



# RETHINKING PROSPERITY

*Forging Alternatives to a  
Culture of Consumerism*



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## *Forging Alternatives to a Culture of Consumerism*

*Bahá'í International Community's Contribution to the  
18th Session of the United Nations Commission  
on Sustainable Development*

**A**gainst the backdrop of climate change, environmental degradation, and the crippling extremes of wealth and poverty, the transformation from a culture of unfettered consumerism to a culture of sustainability has gained momentum in large part through the efforts of civil society organizations and governmental agencies worldwide. Beyond informed policies and 'greener technologies' it is a transformation that will require an earnest examination of our understanding of human nature and of the cultural frameworks driving institutions of government, business, education, and media around the world. Questions of what is *natural* and *just* will need to be critically re-examined.

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In its contribution to the Commission's review of the 10-Year Framework for Programmes<sup>1</sup> on Sustainable Consumption and Production, the Bahá'í International Community would like, first, to note the strengths of this evolving Framework and, second—in line with the vision outlined above—to identify issues which require further

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1 The main objective of the 10-Year Framework for Programmes is to be a global framework for action on sustainable consumption and production (SCP) that countries can endorse and commit to in order to accelerate the shift towards sustainable consumption and production patterns, thereby promoting social and economic development within the carrying capacity of ecosystems and de-linking economic growth from environmental degradation. The main challenge is to provide not only the key programs of the framework, but also the mechanisms for their implementation (e.g. financial support, capacity building, and technical assistance). See: *Proposed Input to CSD 18 and 19 on a 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production*. Third Public Draft (2 September 2009). Prepared by the Marrakech Process Secretariat: UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) and UN Environment Programme (UNEP). [[http://esa.un.org/marrakechprocess/pdf/Draft3\\_10yfpniputtoCSD2Sep09.pdf](http://esa.un.org/marrakechprocess/pdf/Draft3_10yfpniputtoCSD2Sep09.pdf)]

elaboration. In terms of its strengths: the Framework considers the economic, social and environmental aspects of the transition to sustainable consumption and production, thereby breaking down the long-standing compartmentalization of these domains<sup>2</sup>; it recognizes the inter-linkages between the themes of the Framework (e.g. education, institutional capacity building, participation of women, application of indigenous knowledge, etc.)<sup>3</sup>; it has sought to involve stakeholders from around the world through regional consultations; and it calls on actors from all levels of society to achieve the goals articulated therein.

Yet, given that the Framework seeks to promote the shift towards sustainable consumption and production—implicitly challenging cultural norms and values, which have promoted consumerism at all cost—a number of underlying conceptions will need to be examined and, in many cases, revised in order to advance the goals therein. These include conceptions of human nature; of development (and the nature of progress and prosperity); of the nature and causes of recent economic crises; of processes of technological

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2 “Applying a Life-Cycle Perspective to the economic system can provide a way to structure the overall approach of the 10YFP as well as identify clear entry points for actions as well as actors. It allows for single focus on either production or consumption, or integrated focus on both while taking into account the economic, social and environmental impacts of products and services throughout their whole life-cycle. Because it is based on the total use of resources going into the production of goods and provision of services as well as the resulting emissions and waste, this life-cycle perspective provides a holistic picture of all the entry points for remediation as well as possible synergistic intervention throughout the production and consumption chain.” *Proposed Input to CSD 18 and 19 on a 10-Year Framework of Programmes* (see Note 1).

3 Ibid.

development; and of the means and ends of educational processes. We invite others actively working to promote sustainable consumption and production to engage with us in dialogue about these underlying issues in order to learn from each other's perspectives and experiences and to collectively advance efforts to build a just and sustainable society.

### **Human nature**

The question of human nature has an important place in the discourse on sustainable consumption and production as it prompts us to re-examine, at the deepest levels, who we are and what our purpose is in life. The human experi-

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ence is essentially spiritual in nature: it is rooted in the inner reality—or what some call the ‘soul’—that we all share in common. The culture of consumerism, however, has tended to reduce human beings to competitive, insatiable consumers of goods and to objects of manipulation by the market. Commonly held views have assumed the existence of an intractable conflict between what people really want (i.e. to consume more) and what humanity needs (i.e. equitable access to resources). How, then, can we resolve the paralyzing contradiction that, on the one hand, we desire a world of peace and prosperity, while, on the other, much of economic and psychological theory depicts human beings as slaves to self-interest? The faculties needed to construct a more just and sustainable social order—moderation, justice,

love, reason, sacrifice and service to the common good—have too often been dismissed as naïve ideals. Yet, it is these, and related qualities that must be harnessed to overcome the traits of ego, greed, apathy and violence, which are often rewarded by the market and political forces driving current patterns of unsustainable consumption and production.

## **Vision of development**

In a similar manner, the articulation of a vision of sustainability must emerge from a public discourse on the nature and purpose of human development and the roles assigned to its protagonists.

The Bahá'í International Community understands the transition to sustainable consumption and production as part of a global enterprise which enables all individuals to fulfill their dual purpose, namely to develop their inherent potentialities and to contribute to the betterment of the

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wider community. It is not enough to conceive of sustainable consumption and production in terms of creating opportunities for those living in poverty to meet their basic needs. Rather, with the understanding that each individual has a contribution to make to the construction of a more just and peaceful social order, these processes must be arranged in a way that permits each to play his or her rightful role as a productive member of society. Within such a framework,

sustainable consumption and production could be characterized as processes that provide for the material, social and spiritual needs of humanity across generations and enable all peoples to contribute to the ongoing advancement of society.

Progress at the technical and policy levels now needs to be accompanied by public dialogue—among rural and urban dwellers; among the materially poor and the affluent; among men, women and young persons alike—on the ethical foundations of the necessary systemic change. A sustainable social order is distinguished, among other things, by an ethic of reciprocity and balance at all levels of human organization. A relevant analogy is the human body: here, millions of cells collaborate to make human life possible. The astounding diversity of form and function connects them in a lifelong process of giving and receiving. It represents the highest expression of unity *in* diversity. Within such an order, the concept of justice is embodied in the recognition that the interests of the individual and of the wider community are inextricably linked. The pursuit of justice within the frame of unity (in diversity) provides a guide for collective deliberation and decision-making and offers a means by which unified thought and action can be achieved.

Ultimately, the transformation required to shift towards sustainable consumption and production will entail no less than an organic change in the structure of society itself so as to reflect fully the interdependence of the entire social body—as well as the interconnectedness with the natural world that sustains it. Among these changes, many of which are already the focus of considerable public discourse, are: the consciousness of world citizenship; the eventual federation of all nations through an integrated system of governance with capacity for global decision-making; the establishment

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of structures which recognize humanity's common ownership of the earth's resources; the establishment of full equality between men and women; the elimination of all forms of prejudice; the establishment of a universal currency and other integrating mechanisms that promote global economic justice; the adoption of an international auxiliary language to facilitate mutual understanding; and the redirection of massive military expenditures towards constructive social ends<sup>4</sup>.

### **Crisis in the current economic system**

As is well known, the dominant model of development depends on a society of vigorous consumers of material

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4 “The enormous energy dissipated and wasted on war, whether economic or political, will be consecrated to such ends as will extend the range of human inventions and technical development, to the increase of the productivity of mankind, to the extermination of disease, to the extension of scientific research, to the raising of the standard of physical health, to the sharpening and refinement of the human brain, to the exploitation of the unused and unsuspected resources of the planet, to the prolongation of human life, and to the furtherance of any other agency that can stimulate the intellectual, the moral, and spiritual life of the entire human race.” Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991). [<http://reference.bahai.org/en/t/se/WOB/wob-56.html>].

goods.<sup>5</sup> In such a model, endlessly rising levels of consumption are cast as indicators of progress and prosperity. This preoccupation with the production and accumulation of material objects and comforts (as sources of meaning, happiness and social acceptance) has consolidated itself in the structures of power and information to the exclusion of competing voices and paradigms. The unfettered cultivation of needs and wants has led to a system fully dependent on excessive consumption for a privileged few, while reinforcing

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5 According to the Worldwatch Institute, consumption expenditures per person almost tripled between 1960 and 2006. (Worldwatch Institute, *State of the World 201: The Rise and Fall of Consumer Cultures*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010.) 60 billion tons of resources are extracted annually—50 percent more than 30 years ago. (Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without growth? The transition to a sustainable economy*. London: Sustainable Development Commission. March 2009; [[http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/publications/downloads/prosperity\\_without\\_growth\\_report.pdf](http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/publications/downloads/prosperity_without_growth_report.pdf)]. The 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment found that some 60% of ecosystem services—climate regulation, the provision of fresh water, waste treatment, food from fisheries, etc.—were being degraded or used unsustainably. (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, *Ecosystems and Human Well-Being: Synthesis*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 2005.)

patterns of consumption and production. Stark are the contrasts between the consumption of luxuries and the cost of provision of basic needs: basic education for all would cost \$10 billion<sup>6</sup>; yet \$82 billion is spent annually on cigarettes in the United States alone.<sup>7</sup> The eradication of world hunger would cost \$30 billion<sup>8</sup>; water and sanitation—\$10 billion.<sup>9</sup> By comparison, the world's military budget rose to \$1.55 trillion in 2008.<sup>10</sup>

The narrowly materialistic worldview underpinning much of modern economic thinking has contributed to the degradation of human conduct, the disruption of families and communities, the corruption of public institutions, and

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6 Action Aid (United Kingdom). *Fact File*. (<http://www.actionaid.org.uk>). See also: Sperling, Gene B. (Director of the Center for Universal Education, USA). *The Case for Universal Basic Education for the World's Poorest Boys and Girls*. November 2005. (Council on Foreign Relations, [www.cfr.org](http://www.cfr.org)).

7 *The Case for* Center for Disease Control and Prevention. *Economic Facts About U.S. Tobacco Use and Tobacco Production*. (Cites 2005 data). [[http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data\\_statistics/fact\\_sheets/economics/econ\\_facts/index.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/fact_sheets/economics/econ_facts/index.htm)].

8 United Nations. Press Release. *Secretary-General Calls for \$30 Billion to Restructure World Agriculture, Create Long-Term Food Security*. 30 November 2008. [<http://www.un.org/esa/ffd/doha/press/foodsideevent.pdf>]

9 “The estimated cost of closing the gap between current trends and what is needed to meet the target ranges from \$10 billion to \$18 billion per year.” United Nations Department of Public Information. Press Release. *Secretary-General, addressing side event, spells out areas ‘crying out for action’ to advance implementation of water and sanitation agenda*. 25 September 2008. [<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2008/sgsm11813.doc.htm>].

10 International Institute for Strategic Studies. [<http://www.iiss.org/whats-new/iiss-in-the-press/february-2010/report-military-spending-unaaffected-by-recession/>]

the exploitation and marginalization of large segments of the population—women and girls in particular. Unarguably, economic activity and the strengthening of the economy (a process that may include, but is not synonymous with, economic growth) have a central role to play in achieving the prosperity of a region and its people. Yet the shift towards a more just, peaceful and sustainable society will require attention to a harmonious dynamic between the material and non-material (or moral) dimensions of consumption and production. The latter, in particular, will be essential for laying the foundation for just and peaceful human relations; these include the generation of knowledge, the cultivation of trust and trustworthiness, eradication of racism and violence, promotion of art, beauty, science, and the capacity for collaboration and the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

In this light, it is also important to emphasize the relationship between production and employment as a critical dimension of a strong economy. Too often, increases in productivity have been accompanied by delocalization or a transition to automation and thus, rising levels of unemployment. A single-minded focus on profit-maximization has also valued workforce reduction wherever possible. Under the present system, unemployment and underemployment are soaring and the majority of the world's population does not earn enough to meet their basic needs. Those living in poverty have no means by which to express themselves in such a system. Sustainable production is not simply about 'greener' technology but rather, should involve systems that enable all human beings to contribute to the productive process. In such a system, all are producers, and all have the opportunity to earn (or receive, if unable to earn) enough to meet their needs. More than simply the means of generating

wealth and meeting basic needs, work provides a role in the community and developing one's talents, refining one's character, rendering service and contributing to the advancement of society.

## **Technological development**

The Framework for Programmes highlights the importance of technology transfer and knowledge sharing for achieving sustainable levels of consumption and production. Yet, the majority of technological development is driven by market forces that do not reflect the basic needs of the world's peoples. Furthermore, the emphasis on the trans-

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fer of technology without accompanying efforts to increase participation in the generation and application of knowledge can only serve to widen the gap between the rich and the poor—the 'developers' and the 'users' of technology. Developing the capacity for identifying technological need and for technological innovation and adaptation—in light of societal needs and environmental constraints—will be vital to social progress. The transformation of complex social realities will require the development of institutional capacity within local populations to create and apply knowledge in ways that address the specific needs of that population. This question of institutional capacity (e.g. the establishment of regional centers of research and training) constitutes a major

challenge to sustainable development. If successfully met, however, the result will be to break the present unbalanced flow of knowledge in the world and dissociate development from ill-conceived processes of modernization. “Modern” technologies will be characterized by an orientation towards addressing locally defined needs and by priorities that take into account both the material and moral prosperity of society as a whole.

## **Education**

The Framework for Programmes identifies education and institutional capacity building as two of the programs that could support the implementation of sustainable patterns of

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consumption and production. Yet, if they are to effect the profound changes in the minds of people and in the structures of society (needed to shift towards sustainability), the nature of the educational processes will need to be rethought. As a starting point, the program of education must be based on a clear vision of the kind of society that we wish to live in; and the kind of individuals that will bring this about. It needs to help learners reflect on the purpose of life and help them to step out of their cultural realities to develop alternative visions and approaches to the problems at hand and to understand the manifold consequences of their behaviors and to adjust these accordingly.

Schools themselves must become participants in the social transformation processes. The curriculum cannot simply aim to impart relevant knowledge and skills; rather it should aim to develop the vast potential inherent in the human being. Individuals must be assisted to channel this potential towards the betterment of their communities and the advancement of society as a whole. The level of consciousness and the deep spirit of service and collaboration required to transform individual behaviors and institutional forces in the direction of sustainability will require a transformation of educational processes commensurate with the task at hand.

### **Bahá'í community's approach to cultural transformation**

Cultural transformation involves deliberate changes in individual choices and in institutional structures and norms. For over a decade, the worldwide Baha'i community has been endeavoring systematically to effect a transformation among individuals and communities around the world—to inspire and build the capacity for service. The framework for action guiding these activities has been rooted in a dynamic of *learning*—characterized by action, reflection, and consultation. In thousands of communities, Baha'is have set into motion neighborhood-level processes that seek to empower individuals of all ages to recognize and develop their spiritual capacities<sup>11</sup> and to channel their collective energies towards

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11 Just as the physical body possesses physical capacities for movement, growth, etc., so too the soul has capacities, which can be consciously developed. These capacities include human consciousness; the power of intellect and rational thought; the capacity to love; the power of will; and the capacity to initiate and sustain action for the betterment of society, to name a few.

the betterment of their communities. Aware of the aspirations of the children of the world and their need for spiritual education, they have started children's classes that focus on laying the foundations of a noble and upright character. For youth aged 11-14, they have created a learning environment which helps them to form their moral identity at this critical time in their life and to develop skills which empower them to channel their constructive and creative energies toward the betterment of their communities. All are invited to take part in small groups of participatory learning around core concepts and themes which encourage individuals to become agents of change in their communities within a dynamic of learning and an orientation towards service.

The approach to curriculum development for these activities has not been one of design, field testing and evaluation; rather the first step in writing any set of materials has been taken when experience emerges from grassroots action in response to particular development needs. Curriculum materials are continually refined in light of new knowledge

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and insights. The cultural shifts taking place are evident in the greater capacity to carry out collective action, to see oneself as an agent of change in the community, as a humble learner, as an active participant in the generation, diffusion and application of knowledge. The continuous cycle

of learning through action, reflection and consultation has raised awareness of the needs and resources across communities as well as strengthened the mechanisms for collective action and deliberation.

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In addition, professionals in various fields have joined together in organizations inspired by Bahá'í principles and values to work for sustainable consumption and production. The European Bahá'í Business Forum and affiliated bodies in other regions are working with business leaders to consider social purposes beyond profit, including sustainability in production processes and corporate responsibility. The International Environment Forum<sup>12</sup> has long promoted sustainable lifestyles and more ethical consumption, including participation in the former Consumer Citizenship Network in Europe and now the Partnership for Education and Research for Responsible Living.<sup>13</sup>

The movement to redefine cultural norms in light of the exigencies of justice and sustainability is well underway. In different measures, leading cultural institutions, including governments, education and media, as well as businesses, religious organizations and civil society are bringing the values of sustainability to the forefront of public consciousness.

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12 International Environment Forum: [www.iefworld.org](http://www.iefworld.org)

13 Partnership for Education and Research about Responsible Living: <http://www.hihm.no/hihm/Prosjektsider/CCN/PERL>

Broader visions of human purpose and prosperity are moving from the periphery to the center of public discourse. It is becoming clear that 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.