

# Transformative Change

Science for Transforming Society

Issues for Discourse with Youth

Bahá'í Discourse - Transformation

# Transformative Change Assessment

A Transformative Change Assessment was issued by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services in December 2024. IPBES is the scientific advisory body to the Convention on Biological Diversity approved at the Earth Summit in 1992.

# Transformative Change Assessment

Prepared over three years by more than 100 leading experts from 42 countries from all regions of the world, the assessment explains what transformative change is, how it occurs, and how to accelerate it for a just and sustainable world.

# Transformative Change Assessment

Transformative change for a just and sustainable world is urgent because there is a closing window of opportunity to halt and reverse biodiversity loss and to prevent triggering the potentially irreversible decline and the projected collapse of key ecosystem functions.

# Bahá'í Confirmation

The assessment by scientists is very close to the Bahá'í approach to the transformation of society. Placing the Bahá'í principles in this scientific framework can both support and reinforce this process of transformation. This class follows the structure and main issues and recommendations of the assessment (in the headings).

# **Underlying causes of biodiversity loss**

## ***the disconnection of people from nature and domination over nature and other people***

...economic prosperity has come at a tremendous cost to our natural environment. In fact, no country has emerged as a major industrial power without a legacy of significant environmental damage, affecting the security and well-being of its own populations and, equally significantly, those of developing nations. The growth-driven economic paradigm rooted in national interests at the expense of social and environmental variables and international well-being is under increasing scrutiny.

*(Bahá'í International Community, [Eradicating Poverty: Moving Forward As One](#), 2008)*

***the inequitable concentration  
of power and wealth***

Dogmatic materialism captured all significant centres of power and information at the global level, ensuring that no competing voices could challenge projects of world wide economic exploitation.

(based on Universal House of Justice, *One Common Faith*, p. 3-4)



# *the inequitable concentration of power and wealth*

Humanity's collective life suffers when any one group thinks of its own well-being in isolation from that of its neighbours' or pursues economic gain without regard for how the natural environment, which provides sustenance for all, is affected. A stubborn obstruction, then, stands in the way of meaningful social progress: time and again, avarice and self-interest prevail at the expense of the common good. Unconscionable quantities of wealth are being amassed, and the instability this creates is made worse by how income and opportunity are spread so unevenly both between nations and within nations.

(Universal House of Justice, To the Baha'is of the World, 1 March 2017)

# *the inequitable concentration of power and wealth*

The time has come when those who preach the dogmas of materialism, whether of the east or of the west, whether of capitalism or socialism, must give account of the moral stewardship they have presumed to exercise.... Why is the vast majority of the world's peoples sinking ever deeper into hunger and wretchedness when wealth on a scale undreamed of... is at the disposal of the present arbiters of human affairs?

(Universal House of Justice, 1985, *The Promise of World Peace*, I, p. 7)

# *the prioritization of short-term individual and material gains*

Materialism, rooted in the West, has now spread to every corner of the planet, breeding, in the name of a strong global economy and human welfare, a culture of consumerism. It skilfully and ingeniously promotes a habit of consumption that seeks to satisfy the basest and most selfish desires, while encouraging the expenditure of wealth so as to prolong and exacerbate social conflict.

(Universal House of Justice, To Baha'is in the Cradle of the Faith, 2 April 2010)

# **Five overarching challenges to transformative change**

**relations of domination over nature and people,  
especially those that emerged and were propagated  
in colonial eras and that persist over time**

The deepening environmental crisis, driven by a system that condones the pillage of natural resources to satisfy an insatiable thirst for more, suggests how entirely inadequate is the present conception of humanity's relationship with nature.... The principle of the oneness of humankind implies, then, an organic change in the very structure of society.

(Universal House of Justice, To the Baha'is of Iran, 2 March 2013, para. 6)

**relations of domination over nature and people,  
especially those that emerged and were propagated  
in colonial eras and that persist over time**

*The elements and lower organisms are  
synchronized in the great plan of life. Shall  
man, infinitely above them in degree, be  
antagonistic and a destroyer of that  
perfection?*

(‘Abdu'l-Bahá, talk at Leland Stanford Junior University, Palo Alto, California, 8 October 1912.  
*Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 350)

# *economic and political inequalities*

One of the most pressing problems of humanity in the current century is how a growing, rapidly developing, and not yet united global population can, in a just manner, live in harmony with the planet and its finite resources.... The limited availability and inequitable distribution of resources profoundly impact social relations within and between nations in many ways, even to the point of precipitating upheaval and war [and] devastating consequences for the environment.

(Universal House of Justice, letter of 29 November 2017 [https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20171129\\_001](https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20171129_001))

# *inadequate policies and unfit institutions*

In general one can say that modern democracies have been established as the outcome of attempts to limit the power of absolute monarchy, of dictatorships, or of certain dominant classes. This may have come about gradually through the centuries, or tumultuously by a series of revolutions. Thus, even when democratic constitutions and structures have been established, there remains a suspicion of authority as such, and a tension between the degree of freedom accorded to individual citizens and the imposition of sufficient public discipline to protect the weak against the selfish pursuits of the strong among the citizenry.

(Universal House of Justice, to an individual, 18 July 2000)



# *unsustainable consumption and production patterns including individual habits and practices*

Materialism's gospel of human betterment produced today's consumer culture pursuing ephemeral goals. For the small minority of people who can afford them, the benefits it offers are immediate, and the rationale unapologetic. The breakdown of traditional morality has led to the triumph of animal impulse, as instinctive and blind as appetite. Selfishness becomes a prized commercial resource; falsehood reinvents itself as public information; greed, lust, indolence, pride - even violence - acquire not merely broad acceptance but social and economic value.

(based on Universal House of Justice, *One Common Faith*, 2005)

# ***limited access to clean technologies and uncoordinated knowledge and innovation systems***

Technological innovation, much like the prevalent development paradigm, is deeply influenced by materialistic underpinnings. Basic notions about progress are largely founded on a belief that the acquisition of goods will conduce to greater levels of wellbeing. Solutions are devised based on these assumptions and widely transplanted without considering social, ethical, and spiritual implications. Even when resulting technologies benefit society in one way, they can have the effect of perpetuating existing disparities or undermine other social goals.

*(Baha'i International Community, Reflections of Our Values: Digital Technologies and a Just Transition, 2021)*

# **Four principles to guide deliberate transformative change**

# 1. *Equity and justice*

*Take from this world only to the measure of your needs, and forego that which exceedeth them. Observe equity in all your judgements, and transgress not the bounds of justice, nor be of them that stray from its path.*

(Bahá'u'lláh, Súriy-i-Mulúk §19, in *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, p. 193)

# *1. Equity and justice*

Social justice will be attained only when every member of society enjoys a relative degree of material prosperity and gives due regard to the acquisition of spiritual qualities. The solution, then, to prevailing economic difficulties is to be sought as much in the application of spiritual principles as in the implementation of scientific methods and approaches.

(Universal House of Justice, *To Baha'is in the Cradle of the Faith*, 2 April 2010)

# 1. *Equity and justice*

Against 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.... ..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.

*(Bahá'í International Community, Rethinking Prosperity: Forging Alternatives to a Culture of Consumerism, 2010)*

## ***2. Pluralism and inclusion***

The community... can provide a space where alternative, inclusive, and cooperative ways of life can find expression, where men wholeheartedly come to see women as equal partners, and all are empowered to develop leadership abilities.... Through moral educational programs, attitudes of unity and fellowship are instilled from a young age so that participants come to view each other as valued allies working for the well-being of their communities. Central to this process is capacity-building — enhancing the ability of participants to better understand the material, social, and spiritual realities of their societies and to devise next steps as they collectively chart their own path of progress, deriving fulfilment through service.

*(based on Bahá'í International Community, [The Heart of Resilience: The Climate Crisis as a Catalyst for a Culture of Equality](#), 2022)*

### ***3. Respectful and reciprocal human-nature relationships***

We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions.



### ***3. Respectful and reciprocal human-nature relationships***

Bahá'ís believe that the crucial need facing humanity is to find a unifying vision of the nature and purpose of human life. An understanding of humanity's relationship to the natural environment is an integral part of this vision.

*(Bahá'í International Community, Seven Year Plan of Action on Climate Change, 2009)*

## 4. *Adaptive learning and action*

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

(Bahá'í International Community, *One Planet, One Habitation*, §22)

## ***4. Adaptive learning and action***

...the pathway to sustainability will be one of empowerment, collaboration and continual processes of questioning, learning and action in all regions of the world.... As the sweeping tides of consumerism, unfettered consumption, extreme poverty and marginalization recede, they will reveal the human capacities for justice, reciprocity and happiness.

*(Bahá'í International Community, 2010, Rethinking Prosperity: Forging Alternatives to a Culture of Consumerism)*



**Transformative change is  
fundamental system-wide  
shifts**

in *views* –  
*ways of thinking, knowing and seeing*

*Every man of discernment, while walking upon the earth, feeleth indeed abashed, inasmuch as he is fully aware that the thing which is the source of his prosperity, his wealth, his might, his exaltation, his advancement and power is, as ordained by God, the very earth which is trodden beneath the feet of all men. There can be no doubt that whoever is cognizant of this truth, is cleansed and sanctified from all pride, arrogance, and vainglory.*

in *views* –  
*ways of thinking, knowing and seeing*

Bahá'u'lláh loved the beauty and verdure of the country. One day He passed the remark: *'I have not gazed on verdure for nine years. The country is the world of the soul, the city is the world of bodies.'*

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in J. E. Esslemont, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*. Chpt. 3, p. 35)

## *in structures – ways of organizing, regulating and governing*

This [global] perspective must now evolve to reflect the essential connectedness and common fate of humanity that for too long has struggled against a worldview that emphasized sovereignty, ascendancy and competition. Efforts to reconceptualize sovereignty, from an absolute right to a responsibility, signal that a shift in consciousness towards greater degrees of global solidarity is already underway.

*(Bahá'í International Community, Seizing the Opportunity: Redefining the challenge of climate change, 2008)*



## *in structures – ways of organizing, regulating and governing*

Society must develop new economic models....

Resources must be directed away from those agencies and programs that are damaging to the individual, societies and the environment, and directed toward those most germane to furthering a dynamic, just and thriving social order. Such economic systems will be strongly altruistic and cooperative in nature; they will provide meaningful employment and will help to eradicate poverty in the world.

*(Bahá'í International Community, Valuing Spirituality in Development: Initial Considerations Regarding the Creation of Spiritually Based Indicators for Development, 1998)*

## In *practices* – *ways of doing, behaving and relating*

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. ...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.

(Bahá'í International Community, *Rethinking Prosperity: Forging Alternatives to a Culture of Consumerism*, 2010)

## In *practices* – *ways of doing, behaving and relating*

*Briefly, it is not only their fellow human beings that the beloved of God must treat with mercy and compassion, rather must they show forth the utmost loving-kindness to every living creature.... The feelings are one and the same, whether ye inflict pain on man or on beast.*

*Train your children from their earliest days to be infinitely tender and loving to animals. If an animal be sick, let the children try to heal it, if it be hungry, let them feed it, if thirsty, let them quench its thirst, if weary, let them see that it rests.*



**Five key strategies and  
associated actions  
that have complementary  
and synergistic effects**

# ***1. Conserve, restore and regenerate places of value to people and nature that exemplify biocultural diversity***

The Bahá'í communities are called upon to make the conservation of the environment an integral part of their ongoing activities by “...assisting in endeavours to conserve the environment in ways which blend with the rhythm of life of our community.”

(Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, *Conservation of the Earth's Resources*, October 1989)

## ***2. Drive systematic change and mainstreaming biodiversity in the sectors most responsible for nature's decline***

...in light of the interdependence of all parts of nature, and the importance of evolution and diversity "to the beauty, efficiency and perfection of the whole," every effort should be made to preserve as much as possible the earth's bio-diversity and natural order.

(based on Bahá'í International Community, *Valuing Spirituality in Development*, 1998)

### ***3. Transform economic systems for nature and equity***

To alleviate a variety of problems born of the economic inequalities so prevalent in the world today, social and economic development will require, especially among the younger generations, a fundamental shift in perspective, one that changes the way in which certain essential concepts are viewed--the true purpose of life, the nature of progress, the meaning of true happiness and well-being, and the place that material pursuits should assume in one's individual and family life.

[\(Universal House of Justice, To Baha'is in the Cradle of the Faith, 2 April 2010\)](#)



### ***3. Transform economic systems for nature and equity***

As trustees or stewards of the planet's resources and biodiversity, we must ensure sustainability and equity of resource use into distant future, consider the environmental consequences of development activities, temper our actions with moderation and humility, value nature in more than economic terms, and understand the natural world and its role in humanity's collective development both material and spiritual.

*(based on Bahá'í International Community, [Valuing Spirituality in Development](#), 1998)*

### ***3. Transform economic systems for nature and equity***

Sustainable environmental management must come to be seen not as a discretionary commitment mankind can weigh against other competing interests, but rather as a fundamental responsibility that must be shouldered, a pre-requisite for spiritual development as well as the individual's physical survival.

(based on Bahá'í International Community, *Valuing Spirituality in Development*, 1998)

## 4. Transform governance systems to be inclusive, accountable and adaptive

The Bahá'í administrative system attaches great importance to cooperative decision-making and assigns organizational responsibility for community affairs to freely elected governing councils at the local, national, and international levels. This hierarchy devolves decision-making to the lowest practicable level - thereby instituting a unique vehicle for grassroots participation in governance - while at the same time providing a level of coordination and authority that makes possible collaboration on a global scale.

(based in Bahá'í International Community, *Overcoming Corruption in Public Institutions*, 2001)

## ***5. Shift views and values to recognize human-nature interconnectedness***

*Nature is God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world.*

*(Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 142)*

## 5. *Shift views and values to recognize human-nature interconnectedness*

*When... thou dost contemplate the innermost essence of all things, and the individuality of each, thou wilt behold the signs of thy Lord's mercy in every created thing, and see the spreading rays of His Names and Attributes throughout all the realm of being.... And whensoever thou dost gaze upon creation all entire, and dost observe the very atoms thereof, thou wilt note that the rays of the Sun of Truth are shed upon all things and shining within them.... Look thou upon the trees, upon the blossoms and fruits, even upon the stones. Here too wilt thou behold the Sun's rays shed upon them, clearly visible within them, and manifested by them.*

## 5. *Shift views and values to recognize human-nature interconnectedness*

*The innumerable created things that are found in the world of existence - be they man, animal, plant, or mineral - must each be composed of elements. There is no doubt that the completeness seen in each and every thing arises, by divine creation, from the component elements, their appropriate combination, their proportionate measure, the manner of their composition, and the influence of other created things. For all beings are linked together like a chain; and mutual aid, assistance, and interaction are among their intrinsic properties and are the cause of their formation, development and growth.*

*(‘Abdu'l-Bahá, [Some Answered Questions](#), Chpt. 46, p. 205)*

**Visions for living in harmony with nature are more likely to succeed when they emerge from inclusive, rights-based approaches and stakeholder processes and when they incorporate collaboration for change across sectors**

# A Bahá'í vision

A flourishing global civilization in harmony with the natural environment is a vision toward which growing numbers are laboring. The world that beckons is one of integration and balance, beauty, and maturity. It is a world with a redefined sense of progress, filled with communities and individuals working together with the support of institutions toward the realization of their highest aspirations. It is a world increasingly relieved of the destructive moral compromises — social, economic, and environmental — that have so often been asserted as necessary to progress.

(Bahá'í International Community, *One Planet, One Habitation*, §42-44)



