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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION

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Some nine years ago, over the course of the Earth Summit process, the governments of the world, with significant contributions from global civil society, crafted Agenda 21, a remarkably forward-looking strategy for the achievement of sustainable development world wide.

Some nine years later, the work of determining the next steps in the evolution of Agenda 211 has been placed upon the shoulders of the World Summit on Sustainable Development. The Summit has been called to "identify major constraints hindering the implementation of Agenda 21" and to "address new challenges and opportunities that have emerged since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development."² It is in identifying these major constraints, challenges and opportunities that the Summit's Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) must necessarily come face to face with spiritual issues.

"No matter how far the material world advances," the Baha'i Writings state, "it cannot establish the happiness of mankind. Only when material and spiritual civilization are linked and coordinated will happiness be assured. ...for in material civilization good and evil advance together and maintain the same pace."³

The Baha'i International Community is convinced that unless and until spiritual issues become central to the development process, the establishment of a sustainable global civilization will prove impossible. For the vast majority of the world's people the idea that human nature is fundamentally spiritual is an incontrovertible truth. Indeed, this perception of reality is the defining cultural experience for most of the world's people and is inseparable from how they perceive themselves and the world around them.⁴ It is, therefore, only by bringing a focus on the spiritual dimension of human reality that [2] development policies and programs can truly reflect the experiences, conditions and aspirations of the planet's inhabitants and elicit their heartfelt support and active participation.

On the one hand, the governments of the world have, collectively, begun to acknowledge a spiritual dimension to development. This can be seen in the global action plans that emerged from the great world conferences held in the 1990's by the United Nations. Agenda 21, for example, calls for "social, economic and spiritual development," recognizing that "individuals should be allowed to develop their full potential, including healthy physical, mental and spiritual development."⁵ Subsequent declarations and action plans have reinforced this call and gone further. For example, in the Copenhagen

Declaration the governments of the world unambiguously affirm that "our societies must respond more effectively to the material and spiritual needs of individuals, their families and the communities in which they live.... not only as a matter of urgency but also as a matter of sustained and unshakeable commitment through the years ahead."⁶ In the Beijing Platform for Action they agree that "[r]eligion, spirituality and belief play a central role in the lives of millions of women and men, in the way they live and in the aspirations they have for the future."⁷ And in the Habitat Agenda, the world's governments commit to "achieving a world of greater stability and peace, built on ethical and spiritual vision."⁸

On the other hand, beyond such general statements and commitments, these global agreements offer little understanding of what the terms "spirituality," "spiritual vision," and "spiritual development" mean in principle or in practice. If, indeed, spirituality is as crucial to sustainable development as these global action plans have avowed, then it is time to move beyond generalities, to explore, in depth, the spiritual principles at the heart of development and to consider fully their ramifications for all stages of the development process.

This exploration of spiritual principles is completely in line with the PrepCom's mandate to "identify major constraints hindering the implementation of Agenda 21" and to "address new challenges and opportunities that have emerged" since the Earth Summit. Any strategies for overcoming such constraints and challenges as war, poverty, social disintegration, extreme nationalism, greed, corruption and apathy, which do not take into account spiritual principles will prove ephemeral, at best. In considering new opportunities for overcoming these constraints and challenges, the PrepCom should look to the remarkable development of interfaith relations and the expansion of interfaith initiatives. Religious and spiritual traditions are increasingly coming together to foster friendliness, fellowship and understanding among their diverse communities. They are also increasingly working together on policies, programs and initiatives with secular bodies ranging from private enterprises and organizations of civil society, to governments and international institutions. In such work, religious and spiritual value systems are viewed not as separate from "real [3] world concerns," but as vital sources of knowledge and motivation, as wellsprings of values, insights, and energy without which social cohesion and collective action are difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.⁹

This blossoming of interfaith work can be seen in such initiatives as the World Faiths Development Dialogue;¹⁰ the World Conference on Religion and Peace;¹¹ the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC);¹² the Parliament of the World's Religions;¹³ and the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders.¹⁴ It can be read in the numerous joint declarations and agreements in which the religions have articulated a common vision of humanity's future based on such universal principles as love, justice, compassion, moderation, humility, sharing, service, peace and the oneness of

the human family.¹⁵

In seeking to incorporate spiritual principles into its deliberations, the PrepCom should take advantage of this new stage in the relations among the world's religions.

[4] It might do so by making the topic "Sustainable Development: the Spiritual Dimension" one of the "main themes for the Summit."¹⁶ It could then initiate a major review of international agreements, proclamations and statements which focus on religious and spiritual values, particularly as they relate to and impact the development process. This review should begin with the global action plans of the world conferences of the 1990's, since it was here that the governments of the world publicly acknowledged the importance of spiritual values in development.¹⁷ It should then be expanded to include major interfaith declarations and agreements and other relevant initiatives.¹⁸

While this review is being conducted, the PrepCom could facilitate a series of consultations involving both representatives and leaders of various religious and spiritual traditions. These consultations, which might be held before the next PrepCom, should focus on spiritual principles as they relate to Agenda 21 and sustainable development. A series of regional consultations followed by an international consultation might be held, or, if that is not feasible, then, at the very least, an international consultation should be organized. The results of these consultations and of the "documents review" should be issued as a UN document for use by the PrepCom in its deliberations.

Although these proposed efforts are modest, the world's governments would, by supporting them, be sending a clear message that they are serious about their previous commitments to incorporate spiritual considerations into the development process. More important, however, the "documents review" and the global consultations would undoubtedly produce innovative ideas and approaches and might possibly generate a powerful vision based on spiritual principles - principles which, because they resonate with the human soul, have the power to motivate the sacrifices and changes that will be needed if humanity is to overcome the seemingly intractable problems it faces.

Ultimately, the creation of a peaceful and just global civilization, in which the diverse peoples of the world live in harmony with one another and with the natural world, will require a significant reorientation of individual and collective goals and a profound transformation in attitudes and behaviors. Such far-reaching changes will come about only by addressing the non-material dimension of reality and drawing on humanity's vast spiritual resources.

FOOTNOTES

1. Conscious of the fact that more knowledge and experience would emerge as the world community sought to implement this strategy - and that a higher level of international cooperation was still possible - Agenda 21 was defined, in its preamble, as a "dynamic programme" which "could evolve over time in the light of changing needs and circumstances." (Agenda 21, Chapter 1.6, Preamble)

2. Ten-year review of progress achieved in the implementation of the outcome of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. A/RES/55/199, 15c-d (20 December 2000).
3. 'Abdu'l-Baha, Promulgation of Universal Peace, page 109, Baha'i Publishing Trust, Wilmette, 1982.
4. This perception of reality can be discovered in the earliest records of civilization and has been cultivated for several millennia by every one of the great religious traditions. Its enduring achievements in law, the fine arts, and the civilizing of human intercourse are what give substance and meaning to history. In one form or another its promptings are a daily influence in the lives of most people on earth.
5. Agenda 21, Chapters 6.3 & 6.23. Emphasis added.
6. Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development, #3. Emphasis added.
7. Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Chapter 2, #24. Emphasis added.
8. Habitat Agenda, Chapter 1, #4, Preamble. Emphasis added.
9. Meaningful social transformation cannot come from political prescriptions or technical recipes alone. An approach to development that incorporates moral and spiritual imperatives will more likely lead to enduring changes in both individual and collective behavior than an approach that ignores these requirements. There is, therefore, much to be gained by seriously and systematically examining the role of religious resources and spiritual values in building human capacity.
10. The World Faiths Development Dialogue is a collaborative initiative at the national and international levels between the World Bank and several world religions. Its mission is to assist in combating poverty and to bring spiritual principles into development thinking and practice.
11. The World Conference on Religion and Peace is an international organization in which numerous world religions cooperate to promote peace and understanding. It is organized on an international, regional and national basis.
12. The Alliance of Religions and Conservation brings together eleven world faiths for consultations on conservation issues. It also encourages collaborative efforts between the religions and environmental organizations.
13. The 1999 Parliament of the World's Religions brought together over 7,000 people in Cape Town, South Africa. The goal of the Parliament was to create greater respect, understanding, cooperation and harmony among the world's peoples and religions. Participants took part in a wide range of activities discussing, learning, sharing and discovering. The seminal document, A Call to Our Guiding Institutions, was issued during the Parliament (see footnote #15).
14. Held in part in the UN General Assembly Hall, in August 2000, the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders brought

together some 1,000 religious and spiritual leaders from around the world. The gathered leaders discussed pressing issues facing the world community, including the challenges of fostering peace and encouraging inter-religious understanding and cooperation. A major theme of the Summit was how the religions could work with the United Nations in its mission for human rights, development, peace and justice. At an historic plenary session, "Engaging Religious Leadership in the Work of the United Nations," members of the panel, composed of several high level UN officials, voiced their conviction that spirituality and the insights and vision of religion were greatly needed in the policies and programs of the United Nations.

15. These documents include the Final Statement by the Co-Chairs Second Meeting of the World Faiths Development Dialogue (the World Faiths Development Dialogue) <<http://www.worldbank.org/html/extdr/extme/ps111599a.htm>>; A Call to Our Guiding Institutions (the 1999 Parliament of the World's Religions) <<http://www.cpwr.org/calldoc.html>>; and the Commitment to Global Peace (the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders) <<http://www.millenniumpeacesummit.org/aboutframe.html>>.

16. A/RES/55/199, 15g.

17. In fact, the PrepCom is to "take into account, as appropriate, the outcomes relevant to sustainable development of other United Nations conferences and summits and their follow-up activities." A/RES/55/199, Preamble.

18. Two initiatives which might be considered in this review are: the October 1994 seminar on "Ethical and Spiritual Dimensions of Social Progress," organized by the UN Secretariat for the World Summit for Social Development (the document produced is entitled, "Ethical and Spiritual Dimensions of Social Progress"); and the November 2000 "Colloquium on Science, Religion and Development," organized by the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity of the Baha'i International Community (the document produced is entitled "Statement of Preliminary Findings of the Colloquium on Science, Religion and Development").