

# Seizing the Opportunity: Redefining the challenge of climate change



Initial Considerations of  
the Bahá'í International Community

Once the domain of scientists and negotiators, the discourse on climate change<sup>1</sup> has become a core part of informed debates about the future direction of the affairs of humankind. Authoritative assessments that global warming is “unequivocal” and directly linked to human activity<sup>2</sup>; that it constitutes the “widest-ranging market failure ever seen”<sup>3</sup>; and that it represents the “defining human development challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century”<sup>4</sup> – have seized the attention of governments and peoples alike.<sup>5</sup> Yet the search for solutions to climate change has revealed the limits of traditional technological and policy approaches and has raised difficult questions about justice, equity, responsibility and obligation. As communities and policy-makers worldwide have wrestled with these questions, they have brought us all to the threshold of a tremendous opportunity. It is the opportunity to take the next step in the transition from a state-centered mode of interacting on the world stage to one rooted in the unity which connects us as the inhabitants of one biosphere, the citizens of one world and the members of one human civilization. The nature of this step, its significance and some of the means for its accomplishment are the focus of the Bahá’í International Community’s contribution to forging a path out of the climate change challenge.

Decades of research, advocacy and policy-making have provided a strong scientific basis for action on climate change, have raised public awareness and have provided norms and principles to guide decision-making. Building on this foundation, the governments of the world have embarked on a major negotiating effort aimed at charting the course of cooperative action on climate change.<sup>6</sup> The negotiations focus on a shared vision for long-term cooperative action as well as a long-term global goal for emission reductions, which is to be met through mitigation of climate change, adaptation to its impacts and the mobilization of technological and financial resources. The process seeks to pave the way for an agreed outcome at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in 2009.<sup>7</sup> As negotiations proceed to set the rules and establish the mechanisms that will determine how governments assist vulnerable countries and approach this global challenge, they will test the resolve of the international community to address comprehensively and justly the shared threat of climate change.

Yet, in the face of the destructive impacts of climate change – exacerbated by the extremes of wealth and poverty – a need for new approaches centered on the principles of justice and equity is apparent. A dynamic and burgeoning discourse on the ethical<sup>8</sup> dimensions of climate change has brought to the fore the role of ethical inquiry in overcoming some of the most difficult substantive and process-related challenges.<sup>9</sup> The fundamental questions it seeks to address include: Who is responsible for the consequences of climate change?; Who should pay for the damages?; How should target levels of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere be determined?; What procedures will ensure fair representation in decision-making?; and, if nations have a responsibility to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, how do those responsibilities devolve onto the various units of government, organizations, individuals and non-state actors?<sup>10</sup> The challenge before the world community, then, is not only a technical one but a moral one, which calls for the transformation of thoughts and behaviors so as to allow our economic and social structures to extend the benefits of development to all people.

To contribute to this important discourse, we assert that the principle of the oneness of humankind must become the ruling principle of international life. This principle does not seek to undermine national autonomy or suppress cultural or intellectual diversity. Rather, it makes it possible to view the climate change challenge through a new lens – one that perceives humanity as a unified whole, not unlike the cells of the human body, infinitely differentiated in form and function yet united in a common purpose which exceeds that of its component parts. This principle constitutes more than a call for cooperation; it seeks to remold anachronistic and unjust

patterns of human interaction in a manner that reflects the relationships that bind us as members of one human race. The earnest consideration of the place of this principle in international relations should not be seen as an abstract exercise; it is precisely this level of analysis that must be undertaken and this level of commitment secured in order to forge a coherent ethic for the resolution of the climate change crisis. In order to progress beyond a world community driven by a largely economic and utilitarian calculus, to one of shared responsibility for the prosperity of all nations, such a principle must take root in the conscience of the individual. In this way, we come to recognize the broader human agenda – which subsumes those of climate change, poverty eradication, gender equality, development, and the like – and seeks to use both human and natural resources in a way that facilitates the progress and well-being of all people.

A response to climate change will require profound changes at the level of the individual, the community and the nations of the world. These will no doubt be informed by continuing progress in the arenas of science, technology, economics and policy. To complement the processes of change already underway, we consider the concrete ways in which the principle of the oneness of humanity could be operationalized at the above-mentioned levels and could serve to build momentum, support and intellectual capacity for more integrated and just approaches to the solution of the challenge before us.

### **The Individual Level: Engaging children and youth**

A fundamental component of resolving the climate change challenge will be the cultivation of values, attitudes and skills that give rise to just and sustainable patterns of human interaction with the environment. The engagement of children and youth will be particularly important as this population will be called upon to exercise leadership and address the dramatic and complex challenges of climate change in the decades to come. It is at a young age that new mindsets and habits can be most effectively cultivated. The important role of education and public awareness has been highlighted in the UNFCCC<sup>11</sup> as well as the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014), which promotes the integration of “principles, values, and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning.”<sup>12</sup>

In practical terms, this means that girls and boys must be afforded access to the same curricula, with priority given to the girl child who will one day assume the role of educating future generations. The curriculum itself must seek to develop in children the capacity to think in terms of systems, processes and relationships rather than in terms of isolated disciplines. Indeed, the problem of climate change has powerfully demonstrated the need for integrated and systemic approaches. Students must also be given the concrete skills to translate their awareness into action. This can be accomplished, in part, through incorporating an element of public service into curricula, thereby helping students to develop the ability to initiate projects, to inspire action, to engage in collective decision-making and to cultivate their sense of dignity and self-worth. Overall, the curriculum should strive to integrate theoretical and practical considerations as well as to link notions of individual progress with service to the broader community.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Community Level: Advancing gender equality and encouraging dialogue between science and religion**

On the community rests the challenge of providing the setting in which decision-making can occur peacefully and individual capabilities can be channeled through collective action. One of

the most pervasive social challenges besetting communities around the world is the marginalization of girls and women – a condition further exacerbated by the impacts of climate change. Around the world, women are largely responsible for securing food, water and energy for cooking and heating. Scarcity of resources arising from climate change intensifies the woman's burden and leaves less time to earn an income, attend school or care for the family. Moreover, natural disasters exact a heavier toll on women given their lack of access to information and resources, and, in some cases, their inability to swim, drive or even leave the house alone. It would be a mistake, however, to cast women as the victims or simply as under-resourced members of society; they represent perhaps the greatest source of untapped potential in the global effort to overcome the challenges of climate change. Their responsibilities in families, in communities, as farmers and as stewards of natural resources make them uniquely positioned to develop strategies for adapting to changing environmental conditions. Women's distinct knowledge and needs complement those of men, and must be duly considered in all arenas of community decision-making. It is in relationship and consultation with one another that the most effective strategies for mitigation and adaptation can be devised.

In light of this reality, the United Nations must give more attention to the gender dimensions of climate change. Neither the principal legal nor scientific framework guiding climate change negotiations – the UNFCCC and the Synthesis Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change – makes reference to gender. To begin to remedy this situation, we call on the United Nations and member states to include a gender dimension in their response to climate change and in their ongoing and future negotiations of climate change agreements. As a starting point, a gender component could be included in national reports to the UNFCCC; the presence of gender experts on UNFCCC delegations would further strengthen the gender analysis. Efforts to give due attention to this critical dimension of climate change, however, cannot be limited to ad hoc measures. Instead, they must be reinforced by efforts to include and raise up the voices of women in all arenas of human endeavor so as to create the social conditions in which the most fruitful collaboration and innovation can take place.<sup>14</sup>

Given their tremendous capacity to mobilize public opinion and their extensive reach in the most remote communities around the world, religious communities and their leaders bear an inescapable and weighty role in the climate change arena. By many measures, increasing numbers of religious communities are consistently lending their voice and resources to efforts to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change – they are educating their constituencies, providing a scriptural basis for ethical action and leading or participating in efforts at the national and international levels.<sup>15</sup> This role, however, must now unfold in the context of an emerging conversation – a rapprochement – between the discourses of science and religion. The time has come for the entrenched dichotomy between these two systems of knowledge to be earnestly re-examined. Both are needed to mobilize and direct human energies to the resolution of the problem at hand: methods of science facilitate a more objective and systematic approach to problem solving while religion concerns itself with those moral inclinations that motivate action for the common good. In an age yearning for justice and equality, religious doctrines will need to be carefully examined. Those that encourage social exclusion, passivity or inequality between the sexes will fail to engage the peoples of the world while qualities of justice, compassion, trustworthiness, humility and generosity – common to all religious traditions – will be even more urgently needed to forge the patterns of progressive community life.

## **The National and International Levels: Building foundations for cooperative action**

At a basic level, governments bear the responsibility of adhering to stated commitments and abiding by the rule of law. This level of commitment is essential for the cultivation of trust and relationship-building among nations, particularly as governments embark on the negotiation of a new global climate change agreement. Attention to the integrity of the negotiating process itself represents another important trust-building measure. Negotiations need to ensure that all stakeholders – both industrialized and developing economies representing mitigation and adaptation concerns respectively – are included.

While it is acknowledged that any effective climate change policy needs to be rooted in a global perspective, even this enlargement of the sphere of responsibility has not sufficiently moved governments to act. This 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.<sup>16</sup> To be sure, the solution to climate change exceeds the capacities and resources of any one nation and requires the full cooperation of all nations, each according to their means.

Governments now need to forge an agreement commensurate with the problem at hand and one which meets the needs of societies most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. The agreement needs to put in place the requisite institutional frameworks<sup>17</sup> as well as establish international mechanisms capable of mobilizing financial resources and accelerating innovation needed to transition to a low carbon society. The more economically developed nations need to display leadership consistent with their historic responsibility and economic capacity and commit to significant emission reductions. Developing nations, in a manner consistent with their capacities and development aspirations, must contribute through efforts to transition to cleaner development pathways. This is the time for leaders from all spheres of human endeavor to exercise their influence to identify solutions, which make it possible for mankind to address this challenge and, in so doing, chart a sustainable course to global prosperity.

Much has been said about the need for cooperation to solve a climate challenge that no nation or community can solve alone. The principle of the oneness of humankind presented in this statement seeks to move beyond utilitarian notions of cooperation to anchor the aspirations of individuals, communities and nations to those of the progress of humanity. In practical terms, it affirms that individual and national interests are best served in tandem with the progress of the whole. As children, women, men, religious and scientific communities as well as governments and international institutions converge on this reality, we will do more than achieve a collective response to the climate change crisis. We will usher in a new paradigm by means of which we can understand our purpose and responsibilities in an interconnected world; a new standard by which to evaluate human progress; and a mode of governance faithful to the ties that bind us as members of one human race.



---

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Climate change, as defined by Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) refers to “a change in the state of the climate that can be identified by changes in the mean and/or the variability of its properties and that persists for an extended period, typically decades or longer. It refers to any change in climate over time, whether due to natural variability or resulting from human activity.” (IPCC, 2007. *Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report. An Assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. [Allali, A. et al. (eds.)] Cambridge University Press: New York.) The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) defines climate change as a “change of climate that is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity and that alters the composition of the global atmosphere.” (United Nations. *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change*. UN Doc. FCCC/INFORMAL/84 GE.05-62220 (E) 200705. 1992).

<sup>2</sup> *Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report*. See note 1.

<sup>3</sup> Stern, Nicholas. 2006. *The Economics of Climate Change. The Stern Review*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York.

<sup>4</sup> UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), 2007. *The Human Development Report 2007/2008: Fighting Climate Change, Human Solidarity in a Divided World*. Palgrave Macmillan: New York. The report states that the consequences of a 2°C or greater increase in global temperature will include, among others: coastal flooding displacing 180-230 million people; water shortages affecting 1.8 billion people; and will put 220-400 million people at risk of malaria.

<sup>5</sup> 2007 may be remembered as the year in which the issue of climate change became firmly established on the global agenda. That year: the Nobel Peace Prize was jointly awarded to Al Gore and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change; the UN Security Council held its first debate on the impacts of climate change on peace and security; the UN Secretary-General convened a high-level meeting with heads of state and top officials to build momentum for the December 2007 UN climate change conference, which brought together representatives from over 150 member states to chart the course for a new negotiating process to tackle climate change.

<sup>6</sup> At the 2007 United Nations Climate Change Conference, participating nations adopted decisions collectively referred to as the “Bali Road Map,” which established a comprehensive negotiating process to achieve the full implementation of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The Road Map also addresses negotiations on further commitments under the Kyoto Protocol after 2012 and sets a deadline for both processes at the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen at the end of 2009. (UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Conference of the Parties, 13th Session. *Report of the Conference of the Parties*. UN Doc. FCCC/CP/2007/6/ and Add.1. 14 March 2008.)

<sup>7</sup> The conference is organized by the UNFCCC (see note 6) and will be held in Copenhagen, from November 30 - December 11, 2009. The goals of the conference will be to conclude negotiations of a global climate agreement and to set targets for emission reductions for industrialized countries beyond 2012 (when the first commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol comes to an end). The Kyoto Protocol is an international binding agreement, linked to the UNFCCC, that sets targets for 37 industrialized countries and the European community for reducing greenhouse gas emissions to an average of five per cent against 1990 levels over the period 2008-2012. (United Nations. *Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change*. 1998.)

<sup>8</sup> Ethics refers to the field of philosophical inquiry that examines moral principles, standards of conduct, notions of right and wrong as well as the motives and consequences of human conduct.

<sup>9</sup> The UNFCCC (see note 1) began to operationalize the ethical approach to climate change by putting forward principles to guide States’ Parties’ actions to achieve the objective of the Convention. These principles included: attention to the specific needs of developing countries; adoption of precautionary measures and the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities.

<sup>10</sup> An analysis of the ethical dimensions of climate change is provided in: Brown, D. et al. 2006. *The White Paper on the Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change*. The Collaborative Program on the Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change, Rock Ethics Institute, Penn State University: State College, Pennsylvania.

<sup>11</sup> Article 6 of the UNFCCC (see note 1) addresses “Education, Training and Public Awareness” and states that States Parties shall commit to the “the development and implementation of educational and public awareness programmes on climate change and its effects; public access to information on climate change and its effects ...”

---

<sup>12</sup> In December 2002, the UN General Assembly resolved to launch the *United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development* (2005-2014) with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as the lead agency. The Decade effort seeks to encourage changes in behavior that will create a more sustainable future in terms of environmental integrity, economic viability, and a just society for present and future generations. Education for sustainable development involves learning to: respect, value and preserve the achievements of the past; appreciate the wonders and the peoples of the Earth; live in a world where all people have sufficient food for a healthy and productive life; assess, care for and restore the state of our Planet; create and enjoy a better, safer, more just world; and be caring citizens who exercise their rights and responsibilities locally, nationally and globally. (UN General Assembly, 59th Session. *United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development*. UN Doc. A/Res/59/237. 24 February 2005.)

<sup>13</sup> The Bahá'í International Community has strongly promoted the theme of world citizenship as an ethical foundation for sustainable development, with the understanding that only a profound sense of responsibility for the well-being of humanity would mobilize civil society and governments to allocate resources needed to achieve sustainable development. (Bahá'í International Community. 1993. *World Citizenship: A Global Ethic for Sustainable Development*. New York.)

<sup>14</sup> In this regard, the United Nations must work to strengthen its mechanisms for gender equality by increasing the power, authority and resources dedicated to the protection and promotion of women's human rights, gender equality and women's empowerment.

<sup>15</sup> While it cannot be denied that the influencing power of religion is sometimes used for harmful purposes, in the context of the climate crisis, many religions have arisen to appeal to their members' sense of empathy and to those values that transcend self-interest. For an examination of the role of religion in addressing climate change, see Posas, Paula J. 2007. "Roles of Religion and Ethics in Addressing Climate Change," *Ethics in Science and Environmental Politics*. Vol. 2007: 31-49.

<sup>16</sup> The Responsibility to Protect doctrine obligates individual states and then the international community to prevent and end unconscionable acts of violence irrespective of where those acts occur. The Responsibility to Protect doctrine incorporates the "responsibility to prevent" and the "responsibility to rebuild" as essential elements on either side of intervention. (International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), *the Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty*. December 2001.) The doctrine refutes the long-standing assertion of the UN Charter that there is no right to "intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state." The doctrine was endorsed by UN member states at the 2005 World Summit and subsequently reaffirmed by the UN Security Council.

<sup>17</sup> While it is uncertain what form future institutional structures will take, it is increasingly clear that they will need to reconcile the tension between the need to manage the earth's resources on a global scale and states' sovereign right to exploit their resources according to their own development priorities. The Secretary-General's Report "Delivering as One" has put forward many recommendations for strengthening the United Nations' response to climate change. (United Nations. Secretary-General's High-level Panel on UN System-wide Coherence in the Areas of Development, Humanitarian Assistance, and the Environment. *Delivering as One: Report of the Secretary-General's High-level Panel*. 9 November 2006.) To create broader foundations for agreement, it will be helpful to articulate the key functions that future global institutions will need to perform in order to achieve effective mitigation and adaptation. These include: assisting the most vulnerable to deal with climate change; marshalling adequate financial resources; facilitating a timely international response to climate shocks; overseeing accountability and reporting mechanisms; providing legal frameworks; managing and ensuring equal access to the earth's resources; and integrating environmental legislation into other social development agendas.