

One Planet, One Habitation

A Bahá'í Perspective on Recasting
Humanity's Relationship with the Natural World

A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community

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Brochure formatted for study



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Relationship with the Natural World*

A STATEMENT OF THE BAHÁ'Í INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY



“This span of earth is but one homeland and one habitation. It behooveth you to abandon vainglory which causeth alienation and to set your hearts on whatever will ensure harmony.”

— *Babá 'n' Iláá*

THE NATURAL WORLD, in all its wonder and majesty, offers profound insight into the essence of interdependence.

From the biosphere as a whole to the smallest microorganism, it demonstrates how dependent any one life-form is on numerous others—and how imbalances in one system reverberate across an interconnected whole.

Intimately embedded in this greater system, and deeply reliant upon it, humanity faces a paradox growing more consequential by the day. On the one hand, the human race has never held more power to shape the physical world on planetary scales—a development some have termed the anthropocene. This is a testament to our collective ingenuity and creativity, as well as the boundless potential before us. On the other, that very power, when untempered by thoughtful consideration and directed by priorities heedless of the present and future common good, gives rise to consequences not only worldwide in scope but potentially irreversible.

As the grave effects of surpassing planetary limits become increasingly apparent, from climate change to biodiversity loss to environmental degradation and pollution, humanity is being compelled to develop more mature, collaborative, and constructive relationships between its peoples and with the natural environment.

Thinking on environmental issues has progressed markedly since the landmark United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in 1972. The advances achieved over the past half-century, whether scientific, legal, or institutional, stand as a reason for confidence and a source of hope for the future. Yet, today, increases in understanding must be translated into action far more rapidly and on much wider scales. Sweeping changes in the organization and operation of human affairs have become an existential imperative, necessary and unavoidable. The question before the nations and leaders of the world is whether the needed action will be taken as a matter of conscious choice and prevention, or whether it will be prompted by the destruction and suffering wrought by escalating environmental breakdown.

TRUSTEESHIP OF THE NATURAL WORLD

Human beings exercise a level of influence over the natural world unique among all forms of life on the planet. At times, this has been construed as justification for an orientation toward mastery and control of nature, buttressed by notions of ownership and dominance. As more and more people have come to recognize humanity's interconnection with and dependence on the environment, however, they have accepted that our unique impact carries with it the inescapable duty to nurture and protect the natural world.

Each of us enters the world as a trust of the whole. Each in turn bears a measure of responsibility for the welfare of all and for the planet on which we depend. This world-encompassing sense of trusteeship does not seek to eliminate humanity's impact on the natural world. Material resources

will always be required to sustain and advance civilization. The goal, rather, is to direct that impact consciously, creatively, and compassionately.

As we learn how best to utilize the earth's raw materials for the good of all, we must be conscious of our attitudes toward the source of our subsistence. Our activities must reflect the fact that the wealth and wonders of the earth are the common heritage of all people, who deserve just and equitable access to its resources. Our choices must evince an intergenerational perspective in which the well-being of future inhabitants is taken into account at all levels of decision-making. And in this turbulent period of human history, our activities must increasingly be tempered by the wisdom and judgment that come with growing maturity.

"Is there any deed in the world
that would be nobler than
service to the common good?
... No, by the Lord God!"

— *Bahá'í holy writings*

One People in One Global Homeland

From a perspective wide enough to encompass the planet in its entirety, humanity can be seen in no other light than as one people living in one global homeland. Consciousness of this oneness, expressed through relationships of justice, constitutes the only foundation on which sustainable societies can be raised.

Every people, in its own way, celebrates the ever-abundant beauty and grandeur of nature. The traditions of every culture pay homage to that priceless heritage that sustains not only the physical needs of bodies but also the transcendent qualities of the spirit. The task of building a sustainable and flourishing world holds the promise of providing a point of unity not only in shared endeavor, but in joyful celebration as well.

To acknowledge humanity's oneness is not to suppress variations of expression, culture, or social organization. The principle of unity contains within it the essential concept of diversity; indeed, this is what distinguishes it from uniformity. In the natural world, systems flourish through the interaction of highly diversified elements. Differences between various components can enhance the functioning of the whole and strengthen the resilience of the overall system.

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One People in One Global Homeland (continued)

In human affairs, diversity of thought, background, and approach are similarly critical. It is through the interaction of diverse perspectives and experiences that higher degrees of truth can be found and insight gained. Otherwise, an overabundance of similar views and opinions, like excessive dependence on a single natural resource, leaves a system exposed to dangers and vulnerable to breakdown.

The contributions of ever more populations, well coordinated and integrated, will be required to rebalance humanity's relationship with the natural world.

Presumptions of any one group's superiority over another, asserted along lines of nationality, race, wealth, or any other characteristic, cannot but erode the bonds needed to generate consensus and sustain coordinated action. Feelings of otherness invariably undermine motivation to work for the common good, either social or ecological.

Humanity has often struggled to appreciate diversity while working to build unity, to respect and protect the particular while drawing on the strength of the shared. Stewardship of the natural world offers a powerful means to reconcile these interconnected ideals.

EMPOWERING PROTAGONISTS OF TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE

All of the earth's inhabitants deserve the opportunity to enjoy the fruits of a global society advancing in harmony with the natural world. To create such a society, people everywhere must be empowered to participate in the constructive processes that will give rise to it. Building capacity in individuals, communities, and institutions to contribute effectively to transformational change is therefore an indispensable element of effective environmental action.

For the individual, this implies developing a range of interrelated capacities—scientific, technical, social, moral, and spiritual. Individuals must be endowed with an understanding of concepts, knowledge of facts, and mastery of methods, as well as the skills, attitudes, and qualities required to establish more healthy

and sustainable patterns of individual and collective life.

In terms of local communities, capacity building involves the enrichment and conscious shaping of culture. On the community rests the challenge of creating a milieu in which individual wills blend together, in which powers are multiplied and manifest themselves in collective effort, and in which higher expressions of the human spirit are demonstrated in new ways of arranging the affairs of society.

Attention must also be paid to strengthening organizational structures. Institutions with capacity are needed at every level that can act as channels through which the talents and energies of individuals and groups can be expressed in service to the common good.

“We should continually be establishing new bases for human happiness and creating and promoting new instrumentalities toward this end.”

—Babá'i holy writings



One People in One Global Homeland (continued)

PROPOSALS FOR EXPLORATION

Pressing environmental realities demand of humanity an increasingly mature integration of principle and action, informed by a process-oriented approach to progress. Productive steps should be taken as quickly as possible within current systems, limitations notwithstanding, even as foundations that reflect new paradigms better able to meet contemporary needs are put into place. Toward this end, proposals are offered throughout this document in a spirit of inquiry, drawing inspiration from instances where the international community not only imagined a better world, but attempted action along paths previously untraveled. Such practical experiences offer insight into what becomes possible when consensus and requisite action are allowed to transcend prevailing narratives that impede movement toward meaningful change.



One means of reinforcing the principle of the oneness of humanity that could be considered is establishing mechanisms that would evaluate the global impacts of domestic policies. An agreed-upon international advisory body, for example, could assess such impacts across national borders and recommend adjustments or restitution as necessary.

Within current structures, strengthening the legal framework related to the natural world would lend coherence to the biodiversity, climate, and environmental regimes, and provide stronger foundations for common stewardship of the planet. Integrating governance structures in this way is well within the capacity of the international community, and past experiences—advances and setbacks alike—provide valuable foundations which can be drawn upon. Efforts to increase coherence between engagement in areas of peacekeeping, mediation, human rights, reconstruction, and long-term development, for example—from the establishment of the United Nations' Peacebuilding Architecture to the proposed new agenda for peace—hold initial lessons about what a process of harmonization of related efforts could look like.

Consensus in Action

Moving humanity to a more sustainable and harmonious relationship with the natural world will require a strong and actionable consensus, along with collective will, around key principles that are to shape the affairs of the international community. A level of agreement has been established around foundational principles such as stewardship, interdependence, and justice. But such ideals have yet to take hold as the accepted foundation for collective global action.

The insufficiency of national plans to reduce carbon emissions under the 2015 Paris Agreement, to date, provides one well-noted example. This gap between rhetoric and action is indicative of a deeper challenge, namely that principles related to

sustainability are not embedded deeply enough in the collective consciousness to shape the choices and behaviors of nations.

Consensus that has been well settled is demonstrated not merely by the name and claim of text on a page, but through coordinated, collaborative action; its touchstone is deeds, not words. Strong commitment to key principles and values at the international level assists national and local leaders to overcome the barriers that inevitably arise in implementing necessary changes. It clarifies the rationale for nations to provide one another with the resources necessary to bring agreements to life. And it helps societies move past objections based on limited or self-serving interests.

Consensus that has been well settled is demonstrated not merely by the name and claim of text on a page, but through coordinated, collaborative action....

No longer can the peoples of the world be asked to tolerate the disjunction of agreements signed but left unimplemented. Action must be made coherent with principles that are collectively embraced and championed by all. The international order must be placed on a footing that effectively facilitates planetary responses to planetary challenges.



PROPOSALS FOR EXPLORATION

Consensus around global objectives, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), could be more robustly translated into action by framing consultation around common recognition that every country still has much to learn about integrating the imperatives—equally important—of both sustainability and development. Some countries have secured high levels of material development for many of their citizens, but exert disproportionate ecological impact in terms of resources consumed and waste generated. Others have a much more sustainable ecological footprint, but remain in need of significant material development to meet the basic needs of their citizens. The goal each nation must be working toward is well-being for all populations through means that ensure sustainable and harmonious relationships with the natural environment. Centering this universal goal would provide an important point of unity around which consensus can be translated into collective, purposeful action.

Building actionable consensus around moral and ethical standards, alongside climate and environmental standards, can help ensure principle takes precedence over profit. This is not uncharted territory for the international community. Valuable lessons can be drawn, for example, from the certification process the United Nations established to curb the circulation of conflict-related diamonds. Notwithstanding any shortcomings of that process, it represents an instance of consensus on ethical and social factors being translated into concrete measures of analysis and adjustment at various steps in a commodity's value chain.



Redefining Progress

If humanity's relationship with the natural world is to be refashioned, notions of progress, civilization, and development will need to be redefined. Efforts in this direction, such as budgets centered around well-being or indicators of progress more holistic than gross domestic product, must be expanded and deepened, and fundamental questions interrogated further. What are the qualities by which a person, nation, or corporation are judged successful? For what are they commended and appreciated?

So long as such questions are answered according to values that prioritize possessions over relationships or acquisition over responsibility, a sustainable world will remain out of reach. Such values, by their very nature and effect on the human spirit, beckon incessantly to excess, exploitation, and depletion. They also give rise to gross extremes of alienating wealth and debilitating poverty. Only to the degree that these are set aside can

the profound contradictions they give rise to—not least the expectation of infinite growth on a finite planet—be resolved. And only as progress is understood in new terms can the fundamental drivers of present environmental crises be accurately identified and lasting change be made.

What should be plainly acknowledged is that no country has yet mastered the process of sustainable development. Certain forms of industrialization, technological capacity, and macroeconomic growth have often been equated with development. But the dissatisfaction and difficulties of multitudes living in areas traditionally considered developed, no less than the injustices facing numerous other populations around the world and the strain put on the natural world, demonstrate that such a vision is incomplete at best and often actively detrimental. No one pattern of life and vision of society can be taken as the model toward which all humanity should aspire.




RETHINKING ECONOMIC ARRANGEMENTS

Modern economic arrangements have resulted in both the degradation of ecosystems and the impoverishment of many local communities and individual lives. Inequalities are rising and the harm inherent in the perpetual creation and gratification of wants has been demonstrated beyond objection. Putting the world on more ecologically sustainable foundations requires a recasting of the global economic order. People and the planet need to be valued as explicitly today as profit and economic gain have been in the past.

As current imbalances are driven in large part by numerous forms of excess, the principle of moderation will need to find much fuller expression in global arrangements. Concepts of contentment, sufficiency, and simplicity, which find little place in growth-driven paradigms, will have to be reclaimed and expanded. Patterns of life that have come to be associated with extreme wealth—devotion to convenience and luxury, for example, or high levels of consumption and waste—will need to be set aside. Basic notions of progress, development, and prosperity will need to be recast in far more holistic terms.

Movement toward these goals will require economic arrangements to be disciplined according to values higher than their own ends. The practical experience of individuals, communities, businesses, and nations leaves no room for doubt: there is an inherent moral dimension to the generation, distribution, and utilization of wealth and resources.

Humanity's collective life suffers when any one group thinks of its own well-being in isolation from that of its neighbors, or pursues economic gain without regard for how the natural environment is affected. Every choice leaves a trace. Economic decisions must therefore be taken in accordance with lofty ideals. Wealth must serve humanity. There is no justification for continuing to perpetuate views, structures, rules, and systems that manifestly fail to serve the common good.



“The arrangements of the circumstances of the people must be such that poverty shall disappear, that everyone, as far as possible ... shall share in comfort and well-being.”

— *Bahá'í holy writings*



Redefining Progress (continued)

Crafting a more holistic conception of progress will require an expanded understanding of ourselves as a species, including truths about the human spirit itself. The planet, its peoples, and creatures have suffered tremendously from a materialistic mindset that views the individual as a purely self-interested economic unit, competing with others to accumulate an ever-greater share of the world's material resources. This caricature has largely been rejected at the level of formal theory as simplistic and crude. Many aspects of the global order still rest on these assumptions, however, and often reinforce and deepen them.

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.

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.

PROPOSALS FOR EXPLORATION

SDG 17.19 calls for the development of measures of progress to complement gross domestic product. This is a worthwhile aim that has been echoed by the Secretary-General of the United Nations and that should receive due priority and resourcing. International gatherings, for example—both ad-hoc and in the regular United Nations calendar—could explore complementary measures from the perspective of the thematic focus particular to each.

In addition to measurement becoming more holistic, contemporary conceptions of progress itself must be reconsidered and in many aspects recast. Toward this end, a committee of experts or similar body could build on promising efforts already underway, identify questions in need of exploration, outline alternatives, and define areas ripe for action. The aim would not be a single set of findings but rather an ongoing process of inquiry into what a sustainable civilization includes, and how its features might be appropriately valued and promoted. One example that holds lessons in this regard was the adoption of the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, when the international community reached widespread consensus that global progress was served more fully by eliminating the use of chemicals that damaged the atmosphere, over the financial gains expected from continued sale of those substances.

Aligning with Higher Principles

Humanity's existence is governed not only by physical forces, but also by social and moral laws of cause and effect. Greed is inherently corrosive to the common good, no matter how artfully justified or concealed. Acts of selfless compassion invariably hold the power to motivate and inspire, no matter how seemingly simple or isolated.

From this perspective, the path to a more harmonious relationship with nature cannot be one of technological adjustment alone. It must also involve communities and societies learning to align themselves with higher principles.

Unlocking the high-minded qualities latent in every individual has been a central concern of religious teachings and ideals for millennia. That fanaticism and sectarian dogmatism have undermined the moral and ethical

imperatives that lie at the heart of so many faith traditions can hardly be denied. Nevertheless, communities that are actively laboring to put transcendent values into practice, for the betterment of all, represent a reservoir of experience worthy of serious consideration.

"Man's merit lieth in service and virtue and not in the pageantry of wealth and riches," asserts Bahá'u'lláh, providing one example, among many, of an approach to personal identity and collective interaction that is grounded in values transcending material prosperity alone. How such ideals come to infuse the thinking and behavior of growing numbers, and how this process can be consciously fostered and accelerated, are questions of central importance to the environmental movement and to humanity as a whole.

PROPOSALS FOR EXPLORATION

Much remains to be learned about models of society that prioritize ethical principles and actively foster their development and application throughout a population. Establishing within each United Nations agency a focal point of learning about the practical application of moral and ethical principles, rather than simply seeking ready solutions, could generate knowledge about how advancement can be promoted across the full range of human experience.

A notable alternative to the paradigm of material advancement alone can be found in the significance that multitudes around the world place in the transcendence of the human spirit and its connection with the divine. Much could be learned from a systematic and scientific inquiry into communities that are learning to apply spiritual principles—such as selflessness, solidarity with others, and stewardship for the natural world—to advance broad-based social progress. In addition to various United Nations initiatives already focused on engagement with faith-based organizations, such an inquiry could explore alternative sources of motivation and inspiration, and the impact they can have on community and environmental well-being.

SCIENCE AND RELIGION: COMPLEMENTARY SYSTEMS OF KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE

In working to build a more sustainable world, humanity has at its disposal two mutually reinforcing systems of knowledge and practice: science and religion.


Scientific inquiry has been a vital instrument in seeking to understand physical reality and in forging innovative solutions based on a search for truth and a commitment to learning. When combined with values such as freedom from prejudice and bias, it has enabled humanity to separate fact from conjecture. Scientific capabilities—of observing, measuring, rigorously testing ideas—have allowed us to construct a coherent understanding of the laws and processes governing physical reality, as well as to gain insights into human conduct and the working of society. Far from being the province of researchers and

academics alone, the methodologies of scientific inquiry are tools that any individual or community can employ.

For its part, religion provides a framework by which high ideals can be applied to individual lives and to the life of society, for the betterment of all. The spiritual principles animating the world's enduring religions have aided individuals and entire populations to grapple with questions of meaning, purpose, and the nature of the good life and the good society. When true to these ideals, religion has provided a bulwark against ideologies of materialism that would reduce human beings to mere resources to be exploited or consumers to be satiated. At its highest, religion has not only raised the call to virtues such as integrity, good character, high resolve, cooperation,

and sacrificial endeavor, but drawn growing numbers together around such principles, unifying disparate elements, and giving rise to cohesive communities working to manifest high ideals in practice.

Taken together, science and religion provide fundamental organizing principles by which lasting progress can be made. When both the material and spiritual dimensions of humanity are kept in mind, and due attention is given to both scientific and spiritual knowledge, the tendency to reduce human progress to the consumption of goods, services, and technological packages is avoided. Both science and religion are essential to the liberation of individuals and communities from the traps of ignorance and passivity. Both are vital to the advancement of civilization.



"Religion and science are the two wings upon which man's intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress."

— Bahá'í holy writings





Justice as Process and Outcome

Central to any authentic conception of oneness at a planetary level are issues of justice. That widespread suffering has resulted from humanity's extractive relationship with the natural world, that a select few benefit from excessive use of the earth's resources to the detriment of many others, that immediate preferences often override the basic needs of future generations—these reveal profound injustices to people and planet.

Correcting such ills will require an honest reckoning, along with creativity, perseverance, and humility in response. The voices of those who have been disadvantaged by the current order will need to figure far more prominently into decision-making processes at all levels. Insight will need to be sought from populations sustaining more harmonious relationships with the natural world, many of whom live in areas other than urban centers. Diverse cultural understandings of humanity's relationship with the natural world, especially those of indigenous peoples, can provide needed insights into the creation of more holistic and sustainable models for present and future generations.

Justice demands a wide range of outcomes—that the benefits of human civilization be distributed with equity, for example, or that responsibility for undertaking necessary transitions be apportioned in light of actors' historic contributions to the present climate crisis. But justice at the level of outcome is established only through the operation of justice at the level of process. At the individual level, justice calls for fair-mindedness in one's judgments and equity in one's treatment of others. At the group level, it is the practical expression of awareness that the interests of the individual and those of society are inextricably linked. It also requires a standard of truth-seeking far beyond the patterns of negotiation and compromise that tend to characterize present-day relations—a process of consultation and decision-making that is principled, candid, and fact-based.

At all levels, the capacity to manifest justice—and commitment to doing so—must be strengthened. Just and equitable relationships are indispensable foundations for any unified global movement for the common good.

PROPOSALS FOR EXPLORATION

Justice demands coherence between word and deed. Beyond establishing new bodies or concluding new agreements, therefore, the international community must make the fulfillment of promises already made a keystone of all future efforts. In doing so, it can help reestablish stores of trust which have become perilously depleted in recent years—trust in elected authorities, trust in news media, trust in the findings of science, and trust in the commitments made by world leaders.

Within current structures, global arrangements could be made more just by establishing means to estimate and model the effects that proposed policies would have in the future. Such a forward-looking orientation, as seen, for example, in the proposed United Nations Special Envoy for Future Generations and building on the lessons learned from localities that have instituted such an approach, would help insulate decision-making from narrower interests of present actors and prioritize medium and long-term equity and stewardship.

LEARNING AS A MODE OF OPERATION

A global civilization in a sustainable relationship with the natural world has never existed. Laying its foundations in numerous localities, reflecting a vast spectrum of social and ecological circumstances, therefore calls for a process of learning on a global scale. Basic requirements and foundational principles have been identified in numerous areas, ranging from physical processes to policy frameworks. Yet the wise application of principles to specific instances of social transformation is something that can only be learned through experience.

To take learning as a central objective of environmental action calls for specific habits and behaviors. When operating in a mode of learning, visions and strategies are reexamined time and again. Plans grow organically over time and are modified in light of action taken, experience generated, and lessons learned. Action is process-oriented, rather than solely defined by events or projects. Haphazard change is avoided and continuity of effort is maintained.

Genuine learning hinges as much on the motive and intent of actors, as on formal structures and processes. An international conference characterized by concern for status and reputation, or credit and blame, for example, will struggle to generate useful insights, no matter how many sessions are devoted to the sharing of best practices or lessons learned.

An orientation toward learning also requires understanding of the role of mistakes and setbacks in the path of progress. Whereas the scientific method makes full use of the dialectic of trial and error, international processes are often consumed by a search for the perfect program or policy from the outset. This must be replaced by a culture of exploration

and an earnest search for appropriate solutions, in full recognition that all involved will, at times, encounter setbacks and fall short. Humility is the gateway to learning.

Vital to a mode of learning in action is the principle of consultation, understood as the process of building consensus about the truth of a situation and determining the wisest course of action among available options. In a consultative process, individual participants strive to transcend their respective points of view, and function instead as members of a collective with its own aims and goals. In an atmosphere characterized by both candor and courtesy, ideas belong not to the individual to whom they occur, but to the group as a whole. Truth is not treated as a compromise between opposing interest groups, nor are participants animated by the desire to control one another. The aim is to harness the power of unified thought and action. And the perspectives and aspirations of those whose lives will be impacted by decisions are kept in mind at all times.

Building more sustainable societies involves not only the application of existing knowledge, but also the generation of new knowledge. Much of this will take the form of insights acquired through experimentation at the local level. Initial observations may consist of little more than personal accounts of grassroots actors. But over time patterns emerge which can be documented and analyzed, leading to an increasingly rich body of knowledge which can be disseminated back to the grassroots and used to shape subsequent efforts. Conceived in this way, learning about the construction of a sustainable world becomes the province not of a limited group of experts alone, but rather an endeavor both relying on and welcoming the contribution of the masses of humanity.

“Knowledge is as wings to man's life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone.”

— Babá'í holy writings

Embracing the Role of the State

Numerous actors have a part to play in building a more sustainable world. Local communities can do much to foster collective action and multiply the innovative capacities of their members. Youth consistently demonstrate an openness to new ways of organizing society, a willingness to learn through front-line action, and a readiness to commit themselves to high endeavors and the well-being of future generations. Business and industry, as linchpins of the contemporary economic order, can make constructive decisions whose benefits ripple through societies and landscapes across the globe. The role of national government, however, is unique and preeminent today. At this point in human history, the nation-state is one of the fundamental units of the global political order. States therefore have an indispensable role in addressing transnational environmental challenges.

The mandate of the state, as steward of the common good, is long-term in nature, transcending electoral cycles and political terms. Effective governance ensures the flourishing of all within a jurisdiction, for generations to come.

The state also bears crucial responsibility for governing the commons, whether within its own borders or in collaboration with other institutions beyond them, for example in managing and caring for public goods that benefit all.

The full capacities of the state must be brought to bear on environmental challenges. Remaking entire industries across various sectors of society is the work of decades, involving vast quantities of financial resources, jobs, and physical infrastructure. Vital, therefore, will be government's role in developing long-term plans, advancing them methodically over time, and creating the conditions in which necessary advances become feasible.

In some cases this might take the form of subsidies, compensation, regulatory adjustments, or other means of incentivizing needed action. At other times, the norm-setting role of government and individual leaders will be required—explaining, encouraging, praising, calling to action. In all, institutions of governance are uniquely positioned to foster and sustain generational transition.



Establishing new qualities and attitudes toward leadership will be essential, if states are to effectively address environmental concerns. Personal character is central in this regard and progress would be seen in leaders approaching public service as a responsibility and not a path to personal gain, demonstrating accountability to ends higher than electoral victory or personal advancement, and taking decisions that are difficult but aligned with the greater good. Such instances of moral courage stand among leaders' most enduring achievements and will be remembered long after the calculations of any particular moment or political climate have faded.

Pessimism about the role of the state has grown in recent years, and it is true that many have suffered when governments have been unable or unwilling to fulfill their functions—when the role of establishing rules and standards has been surrendered to those with vested interests; when service provision has been privatized in ways that subordinate human well-being to the demands of the profit motive; when political corruption and expediency have sacrificed the common good to personal advantage.

Good governance creates the context in which the private sector, the scientific community, civil society, and others can make their highest contributions.

Yet such reflections are less an indictment of government itself than a reminder of the unique power it holds. Good governance allows the power of action to be unlocked at the level of individual initiative and to surge at the level of collective volition. Good governance creates the context in which the private sector, the scientific community, civil society, and others can make their highest contributions. All, therefore, have an interest in ensuring that government executes, as fully as possible, its functions as promoter of the public trust.




THE LOCUS OF DECISION-MAKING

In an age when global processes are felt equally within villages and across continents, sustained attention will need to be given to determining the appropriate locus of decision-making. Key in this regard is the principle that decisions should be made at the level at which optimum results can be obtained.

Fidelity to this principle would imply, in many cases, a profound devolution of power and authority to local communities and governing institutions. Decision-making processes will need to become far more inclusive, local, and participatory in the coming years. Every population has the right and responsibility to mark out its own path of progress and each has a vital contribution to make in building a more sustainable civilization. Moreover, experience has demonstrated that without the commitment of those whose lives are affected, programs and policies struggle to take root in the populations on which their implementation depends.

Complementing trends toward localization, appropriate decision-making also requires action to be taken at levels that transcend the nation-state, when necessary. Numerous environmental challenges are transboundary in scope and effect, and thereby unsolvable through legislation at the national level alone. Legitimate concern for national interests must therefore find expression within global structures that facilitate effective and coordinated action in service to a prospering international community. The only viable way forward lies in a system of deepening global cooperation.

The efficacy of efforts at any one level depends on the quality and reciprocity of interlinkages between them. Policy-making at the national or global level can become abstract and theoretical—and thereby potentially irrelevant or counterproductive—if disconnected from conditions at the grassroots. Similarly, initiatives at the community level will remain limited if they are not connected to global processes concerned with humanity as a whole. Structures will be required, then, to facilitate the transfer of knowledge and insights as they are generated through practical experience and analysis.



“[The principle of the oneness of humanity] insists upon the subordination of national impulses and interests to the imperative claims of a unified world. It repudiates excessive centralization on one hand, and disclaims all attempts at uniformity on the other.”

— *Bahá'í holy writings*

Embracing the Role of the State (continued)

PROPOSALS FOR EXPLORATION

States' responsibilities to advance the well-being of their people—ultimately grounded in the flourishing of humanity as a whole—must be paramount in the formation of public policy. Decision-making fora, therefore, need to be structured in ways that ensure states' active advancement of the common good over other, more limited concerns. Many spaces in which law and policy are determined today are heavily influenced by other actors motivated at least in part by interests such as the accumulation of financial profit or political power. Mechanisms are therefore needed that would ensure that such actors—whether multinational corporations, media entities, technological platforms, special interest groups, or others—would be included only to the degree that their participation bolsters long-term sustainability and enhances, rather than undermines, the good-faith efforts of the representatives of the people. In the context of the United Nations this could, for example, take the form of policies that ensure preferential treatment or undue influence is not accorded to non-state actors with access to outsized financial or other material resources.

Gaps between the scale of action needed to address climate challenges and the measures actually undertaken are often attributed to a perceived absence of financial resources. Yet the prudent mobilization and expenditure of resources to advance the common good, at scales commensurate with relevant needs, is a fundamental responsibility of the state. Governing institutions therefore bear a critical duty toward both present and future generations. This responsibility confers on states a moral and ethical mandate to raise resources sufficient to address pressing and future requirements, with due consideration for standards of justice, capacity, and responsibility. It also requires that those resources be spent in furtherance of the well-being of humanity—and not in subsidizing unsustainable or destructive patterns of life. Expanding such responsibilities to the global level, in addition to their clear implications for national policy, would require significant adjustments to economic arrangements between countries, not least in taking the steps required to ameliorate the gross and destructive disparities of wealth between them. A variety of measures have been offered over several decades toward this end, such as a mechanism to ensure global tax coordination or a framework for regulating illicit financial flows. If implemented thoughtfully, such proposals could do much to utilize well the available pool of global resources.

The World that Beckons

A flourishing global civilization in harmony with the natural environment is a vision toward which growing numbers are laboring. The world that beckons is one of integration and balance, beauty, and maturity. It is a world with a redefined sense of progress, filled with communities and individuals working together with the support of institutions toward the realization of their highest aspirations. It is a world increasingly relieved of the destructive moral compromises—social, economic, and environmental—that have so often been asserted as necessary to progress.

Movement toward this vision has begun; its momentum is gathering. Lofty ambitions have been articulated and action is being called for on scales unseen. Yet the pace of transformation has not, so far, risen to the demands of the moment. The range of options available to make the adjustments necessary will only narrow if action is deferred to the future. Will humanity act on the truth that its own destiny and that of the planet are irrevocably intertwined? Or will still greater calamities be required to move it to action?

Movement toward this vision has begun; its momentum is gathering.

The gulf between intention and action is one of the central challenges facing humanity today. This gap can be bridged; individuals, communities, and nations are contributing their share toward this goal every day. Yet for action to rise to the scales required, far stronger consensus and collective will among the nations is needed around the values demanded by the current stage of humanity's development. It also calls for much greater resolve in putting those values into practice, recommitting to that which is beneficial to the common good and discarding whatever stands in the way of answering the moral and practical call of the present hour. This is a high endeavor indeed, and its benefits a priceless legacy that must be left to the generations to come. Let us join together in rising to its demands.



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866 United Nations Plaza, Suite 120
New York, NY 10017, USA
www.bic.org