

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

June 2022

Part 2 of 4

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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.

(One Planet – One Habitation §12)

Consensus in 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 in action

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.

(One Planet – One Habitation §14)

Consensus in 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.

(One Planet – One Habitation §15)

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.

(One Planet – One Habitation §16)

PROPOSALS FOR EXPLORATION

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.

(One Planet – One Habitation §16)

PROPOSALS FOR EXPLORATION

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.

(One Planet – One Habitation §16)

PROPOSALS FOR EXPLORATION

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.

(One Planet – One Habitation §16)

PROPOSALS FOR EXPLORATION

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.

(One Planet – One Habitation §16)

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?

(One Planet – One Habitation §17)

Redefining progress

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.

(One Planet – One Habitation §18)

Redefining progress

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.

(One Planet – One Habitation §18)

Redefining progress

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.

(One Planet – One Habitation §19)

Redefining progress

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.

(One Planet – One Habitation §19)

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.

(BOX: Rethinking Economic Arrangements)

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.

(BOX: Rethinking Economic Arrangements)

Rethinking Economic Arrangements

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.

(BOX: Rethinking Economic Arrangements)

Rethinking Economic Arrangements

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.

(BOX: Rethinking Economic Arrangements)

Rethinking Economic Arrangements

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.

(BOX: Rethinking Economic Arrangements)

Rethinking Economic Arrangements

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.

(BOX: Rethinking Economic Arrangements)

Poverty shall disappear

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

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.

(One Planet – One Habitation §20)

Redefining progress

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.

(One Planet – One Habitation §20)

Redefining progress

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.

(One Planet – One Habitation §21)

Redefining progress

To redefine progress is not to dismiss any legitimate accomplishments of the past, but to expand the boundaries of achievements yet to come.

From new approaches to ownership and usership, to new forms of urban organization, to new methods of agriculture, power generation, and transportation, the possibilities before humanity are vast.

(One Planet – One Habitation §22)

Redefining progress

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.

(One Planet – One Habitation §22)

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.

(One Planet – One Habitation §23)

PROPOSALS FOR EXPLORATION

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.

(One Planet – One Habitation §23)

PROPOSALS FOR EXPLORATION

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 Planet – One Habitation §23)

PROPOSALS FOR EXPLORATION

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.

(One Planet – One Habitation §23)

Sources

Bahá'í International Community. *One Planet, One Habitation: A Bahá'í Perspective on Recasting Humanity's Relationship with the Natural World*, 1 June 2022. https://iefworld.org/2022bic_OPOH and https://www.bic.org/sites/default/files/pdf/one_planet_one_habitation.pdf

Working Toward One Planet and One Habitation: Sustainability and Environmental Efforts by Bahá'í Communities Around the World <https://opoh.bic.org/>

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