

Beyond the Consumer Economy

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Who is most responsible?

The most significant impact on the environment and sustainability comes from the wealthy and our society of abundance.... The only way we can avoid the climate and biodiversity catastrophes is through a significant reduction in our lifestyle and GDP in Western economies, with all the losses in employment and changes in our economic model that this implies. We must rethink our communities from the bottom up and simplify our ways of living.

(based on Thomas Wiedmann et al. (2020) Scientists' Warning on Affluence. *Nature Communications* 11:3107
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-020-16941-y>)

Questioning the consumer culture

- Materialism's gospel of human betterment produced today's consumer culture pursuing ephemeral goals
- Selfishness becomes a prized commercial resource; falsehood reinvents itself as public information; greed, lust, indolence, pride - even violence - acquire not merely broad acceptance but social and economic value

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

Greed Institutionalized

- traditional corporations are greed institutionalized
- corporate lobbies and corruption now control most governments
- there is no global governance for non-state entities like corporations
- no influence over those with real power today in the economic system

No going back

- there is no going back
- the past is no guide to the future
- that future is yet to be invented
- this is your challenge as youth

Need for a positive response

In your community, you can foster community cohesion, connectedness and participation, reduce inequality, build social capital with shared goals, while undertaking social actions to address local environmental problems.

You can generate meaning and purpose to create the active hope that you need.

Recognizing Human Nobility

[T]he nobility inherent to every human being... is a fundamental tenet... upon which hope for the future of humankind is built. Economic life is an arena for the expression of honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, generosity, and other qualities of the spirit. The individual is not merely a self-interested economic unit, striving to claim an ever-greater share of the world's material resources.

(Universal House of Justice, To the Baha'is of the World, 1 March 2017)

Questioning our assumptions

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

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

What about our gender stereotypes?

Identities based on racism, nationalism and religious bigotry have deep roots in our subconscious.

We inherit so much without questioning that it requires a significant effort to bring ourselves to account each day.

Redefining progress

Only by ensuring that material progress is consciously connected to spiritual and social progress can the promise of a better world be fulfilled.

(Bahá'í International Community, A Governance Befitting, 21 September 2020)

Rethinking Economic Arrangements

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.

Concepts of contentment, sufficiency, and simplicity, which find little place in growth-driven paradigms, will have to be reclaimed and expanded.

(Bahá'í International Community. *One Planet, One Habitation: A Bahá'í Perspective on Recasting Humanity's Relationship with the Natural World*, 1 June 2022, [Rethinking Economic Arrangements](#))

Rethinking Economics

Society must develop new economic models....
Resources must be directed... 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.

(Bahá'í International Community, *Valuing Spirituality in Development: Initial Considerations Regarding the Creation of Spiritually Based Indicators for Development*. A concept paper written for the World Faiths and Development Dialogue, Lambeth Palace, London, 18-19 February 1998)

A shift in perspective - values

This requires a fundamental shift in how you view certain essential concepts:

- the true purpose of life
- the nature of progress
- the meaning of true happiness and well-being
- the place of material pursuits in your individual and family life

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

Choosing Your Field of Work

- Consider the difference between gaining wealth through earnest effort in fields such as agriculture, commerce, the arts, and industry, or
- obtaining it without exertion or through dishonourable means
- what consequences for individual development and social progress?
- how can you generate income to ensure true happiness through the development of spiritual qualities, such as honesty, trustworthiness, generosity, justice, and consideration for others, and the recognition that material means are to be expended for the betterment of the world?

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

New and emerging careers

- alternative economics, work as service
- eliminating poverty, reducing inequality
- new social structures, institutions, governance
- building unity in local communities, managing migration
- saving the Earth, endangered species, ecosystems
- regeneration, food and agriculture, water, biocapacity
- renewable energy, climate adaptation, loss and damage
- education to enable individual capacity

Things to consider

How would the economy function?

What would be everyone's rights and responsibilities?

Most fundamentally, what would be the underlying principles and values to guide this ever-evolving system?

Things to consider

The physical characteristics of the world we want to build and live in

How our human systems will relate to and integrate with the natural systems of the biosphere

The qualities of our communities

The systems of organization and governance required from the local to the global levels

Things to consider

What wisdom from older generations might be useful?

What new wisdom of a very different world can we bring to our discussions?

Is there a role for religion?

What future do we want to invent?

Ways Forward

- everyone should have education/training and opportunity to serve society
- education to overcome gender stereotypes
- replacing monetary wealth by human well-being as goal of society
- importance of environmental well-being to justice and equity
- priority to the spiritual dimension of values and moral principles

Pathway to Sustainability

The pathway to sustainability will be one of empowerment, collaboration and continual processes of questioning, learning and action in all regions of the world. It will be shaped by the experiences of women, men, children, the rich, the poor, the governors and the governed as each one is enabled to play their rightful role in the construction of a new society. As the sweeping tides of consumerism, unfettered consumption, extreme poverty and marginalization recede, they will reveal the human capacities for justice, reciprocity and happiness.

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

International Environment Forum (IEF)

IEF is a Baha'i-inspired professional organization for environment and sustainability founded in 1997, with over 500 members in 90 countries. It is accredited by UN in the science/technology major group. It addresses:

- Interface of science and ethics
- Climate change and environmental sustainability
- Extremes of wealth and poverty, a just economy
- International environmental governance

It works for the fundamental systems change needed to transition to a sustainable society <https://iefworld.org>

