

Sustainable Development, A Bahá'í View: Warwick Leaflets

Economic Growth and the Environment

Sustainable development is normally defined as development which meets present needs without reducing the ability of future generations to meet their needs. However, just the reverse is happening, since economic growth has largely occurred through running down the environment, which is essential to the biological, economic and social stability of our society.

The environment provides the raw materials for economic development (fossil fuels, minerals, timber, etc.); acts as a sink or dumping ground for the waste (often toxic) of the system; provides life-sustaining environmental services (eg climate stability, soil conservation); and supports human (and animal) habitats, cultures and livelihoods. The problem is that the more the environment contributes to the first two functions, the more the latter two suffer. Global warming, the thinning of the ozone layer, ground, water and air pollution, over-fishing and the loss of forests and wetlands are all very serious consequences. But this is disguised in the way we measure economic growth - the decline in the value of the environment is not taken into consideration in national income accounts.

These problems are made worse by what economists call 'market failure': unless governments intervene there is no mechanism for people to pay the social costs of profitable private activities - like soil erosion and flooding caused by deforestation, or pollution from industrial processes - just as there are no means of paying for the environmental benefits which arise from private actions, eg sustainable forest management by Amazonian rubber-tappers. Market forces therefore do not favour or reward sustainable natural resource management. In fact they encourage and reward the opposite - exploitation of the environment for short term benefit.

Extremes of Poverty and Wealth

This picture becomes more complicated when we introduce the problem of equity. The growth process has been accompanied by an increasing division of wealth and poverty due to a host of historical factors such as the technological, educational and military dominance of some countries, and inequities in the system of international trade. Apart from the moral unacceptability of a situation in which the top 20% of the world's population is 150 times richer than the bottom 20% (according to United Nations research), extremes of wealth also increase environmental degradation. At the poverty end of the scale, countries are forced to exploit their natural resources to pay national debt interest, and landless people cut down forests to grow basic food crops. Population growth is highest among the poorest. At the richer end, over-consumption of energy and material goods is directly causing global warming, pollution, etc. As Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, warned over 100 years ago:

"If carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it has been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation."

The Earth Summit and Agenda 21

The Earth Summit was held in Rio in 1992 to discuss these problems. Although this was an historic meeting, the clash of national and vested interest groups prevented far-reaching solutions to these

problems. Arguably the most significant output was Agenda 21, a blueprint for sustainable development for the 21st Century. Many of the central ideas in Agenda 21 - education, consultation, participation, the role of women, global cooperation, the tackling of poverty, etc. - echo Bahá'u'lláh's writings. The following are some of the main principles that form a Bahá'í view of how to progress towards sustainable development.

A Change in the Value System

Materialistic and ego-centred values underpin all the above-mentioned problems - for example, economic growth relies on ever-increasing consumption. It is clear that for genuine and effective action to tackle the problems of poverty and over-consumption, a major change in the value system is essential. However, inertia is preventing society from making such a change; the Bahá'í Peace Statement sent to world leaders in 1985 described this as a "*paralysis of will*" rooted in a "*deep-seated conviction of the inevitable quarrelsomeness of mankind*." Many believe that human beings are inevitably selfish and egocentric. However in many indigenous societies, values are orientated more to the community than the individual; for example in some Amerindian societies it is regarded as anti-social to accumulate wealth. Values stem primarily from culture and education. The main role of divine revelation is to help people develop their inherent 'spiritual' potential. Bahá'u'lláh said:

"Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can alone cause it to reveal its treasures."

The Development of New Democratic Structures

With the change in values must come new democratic structures which seek the widest participation, transparency and accountability in decision making, as recognized in Agenda 21. The Bahá'í community offers the world a new model based on elected institutions at the local, national and global levels, and free of divisive party political processes like propaganda. The Bahá'í model reflects the need for a balance between decentralization in decision-making and international legislation and control - since environmental and development problems and potential solutions transcend national boundaries. An unbridled economic nationalism is weakening the stability on which each individual country ultimately depends.

The proper functioning of Bahá'í institutions depends on unity between the elected members, and a detached and loving process of consultation, described by Bahá'u'lláh as "*the maturity of the gift of understanding*". Only when ego and self-interest are subordinated to the greater benefit of society can effective solutions be identified and developed.

The Role of Women

The equality of rights and opportunities for women and men is a central tenet of the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'u'lláh even said that in a situation in which there are insufficient resources to educate all the children, priority should be given to girls as they are the primary educators of the next generation. Recent World Bank research shows that the highest return on any form of social investment is from education of girls and women.

The Harmonisation of Scientific and Religious Viewpoints

Bahá'ís believe that science and religion complement each other in the individual process of investigation of truth. The development process reflects a bewildering complex of biological, economic, social, political, ethical and spiritual or psychological problems. At present these problems are being assessed almost entirely from the 'scientific' reductionist viewpoint, but many aspects of the problem, like human motivation, prejudice in all its various forms, and corruption, relate more to the human psyche; thus for

Bahá'ís, the problems of the environment and development are aspects of *"the world encompassing sickness of the human spirit."*

A partial analysis of the problem can only lead to a partial solution. Introduction of the spiritual dimension not only involves a more holistic analysis, but also introduces a complementary subjective and intuitive element. For example we are now able to observe (through science) the perfect harmony and interdependence of complex eco-systems. An intuitive conclusion might be that the unity we observe in nature reflects a spiritual principle or law. When a spiritual law is broken, the consequences are likely to be severe. Such a viewpoint can influence the way we treat the environment and help develop lasting solutions.

The Need for a Global Citizenship Ethic

Agenda 21 correctly identifies the need for global co-operation, but does not really say how it will come about. This is why the Bahá'í community's response to Agenda 21 has been a campaign for 'World Citizenship' as a new global ethic for sustainable development: only when personal commitment broadens from family, ethnic and national concerns to a wider loyalty to the whole human race, will it be possible to effectively apply the principles of sustainable development contained in Agenda 21.

In conformity with Bahá'u'lláh's vision that *"the Earth is but one country and mankind its citizens"*, Bahá'ís believe that the oneness of mankind should be taught in schools and proclaimed at every possible level, in order to begin to overcome the racial, gender, religious and social prejudices of a divided humanity, and bring about the necessary unity for a lasting solution.

Bahá'ís worldwide are putting these principles into action in a range of educational, health, environmental and agricultural projects. In addition, the Bahá'í community has been very active in the Agenda 21 process. Bahá'ís try to act on Bahá'u'lláh's exhortation: *"Let deeds not words be your adorning."*

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