

Shared Vision, Shared Volition: Choosing Our Global Future Together

A statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris, France

Anthropogenic climate change is not inevitable; humanity chooses its relationships with the natural world. This lies at the heart of the 2015 Paris Climate Conference (COP 21), the efforts of which are, in many ways, focused on identifying means by which better choices can be made. The current global order has often approached the natural world as a reservoir of material resources to be exploited. The grave consequences of this paradigm have become all too apparent, and more balanced relationships among the peoples of the world and the planet are clearly needed. The question today is how new patterns of action and interaction can best be established, both individually and collectively, through personal choices, social systems, and governing institutions.

With the adoption of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including its social, economic and environmental dimensions, momentum for meaningful change has been building. A universal, legally binding agreement on carbon emissions seems within reach for the first time. Yet sustainability is defined as much by human and social factors as ecological ones. Correlation has been found, for example, between inequality and environmental degradation¹, suggesting that the relationships linking human beings with one another have a direct impact on the physical resources of the planet. The global systems that have left many facing poverty and want, have similarly impoverished the natural environment.

A more balanced attitude toward the environment must therefore address human conditions as consciously as it does natural ones. It must be embodied in social norms and patterns of action characterized by justice and equity. On this foundation can be built an evolving vision of our common future together. And that vision, in turn, stands as a powerful mechanism for mobilizing action around the world and coordinating numerous efforts into mutually-reinforcing lines of action.

Foundations for a New Consciousness

Setting humanity on a more sustainable path to the future involves transformation in attitudes and actions. Reform of institutional structures will be critical, and indeed this is a central focus of those gathered at COP 21. Yet ultimately it is people, whatever their role or place in society, who implement the policies of a central administration or ignore

¹See, for example, the 2011 Human Development Report: "A joint lens shows how environmental degradation intensifies inequality through adverse impacts on already disadvantaged people and how inequalities in human development amplify environmental degradation." Also, Holland, T. G., Peterson, G. D., & Gonzalez, A. (2009). *A Cross-National Analysis of How Economic Inequality Predicts Biodiversity Loss*. *Conservation Biology*, 23(5), 1304-13013; Andrich, M. A., Imberger, J., & Oxburgh, E. R. (2010). *Raising Utility and Lowering Risk through Adaptive Sustainability: Society and Wealth Inequity in Western Australia*. *Journal of Sustainable Development*, 3(3), 14-35.

them, who participate in well-conceived programs or continue patterns of life as before. We all have agency and none of our decisions are without consequence. Establishing sustainable patterns of individual and collective life will therefore require not only new technologies, but also a new consciousness in human beings, including a new conception of ourselves and our place in the world.

From where will this consciousness arise? And where will the volition and self-discipline needed to embody it in countless cities, towns, and villages be found? Qualities such as the capacity to sacrifice for the well-being of the whole, to trust and be trustworthy, to find contentment, to give freely and generously to others derive not from mere pragmatism or political expediency. Rather they arise from the deepest sources of human inspiration and motivation. In this, faith has shown itself to be key, whether in the efficacy of sustainability efforts or the capacity of the human race.

Of particular note is the role to be played by religious faith. Religion has been a feature of human civilization since the dawn of recorded history, and has prompted countless multitudes to arise and exert themselves for the well-being of others. Religion offers an understanding of human existence and development that lifts the eye from the rocky path to the distant horizon. And when true to the spirit of its transcendent founders, religion has been one of the most powerful forces for the creation of new and beneficial patterns of individual and collective life.

Religion therefore offers a vital source of commitment to new and potentially challenging patterns of daily life. It is notable that religious leaders and faith-based organizations have been increasingly active on environmental and justice issues as they relate to climate change. But religious conviction does not automatically translate into service to the common good. It is entirely possible, for example, to have a congregation of well-intentioned adherents whose actions do little to contribute to the betterment of society. Clearly there is much to learn about how noble ideals become expressed in committed, sustained action. In this sense, religious communities can be understood as communities of practice in which spiritual teachings are translated into social reality. Within them, a process of capacity building that enables people of all backgrounds to participate in the transformation of society can be set in motion. How this unfolds in different contexts and cultures promises to be an area of rich exploration for all working on sustainability issues.

Identifying the spiritual principles at the root of ecological challenges can also be key in formulating effective action. Principles— that humanity constitutes but a single people, for example, or that justice demands universal participation in the work of sustainable development – reflect the rich complexity of human nature. Just as importantly, they help foster the will and the aspiration needed to facilitate the implementation of pragmatic measures. Identifying the principles underlying given issues and formulating action in light of their imperatives is therefore a methodology that all can benefit from and contribute to – those in traditionally religious roles, but also leaders of government, the corporate sector, civil society, and others involved in the formulation of public policy.

A Basis for Collective Action

Action on issues of sustainability is often grounded in the sentiment that we all live on the same planet. Of course shared concerns such as climate change, transnational migration, and global pandemics are not to be discounted. But truly transforming individual and collective patterns of life will require a much deeper appreciation of the interconnectedness of the planetary biosphere. People and the environment are interconnected aspects of one organically integrated system. At this point in history, neither can be accurately understood in isolation from the other.

Implicit in this understanding is the organic oneness of the human race itself. Deceptively simple in popular discourse, the concept that humanity constitutes a single people has numerous implications for the formulation of effective action at all levels. COP 21, for example, can be understood as an opportunity to embrace more deeply the practical implications of the oneness of humanity, including the obligation to translate our moral responsibility toward one another and the natural world into tangible agreements, approaches, and plans of action.

A rich and deepening consciousness of the oneness of humankind is the only way that the obstacles inherent in dichotomies like rich/poor, north/south, developed/developing can be overcome. Designations of this kind are not without basis, for some countries *do* have more financial resources than others. But while such realities are not to be denied, neither should they be allowed to paralyze constructive action. Rather, they should be incorporated into the perspective that an integrated, sustainable and prosperous world will not be built by “us” working together with “them”, but by all of us working on behalf of everyone.

The principle of the oneness of humankind highlights the powerful connections found between raising the well-being of people and reversing environmental degradation. It is true that the ecological footprint of certain areas is far larger than that of others. This is a reality that will need to be addressed through both voluntary choice and governmental regulation. But equally important will be lifting billions out of poverty in ways that not only reduce harm to the environment, but actively improve it. Addressing social needs in the context of environmental ones responds to the pressing moral imperatives of climate change. But its rationale is highly pragmatic as well, for climate change calls for urgent action, and the dividends of such steps are greater the sooner they are taken.

Efforts of this kind also lay a foundation for valuing people and the planet as explicitly as profit has been. It is widely recognized today that the single-minded pursuit of financial gain has all too often led to the destruction of both natural systems and human lives. This legacy has left deep ambivalence about the role the corporate sector and market forces should play in sustainability efforts. Such questions are complex and not simply answered. But what seems imperative is that good faith efforts be integrated into a just global effort that avoids all forms of exclusion that breeds opposition, hostility, defensiveness, and distrust.

Recasting Relationships for a Sustainable Planet

The principle of the oneness of humankind has implications for relationships at all levels. Individual choices and governmental action are often subtly placed in opposition to one another, suggesting that one or the other either takes or deserves precedence. In reality, of course, both are needed. Agreements and protocols at the governmental level will not be sufficient if individuals do not adopt more sustainable lifestyles and behaviors. Similarly, individual actions alone, such as conserving water and reducing waste, for instance, will not be sufficient if governments do not make the necessary changes at the structural level. Also crucial is the community which, as a distinct unit of civilization with its own capacities and qualities, has a unique and vital role that cannot be overlooked. Increasing integration between these three levels will be needed, if long-lasting progress is to be achieved.

What might this look like in practice? Consumption habits provide a helpful illustration. People might be open to recycling, for example, but live in areas without services such as drop-off centers or community composting. Without appropriate supports from government, then, possibilities for individual change are severely constrained. Institutional action to create an enabling environment is needed. Government has a vital role to enact the policies, laws, and regulations needed to support the desired actions and behaviors.

This framework, however, merely sets the stage. For ultimately it is individuals who take the initiative to adopt new patterns of action or continue with business as usual. Human behavior and personal decision-making are therefore critical to the success of sustainability efforts, particularly in the sphere of values, ethics, and morals. Such qualities might seem diffuse or somewhat “soft”, but changes in lifestyle will not be sustained if normative drivers of behaviors such as attitudes and beliefs do not shift as well. Consumption habits will not change if acquisition and the ongoing accumulation of luxury goods are seen as powerful symbols of success and importance. Building more sustainable patterns of life will therefore require continuing conversation about human nature and the prerequisites of well-being.

How do such conversations arise? Government can contribute, through educational outreach and efforts to build commitment among stakeholders. But the community has a vital role to play in allowing for dialogue about choices and behavior. Are municipal or provincial policies on water conservation welcomed as progress or treated as an unnecessary hassle? Are collective decisions about infrastructure informed by a shared vision of the future or do individuals mostly look out for themselves? The qualities of culture that inform questions such as these arise within the context of community. The community can provide an arena in which numerous participants, backgrounds, talents, and efforts combine to achieve change and progress. It also provides a key space in which consensus on shared goals and objectives can be reached and a common vision of the future built among a population. The growing list of cities taking far more robust action than their national governments on climate issues is just one example of the power

inherent in a community that is able to pursue a common purpose through coordinated efforts.

Exploring new patterns of interaction among the actors of society, such as individuals and institutions, will be central to the task of building more sustainable relationships with the natural world and among various segments of the global family. The work of addressing global climate change ultimately revolves around the aim of human lives well lived, which is a goal cherished by people and cultures the world over. In it can therefore be found a powerful point of unity to support the work ahead. We trust that the efforts of those at COP 21 will contribute to building a firm foundation on which the well-being and prosperity of humanity can be ever more effectively pursued for this and future generations.