

Sustainable Development: Advancing Toward a Global Civilization

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Sustainable Development? Isn't it just for developing countries—and doesn't the responsibility for development rest with the United Nations and non-governmental organizations and charities? No! Today, every corner of the Earth needs sustainable development—and all of us are called to play a part in it. Baha'u'llah said: **“All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.”** – *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 215.

So what should civilization advance toward?

The Baha'i teachings provide us with quite a clear vision of a spiritual future civilization, what prophets have long referred to as humanity's Golden Age. From a Baha'i perspective, in that future state of civilization the Earth will become a place where people live in peace, where every individual is equally respected, no matter their race, nationality, gender, or economic status. Nobody will go hungry or live in poverty, and nobody will own excessive amounts of wealth. People will regard their work as worship, and do their best to serve their fellow world citizens. A global, democratically-elected parliament will govern the world's affairs. Human interactions will be characterized by trustworthiness. We will live in harmony with each other and with nature. The extreme pollution caused by previous generations that led to massive extinction of plants and animals, that warmed the earth and changed its climate will have ceased, and much effort will have gone into the clean-up and restoration of the Earth's ecosystems. All people will have access to education and basic services, and everyone will have the opportunity to develop their full spiritual potential and contribute to the common good.

So with those lofty goals in mind, development simply means the processes we utilize to get to this mature state of a global civilization.

That, of course, doesn't only mean material or technological development. Spiritual development forms the foundation for these changes, and is needed everywhere. Material development needs to include this spiritual dimension. The Baha'i writings say:

All the Prophets have come to promote divine bestowals, to found a spiritual civilization and teach the principles of morality. Therefore, we must strive with all our powers so that spiritual influences may gain the victory. For material forces have attacked mankind. The world of humanity is submerged in a sea of materialism. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 12.

Development efforts must consider the specific needs of each country or area. In developing nations, sustainable development means to address abject poverty and to improve access to fresh water, food, education, clean energy, sanitation, and health care.

In the so-called developed world, this means changing the economic system into a more equitable one, and ending the destruction of nature, of the life-support systems we all depend on. This means moving away from fossil fuels and implementing clean energy. It also means switching to agricultural methods in harmony with nature and healthy for farm workers, and which puts food production in the service of people and not only profit. It will require a major change in the transportation system, as well. Last, but not least, consumerism must be abandoned.

So how can we, as individuals, contribute to development and work for social change?
Baha'is believe that progress in the development field depends on and is driven by stirrings at the grass roots of society rather than from an imposition of externally developed plans and programmes. – Baha'i International Community's Seven Year Plan of Action on Climate Change, 2009, # 4.

Everyone will need to play a part in sustainable development. The Universal House of Justice provides Baha'is with the following council concerning social action:

... its primary concern must be to build capacity within a given population to participate in creating a better world. Social change is not a project that one group of people carries out for the benefit of another. – April 2010.

The Baha'i core activities, especially the study classes, aim to empower individuals by developing their capacity for service. Depending on the size of the community and its needs, the desire to be of service will lead to social action. In a statement, the Baha'i International Community describes these efforts in more detail:

... Baha'is all over the world are engaged in a coherent framework of action that promotes the spiritual development of the individual and channels the collective energies of its members towards service to humanity. Thousands upon thousands of Baha'is, embracing the diversity of the entire human family, are engaged in certain core activities. These activities promote the systematic study of the Baha'i Writings in small groups in order to build capacity for service. They respond to the inmost longing of every heart to commune

with its Maker by carrying out acts of collective worship in diverse settings, uniting with others in prayer, awakening spiritual susceptibilities, and shaping a pattern of life distinguished for its devotional character. They provide for the needs of the children of the world and offer them lessons that develop their spiritual faculties and lay the foundations of a noble and upright character. They also assist junior youth to navigate through a crucial stage of their lives and to become empowered to direct their energies toward the advancement of civilization. As Baha'is and their friends gain experience with these initiatives, an increasing number are able to express their faith through a rising tide of endeavours that address the needs of humanity in both their spiritual and material dimensions. – Ibid.

Everyone is welcome to participate in these efforts to uplift the human spirit, to improve our neighborhoods, and to build a better world.

Everyone is also welcome to learn more about what sustainable development means by participating in the online course *Sustainable Development and the Prosperity of Humankind* offered by the Wilmette Institute. In this 7-week course, you will have the opportunity to study the economic, social, and environmental issues that humanity faces in achieving sustainability and to discuss the spiritual principles that can help us find solutions. You will be able to explore the implications of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals for your community action, reflection, and consultation. Course materials will also cover the importance of education for sustainable development, reinforced with spiritual values, as the basis for helping each of us detach ourselves from Western materialistic civilization, reexamine our present lifestyles, and begin to live more sustainably in accordance with the Baha'i teachings. The Sustainable Development course will start on 1 September. Scholarships are available for those who need them.