

# PROSPERITY OF HUMANKIND

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This statement of the Bahá'í International Community's Office of Public Information, released in January 1995 in preparation for the United Nations World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, examines prevailing attitudes and practices in social and economic development. It redefines the roles of all those involved and questions underlying assumptions about the nature of true global prosperity.

## **Universal House of Justice letter of 23 January 1995**

To the National Spiritual Assemblies of the Bahá'ís throughout the world

Dear Friends,

As the twentieth century rapidly approaches its end, there is a marked acceleration in the efforts of governments and peoples to reach common understandings on issues affecting the future of humankind. The 1992 Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro, the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, the forthcoming March 1995 World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, to be followed in September by the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, are conspicuous indications of this acceleration. These events are as capstones to the myriad activities taking place in different parts of the world involving a wide range of nongovernmental organizations and networks in an urgent search for values, ideas and practical measures that can advance prospects for the peaceful development of all peoples. In this endeavor can be discerned the gathering momentum of an emerging unity of thought in world undertakings, the realization of which our sacred scriptures describe as one of the lights of unity that will illumine the path to peace. The Bahá'ís around the world are, of course, heartened by such hopeful trends and will continue increasingly to lend moral and practical support to them as opportunities allow.

In view of the intensive attention being given to the issues of social and economic development since the Earth Summit in Brazil, we requested the Bahá'í International Community's Office of Public Information to prepare a statement on the concept of global prosperity in the context of the Bahá'í Teachings. This statement is now ready for distribution. We are therefore very pleased to send each of you herewith a copy of "The Prosperity of Humankind" and to commend it to your use as you pursue activities that enable you to interact with governments, organizations, and people everywhere. Our confident hope is that the statement will assist you to foster understanding of this important topic among the members of your communities and thus vitalize their contribution to the constructive social processes at work throughout the planet.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,  
The Universal House of Justice

i. Peace and Development – “the needs of the age”

1. The ideal of world peace is taking structure – obstacles are collapsing, conflicts resolving, hopefulness awakening.
2. Spiritual and intellectual energies are seeking expression; people yearn for peace – this must be channeled, not through summons, but through a full vision of human prosperity and material and spiritual well-being, benefiting all of humanity.
3. With the recent physical unification of the planet, history of humanity as a whole as begun – the challenge is to draw on collective inheritance and consciously and systematically take responsibility for our destiny.
4. The vision for civilization’s next stage requires a reexamination of the attitudes and approaches underlying development – from policy and resource distribution, to goals and social structures, to principles of justice and the role of knowledge, and to the understanding of human nature.
5. Two discussions emerge that bear on strategies of global development:
  - Prevailing beliefs about the nature and purpose of the development process
  - The roles of the various protagonists
6. Current assumptions are materialistic – the purpose of development is defined by material prosperity.
7. This conception cannot meet humanity’s needs, as demonstrated by the abyss between rich and poor.
8. The social and economic crisis reflects these false conceptions of human nature – the purpose of development must be sought in the spiritual dimensions of life and motivation.
9. Roles need redefining – currently, the world’s populations are, at best, given secondary, limited, and irrelevant decision-making options.
10. This approach is endorsed by religion, burdened by paternalism and unable to translate faith into confidence to transcend material conditions.
11. People everywhere are galvanized by vision of a new global order – they are responding with social change.
12. This change in the way people see themselves, echoing “**Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements**”, raises questions about the role assigned to the general body of humanity.

I. Oneness of Humankind – “the well-being of mankind”

13. Consciousness of the oneness of humankind engages the world in assuming responsibility for its collective destiny – it challenges contemporary institutions based in competition and founded with a materialistic interpretation: adversarial politics, class struggles, legal system.
14. Bahá’u’lláh compared the world to the human body – a model by which we can organize planetary society
  - The world (body) is not just a mass of mere individuals (differentiated cells), but associations and groups, each endowed with intelligence and will

- Unity in diversity permits the full realization of the distinctive capacities inherent in each component
  - Each cell both contributes to and receives from the body
  - Physical well being makes possible the expression of human consciousness; biological (social) development transcends the existence of the body
15. Human species is an organic whole – the process of social organization has advanced from stage to stage, each opening up new opportunities for exercise of human capacity.
  16. The relationship between the individual and society is reciprocal, and as social organization has increased, capacities latent in each human being expanded – thus, transformation must find purpose simultaneously within human consciousness, internally, and social structures, externally.
  17. Global civilization needs laws and institutions universal in character and authority – when decision-making peoples embrace the concept of the oneness of humanity, and its principles are propagated through education and media, will the world formulate and commit to common goals; protecting itself from strife and conflict. **“The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established.”**

## II. Justice – “the appearance of unity”

18. Justice is the power that translates consciousness of oneness into collective will, the ruling principle of social organization, the standard by which to judge development.
19. Individually, justice is the faculty of the soul that enables one to distinguish truth from falsehood, to know through one’s own knowledge, and is **“the best beloved of all things”**.
20. Collectively, justice is the compass in decision making, for it is the means by which unity of thought and action can be achieved, and it indicates that the interests of the individual and those of society are inextricably linked – it fosters a consultative climate free from manipulation and partisanship.
21. Developmentally, justice protects from defining progress in terms of technological advance for a privileged minority at the expense of the general population; ensures that resources are not diverted; engages the masses only in programs that meet their needs.
  - Requisites for successful collective undertaking – honesty, willingness to work, and a spirit of cooperation – are harnessed only when every member and group of society can trust that they are protected by standards and assured of equal benefits.
22. Development strategy involves freeing the issue of human rights from the false dichotomy of individual and collective well-being, leading to failed historical ideologies of the cult of individualism or the deification of the state – only consultation in the framework of the oneness of humankind can concern for human rights be expressed.

23. The UN institutions have assumed this task – they generalized the term “human rights” and formally recognized social justice as a correlative to the establishment to peace.
24. The activity of consciousness – which distinguishes human nature – to know, to explore reality, investigate the purpose of existence, and to develop the endowments of human nature requires protection and freedom.
25. The UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and many of its guarantees (universal education, freedom of movement, freedom of belief, access to information), received its moral imperative from this distinguishing impulse of human consciousness.
26. Most of the other rights defined by the UN (security of family, ownership of property, right to privacy, health care, fair employment) are morally founded upon the principle that, since humanity is one, each member is a trust of the whole.
27. Collective trusteeship also protects cultural diversity and interactions of cultures, vital to development as humanity experiences collective maturity and heritage bears fruit.
28. **“The light of men is Justice. Quench it not with the contrary winds of oppression and tyranny. The purpose of justice is the appearance of unity among men. The ocean of divine wisdom surgeth within this exalted word, while the books of the world cannot contain its inner significance.”**

### III. Consultation – “the maturity of the gift of understanding”

29. Promotion of human rights requires redefinition of human relationships, which reflect a mature understanding of humanity, oneness, and justice.
30. This will lead to new understandings of the nature of family, the role of women, one’s relation to work and economics, the work of NGOs, the protection of the environment, and ultimately the establishment of a world federation.
31. Central to this task is the process of consultation; **“In all things it is necessary to consult. The maturity of the gift of understanding is made manifest through consultation.”**
32. This process of truth-seeking – arriving at a consensus and choosing the wisest action – does not use negotiation, compromise, protest, debate, propaganda, partisanship.
33. Rather, individuals transcends their point of view and function as members of one body, where ideas belong to the whole, and all support the arrived at decision.
34. Consultation is the operating expression of justice, the organizing principle of projects, and is a basic feature of successful development strategy, because it ensures the commitment of the people as participants; **“No man can attain his true station except through his justice. No power can exist except through unity. No welfare and no well-being can be attained except through consultation.”**

### IV. Knowledge – “should be acquired as can profit the peoples of the earth”

35. This level of global development calls for new levels of capacity, which requires structures that enable every society enormous expansion in access to and application of knowledge – universal education is indispensable.
36. Through two knowledge systems – religion and science – humanity’s experiences have been organized and interpreted, powers explored, and civilization advanced; especially when each has worked in concert.
37. “Development” cannot regard most of humankind as users of products of science/technology created elsewhere, preserving established elites and the gap between rich and poor – the issue is how to organize science/technology.
38. All people must be permitted to participate in the processes of expanding scientific/technological activity on the basis of capacity, particularly possible now given the acceleration of instruments of communication bringing information and training to all irrespective of geography or culture.
  - In addition to education for all, this requires the establishment of centers of learning that enhance capabilities for all to generate and apply knowledge.
39. The vast majority of the world’s population regards as truth that human nature’s identity is spiritual – cultivated by the great religions, enduring through civilization, and influencing daily life.
40. Yet, current development efforts are not seeking to tap capacities universal and creative, spiritual issues are not at the center of discourse, priorities have been determined by the purely materialistic world views of small minorities – all these stand as barriers to universal participation by denying the validity of the participants' defining cultural experience.
41. Moral issues have historically been bound up with contending theological doctrines and have blocked progress; the solution, however, is not claiming they are outside development’s framework and in discouraging the investigation of spiritual reality and ignoring the deepest roots of human motivation – this simply places humanity's future into the hands of a new dogma, one which argues that truth is amoral and facts are independent of values.
42. The greatest achievements of religion have been moral in character, and it has been the chief influence in the civilizing of human character – through its teachings and the examples of those illumined by them:
  - People have developed the capacity to love, to practice forgiveness, to trust.
  - People have learned to discipline their animal natures, to make sacrifices for the common good, to use wealth/resources to serve the advancement of civilization.
  - Institutional systems have been devised to translate these moral advances into the norms of social life.
43. Empowerment of humankind through a vast increase in access to knowledge requires ongoing dialogue between science and religion
  - To look to moral principle to ensure appropriate application of science

- To learn to distinguish between subjective views and objective reality, inculcate devotion to truth and detachment from the promptings of interests and passions.
- To cultivate thinking in terms of process unclouded by prejudices.
- To illuminate the production of wealth with the spiritual insight that service to humankind is the purpose of both individual life and social organization.

#### V. Economics – “dedicated to the welfare of society”

44. Economic issues need to be in the context of capacity-building through knowledge expansion; material benefits are not ends in themselves, but serve to extend the reach of human abilities, and thus economic efforts should equip people and institutions with the means a new social order can be built that cultivates the limitless potentialities latent in human consciousness, and empowers – the real purpose of development.
45. When economics accepts this as the purpose of development and its own role as a means will it be freed from materialistic preoccupations and fulfill its potential to achieve human well-being in the full sense of the term – this field demonstrates the most apparent need
46. Poverty, as an example.
  - Material resources exist or can be created through technology, but science responds to priorities not related to the real interests of the generality of humankind.
  - What’s required is a spiritual and scientific quest for appropriate values.
  - Religion can’t contribute if it cannot distinguish between contentment and mere passivity, and teaches poverty is an inherent feature of earthly life – religion must find new spiritual concepts and principles relevant to our age of unity and justice.
47. Unemployment, as another example: currently, the purpose of seeking employment is conceptualized as gaining means for consuming goods, resulting in the maintenance and expansion of production of goods, which supports employment – this inadequate conception has led to work force apathy and demoralization.
48. The world needs "work ethic", habits and attitudes generated by the creative interaction of science and religion.
  - In expressing capacities through productive work designed to meet needs, people become participants in the processes of the advancement of civilization
  - They fulfill purposes that unite them with others.
  - As work is consciously undertaken in a spirit of service it is a form of prayer, a means of worshipping God.
  - It is to this capacity of the self that development strategy must appeal.
49. The environmental crisis, as a third example
  - Theory is based on the false belief that there is no limit to nature's capacity.

- Absolute value to expansion, to acquisition, and to the satisfaction of people's wants as goals is not a realistic guide to policy.
  - Economic decision-making tools aren't reflecting the fact that challenges are global not local.
50. The solution that will empower humanity to assume trusteeship is a new system of values; an understanding that is scientific and spiritual in the fullest sense of the terms.
  51. Essential are the capacity for contentment, not fatalism; the welcoming of moral discipline, not life-denying Puritanism; devotion to duty, not self-righteousness; all of which have been instilled repeatedly throughout history by the great religions and today must be expressed in a form consistent with humanity's coming-of-age.
  52. Denial of full equality to women sharpens the challenge to science and religion in the economic life of humankind; social inequities, dictated by requirements of the past, cannot be justified at this point of humanity's maturity – equality of the sexes is central to the success of development. **"Women and men have been and will always be equal in the sight of God."**
  53. The extent to which women gain access to economic endeavor will set the pace of development; this calls for the full participation of a range of sympathetic experience and insight hitherto excluded from the classical models of impersonal markets and autonomous self-regarding actors, drawing on spiritual and scientific sensibilities – viewing human beings in relation to others, as altruistic, and recognizing the centrality of the role of the family and the community.

#### VI. Power – “the pivot of the oneness of mankind”

54. A transformation of this scale raises questions, and requires redefinitions, of the power to accomplish it and the authority to exercise that power.
55. Throughout history, power was advantage enjoyed by individuals, factions, classes, nations, or groups, especially men rather than women, and expressed in means used against others in order to acquire, surpass, dominate, resist, and win – becoming an inherent feature of the human culture of division and conflict regardless of society, religion, politics system, geography, or age.
56. These habits, attitudes, and behaviors related to the use of power have resulted in ruinous setbacks and extraordinary advance, both with clear limits – in an age of global problems, the idea that power means advantage for one segment is of no practical use to development.
57. Humanity's own requirements of maturation are demanding new conceptions of power; throughout history, there have been examples of conceiving power in other forms – the power of truth, the power of character and example, and particularly, unity, **“so powerful...that it can illuminate the whole Earth.”**
58. Institutions will elicit people's potentialities as the exercise of authority is governed by principles in harmony with humanity's maturity, which requires those in authority to:

- Win the confidence, respect, and genuine support of those they govern.
- Consult openly with all whose interests are affected by decisions being arrived at.
- Assess in an objective manner the needs and aspirations of the communities.
- Benefit from scientific and moral advancement to make appropriate use of resources.
- Give priority to building and maintaining unity
- Commit to the search for justice in all matters.

59. These principles operate within a democratic culture, not one of partisanship and electioneering, but one that serves the real developmental interests of the people.

60. Those selected should have a global perspective and consider themselves responsible for the welfare of all of humanity, despite at what level of governance they serve.

## VII. Institutions – “instruments for nurturing human potential”

61. Creating global development strategy that will accelerate humanity's coming-of-age requires reshaping all the institutions of society; to be conducted along lines that serve humanity's real needs.

- All of humanity are protagonists of this process.
- It's based on recognition of the oneness of humankind, a commitment to the establishment of justice, and a capacity-building dialogue between science/religion.
- It requires a rethinking of the concepts/assumptions currently governing social and economic life.

62. Social evolution has arrived at a decisive turning point in which all the phenomena of existence are impelled forward into new stages of their development – the spirit of the age; a conviction that so great a transformation in human consciousness is underway has inspired these views, and Bahá'u'lláh's words bring assurance that God has endowed humanity with spiritual resources fully equal to this challenge: **“O ye that inhabit the heavens and the earth! There hath appeared what hath never previously appeared.” “This is the Day in which God's most excellent favors have been poured out upon men, the Day in which His most mighty grace hath been infused into all created things.”**

63. The unprecedentedly destructive turmoil of human affairs should not allow leaders to have doubt about the ultimate outcome of this process of testing current habits, attitudes, and institutions – the birth of a new world.

- “What is required of the peoples of the world is a measure of faith and resolve to match the enormous energies with which the Creator of all things has endowed this spiritual springtime of the race.”