

Embracing INTERDEPENDENCE

FOUNDATIONS *for a*
World in Transition

A STATEMENT OF THE BAHÁ'Í INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY
ON THE OCCASION OF THE UNITED NATIONS SUMMIT OF THE FUTURE



“The well-being
of mankind,
its peace and security,
are unattainable
unless and until
its unity
is firmly established.”

— *Bahá'í holy writings*



ON THE OCCASION of the Summit of the Future, the international community faces both a profound opportunity and a vital imperative: the tremendous task of centering humanity's interdependence at the heart of the global governance system.

The vast strides made since the Second World War, beginning with the formation of the United Nations, represent a significant movement toward a peaceful and prosperous global order. Much like the League of Nations before it, the United Nations, arising from the ashes of global catastrophe, signified the best collective effort of its time in search of real, lasting peace. That the UN continues to be the only multi-lateral entity able to engage every nation of the world in matters related to global governance is significant. Indeed, its sustained existence reflects a resounding recognition that effective international coordination is a prerequisite for enduring peace and well-being.

Regrettably, the spirit of solidarity—which seemed to be on the rise at the turn of the century when the world's leaders agreed on a set of global ambitions—is steadily eroding. Progress made over decades is in decline. And the scale and complexity of global challenges rapidly outpace the evolution of the systems designed to respond to them. These distressing trends are in fact symptoms of a deeper ailment facing societies: an inability on the part of the global community to fully embrace the reality that humanity is inextricably interdependent. There is every reason to believe that severe crises will continue to deepen until those responsible for governing world affairs, indeed the generality of humankind, embrace the profound implications of this truth.

The Summit of the Future thus takes place at a moment when our present trajectory is no longer viable. Hundreds of recommendations for institutional reform have been suggested at this time, each with its own potential benefits. Yet, the needs of the moment call for an even greater task of devising a new conceptual framework, which includes a new set of underlying assumptions, if innovations are ultimately to succeed.

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To this end, in place of offering additional proposals for reform, the Bahá'í International Community invites the arbiters of international affairs, once again,¹ to consider the implications of an alternative central organizing principle—the oneness of humankind. Without full acceptance of this principle, lasting peace and prosperity will remain a distant hope, and even systems of global governance will tend to reinforce division, deepen inequalities, and prioritize the interests of certain groups over the common good of all. It is our belief

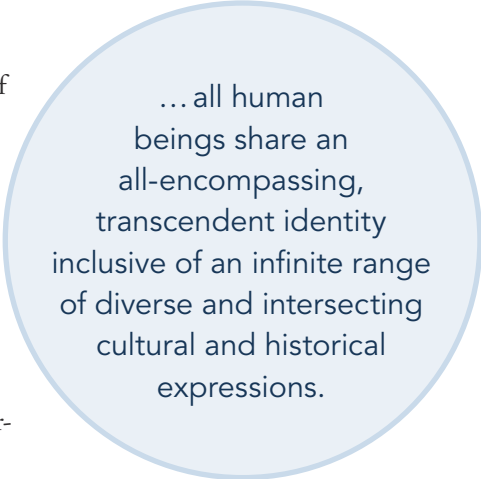
that placing the oneness of humankind at the heart of international affairs is a necessary prerequisite to stave off further catastrophe and secure lasting peace and harmony.

1 See *Turning Point For All Nations*, a statement of the Bahá'í International Community on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the United Nations; and *A Governance Befitting: Humanity and the Path Toward a Just Global Order*, a statement of the Bahá'í International Community on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the United Nations.

A Shared Story

Identity in an age of transition

TO ACKNOWLEDGE the oneness of the human family is not to call for uniformity or to abandon the strengths of many established systems of governance. Rather, it implies that all human beings share an all-encompassing, transcendent identity inclusive of an infinite range of diverse and intersecting cultural and historical expressions. And the age we live in is increasingly one of interconnection and integration, requiring new models of decision-making.



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Instead of recognizing this reality, current systems and structures are deeply embedded within oppositional conceptions of identity that breed mistrust and reinforce competition. Categories of “us” and “them” are deployed in the pursuit of incomplete conceptions of progress, leading to the unjust preferential treatment of one group over another. Although bounded circles of belonging have existed throughout history, circumstances have caused their outer limits to expand over time—from the community, to the city, to the nation—to ensure human survival and flourishing. The transition toward greater degrees of integration has yet to reach its apex. In an age of global interdependence, the forces propelling new forms of interconnection now demand a step never taken before: widening the circle of belonging to transcend any designation of “the other” and to embrace humankind in its entirety, drawing upon its rich diversity as a source of limitless strength.

In the sphere of international governance, divisions based on bounded conceptions of identity are expressed most clearly through notions of state sovereignty. Key assumptions have long shaped the contours of international governance—that national identities are immutable, that local or national priorities are in competition with

global agendas, that the advancement of one segment of the world is to the detriment of another, or that the power of a nation is defined by its ability to dominate and accumulate. Yet absolute national sovereignty is increasingly untenable—whether through the borderless risks of climate change or global pandemics, the capacity of technology to both advance and divide societies, or the challenges and opportunities presented by the movement of people around the world.

A central task before the international community, then, is to devise a new and expanded conception of sovereignty—one that considers how the advantage of the part is best served by the progress of the whole. Such a redefinition would encourage both a legitimate concern for one's country as well as for the well-being of all of humankind, recognizing that as timelines are extended further into the future, the interests of the individual, the community, the nation, and the world are increasingly aligned. And, far from threatening diversity or entrenching homogeneity, it would reconcile the strength and beauty that comes with embracing particular identities within a greater sense of shared belonging.

These efforts will also need to be accompanied by the development of a shared vision of humanity's future. While history is replete with injustice, competition, and crisis, these are not the only features that define our current order. Examples of solidarity, compassion, and hope have also propelled advancement, even amidst societal turbulence. This fuller historical perspective is important in contextualizing our collective trajectory as it allows new foundations based on a longer term perspective to be laid. Any action taken today must, therefore, both learn from the shortcomings of our past and utilize constructive expressions of the human spirit.

"It is through love for all people, and by subordinating lesser loyalties to the best interests of humankind, that the unity of the world can be realized and the infinite expressions of human diversity find their highest fulfilment."

— *The Universal House of Justice,*
world governing body of the Bahá'í Faith

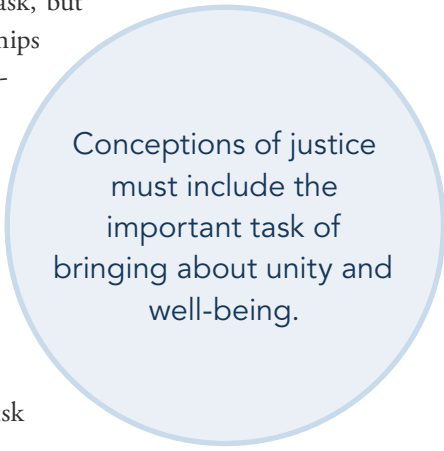
A Shared Path

The principle of justice in recasting relationships

RECOGNIZING HUMANITY'S ONENESS has vast implications on the way individuals and nations relate to one another and with the planet. In a world where violence, selfishness, and antagonism are largely viewed as reflections of our human nature, one might ask, how can a future characterized by greater degrees of integration and coexistence come about?

What is needed is a candid acknowledgement that these baser forms of behavior have not only been normalized, but also rewarded at the expense of higher conceptions of humanity which are often undervalued—the inherent capacity to love, to show compassion, to make sacrifices in support of a greater cause, to forgive. The tendency to encourage patterns of behavior based primarily on negative expressions of human nature, however, has resulted in mounting degrees of prejudice, conflict, and extreme inequality, as well as the unbounded exploitation of the earth's resources.

Reconceptualizing human nature is no simple task, but it can have a profound impact on the relationships that sustain society. Take, for example, dominant approaches to justice which typically seek accountability and retribution as their primary objective. While evidently holding merit in specific contexts, these approaches cannot be the end of the analysis in an interdependent world, for they can have the effect of breeding vengeance, reinforcing division, or stoking mistrust and resentment. Conceptions of justice must therefore begin to include the important task of bringing about unity and well-being.



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What might an expanded conception of justice look like in practice? In the field of economics—in an age where there are sufficient material means for every individual—justice should call us to reevaluate the distribution of resources through a broader lens of human dignity, rights, and well-being rather than competition and accumulation. This requires a deeper questioning of the assumption that individuals are solely self-interested. Ultimately, narrowly materialistic theories and systems of measurement that reward unsustainable and exploitative patterns of behavior will need to give way to new economic arrangements that take into consideration issues of sufficiency together with social, environmental, and spiritual dimensions of human existence.

Questioning underlying assumptions through the lens of expanded notions of justice would also need to be applied to other areas of existence—peace and security, youth and future generations, science and technology, gender equality, and global governance, to name a few. For if portions of the world continue to prioritize their own short-term flourishing at the expense of others, an imbalance will eventually cause those nations—and humanity in its entirety—to face the inevitable consequences of that injustice. Confronting these and other similar questions will allow the international community to overcome deadlock and to work toward devising and implementing constructive and enduring solutions.

“The purpose of justice is the appearance of unity...
The organization of the world and the tranquility of mankind
depend upon it.”

— *Bahá’í holy writings*

A Shared Responsibility

Leadership that transforms words into deeds

EMBRACING INTERDEPENDENCE and humanity's oneness holds important implications for the way leaders take decisions at all levels, especially on the global stage. The challenges of our time are well-known. And while numerous foundational international instruments, such as the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, have been accepted by fair-minded individuals and nations alike, they struggle to find full expression in the lived realities of people and communities around the world.

Scientific evidence, long-term economic projections, and moral imperatives, for example, all provide compelling reasons for urgent effort toward climate mitigation and adaptation. Scores of international agreements, the Paris Agreement chief among them, commit nations to take certain steps. Yet these actions are still to be implemented sufficiently. This contradiction between aspiration and action is a common feature of the international arena, whether in the domain of peace and security, poverty alleviation, or the advancement of women, among others. The tendency toward skepticism and caution that prevents meaningful and enduring action is understandable when set against a painful history of countless breaches of trust. But the state of the world and humanity's growing interconnectedness demand movement from words to deeds. The role of leadership, then, goes beyond asserting what should be done, to creating an enabling environment where the necessary actions can be taken.

Leaders must overcome this paralysis of will, ultimately rooted in a narrow understanding of individual and collective purpose. To counteract the inertia of the status quo, individual leaders will need to employ new forms of statecraft founded on

greater degrees of unity. When considering any proposed policy or action on the international stage, leaders, then, are called on to ask: will this decision advance the good of humankind in its entirety?

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While such a path requires courage, it is a matter of pragmatic necessity that will, no doubt, yield countless benefits. The peoples of the world yearn for leaders and institutions that will take action to address their most pressing concerns. Those leaders will be met with even greater support if they are also able to exhibit integrity and trustworthiness, uphold commitments, act with impartiality, and direct political and economic affairs with wisdom and justice. In reality, history has demonstrated that humanity will ultimately rally around and honor those who arise to prioritize its collective well-being.

"True civilization will unfurl its banner in the midmost heart of the world whenever a certain number of its distinguished and high-minded sovereigns—the shining exemplars of devotion and determination—shall, for the good and happiness of all mankind, arise, with firm resolve and clear vision, to establish the Cause of Universal Peace."

— *Babá'í holy writings*

A Shared Framework

Laying a foundation for transformation

THE IDEAS OFFERED thus far outline a common framework founded on the unreserved acceptance of humanity's interdependence. While many assert the values at the heart of this framework, its effective application is often challenged as unrealistic. What would this look like in practice?

For its part, the worldwide Bahá'í community, together with friends, colleagues, and citizens from every walk of life, have been gaining experience around how to promote peaceful and prosperous societies through the application of this framework, with evidence of notable and constructive transformation in individual lives, community dynamics, and institutional arrangements. Taking shape in virtually every country and region of the world, these efforts² are guided and supported by institutional arrangements from the local to the international level. Such arrangements enable the generation and dissemination of insights and best practices across the globe, which have been widely adopted and implemented according to local circumstances.

Many of the initiatives carried out by Bahá'í communities begin with the creation of consultative spaces in villages or neighborhoods that invite members of their societies, irrespective of background or belief, to better understand their material and social reality, and devise appropriate responses to the challenges they face. On numerous occasions, these spaces have given rise to short term social and economic development initiatives, such as educational campaigns, health projects, environmental awareness actions, or humanitarian assistance efforts.

Over time, many of these efforts draw increased local or national support through an ongoing process of consultation on the application of this shared framework. Some

2 See *For the Betterment of the World: The Worldwide Bahá'í Community's Approach to Social and Economic Development* for a range of examples.

initiatives gradually assume greater degrees of complexity including, but not limited to, projects aimed at teacher-training and literacy, women's empowerment, food security, social cohesion, as well as artistic expressions to inspire action. Notably, this transformative process has resulted in the proliferation of discrete development initiatives—from 400 to 200,000 in over 180 nations and territories within the last decade—as local populations build the capacities and qualities needed to sustain long-term progress.

In practice, these communities have seen that embracing humanity's oneness holds a wide range of implications on the manner in which they approach societal progress—that adversarial approaches to problem-solving, no matter how noble the cause they support, are limited in achieving enduring transformation; that differences of opinion are an opportunity to explore values and strategies from diverse perspectives; that every member of society has the capacity, right, and responsibility to contribute to the common good; and that a hopeful future is within reach, through conscious and dedicated effort.

The lessons learned from these experiences which unfold within a culturally responsive and inclusive common framework are profound. Commitment to principles is far from a naive aspiration. It strikes a resonant chord among populations, and fosters the creation of unified communities of action that can contribute effectively to a global vision. The task at hand is, indeed, achievable; if steps toward a new conceptual framework are taken, millions around the world are prepared to support and encourage its advancement.

"We must now highly resolve to arise and lay hold of all those instrumentalities that promote the peace and well-being and happiness, the knowledge, culture and industry, the dignity, value and station, of the entire human race."

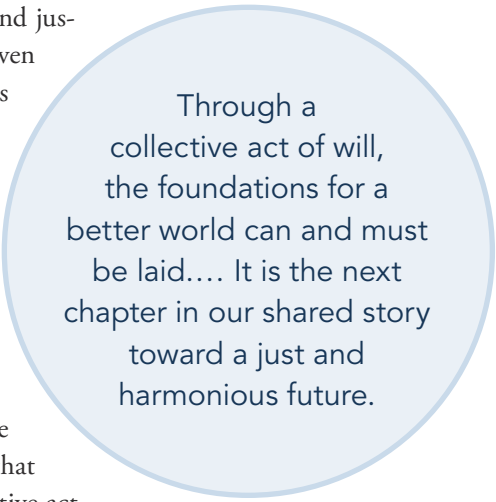
— *Bahá'í holy writings*



HUMANITY ARRIVES at a seminal moment of hope and potential. Through a collective act of will, the foundations for a better world can and must be laid in order to avoid further catastrophe.

For some, the prospect of reconfiguring present arrangements based on noble ideals such as unity and justice might appear idealistic, even ill-timed given the state of the world. Yet to suggest that this shift is better suited for another day fails to recognize that current approaches to global governance themselves are in fact breeding many of the ailments plaguing the world. These will only continue to escalate if not addressed in new ways.

To this end, the Bahá'í International Community invites participants at the Summit of the Future and the processes that follow to join together in a profound, collective act of learning. Rather than continue to hold on to outworn concepts and unworkable assumptions, leaders, together with the peoples of the world, must arise, and with resolute will, consult together in search of appropriate solutions. Laying unshakeable foundations upon which our future can be built is a collective challenge. It is the next chapter in our shared story toward a just and harmonious future.



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Bahá'í
International
Community

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866 United Nations Plaza, Suite 120
New York, NY 10017, USA
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