a decadent age.

(Shoghi Effendi. *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 30)

Redefining Prosperity

Man's merit lieth in service and virtue and not in the pageantry of wealth and riches. Take heed that your words be purged from idle fancies and worldly desires and your deeds be cleansed from craftiness and suspicion.

Dissipate not the wealth of your precious lives in the pursuit of evil and corrupt affection, nor let your endeavours be spent in promoting your personal interest. Be generous in your days of plenty, and be patient in the hour of loss.... Guard against idleness and sloth, and cling unto that which profiteth mankind, whether young or old, whether high or low.

(Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. 1978, p. 138)

Migrants/refugees

Let not conventionality cause you to seem cold and unsympathetic when you meet strange people from other countries. Do not look at them as though you suspected them of being evildoers, thieves and boors. You think it necessary to be very careful, not to expose yourselves to the risk of making acquaintance with such, possibly, undesirable people.

I ask you not to think only of yourselves. Be kind to the strangers....

Help to make them feel at home; ...try to make their lives a little happier.

In this way, even if, sometimes, what you at first suspected should be true, still go out of your way to be kind to them—this kindness will help them to become better.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 1, The Duty of Kindness and Sympathy towards Strangers and Foreigners, 16 October 1911)

Migrants/refugees

Let those who meet you know, without your proclaiming the fact, that you are indeed a Bahá'í. Put into practice the Teaching of Bahá'u'lláh, that of kindness to all nations. Do not be content with showing friendship in words alone, let your heart burn with loving kindness for all who may cross your path.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 1, The Duty of Kindness and Sympathy towards Strangers and Foreigners, 16 October 1911)

The true human nature

A more accurate understanding of human nature would encompass qualities and attitudes such as trustworthiness, mutual support, commitment to truth, and a sense of responsibility, that are the building blocks of a stable social order. It would give rise to models which would avoid or ameliorate the ills of reductive materialism, ensuring that our pursuit of prosperity includes the many other facets of individual and collective well-being.

(Bahá'í International Community, 2022, *One Planet, One Habitation*, §21)

Restoring the Influence of Religion

Unity is a condition of the human spirit. Education can support and enhance it, as can legislation, but they can do so only once it emerges and has established itself as a compelling force in social life. A global intelligensia, its prescription largely shaped by materialistic misconceptions of reality, clings tenaciously to the hope that imaginative social engineering, supported by political compromise, may indefinitely postpone the potential disasters that few deny loom over humanity's future.... As unity is the remedy for the world's ills, its one certain source lies in the restoration of religion's influence in human affairs.

(Universal House of Justice, *One Common Faith*, p. 42-43)

Religion as principal force for consciousness

Bahá'u'lláh has not brought into existence a new religion to stand beside the present multiplicity of sectarian organizations. Rather has He **recast the whole conception of religion as the principal force impelling the development of consciousness**. As the human race in all its diversity is a single species, so the intervention by which God cultivates the qualities of mind and heart latent in that species is a **single process**.

(Universal House of Justice, *One Common Faith*, p. 23)

Material and Spiritual Civilization

...until material achievements, physical accomplishments and human virtues are reinforced by **spiritual perfections**, luminous qualities and characteristics of mercy, no fruit or result shall issue therefrom, nor will the happiness of the world of humanity, which is the ultimate aim, be attained. For although, on the one hand, material achievements and the development of the physical world produce prosperity, which exquisitely manifests its intended aims, on the other hand dangers, severe calamities and violent afflictions are imminent.... Progress and barbarism go hand in hand, unless material civilization be confirmed by Divine Guidance... and be reinforced by spiritual conduct...

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, 225, p. 283-284)

Universal education

The development of a global society calls for the cultivation of capacities far beyond anything the human race has so far been able to muster. The challenges ahead will require an enormous expansion in access to knowledge on the part of individuals and organizations alike. Universal education will be an indispensable contributor to this process of capacity building, but the effort will succeed only to the extent that both individuals and groups in every sector of society are able to acquire knowledge and to apply it to the shaping of human affairs.

(Bahá'í International Community. *Valuing Spirituality in Development*, 1998)

Lifelong Education

Education must be lifelong. It should help people to develop the knowledge, values, attitudes and skills necessary to earn a livelihood and to contribute confidently and constructively to shaping communities that reflect principles of justice, equity and unity. It should also help the individual develop a sense of place and community, grounded in the local, but embracing the whole world. Successful education will **cultivate virtue** as the foundation for personal and collective well-being, and will nurture in individuals a deep sense of **service** and an active commitment to the welfare of their families, their communities, their countries, indeed, all mankind. It will encourage self-reflection and thinking in terms of historical process, and it will promote inspirational learning through such means as music, the arts, poetry, meditation and interaction with the natural environment.

(Bahá'í International Community. *Valuing Spirituality in Development*, 1998)

New approaches to progress

To redefine progress is not to dismiss any legitimate accomplishments of the past, but to expand the boundaries of achievements yet to come. From new approaches to ownership and usership, to new forms of urban organization, to new methods of agriculture, power generation, and transportation, the possibilities before humanity are vast. Seizing them will require a far fuller expression of the stores of human potential latent within every individual and the combined efforts of humanity as a whole. But the coming decades hold the prospect of being an exceptionally rich and rewarding period of human history. Daunting as the unprecedented scale of transformation needed in numerous sectors of society might sometimes seem, it opens possibilities for a great flourishing of human creativity and initiative.

(Bahá'í International Community, 2022, *One Planet, One Habitation*, §22)

Moral Values and Ethical Principles

- Moral values state what is good and of primary importance to human civilization,
- often articulated as ideals
- define right from wrong
- Ethical principles are the operational expression of moral values
- provide guidance to decision-making and action
- A capability of moral reasoning starts from abstract general ethical principles to resolve conflicts that arise from moral dilemmas and ethical problems

Ethics allow a positive process

- Both law and ethics are concerned with the application of justice
- Law: institutions for enforcement, top-down regulation of society, punishment, use of force if necessary, costly
- Ethics: individual attachment to the principle of justice and its application, bottom-up, self-motivated, reward more than punishment
- The stronger the ethical framework and its application, the less need for law; more cost-effective; process-based solution

The forces of global integration

- How do we encourage the forces of integration?
- We need ethics, values, goals and perspectives of a better future
- A vision of a more just and equitable world
- Able to motivate positive actions
- Can an ethical, even spiritual, perspective help us to change our lifestyle and consumption patterns?
- The UN 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals can give us a framework for discourse and action
- We need institutions of global governance for global problems

UN Secretary-General 2030 Agenda

- fundamental transformation is needed in society and the economy
- Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) define a paradigm shift for people and planet
- inclusive and people-centred, leaving no one behind
- integrate the economic, social and environmental dimensions
- in a spirit of solidarity, cooperation, mutual accountability
- with the participation of governments and all stakeholders

UN Secretary-General

Young people will be the torch bearers... the first truly globalized, interconnected, and highly mobilized civil society, ready and able to serve as a participant, joint steward, and powerful engine of change and transformation.

Transforming Our World

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

It is “We the Peoples” who are embarking today on the road to 2030. Our journey will involve Governments as well as Parliaments, the UN system and other international institutions, local authorities, indigenous peoples, civil society, business and the private sector, the scientific and academic community – and all people.... It is an Agenda of the people, by the people, and for the people – and this, we believe, will ensure its success.



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



The SDG's offer a vision of a positive future

A shift in perspective - values

To alleviate a variety of problems born of the economic inequalities so prevalent in the world today, social and economic development will require, especially among the younger generations, a fundamental shift in perspective, one that changes the way in which certain essential concepts are viewed--the true purpose of life, the nature of progress, the meaning of true happiness and well-being, and the place that material pursuits should assume in one's individual and family life.

(Universal House of Justice, To Baha'is in the Cradle of the Faith, 2 April 2010)

Social justice through spiritual principles

Social justice will be attained only when every member of society enjoys a relative degree of material prosperity and gives due regard to the acquisition of spiritual qualities. The solution, then, to prevailing economic difficulties is to be sought as much in the application of spiritual principles as in the implementation of scientific methods and approaches.

(Universal House of Justice, To Baha'is in the Cradle of the Faith, 2 April 2010)

Focus on Hope

- focus on hope, a rare commodity today
- be positive, full of creative imagination
- draw on the fantastic potential hiding within all of us
- youth are the hope of the future
- today will only be a start
- tomorrow is already the future
- the more we build forward, the more that future will open up

Some sources

Bahá'í International Community, *The Prosperity of Humankind*, 1994 World Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen

Bahá'í International Community, *Valuing Spirituality in Development: Initial Considerations Regarding the Creation of Spiritually Based Indicators for Development*, 1998

One Common Faith, commissioned by the Universal House of Justice, 2005

Bahá'í International Community, *Rethinking Prosperity: Forging Alternatives to a Culture of Consumerism*, 2010

Bahá'í International Community, *One Planet, One Habitation: A Bahá'í Perspective on Recasting Humanity's Relationship with the Natural World*, 2022

Questions for discussion

- How can we read our local social reality?
- Are there injustices that need to be addressed?
- What would be everyone's rights and responsibilities?
- Is your community welcoming to immigrants and refugees?
- How can we build community solidarity?
- Most fundamentally, what would be the underlying principles and values to guide this ever-evolving system?