

ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

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Introduction

Issues of environment and sustainability have recently emerged as major concerns, and the Bahá'í Faith has both specific teachings relating to such problems, and institutions that provide for continuing guidance as both the Bahá'í community and the wider society evolve. This chapter relates contemporary scientific understanding of environmental problems to relevant Bahá'í principles.

With humanity's growing population and a material civilisation that has been carried to excess, society has run up against planetary limits, producing a range of environmental problems that threaten humanity's future. Science informs us about climate change, the collapse of ecosystems and loss of biodiversity, pollution threats to the environment and human health, damage to the productive capacity of the planet, and other environmental problems. But the solutions require changes in human motivations and behaviour, which are driven by our individual values and social goals. This is where religion plays an important role. To ensure a better future for our children, the world needs to bring about fundamental transformations in its industries, technologies, and economy; its agriculture and fisheries; its use of resources and sources of energy; its cities and communities; its homes and forms of transport; even its institutions and systems of government, in order to move towards a sustainable society. There is no time to lose, and efforts are needed at all levels from local communities to the global system.

Basic principles

Many scientific concepts find their reflection in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. They range from the nature of creation and basic principles of systems organisation and evolution, to concepts of ecology, environmental responsibility, sustainability, and conservation of the Earth's resources (Research Department 1990). The following are some of those most relevant to the environment.

The natural world and appreciation of nature

The Bahá'í Faith strongly emphasises the importance and spiritual significance of nature: 'The universe and all that is in it are part of Divine creation and reflect Divine attributes.

Nature is God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets*, 142).

There are many benefits from contact with nature, such as by reflecting divine qualities that uplift us.

When . . . thou dost contemplate the innermost essence of all things, and the individuality of each, thou wilt behold the signs of thy Lord's mercy in every created thing, and see the spreading rays of His Names and Attributes throughout all the realm of being. . . . Look thou upon the trees, upon the blossoms and fruits, even upon the stones. Here too wilt thou behold the Sun's rays shed upon them, clearly visible within them, and manifested by them.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections*, 41–42)

Bahá'u'lláh loved the beauty and verdure of the country. One day He passed the remark: ‘I have not gazed on verdure for nine years. The country is the world of the soul, the city is the world of bodies’.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in Esslemont 1923: 40)

Bahá'ís believe that the crucial need facing humanity is to find a unifying vision of the nature and purpose of human life. An understanding of humanity's relationship to the natural environment is an integral part of this vision.

(BIC 2009)

A unified system

While the science of complex systems has only emerged in recent decades as an important discipline, the Bahá'í Writings have always reflected a systems perspective, whether with respect to the world, to human society, or to religion itself. ‘This nature is subject to a sound organization, to inviolable laws, to a perfect order, and to a consummate design, from which it never departs’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 3).

The concept of systems evolving towards increasing complexity is also clearly explained by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. After describing the lower levels of organisation, He calls humans

the highest specialized organism of visible creation, embodying the qualities of the mineral, vegetable and animal plus an ideal endowment absolutely minus and absent in the lower kingdoms—the power of intellectual investigation into the mysteries of outer phenomena. The outcome of this intellectual endowment is science which is especially characteristic of man. This scientific power investigates and apprehends created objects and the laws surrounding them. . . . The most noble and praiseworthy accomplishment of man therefore is scientific knowledge and attainment.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith* 242)

Evolution and change

Evolution is a central concept in the Bahá'í Faith. It is reflected in religion as the concept of progressive revelation contributing to an ever-advancing civilisation. It is normal, therefore that the Bahá'í view of biological evolution fully accepts the scientific evidence. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (*Some Answered Questions* 229) notes, ‘the growth and development of all beings proceeds by gradual

degrees. This is the universal and divinely ordained law and the natural order'. Elsewhere He comments (*Some Answered Questions* 205),

The innumerable created things that are found in the world of existence—be they man, animal, plant, or mineral— . . . are linked together like a chain; and mutual aid, assistance, and interaction are among their intrinsic properties and are the cause of their formation, development and growth.

Ecological principles

'Abdu'l-Bahá (in Research Department 1989: 14–15), already in the early years of the twentieth century, provided a clear description of ecological principles such as cooperation and diversity:

the temple of the world hath been fashioned after the image and likeness of the human body . . . even as the human body in this world, which is outwardly composed of different limbs and organs, is in reality a closely integrated, coherent entity, similarly the structure of the physical world is like unto a single being whose limbs and members are inseparably linked together. . . . The greatest relationship that bindeth the world of being together lieth in the range of created things themselves, . . . all closely related together and . . . influenced by the other or deriveth benefit therefrom, either directly or indirectly. . . . Consider for instance how one group of created things constituteth the vegetable kingdom, and another the animal kingdom. Each of these two maketh use of certain elements in the air on which its own life dependeth, while each increaseth the quantity of such elements as are essential for the life of the other. . . . Of like kind are the relationships that exist among all created things. . . . The higher a kingdom of created things is on the arc of ascent, the more conspicuous are the signs and evidences of the truth that co-operation and reciprocity at the level of a higher order are greater than those that exist at the level of a lower order.

In the physical realm of creation, all things are eaters and eaten: the plant drinketh in the mineral, the animal doth crop and swallow down the plant, man doth feed upon the animal, and the mineral devoureth the body of man. Physical bodies are transferred past one barrier after another, from one life to another, and all things are subject to transformation and change, save only the essence of existence itself.

(‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 157)

Our responsibility for the environment

The Bahá'í view takes our sense of responsibility for the environment to a higher level by linking the scientific view of our dependence on a well-functioning biosphere to our spiritual awareness that nature reflects divine qualities and the creation of God which we must respect. Bahá'u'lláh (Epistle to the Son of the Wolf 44) said:

Every man of discernment, while walking upon the earth, feeleth indeed abashed, inasmuch as he is fully aware that the thing which is the source of his prosperity, his wealth, his might, his exaltation, his advancement and power is, as ordained by God, the very earth which is trodden beneath the feet of all men. There can be no doubt that whoever is cognizant of this truth, is cleansed and sanctified from all pride, arrogance, and vainglory.

'Abdu'l-Bahá (*Promulgation* 350), in His talk on science and religion at Stanford University in 1912, also emphasised this responsibility: 'The elements and lower organisms are synchronized in the great plan of life. Shall man, infinitely above them in degree, be antagonistic and a destroyer of that perfection?'

In 1933 Shoghi Effendi (in *Office of Social and Economic Development* 1988: 4) referred to the interaction of our environment and our spirituality:

We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions.

This is also a collective responsibility of human society. The Universal House of Justice (1981) writes that our fundamental interest in preserving the ecological balance of the world requires unity:

Until such time as the nations of the world understand and follow the admonitions of Bahá'u'lláh to whole-heartedly work together in looking after the best interests of all humankind, and unite in the search for ways and means to meet the many environmental problems besetting our planet, . . . little progress will be made towards their solution.

Sustainability

Our responsibility for the environment ultimately leads to the concept of sustainability, which implies that all environmentally damaging activities are replaced by those that preserve the essential functions of the biosphere and restore if not extend the carrying capacity of the planet for the benefit of future generations. The Bahá'í International Community (BIC) has contributed Bahá'í perspectives on sustainability to international fora, such as this passage:

As trustees, or stewards, of the planet's vast resources and biological diversity, humanity must learn to make use of the earth's natural resources, both renewable and non-renewable, in a manner that ensures sustainability and equity into the distant reaches of time. This attitude of stewardship will require full consideration of the potential environmental consequences of all development activities. It will compel humanity to temper its actions with moderation and humility, realizing that the true value of nature cannot be expressed in economic terms. It will also require a deep understanding of the natural world and its role in humanity's collective development—both material and spiritual. Therefore, sustainable environmental management must come to be seen not as a discretionary commitment mankind can weigh against other competing interests, but rather as a fundamental responsibility that must be shouldered—a pre-requisite for spiritual development as well as the individual's physical survival.

(BIC 1998)

Environmental problems

Beyond fundamental system change, there are ways in which the Bahá'í teachings provide guidance concerning some of the priority environmental issues such as the climate emergency, the

biodiversity crisis, and other ways that modern society is impacting the environment and endangering our future.

Climate change

Scientific evidence has accumulated over the last several decades that the release into the atmosphere of greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide from human activities including the use of fossil fuels, together with agriculture and land use changes such as deforestation, is causing global heating and changing the climate. The Bahá'í World Centre saw this problem of sufficient importance that in 2007 it published a paper on 'Climate change and its ethical implications' in *The Bahá'í World*, the official record of the Bahá'í Faith (Dahl 2007).

As human impacts on the climate increase disasters from extreme storms, floods, droughts, wildfires, and diseases, scientific calls for urgent action have multiplied. However, this requires fundamental change in every aspect of the modern economy and material society, including rapidly abandoning fossil fuels as the energy basis for modern civilisation. The vested interests threatened by these changes have largely succeeded in blocking meaningful action, making climate change a highly divisive political issue. In the consumer society, there is little incentive to change consumption patterns when prices do not reflect the true environmental and social costs considered as externalities. The Bahá'í approach focused on unity is a response to this challenge. Once people realise that their lifestyles will cause real harm to others around the world and to future generations including their own, they will be motivated to change. They will also more readily accept legal measures and prices that reflect true costs, such as through a carbon tax.

The Universal House of Justice (2017b) provided guidance on this issue in a letter:

One of the most pressing problems of humanity in the current century is how a growing, rapidly developing, and not yet united global population can, in a just manner, live in harmony with the planet and its finite resources . . . there does exist at present a striking degree of agreement among experts in relevant fields about the cause and impact of climate change . . . at a time when nations have difficulty reaching agreement on many important issues, the governments of nearly every country on earth have reached political consensus on a joint framework, in the Paris accord, to respond to climate change in a manner that is anticipated to evolve over time as experience accumulates. . . . The agreement represents a starting point for constructive thought and action.

The Bahá'í International Community has also presented statements on climate change at various international events, raising the debate to a higher level. It notes that

the principle of the oneness of humankind . . . makes it possible to view the climate change challenge through a new lens—one that perceives humanity as a unified whole, not unlike the cells of the human body, infinitely differentiated in form and function yet united in a common purpose which exceeds that of its component parts.

(BIC 2008b)

Loss of ecosystems and biodiversity

Humanity is facing a biodiversity crisis. It is estimated that the world will lose 20 to 50 percent of its species in coming decades from climate change, deforestation, and conversion of natural

ecosystems to other uses, the collapse of coral reef ecosystems from global heating and ocean acidification, the excessive use of pesticides and herbicides, and other human impacts. This may be even more threatening to human welfare than climate change. We could rebound from climate change in a few centuries, but gaps left by lost species will last thousands of years. We do not appreciate how dependent we are on the good functioning of healthy natural systems to maintain our soils; our supplies of food, water, and other resources; the carbon cycle and cycles of other essential elements; and even human health.

According to the Bahá'í International Community, 'every effort should be made to preserve as much as possible the earth's bio-diversity and natural order' (BIC 1998). The Bahá'í teachings on nature and ecosystems are also relevant, as they reveal the importance of biodiversity for both our spiritual and material well-being. A love of nature as a reflection of the Divine provides a powerful motivation to respect and protect natural areas and their biodiversity.

Destruction and pollution of resources

As humanity converts an ever larger percentage of the Earth's surface to its use, mines minerals, releases thousands of man-made chemicals into the environment, discards wastes everywhere, contaminates the soil, water, and air with all kinds of pollutants, and otherwise fouls its own nest with no concern for the future, the costs are steadily rising:

The deepening environmental crisis, driven by a system that condones the pillage of natural resources to satisfy an insatiable thirst for more, suggests how entirely inadequate is the present conception of humanity's relationship with nature. . . . The principle of the oneness of humankind implies, then, an organic change in the very structure of society.

(Universal House of Justice 2013)

Driving forces for environmental destruction

Today's environmental crisis is a consequence of our materialistic civilisation prioritising economic growth over the environment. As a result, it is rapidly over-consuming the planet's resources, degrading its carrying capacity, pursuing technological innovations without regard to their environmental impact, and valuing short-term profit for the few at the expense of our future and that of coming generations, pushing us rapidly up to, if not past, planetary boundaries.

The explosive growth of the world population over the last century, powered in part by improvements in health care and the control of epidemic diseases, has also contributed. However, population growth is as much a consequence as a cause of the material imbalances in society. Enough medical knowledge has been shared to lower the death rate in much of the world without sharing enough wealth and education to bring down the birth rate among the poor. Correcting the extremes of wealth and poverty would allow the world population to come back into balance with planetary resources. Seeing the earth as one country and humankind as its citizens would also facilitate migration to bring local populations into balance with local resources.

Materialism and the consumer culture

The Universal House of Justice has repeatedly condemned the materialistic consumer culture that is driving so much environmental destruction while ignoring the higher human purpose expressed as spirituality:

Early in the twentieth century, a materialistic interpretation of reality had consolidated itself so completely as to become the dominant world faith insofar as the direction of society was concerned. . . . Having penetrated and captured all significant centres of power and information at the global level, dogmatic materialism ensured that no competing voices would retain the ability to challenge projects of world wide economic exploitation. (Universal House of Justice 2005: 3–5)

It emphasises the moral failures that underlie this materialistic economic system:

The welfare of any segment of humanity is inextricably bound up with the welfare of the whole. Humanity's collective life suffers when any one group thinks of its own well-being in isolation from that of its neighbours' or pursues economic gain without regard for how the natural environment, which provides sustenance for all, is affected. . . . The forces of materialism promote a . . . line of thinking; that happiness comes from constant acquisition, that the more one has the better, that worry for the environment is for another day. (Universal House of Justice 2017a)

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 2013)

The Bahá'í International Community has similarly criticised this materialistic economy in many of its statements:

The unfettered cultivation of needs and wants has led to a system fully dependent on excessive consumption for a privileged few, while reinforcing exclusion, poverty and inequality, for the majority. Each successive global crisis—be it climate, energy, food, water, disease, financial collapse—has revealed new dimensions of the exploitation and oppression inherent in the current patterns of consumption and production. (BIC 2010)

A challenge . . . faces economic thinking as a result of the environmental crisis. The fallacies in theories based on the belief that there is no limit to nature's capacity to fulfil any demand made on it by human beings have now been coldly exposed. A culture which attaches absolute value to expansion, to acquisition, and to the satisfaction of people's wants is being compelled to recognise that such goals are not, by themselves, realistic guides to policy. . . . Only a breakthrough in understanding that is scientific and spiritual in the fullest sense of the terms will empower the human race to assume the trusteeship toward which history impels it. (BIC 1995)

Poverty

Alongside the environmental destruction driven by the consumer society, there is also the erosion of environmental resources caused by the desperate efforts of the poor to feed themselves and to survive in a world that has largely abandoned them. Despite recent reductions in extreme

poverty, largely in China, half the world's population still struggles to meet basic needs. After some years of improvement, the number of malnourished people is increasing again, reaching over 800 million, as soil degradation, climate change, and drought reduce agricultural yields and cause crop failures.

The Universal House of Justice has highlighted the importance of this problem:

One of the most pressing challenges afflicting multitudes of people across the globe is the disturbed economic situation. The lack of a necessary framework to ensure equity and justice in the distribution of wealth has led to an increase in unemployment and poverty to the extent that even providing life's basic essentials has become extremely difficult for many strata of society. The consequences of the vast divide between the rich and the poor, whether within or among the nations, are indescribable.

(Universal House of Justice 2018)

The deep causes have been analysed by the Bahá'í International Community:

It is now increasingly acknowledged that such conditions as the marginalization of girls and women, poor governance, ethnic and religious antipathy, environmental degradation and unemployment constitute formidable obstacles to the progress and development of communities. These evidence a deeper crisis—one rooted in the values and attitudes that shape relationships at all levels of society. Viewed from this perspective, poverty can be described as the absence of those ethical, social and material resources needed to develop the moral, intellectual and social capacities of individuals, communities and institutions.

(BIC 2008a)

Lack of global governance

Many of these forces that are leading to environmental destruction reflect a fundamental issue facing today's world. Science and technology have given us the means to globalise our society and economy. Trade and commerce unite the world as never before. Barriers to economic activity and finance have largely vanished. Money and goods can flow freely around the world. Multinational corporations operate largely beyond the control of any government. For them and the rich, profits and wealth can be hidden in tax-free havens. Business activities can often be delocalised to wherever labour is cheapest and environmental and social regulations non-existent or unenforced. Widespread corruption makes all this even easier. Profits have been privatised, while unprofitable responsibilities are left to governments without the means to meet them. The only thing that has not been globalised is the free movement of people, as national borders tend to trap cheap labour and make it easier for businesses to play governments off against each other.

At the same time, environmental problems have globalised as we overshoot planetary limits. Countries, in their separate national sovereignties, cannot solve the climate crisis, the collapse of biodiversity, the spread of plastics and other pollution around the world. There are many international environmental agreements, but they are all voluntary. Enforcement is almost impossible, and governments can withdraw if it is in their short-term national interest. We lack adequate global governance for problems that are essentially global. At the national level, we accept that the government can legislate in the common good and adopt necessary environmental regulations, with enforcement mechanisms and courts for their implementation. As long as there is no

equivalent global governance to protect the global common interest, we shall fail to solve even the most existential environmental crises threatening our future.

Positive directions for the future

Environmental problems emerged gradually in the twentieth century as significant preoccupations, and Bahá'ís were some of the early ones to respond to these challenges. Richard St. Barbe Baker, already in 1924, recognised the problems of deforestation and organised 'Men of the Trees', now the International Tree Foundation. He went on to work on reforesting Palestine in the 1930s, defending the redwoods in California, greening the Sahara, and holding World Forestry Charter gatherings in England in the 1950s. Shoghi Effendi became the first life member of Men of the Trees in 1930, and sent messages to the World Forestry Charter gatherings (Hanley 2018). Vinson Brown, a Bahá'í biologist in California, wrote nature guides in the 1940s, taught about the kingdoms of God in Bahá'í children's classes, and with an Eskimo Bahá'í, William Willoya, wrote *Warriors of the Rainbow*, a book that influenced the founders of Greenpeace (Willoya and Brown 1962; Dahl 2005). Bahá'í authors began addressing the environment directly (Dahl 1990; White 1993).

The Bahá'í International Community has also been involved since the beginning of the emergence of the global environmental movement. It was accredited to the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1972 and distributed a statement on 'The Environment and Human Values'. Since then it has continued to be active in UN fora on the environment and sustainability, presenting over forty statements. At the UN Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, referred to as the Rio Earth Summit, Bahá'ís helped to organise the civil society part of the conference, and the BIC presented a statement in the high-level segment. It participated, along with Bahá'í-inspired organisations, in the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, and the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in Rio de Janeiro in 2012, as well as the following UN High Level Political Forum sessions in New York and the major recent UN conferences on climate change.

The environmental involvement of the BIC has extended to interfaith events, such as the World Summit on Religions and Conservation at Windsor Castle in 1995, where Rúhíyyih Khánum, the leading Bahá'í dignitary, led the BIC delegation (*One Country* 1995). It participated in the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), including joining, at the invitation of UNDP, in presenting religious action plans on climate change and the natural environment to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and Prince Philip at Windsor Castle in November 2009, and contributing faith plans for a sustainable future at Bristol, UK, in 2015 (BIC 2015).

Alongside this official Bahá'í activity for the environment, Bahá'í professionals engaged in the environment and sustainable development organised in 1997 their own Bahá'í-inspired professional organisation, the International Environment Forum (IEF), which now has members in more than seventy-five countries. It is accredited by the UN in the science and technology major group and contributes to major UN conferences. Its activities include annual international conferences, often in partnership with other organisations, a monthly newsletter, and an extensive web site of resources on the environment and sustainability from a Bahá'í perspective (<https://iefworld.org>).

Moderation in lifestyles

One of the essential messages of the Bahá'í revelation is the need for moderation in all things, including individual lifestyles and material civilisation as a whole. Bahá'u'lláh (*Gleanings* 342–343) wrote:

The civilization, so often vaunted by the learned exponents of arts and sciences, will, if allowed to overleap the bounds of moderation, bring great evil upon men. . . . The day is approaching when its flame will devour the cities.

For the individual, He advised that the true seeker 'should be content with little, and be freed from all inordinate desire' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 193–194), and further 'Take from this world only to the measure of your needs, and forego that which exceedeth them' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Summons* 193).

When Bahá'u'lláh saw the life of luxury of government officials in Constantinople in 1863, He wrote to the Sultan of Turkey (*Gleanings* 235–236):

Overstep not the bounds of moderation, and deal justly with them that serve thee. Bestow upon them according to their needs, and not to the extent that will enable them to lay up riches for themselves, to deck their persons, to embellish their homes, to acquire the things that are of no benefit to them, and to be numbered with the extravagant. Deal with them with undeviating justice, so that none among them may either suffer want, or be pampered with luxuries. This is but manifest justice.

Today every Bahá'í, indeed everyone on this planet, is challenged to adapt their lifestyle and consumption pattern to the needs of an environmentally constrained world and a society requiring a fundamental transformation towards sustainability. Rather than seeing this as a negative constraint and source of depression, a spiritual perspective can give hope and inspire acts of service (Dahl 2019).

Sustainable agriculture

There is no present justification for people to starve, as there is still adequate food and other resources to meet everyone's needs if equitably distributed. There are extensive Bahá'í Writings on agriculture (Hanley 2005). It should even be possible for the planet to support the eleven billion people expected in 2100 in a society reformed along Bahá'í principles (Hanley 2014).

A core element of a strategy of sustainable development is the reform of agricultural policies and processes. . . . Although farming has been devalued by manufacturing and a rapidly expanding urban population, agriculture still represents the fundamental basis of economic and community life: malnourishment and food insecurity suffocate all attempts at development and progress. Despite this pivotal role, poverty is often concentrated in rural areas. . . . The farmer must be accorded his or her rightful place in the processes of development and civilization building: as the villages are reconstructed, the cities will follow.

(BIC 2008a)

'Abdu'l-Bahá (*Foundations of World Unity* 89) described in some detail the organisation of an agricultural community. 'The fundamental basis of the community is agriculture, tillage of the soil. All must be producers'. He said 'we must begin with the farmer; there will we lay a foundation for system and order because the peasant class and the agricultural class exceed other classes in the importance of their service'. He proposed a system of graduated taxation proportionate to capacity and production, so that there would be no poor in the community. If a farmer has a bad year and has expenses exceeding income, the difference is made up by the community.

Sustainable production and consumption

The Bahá'í perspective integrates all dimensions of society into a coherent system. It sees the environmental and economic aspects as complementary, needing to be brought into harmony (Dahl 1996). Since the main drivers of climate change and other environmental destruction are multinational corporations and other components of the materialistic economic system, their transformation will be central to the paradigm shift required to move towards sustainability. The aim should be sustainable forms of production and consumption that reduce the wasteful exploitation of natural and human resources and aim towards a circular economy more like mature natural ecosystems. The Bahá'í principles on economic and social transformation are reviewed in other chapters. Only a few key points relevant to sustainability, as described in statements of the Bahá'í International Community, are reviewed here.

Central to the task of reconceptualizing the organization of human affairs is arriving at a proper understanding of the role of economics. . . . Resources must be directed away from those agencies and programs that are damaging to the individual, societies and the environment, and directed toward those most germane to furthering a dynamic, just and thriving social order. Such economic systems will be strongly altruistic and cooperative in nature; they will provide meaningful employment and will help to eradicate poverty in the world. (BIC 1998)

Today, much of economic activity and its institutional context is at odds with environmental sustainability. . . . The economic theories of impersonal markets, promoting self-centred actions of individuals, have not helped humanity escape the extremes of poverty on the one hand and over-consumption on the other. New economic theories for our time must be animated by a motive beyond just profit. . . . Where a nation's wealth is concerned, the question becomes one of social value rather than gross dollar measures. The Gross Domestic Product, for example, aggregates the sum total of all economic activity . . . regardless of its social worth or environmental impact. New measures that account for pollutants and economic ills and add unmeasured, unremunerated benefits are needed for a more accurate picture of a nation's economic health and wealth. (BIC 2008a)

Against the backdrop of climate change, environmental degradation, and the crippling extremes of wealth and poverty, the transformation from a culture of unfettered consumerism to a culture of sustainability has gained momentum. . . . The issue of sustainable consumption and production . . . will need to be considered in the broader context of an ailing social order—one characterized by competition, violence, conflict and insecurity—of which it is a part. . . . Sustainable consumption and production could be characterized as processes that provide for the material, social and spiritual needs of humanity across generations and enable all peoples to contribute to the ongoing advancement of society. . . . A sustainable social order is distinguished, among other things, by an ethic of reciprocity and balance at all levels of human organization. . . . Ultimately, the transformation required to shift towards sustainable consumption and production will entail no less than an organic change in the structure of society itself so as to reflect fully the interdependence of the entire social body—as well as the interconnectedness with the natural world that sustains it. (BIC 2010)

Global cooperation

The world has consistently refused to listen to Bahá'u'lláh's message of unity and pursued its headlong race towards environmental destruction. Now the planet itself is sending warning messages from the changing climate and collapsing biodiversity that humanity must act now before it is too late, or suffer the severe consequences that are already on the horizon. It is not that we do not know what to do. The solutions and technologies exist; what is lacking is political will. Powerful vested interests, both in governments and the private sector, are resisting change in defence of their short-term advantages.

The Bahá'í International Community has referred to some of the changes needed to build global cooperation for sustainability, including the consciousness of world citizenship, the eventual federation of all nations through an integrated system of governance with capacity for global decision-making, and the establishment of structures which recognise humanity's common ownership of the earth's resources (BIC 2010). Shoghi Effendi wrote that, under a world federation, 'the economic resources of the world will be organized, its sources of raw materials will be tapped and fully utilized, its markets will be coordinated and developed, and the distribution of its products will be equitably regulated' (*The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 203). This would make it possible to bring the global economy back into balance with planetary limits.

It is clear that strengthened global governance with a reformed United Nations system or something equivalent, able to legislate the necessary protection of the global environment, will be essential to solve the crises of climate change and biodiversity loss, and to rein in the destructive activities of the present world economy (Lopez-Claros et al. 2020).

Perhaps the force of spiritual transformation will still be able to put humanity on course to restore the planet's natural resources and carrying capacity, and to lay the foundations for an ever-advancing civilisation that would be the very definition of sustainability.

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