

Scientific and Spiritual Dimensions of Climate Change

Unit 10

A Holistic Approach to Action

Sections 5 and 6 are specifically intended for Baha'i communities but can easily be put into the context of other faith communities.

Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and centre your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.¹

Bahá'u'lláh,

Section 1: Individual Actions

The climate crisis is huge and requires fundamental changes in society, which will be the topic of the sections below.

Individual actions, though, are important for many reasons:

1. Living an environmentally responsible life is essential for our spiritual integrity. "Justice demands coherence between word and deed."² Our actions must reflect the high spiritual principles of our faith.
2. The collective efforts of individual actions to lead a more environmentally responsible life do make a significant difference.
3. All our economic choices have an influence on the economic system. When we buy something, we are supporting the production of that particular product. For example when we buy an organically grown broccoli, we are supporting organic agriculture. The collective efforts of lowering individual consumption and choosing sustainable products sends a market signal to companies.
4. Good actions are inspiring and are inviting other people to follow. Cultural change starts with individual initiative. Social norms will gradually change.
5. Individuals are also the protagonists of public discourse, social action, and community building (see sections 3, 4, 5 below).

You may like to take some time to talk about individual actions. Aspects to consider may be the different areas of life such as energy, food, and transportation, as well as activities such as shopping, work, and recreation. Sometimes, there are also constraints and obstacles to individual actions, for example, the absence of good public transportation or limitations of time and finances. Perhaps you can share with each other what you are already doing for the environment and what kind of actions you may like to take in the future.

Section 2: A Holistic Approach to Action

The huge problems of climate change and the destruction of the natural world are interconnected with social problems such as abject poverty and exorbitant wealth, an increasing global hunger crisis, systemic inequality and injustice, an impending economic collapse, human conflicts, violence and wars, and a breakdown of social cohesion.

With their [17 Sustainable Development Goals](#), the United Nations have clearly laid out what we must achieve to enable all people to have their basic needs met and lead a dignified life while maintaining the integrity of the Earth's natural systems. There is also an abundance of knowledge and scientific advances we can draw on to make the world a better place. However, despite many well-intentioned efforts, actions toward these goals have been slow, incremental, and by far not adequate to the human suffering and the existential threats to humanity's future. What is missing is a strong collective will.

'Abdu'l-Baha explained:

*The attainment of any object is conditioned upon knowledge, volition and action. Unless these three conditions are forthcoming, there is no execution or accomplishment.*³

Volition can be strengthened by the cultivation of a deep consciousness of the oneness of humanity that finds expression in a commitment to global solidarity. Baha'u'llah wrote:

*Let your vision be world embracing rather than confined to your own self.*⁴

*True peace and tranquillity will only be realized when every soul will have become the well-wisher of all mankind.*⁵

The Universal House of Justice explained the importance of these words for our time:

*Humanity's crying need ... calls ... for a fundamental change of consciousness ... that the time has come when each human being on earth must learn to accept responsibility for the welfare of the entire human family.*⁶

This world-embracing perspective also helps us to approach environmental actions in a holistic manner that includes the social and economic needs of a community.

The Universal House of Justice outlines three broad areas of actions that overlap:

*The friends are called to three simultaneous, overlapping, and coherent areas of action: community-building efforts ...; projects and activities for social action; and involvement in the discourses of society, ...*⁷

We will briefly discuss these three areas below.

Section 3: Public Discourse

*The world is in desperate need of a shared ethic, a sure framework for addressing the crises that gather like storm clouds.*⁸

Universal House of Justice

Humankind has finally woken up to the tremendous threat of climate change, and communities and institutions are seriously deliberating what to do about it.

Individuals and communities can infuse such public discourse with spiritual and ethical principles. All the spiritual principles discussed in this course can be applied depending on the context. In summary, here are some key points:

- Effective climate action requires a world-embracing view that has the well-being of all of humankind and of future generations in mind. This is the application of the Baha'i teaching on the oneness of humankind.
- Pollution has no boundaries. Strong and enforceable laws need to be created to limit greenhouse gas emissions, not only on the local and national level, but also on the international level. There is a desperate need for global environmental governance. Baha'i contributions to public discourse have therefore often emphasized the fundamental importance of global governance, particularly global environmental governance.
- The imperative of abandoning materialism and consumerism is another important area of discourse. We can advance civilization by developing spirituality, culture, sciences, and the arts, but not with an ever-growing production of material things.
- Putting people over profit: *“Building actionable consensus around moral and ethical standards, alongside climate and environmental standards, can help ensure principle takes precedence over profit.”*⁹
- One important point in public discourse is that a transition away from fossil fuels toward an environmentally sustainable economy must be just, so that the necessary sacrifices will not burden financially poor people.

The Universal House of Justice explains the broad nature of public discourse:

*... involvement in public discourse can range from an act as simple as introducing Bahá'í ideas into everyday conversation to more formal activities such as the preparation of articles and attendance at gatherings, dedicated to themes of social concern—climate change and the environment, governance and human rights, to mention a few. It entails, as well, meaningful interactions with civic groups and local organizations in villages and neighbourhoods.*¹⁰

Section 4: Social Action

Social action comes from the grassroots. The Universal House of Justice explained that the primary concern of social action *“must be to build capacity within a given*

*population to participate in creating a better world' and that 'social change is not a project that one group of people carries out for the benefit of another.' Indeed, such endeavours are best initiated from within the communities they are intended to benefit ..."*¹¹

Fruitful social action requires the participation by representatives of all segments of society from the very beginning: People with different racial, cultural, and economic backgrounds, women, Indigenous people, youth and elders, people who have lived in the community for generations as well as newcomers and immigrants, faith communities, representatives of business, political leaders, scientists, and especially people most affected by the issue discussed.

The first step in social action is to assess the reality of a community's situation and to identify needs and problems. Each locality is different, and various environmental issues are usually interconnected with each other and with social and economic concerns. A wide range of questions could be asked such as: Is there a need to adapt to a changing climate or protect our community from worsening storms, droughts, floods, or sea-level rise? Is there a threat to native plants and animals, and are there local ecosystems such as forests or wetlands that need to be protected or restored? What can we do in our community to help the climate? Are there practical actions such as promoting the use of clean energy or would educational activities that elevate the community above materialism and consumerism be most helpful?

Here is a resource that shows the broad spectrum of potential questions about human well-being, social and economic issues, and environmental concerns:

[Assessment of Reality: Questions for Local Community Assessment](#)

A next step will be consultation about how the issues identified can be addressed. It is helpful to use a holistic approach. Social or environmental problems cannot be solved in isolation as they are usually connected to other issues. Often, several problems can and need to be addressed together. What spiritual principles can be applied?

When consulting about one specific problem, it is important to keep the complexity of the situation in mind, to always remember the well-being of all people and of future generations as well as that of the environment.

Depending on the topic discussed, it may be necessary to draw in experts in a particular field. Such experts can be scientists, engineers, civil servants, or Indigenous people knowledgeable about the land.

Identify the ethical principles that would guide the process, for example, is it an issue of equity for a certain segment of the population, or an issue of justice considering future generations, or is it an issue that requires a commitment to truthfulness and honesty?

When considering action, it is wise to be mindful of the human and financial resources available.

Participants may also consider the range of their agency. Neighbourhood or community groups may not have the same authority as the government to institute change. Sometimes it is possible for a community group to collaborate with the government.

The success of a project lies in unity. After diverse views were heard and ideas explored, once a majority finds agreement on a certain action, everyone would need to support it, even those who hold other opinions.

Constructive projects are approached in an attitude of learning. Mistakes will show a clearer path forward. Tolerance, patience, and perseverance are prerequisites for success.

Generally, it is best to begin with small actions. One possible way to start is with identifying one or perhaps two areas where action is most urgent. Another option is to think about some low-hanging fruits, in other words, are there some possible actions that can easily be taken right now?

You may like to discuss how education considering all ages can help with getting support for meaningful action from the wider community.

It is not necessary to “complete” the assessments in all areas before moving toward action to address the most urgent problems. Social action is necessarily an ongoing process of assessing conditions and consulting about how to improve them. It will continue with reflections on the benefits of actions taken, followed by further assessments, reflections, and actions.

Section 5: Community Building

Baha'u'llah said about the future condition of the world *"Such shall be its plight, that to disclose it now would not be meet and seemly."*¹²

It is very difficult to imagine the deterioration of the human condition that lies ahead when worsening climate-change impacts and mounting social problems will converge into an existential crisis.

That is one reason why it is so important to build social cohesion. Strong communities in which people care for each other are more resilient and more able to adapt to worsening climate-change impacts and to work together for the well-being of all.

All over the world, Baha'is are engaged in devotional gatherings, study circles, children's classes and youth educational programs.

These activities help individuals and communities to develop their spiritual capacity, to detach from the ego, and to turn their interest to the common good. They also promote knowledge and develop capacity and skills for service.

And they provide a training ground for applying the Baha'i teachings in our interaction with others. We are all on a path of learning in many areas, for example in how to overcome racism and truly embrace everyone as an equal member of the human

family, or how to overcome environmentally destructive habits and to live a simpler life in harmony with nature.

These activities build community by connecting hearts in friendship. Integrating environmental considerations and actions in community life and education is the topic of the next section.

Section 6: Education

A. The Importance of Environmental Education in the Bahá'í Community

There is a strong need for basic environmental education for all ages. When communities learn about the climate crisis, they can apply the Baha'i teachings and incorporate environmentally responsible actions in their activities.

*These are not days of prosperity and triumph. The whole of mankind is in the grip of manifold ills. Strive, therefore, to save its life through the wholesome medicine which the almighty hand of the unerring Physician hath prepared.*¹³

Baha'u'llah

So, Baha'u'llah calls on us to apply His healing medicine to the current ills of humankind. Administering the medicine requires the knowledge of the illness, as Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, pointed out:

*If the Bahá'ís want to be really effective in teaching the Cause they need to be much better informed and able to discuss intelligently, intellectually, the present condition of the world and its problems.*¹⁴

Environmental education is important for all the three areas of action Bahá'ís are called to by the Universal House of Justice, namely *community-building efforts, projects and activities for social action, and involvement in the discourses of society.*¹⁵

Public discourse will certainly grow in scope and importance. In the years ahead, it will expand from the international and national to the local level. This requires much capacity-building from the bottom up.

This means that we will increasingly need more Bahá'ís who have knowledge about environmental issues and deep insight into the Bahá'í teachings, and who have learned to apply spiritual teachings to these issues.

The Bahá'í teachings demand that words must be supported by deeds. Therefore, public discourse about issues of the environment and sustainable development needs to be accompanied by environmentally responsible community activities and individual lifestyles. Of course, the motivation for such environmentally responsible actions does not come from the outside, merely from a concern how our actions as Bahá'ís are perceived by others, but originates from the heart, as a genuine expression of the Bahá'í teachings about caring for all people and all creatures.

This does not happen automatically as the Bahá'í International Community pointed out:

*... religious conviction does not automatically translate into service to the common good. It is entirely possible, for example, to have a congregation of wellintentioned 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.*¹⁶

There is a need for education about “how noble ideals become expressed in committed, sustained action.”

The Universal House of Justice emphasized how important it is that our actions are aligned with our spiritual principles:

*Every choice a Bahá'í makes ... leaves a trace, and the moral duty to lead a coherent life demands that one's economic decisions be in accordance with lofty ideals, that the purity of one's aims be matched by the purity of one's actions to fulfil those aims.*¹⁷

Understanding the traces, the consequences, of our actions – specifically what impacts they have on the climate and the environment – requires education.

Here are two examples:

- Many environmental problems and social injustices that are connected to our way of life are often geographically removed. For example, when we buy a pair of jeans, we don't see the catastrophic river pollution in China caused by the production of the jeans, and we don't see the people who suffer from the pollution. So, the central Baha'i teaching of the oneness of humankind can be made tangible with such examples. Of course, such education needs to go beyond cognitive recognition, but grow in each human heart.
- For sustainable human behavior it is also important to learn to think in the long-term. Our actions today determine the state of the world's climate in 30 years and beyond. We can prevent much human suffering and “run-away” climate catastrophe with strong actions now.

Environmental education can facilitate a deepening consciousness and understanding that our every-day actions affect our brothers and sisters all around the world. Such an attitude will change the way we live and what we consume.

B. Incorporating Environmental Education in Bahá'í Activities

So how can we build capacity and achieve a higher level of environmentally responsible consciousness and action in our communities?

At an interfaith gathering at Windsor Castle in 2009, each Faith Community submitted their plan of action on climate change. In their contribution, the Bahá'í International

Community explained the process of a Bahá'í approach to environmental education. Below are two excerpts from the statement that are relevant for us today.

[Environmental education] would not simply be aimed at increasing knowledge on the subject but ... would build the capacity of participants to engage in acts of service related to environmental sustainability. Similarly, the programs for children and junior youth would include material on climate change and the contribution that the younger generation can make to address the climate crisis.

Providing a program on themes related to climate change and the environment for the general community as well as education for children and junior youth will be an important step in integrating the spiritual and the practical in a community already committed to the betterment of the planet.¹⁸

The support and encouragement of Bahá'í institutions for environmental awareness, education, and action is vitally important.

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States has written letters to the community in that regard for many years. Here is their letter on the topic of Faith Climate Action Week, dated March 15, 2023:

With spring approaching, we delight to see leaves emerging, winter chill receding, and flowers budding. There are few better times to appreciate the abundance with which our planet has been blessed; nevertheless, even in appreciation of this bounty, we cannot forget that our global environment is in a state of upheaval. According to a recent report from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2022 alone saw 18 separate climate and weather disasters, leading to costs and damages of \$165 billion, which made 2022 the third most costly year with the third highest number of extreme climate events on record. It is no surprise that the disintegrative forces of consumerism and materialism are wreaking havoc on our cherished natural environment.

... we encourage all friends who are interested in serving in the area of education, to assess the needs of their community in regard to environmental awareness and education in a consultative manner, and to then serve that need by infusing environmental topics into their ongoing activities or with special programs that expand the community's environmental knowledge and build capacity in applying spiritual principles and expressing their learning in social action. In a letter to all National Spiritual Assemblies, the Universal House of Justice wrote about "preparing and refining educational materials," saying "We have thus concluded that it would now be propitious for more attention to be paid to extending the capacity to prepare educational materials, particularly in relation to supplementary materials and branch courses."¹⁹

In your educational efforts, you may therefore develop entirely new materials or use already existing materials such as this course and adapt them to your special circumstances.

The following words by Baha'u'llah and the Universal House of Justice give us confidence and strength in whatever challenges may lie ahead:

O people of Bahá! Each one of the ordinances We have revealed is a mighty stronghold for the preservation of the world of being.²⁰

May your minds be ever bent upon the needs of the communities to which you belong, the condition of the societies in which you live, and the welfare of the entire family of humanity, to whom you are all brothers and sisters.²¹

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 - ³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 217–218
 - ⁴ Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah XLIII
 - ⁵ Baha'u'llah, *The Tabernacle of Unity*, www.bahai.org/r/161451281
 - ⁶ 24 May 2001 – To the Believers Gathered for the Events Marking the Completion of the Projects on Mount Carmel, www.bahai.org/r/150293656
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 - ¹¹ From a letter dated 22 October 2012 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/compilations/social-action/3#957685528>
 - ¹² Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah LXI
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 - ¹⁵ Universal House of Justice, 27 April, 2017
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