Reflections of Our Values:
Digital Technologies & a Just Transition

A statement of the Baha'i
International Community to the
59th session of the Commission
for Social Development

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Humanity is in a period of unprecedented transition—having passed through evolutionary stages analogous to infancy and childhood, it is now in a state of turbulent adolescence approaching maturity. Possibilities are opening for marked social change to redefine collective values and underlying assumptions. This is especially evident in the realm of digital technologies. For some, a world-engulfing pandemic has precipitated greater reliance on such technologies to carry out basic tasks and remain connected. For others, lack of access has resulted in further isolation. Questions, then, abound in relation to digital technologies and their role in a just transition to a world reflective of humanity's highest ambitions. We commend this Commission for selecting so pertinent a theme for consideration at this inflection point in human affairs.

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Technological Innovation

Undoubtedly, technological innovation has been a source of many advancements, serving to amplify human intent and capabilities. Yet, like any tool, it can be deployed productively or destructively, depending on the ethical considerations underlying its design and use. To take but one example, when shaped by a concern for human well-being, agricultural innovation, through the creation of sustainable technologies and environmentally friendly methods, has increased food security for many worldwide. When driven by strict profit motives, however, it can result in exploitation of both workers and natural resources, and potentially further deepen inequalities. If technology is to be a means to enhance flourishing, it must extend capabilities in a manner reflecting essential human ideals and aspirations.

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Notwithstanding achievements of new technologies, various forms of social bias and inequity are often embedded in their

design or application, which are unintentionally adopted by users. Decisions related to use and distribution are often left to a privileged few who may not foresee such consequences. In the case of digital technologies, this challenge is exacerbated as specific values and assumptions are engineered into products and adopted at a pace exceeding the capacity of even the most qualified legislatures to properly assess. In an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, where more digital technologies are adopted out of perceived or actual necessity, unforeseen consequences arise, no matter how well-intended a technological system or solution. Recognizing the power of technologies to open new opportunities and shape reality, an honest examination of the presumptions and norms underlying their creation and use is therefore critical.

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As has become increasingly clear in recent years, digital technologies are not implicitly neutral. 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. Divorced from an understanding of the needs of the users themselves, the unconscious adoption of technological tools and services could inadvertently result in communities losing touch with important elements of their cultural heritage. As digital tools are increasingly applied to all areas of individual and

collective endeavor, the question then shifts from whether such technologies should be used, to how they can be appropriately and consciously conceived and applied. This moment of transition presents the opportunity to interrogate the values and intentions informing future technological innovation. Such a process would largely be informed by the experience of local communities rather than external market or ideological forces, diversity rather than uniformity, and a multiplicity of approaches rather than the imposition of dominant but extrinsic worldviews. It also offers a moment to collectively develop the necessary legal standards and regulations that reflect these values and counteract the pernicious side of digital technologies.

Consultation on technological adoption

Developing the capacity for making suitable technological choices in light of essential social needs and mores is vital in order to foster the responsible design, use, and distribution of digital technologies. Guided by moderation, justice, and cultural diversity, this comes with a vigorous evaluation and objective inquiry by individuals, communities, and social institutions into the purpose of their adoption. The current forces driving technological expansion could be moderated by asking questions about underlying assumptions as well as how technologies can support and enhance, rather than subsume and replace, local values. What types of digital technologies reflect a community's vibrancy? Is this technology being adopted in a way that is suited to our community's needs? What forces drive our communities to utilize these technologies? Absent a more

coherent analysis, adopting technology risks becoming an end in itself and could serve to obscure the fundamentally noble nature of the human condition, breeding mistrust, and engendering passivity.

A civilization befitting a humanity coming of age will not emerge through efforts exerted by any one particular group. Every member of the global community should benefit from the fruits of the human mind, be it equitable access to technological innovation or the knowledge generated through its creation. Every individual and community should be given the opportunity to contribute toward its construction. Access to platforms where decisions about humanity's well-being are made must ensure the full range of diverse viewpoints, an essential element of our oneness.

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An inclusive path forward

What is called for is the creation of spaces at all levels, by governments and communities, to openly and honestly analyze the impacts, whether intentional or not, of development endeavors, retaining elements which are conducive to the advancement of the whole human family, and discarding those which reinforce negative habits and patterns of life. Users of technologies, sometimes perceived as passive recipients of products created elsewhere, will need to be actively involved in the process of collectively identifying their priorities and consulting on the impacts of technologies within their context. In doing so, the establishment of institutional processes for systematizing learning about technology will allow them to contribute to a growing body of knowledge at the global level. At the national level, steps will need to be taken to understand how digital technologies can best be regulated to give expression to broader community aims and

values while providing access to knowledge. And, given that their influence transcends national boundaries, international policies—guided by principles of justice, universality, and dignity—will be indispensable in informing the responsible creation, use, and distribution of digital technologies. Moreover, recognizing that digital platforms are increasingly being used to make decisions about just transitions, these spaces will need to accommodate a diversity of voices. As in so many areas, the greatest change will be required from those who have largely benefitted from the prevalent paradigms as they make way for more holistic, just, and appropriate technologies.

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The United Nations has a unique opportunity to demonstrate what such a constructive and explorative use of technology could look like and how it could amplify multiple perspectives. The UN will no doubt prove critical in creating social and political spaces where users of technology are able to enter into meaningful dialogue with creators of technology, as well as policymakers, to discuss the social and spiritual implications of their design, specifically questioning deeper motivations underlying innovations. And it could facilitate the sharing of knowledge created by actors at each level. These important considerations could be revisited periodically in international spaces such as this Commission.

Humanity is being propelled to greater degrees of integration. Accelerated by the coronavirus pandemic, this moment of transition presents an opportunity to draw on the wealth of potential at our disposal. We have the tools, through digital technologies themselves as well as genuine consultation, to ensure a just transition. We have the capacity to allow those historically excluded to participate in critical questions about humanity's future. When all members of the human family are provided the opportunity to contribute to the betterment of the world, and the full range of human capabilities express themselves in charting a meaningful life

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beyond solely materialistic considerations, true prosperity becomes possible. How much more potent, then, if the manner in which we approach the means of digital technologies serves the expression of this noble purpose of human flourishing.

Should these be aligned, there is no limit to the power of innovation in creating a future reflecting the highest expression of humanity's aspirations.