

ONE COUNTRY

“The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens” – Bahá’u’lláh

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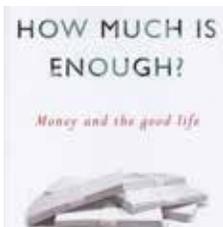
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Rio+20 marks further progress in global movement for sustainable development

RIO DE JANEIRO — Comparisons between the groundbreaking 1992 Rio Earth Summit and this year’s Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development are unavoidable.

Coming shortly after the end of the Cold War, amid the expectation of a “peace dividend,” the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development here produced a set of stirring principles on poverty eradication, environmental protection, and civil society participation to guide humanity into a cleaner and more prosperous 21st century.

The 2012 conference, however, was set against the backdrop of a global economic crisis that had presented many governments with immediate financial challenges. Observers worried that Rio+20 would not live up to its provenance, saying governments seemed mostly unwilling to make the hard choices needed to create a truly sustainable future.

And, indeed, the official outcome document was criticized by many for its lack of concrete commitments, weak governance structures, and limited vision.

Yet a number of observers say the event nevertheless gave a powerful push to the global movement for sustainable development, especially among actors in civil society and business.

Rio+20 was the largest ever United Nations conference. Some 45,000 people came, representing not only governments and international agencies, but also business groups, local authorities, and virtually all sectors of civil society, including environmental

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At the Rio+20 opening session on 20 June 2012: left to right, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Dilma Rousseff, President of Brazil, and Muhammad Shaaban, Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly Affairs and Conference Management. (UN Photo / Maria Elisa Franco)

Sustaining Societies: Towards a New “We”

IN BRIEF

- Sustainable development implies a relationship between present and future generations. Needed is the concept of a world-encompassing trusteeship — the idea that each one of us enters the world as a trust of the whole and, in turn, bears a measure of responsibility for the welfare of all.
- Extremes of wealth and poverty undermine economic vitality, cripple participation in decision-making processes, obstruct the flow of knowledge, and distort the perception of human capacity.
- What is needed is an effective process for exploring issues and making decisions that promotes genuine participation, facilitates collective action, and is responsive to the complexity inherent in efforts to forge sustainable systems.

[Editor’s note: The following is an edited version of the Bahá’í International Community’s Statement to the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, held 20-22 June 2012. The full statement can be read online at: <http://www.bic.org/statements/sustaining-societies-towards-new-we>]

Sustainable development assumes a relationship between present and future generations — a relationship defined not only by geography but also by time. An earnest exploration of these relationships provides a lens through which to evaluate the merits and shortcomings of any proposed institutional arrangements and, more importantly, helps us to articulate our aspirations for the future. The following thoughts are offered as a contribution on these themes.

Trusteeship

A critical dimension of the design and implementation of new economic and institutional frameworks is a world-encompassing trusteeship — the idea that each one of us enters the world as a trust of the whole and, in turn, bears a measure of responsibility for the welfare of all. This principle of trusteeship calls into question the efficacy of present-day expressions of sovereignty. It challenges the ethical basis of loyalties that do not extend beyond the nation state. While multilateralism has strengthened and expanded cooperation among nation states, it has not removed the struggles for power that dominate relations among them. The mere collaboration of self-interested actors in a multilateral enterprise does not ensure favorable outcomes for the community of nations as a whole. As long as one group of nations perceives its interests in opposition to another, progress will be limited and short-lived.

Trusteeship is a concept equally applicable to many other areas of concern to humanity. Human rights, for example, achieve their highest expression when understood in the context of trusteeship: they come to provide a framework for human relations through which all people have the opportunity to realize their full potential, and all are concerned with ensuring the same for others. The shift to sustainable modes of production and consumption is a further expression of this principle: put simply, to consume more than one’s fair share is to deplete the resources needed by others.

The principle of trusteeship implies the need for an intergenerational perspective in which the well-being of future generations is taken into account at all levels of decision-making.

Elimination of the Extremes of Wealth and Poverty

Today, over 80% of the world’s people live in countries where income differentials are widening. While poverty eradication measures have improved living standards in some parts of the world, inequality remains widespread. Numerous and wide-ranging deficits in human well-being are endemic in both poor and rich countries alike. Consider that nearly 800 million adults cannot read or write, two and half billion people lack basic sanitation, nearly half of the world’s children live in poverty, and nearly one billion people do not have enough to eat. At the other extreme, a mere thousand or so individuals seem to control nearly six percent of the Gross World Product. These are symptomatic of structural flaws in the economic system and its institutions, and need to be corrected.

A careful examination of how extreme concentrations of wealth distort relationships within and among nations is timely. Such extremes

undermine economic vitality, cripple participation in decision-making and political processes, obstruct the flow of knowledge and information, and distort the perception of human capacity. Wealth needs to be acquired and expended by nations in a way that enables all the people of the world to prosper. Structures and systems that permit a few to have inordinate riches while the masses remain impoverished must be replaced by arrangements that foster the generation of wealth in a way that promotes justice.

Creating sustainable patterns of economic activity that extend from the local to the global level — covering urban and rural areas — will require a fundamental reorientation of both the principles and institutional arrangements related to production and consumption. The creation and distribution of wealth in rural regions and policies that prevent the forces of economic globalization from marginalizing grassroots initiatives deserve particular attention. Promising approaches include strengthening local capacity for technological innovation and fostering respect for the knowledge possessed by a community or culture.

There is much more to be learned about both extremes of the poverty-wealth spectrum. The voices and lived experiences of the people — including the poorest — must be heard. Beyond economic variables, for example, a much fuller appreciation must be gained of the social and spiritual resources upon which the masses draw in living their lives. A deeper, more widely held understanding of the implications of the global movements and uses of wealth is needed if the actions of governments and the international community are to advance in an informed and constructive manner.

Consultation

What is needed is an effective process for exploring issues and making decisions that promotes genuine participation, facilitates collective action, and is responsive to the complexity inherent in efforts to forge sustainable systems and structures. In this connection, we



At the Rio+20 conference, a dedicated pavilion showcased exhibits and events on sustainable development. (UN Photo / Guilherme Costa)

offer a model of “consultation” — a principle-based approach to collective decision-making practiced by Bahá’í communities around the world.

Current decision-making structures exclude the masses of the world’s people, perpetuate conflict, place too much emphasis on the concerns of a powerful few, are often subservient to struggles for political ascendancy, and have proved inadequate for the task of building a better world in which all are able to prosper.

A Bahá’í approach to development is based on a conviction that all people not only have the right to benefit from a materially and spiritually prosperous society but also have an obligation to participate in its construction. If consultation is to be effective, it must promote the participation of the people in determining the direction of their communities — whether in analyzing specific problems, attaining higher degrees of understanding on a given issue, exploring possible courses of action, or making collective decisions. Facilitating the genuine participation of those traditionally excluded from consultative processes, including the poor, is of the utmost concern.

For progress on the international stage to be sustainable, it must take place within a framework that promotes the attainment of progressively higher degrees of unity of vision and action among its participants. Each forward step — far from representing a momentary triumph of a single

person or faction in an environment of competition — becomes part of a collective process of learning by which international institutions, states, and civil society advance together in understanding.

In such a framework, ideas and suggestions do not belong to a single person or entity. Nor does their ultimate success or failure rest merely on the reputation, status, or influence of the individual or institution putting them forward. Rather, proposals and insights belong to the group, which adopts, revises, or discards them as needed. Frank and open discussion will often yield differing viewpoints, particularly given the diversity of culture, history, and experience represented on the international stage. This can reveal unexamined assumptions and bring to light new concepts and ideas.

We look at Rio+20 as the next step in an unfolding process by which the people of the world learn to reach solutions together. The bonds of affection, trust, and mutual care that bind individuals together are continually expanding to encompass an increasingly larger share of human society. The new ‘we’ is not an abstraction. It is an awareness that we must persistently challenge ourselves, our communities, and social institutions to reassess and refine established patterns of thought and interaction in order to better shape the course of human development throughout the world.

In Iran, intensified attacks in one little-known city are a microcosm of the persecution against Bahá'ís

IN BRIEF

- A new report catalogs the systematic campaign against Bahá'ís in one little-known Iranian city, Semnan, which has a population of 125,000 and only a few hundred Bahá'ís.
- Yet since 2009, at least 30 Bahá'ís have been arrested there, some 27 Bahá'í-owned businesses have been closed by authorities, and more than a dozen Bahá'í properties have been hit by arsonists.
- It is a case study in how official and semi-official elements in an Iranian municipality — including the police, the courts, local officials, and the clergy — can coordinate efforts to completely oppress a minority community.

[Editor's Note: The following story is adapted from a new Bahá'í International Community report, The Bahá'ís of Semnan: a case study in religious hatred. The report examines how events in one city in north central Iran are representative of the wide-ranging persecution faced by Iranian Bahá'ís throughout the country. The full report can be found online at: www.bic.org/inciting-hatred]

SEMNAN, Iran — At first glance, the alleged crimes that sent Adel Fanaian to prison for six years in May 2012 seem particularly grave. They include “mobilizing a group with the intent to disturb national security” and “propaganda against the sacred regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran.”

But a more careful reading of the court record shows Mr. Fanaian was convicted for participation in activities that, in any other country, would be perfectly legal and even quite praiseworthy. His endeavors included

organizing regular worship for his religious community, overseeing the development of morals classes for children and youth, and helping young people obtain a college education.

Mr. Fanaian's severe punishment for his efforts — all aimed at trying to hold together the much-beleaguered Bahá'í community — is but one of a series of harsh prison sentences handed down to Bahá'ís in Semnan in May 2012.

Also in May, three other Bahá'ís in Semnan were sentenced to imprisonment on similar charges. Pouya Tebyanian received six and a half years, Faramarz Firouzian four and a half years, and Anisa Ighani four years and four months. Her husband, Siamak, is already serving time in prison and her incarceration will leave their two young children without resident parents. He had been convicted in 2009 of “membership in illegal groups” and “propaganda activities in favor of Bahá'ism” for his practice of the Bahá'í Faith.

An arson attack with Molotov cocktails on 25 February 2009 left smoke stains on the exterior of apartments occupied by two Bahá'í families in Semnan, Iran.



Over the past four years, Bahá'ís in Semnan have faced raids, arrests, and imprisonments at the hands of government officials; their businesses have been subjected to arson and graffiti attacks or shut down altogether; their cemeteries have been vandalized; their beliefs have been attacked in the media and from the pulpit of mosques. Perhaps most ominously, their children have been denounced in the city's schools.

In Semnan since 2005, at least 34 Bahá'ís have been arrested, some 27 Bahá'í-owned businesses have been closed by authorities, and more than a dozen Bahá'í homes and businesses have been hit by arsonists.

This bleak situation is not confined to Semnan. Bahá'ís are facing particularly severe oppression in a number of other cities, including Abadeh, Aligudarz, Bukan, Isfahan, Ivel, Khorramabad, Laljin, Mashhad, Parsabad, Rafsanjan, Ravansar, and Shiraz.

What makes Semnan significant is the depth, breadth, and intensity of attacks in a small area, sustained over a number of years. Moreover, the widespread and coordinated nature of the attacks on Bahá'ís in Semnan could only be accomplished with government encouragement and permission. The recent intensification there seems to indicate a new level of activity to enforce more strongly the government's long-established policy of discrimination against Bahá'ís.

Inciting hatred

The current phase of persecution against the Semnan Bahá'ís started in late 2008 with reports that a series of widely publicized anti-Bahá'í seminars and rallies had been organized in the city. One, held at the Semnan Red Crescent Society theater, analyzed the supposed link between the Bahá'í Faith and Zionism, a common anti-Bahá'í propaganda theme.

Within weeks of those rallies, on 15 December 2008, the homes of some 20 Bahá'ís were raided by authorities at dawn. Bahá'í materials, computers, and mobile telephones were seized. Nine Bahá'ís whose homes were raided were arrested, one at the time of the raids



A home in Semnan sprayed with offensive graffiti which, when translated into English, reads: "Down with the pagan Bahá'í. Down with America and Britain."

and eight more later, all on entirely false or illegal charges relating purely to their peaceful practice of the Bahá'í Faith. "Evidence" gathered in those raids has sent several Semnan Bahá'ís to court and ultimately prison.

Starting in 2009, there have been numerous incidents of arson or vandalism against Bahá'í homes, businesses, and the cemetery. While many of these were undertaken by apparently anonymous individuals, all signs point to official sanction and, likely, the use of plainclothes agents. These incidents have often been accompanied by the spray-painting of anti-Bahá'í graffiti on buildings with slogans such as "Death to Bahá'ís."

Economic sanctions

Accompanying these attacks have been increased efforts by local authorities to destroy the livelihood of Bahá'ís. This has included a decision in early 2009 by the Chamber of Commerce and some 39 associated trade unions to prohibit the issuing of business licenses or managerial permits to Bahá'ís and to decline to renew existing ones. Most recently, two factories with Bahá'í-ownership interests were shut down in May 2012 — causing not only about 17 Bahá'ís but also at least 42 Muslim employees to lose their jobs. Overall, the closure of some 27 Bahá'í businesses has deprived some 110 families of their main livelihood.

Muslim clerics have been invited to give presentations in Semnan classrooms that insult the Faith. In some cases, Bahá'í school children have been segregated from their classmates. On at least two occasions, Muslim students were encouraged to physically hurt Bahá'í students.

Intelligence agents have stepped up their surveillance of Bahá'ís in Semnan, following them everywhere, apparently as a form of psychological pressure. This heightened monitoring has reportedly caused Bahá'í children to live in constant fear that their parents will be arrested.

The Bahá'ís have made wide-ranging efforts to bring all of these injustices to the attention of the relevant authorities and to seek redress. In virtually every case, they have been rebuffed, further evidence that the government condones these attacks.

In recent years, moreover, it appears that the government has begun to experiment with increasingly violent methods. This has come not only in the form of rising arrests and imprisonment but also in the incitement of hatred against Bahá'ís, with a resulting increase in personal attacks, arson, vandalism, and hate graffiti. Such attacks often appear to be initiated by ordinary citizens, although there is considerable evidence of involvement by government agents, either directly or through agitation.

A dark picture of religious freedom in Iran

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton talks about on the release of the 2011 International Religious Freedom Report on 30 July 2012 at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. (US State Department photo by Michael Gross)



IN BRIEF

- **The US State Department's annual report on International Religious Freedom was sharply critical of Iran for its wide-ranging restrictions on virtually every religious minority in the country.**
- **All religious minorities suffered varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, particularly in the areas of employment, education, and housing. Bahá'ís continued to experience expulsions from, or denial of admission to, universities, said the report.**

WASHINGTON — The United States painted a dark picture of religious freedom in Iran in a new report released in July, documenting how the government there oppresses the followers of virtually every religious minority in the country, restricting their religious activities, limiting their economic prospects, and imprisoning them when they tell others about their beliefs.

“Government rhetoric and actions created a threatening atmosphere for nearly all non-Shia religious groups, most notably for Bahá'ís, as well as for Sufi Muslims, evangelical Christians, Jews, and Shia groups that did not share the government's official religious views,” said the 2011 annual US Department of State's report on International Religious Freedom in its section on Iran, which was released on 30 July 2012.

“Bahá'í and Christian groups reported arbitrary arrests, prolonged detentions, and confiscation of property. During the year, government-controlled broadcast and print media intensified

negative campaigns against religious minorities, particularly Bahá'ís.

“All religious minorities suffered varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, particularly in the areas of employment, education, and housing. Bahá'ís continued to experience expulsions from, or denial of admission to, universities,” the report said.

Introducing the report at a press conference at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said religious freedom is fundamental to human dignity — and a bellwether for all human rights.

“Religious freedom is not just about religion,” said Secretary Clinton. “It's not just about the right of Roman Catholics to organize a Mass, or Muslims to hold a religious funeral, or Bahá'ís to meet in each others' homes for prayer, or Jews to celebrate High Holy Days together — as important as those rituals are. Religious freedom is also about the right of people to think what they want, say what they think, and come together in fellowship

without the state looking over their shoulder.”

Issued annually since 2001, the report analyzes the status of religious freedom around the world, examining progress or regression in every nation outside the US.

The report gave special attention this year to the impact of political and demographic transitions on religious minorities, the effects of conflict on religious freedom, and “the rising tide of anti-Semitism.”

The section on Iran was especially critical, stating that the “government’s respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom continued to deteriorate.”

“The legal system fosters religious abuse and discrimination,” said the report, noting that the “constitution and other laws and policies severely restrict freedom of religion.”

The report found that virtually all religious groups outside the Shia Muslim majority faced discrimination. It noted some 60 Sufis had been arrested last year, that some 6,500 Christian Bibles had been confiscated, and that Zoroastrians also reported detentions and harassment.

Situation of Bahá’ís highlighted

The situation of Iran’s Bahá’í community was highlighted prominently throughout the report. Among other things, the report noted that Bahá’ís are precluded from enrollment in state-run universities, banned from the social pension system, and prohibited from “officially assembling or maintaining administrative institutions.”

The report also stated clearly that Bahá’ís are persecuted because of their religious beliefs.

“The government arbitrarily arrested Bahá’ís and charged them with violating Islamic penal code articles 500 and 698, relating to activities against the state and spreading falsehoods, respectively,” said the report, noting that 95 Bahá’ís were imprisoned and 416 had active cases in the judicial system at the end of 2011.

Noted poet Robert Hayden honored on postage stamp



Robert Hayden, top row, second from right, is included in a new series of US Postal Service postage stamps depicting America’s most important 20th century poets.

WASHINGTON — Robert Hayden, the first African-American to be appointed United States Poet Laureate, has been honored on a postage stamp issued by the US Postal Service.

The portrait of Mr. Hayden — who was a Bahá’í — appears in a special series of 10 stamps depicting America’s most important 20th century poets.

Born in 1913, Robert Hayden attended Detroit City College and earned a master’s degree at the University of Michigan where he was mentored by the celebrated poet W.H. Auden.

Mr. Hayden became acquainted with the Bahá’í teachings in 1943 and was drawn to their focus on racial harmony.

“He wrote several poems about his Bahá’í religious faith,” said an article on the US Philatelic website, “which bolstered his belief in the oneness of all humanity and in the spiritual value of the arts.”

Launching the series of stamps, a US Postal Service press statement said: “The poems of Robert Hayden reflect his brilliant craftsmanship, his historical conscience, and his gift for storytelling. Many of his works render aspects of the black American experience with unforgettable vividness; others are more personal.”

In 1976, Mr. Hayden was named Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, a post which was later renamed Poet Laureate of the United States. He taught at Fisk University in Nashville for 23 years and then at the University of Michigan from 1969 until his death in 1980 at age 66.

The other poets honored on the collection of stamps are Elizabeth Bishop, Joseph Brodsky, Gwendolyn Brooks, E.E. Cummings, Denise Levertov, Sylvia Plath, Theodore Roethke, Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams.

The Tahirih Justice Center wins recognition for helping immigrant women

IN BRIEF

- Since 1997, the Tahirih Justice Center has worked to help immigrant women escape forced marriage, genital mutilation, and other forms of gender-based violence.
- Using its own attorneys and a network of 1,000 others who donate services, it has won 99 percent of its cases and helped more than 14,000 women.
- For this, founder Layli Miller-Muro has won a number of recent awards, including the DVF Award for women's leadership.
- Ms. Miller-Muro attributes the Center's success to the application of Bahá'í principles of non-partisanship and consultation.

WASHINGTON — At the age of 11, Didja faced the prospect of being forced into a marriage with an older man in Mali. Her mother had died and tradition there meant her daughters should be divided among remaining aunts and uncles.

“I was given to my uncle who told me that I was to be married to one of his friends, a man who already had three wives and over 20 children,” Didja said recently. “I was certain that a life of misery and servitude awaited me.”

Today she is living safely, having successfully avoided the forced early marriage with the help of a sympathetic relative who spirited her to the United States — and with the help of the Tahirih Justice Center, which provided free legal advice to help her

win asylum and prevent the possibility of an involuntary return.

Every year, millions of women like Didja, whose full name is withheld, are subjected to gender-based violence: forced marriage, rape, domestic violence, human trafficking, and female genital mutilation. Only a small percentage successfully leave their misery behind.

Since its founding in 1997, the Tahirih Justice Center has helped more than 14,000 women like Didja, mainly by offering free legal help with immigration issues — and also by advocating for changes in US policy regarding issues of gender equality and violence prevention.

A Bahá'í-inspired organization, the Center has been remarkably successful. It has won 99 percent of its legal cases. And it has taken the lead in successfully lobbying for several major changes



Tahirih Justice Center founder and director Layli Miller-Muro, left, with fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg in March 2012, at a ceremony honoring the Center with a DVF award for women's leadership.

in US public policy. For all this, the Center and its founder, Layli Miller-Muro, have been honored by a number of outside organizations.

In 2007, the Center won the Washington Post Award for Excellence in Nonprofit Management. In 2011, Ms. Miller-Muro was chosen by *Newsweek* magazine as one of 150 “fearless women” in the world who are “making their voices heard.” And in March 2012, Ms. Miller-Muro was one of five women to win a “DVF Award” for women’s leadership, sponsored by designer Diane von Furstenberg.

Oscar-winning actress Debra Winger presented the DVF award to Ms. Miller-Muro, noting that the Center has saved thousands of women “from some of the worst crimes imaginable, that are gender based and that could only be understood in a way by another woman.”

“Do they hear you when you cry?”

The Center was established after 17-year-old Fauziya Kassindja fled a forced marriage and female genital mutilation in her homeland of Togo, and ended up imprisoned for more than a year in the United States for immigration law violations, facing the threat of deportation back to Togo.

Ms. Miller-Muro — although still in law school at the time — took the case in 1995 and successfully won it on appeal, establishing a landmark precedent in US immigration law and opening the door for victims of gender-based violence around the world to seek asylum.

The two women co-authored a book, *Do They Hear You When You Cry*. With her portion of the advance, Ms. Miller-Muro founded the Center.

Today, it has more than 30 full-time staff, including attorneys, social workers, public policy advocates and paralegals, working in the main Washington office and two branch offices in Baltimore and Houston. The Center’s budget of more than \$10 million dollars comes from an array of grants, foundation support, and corporate and individual donations, including some \$8 million worth of “pro bono” contributions of time



Tahirih Justice Center staff and supporters at a reception in July 2012 for the opening of a new office in downtown Baltimore.

from lawyers and doctors who help the Center’s clients for free. Currently, more than 1,000 attorneys in some 175 law firms handle over two-thirds of the Center’s legal work on this basis.

The Center also works to advocate public policy changes that will help immigrant women. It was, for example, the lead drafter and advocate for a campaign that culminated in the International Marriage Broker Regulation Act of 2005, a bill which requires such brokers to inform women when the man who seeks to marry them is a known violent offender.

“Tahirih Justice Center is consistently at the forefront of emerging issues surrounding gender based violence,” said Julia Alanen of the Global Justice Initiative, a Washington-based NGO. “What Tahirih does that’s so extraordinary is identify these issues and bring them to light, bring them to the public’s awareness and get other service providers to respond.”

Using spiritual principles

The Center is named after an 19th century Persian poet, Tahirih, who was an early follower of the Bábí Faith, the precursor to the Bahá’í Faith. She was executed in 1844 for her beliefs. Her last recorded words were: “You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women.”

Certainly, the most prominent principle in the Center’s literature is support for the equality of women and men, which in the Bahá’í writings is upheld as a spiritual principle,

with both sexes responsible for its implementation.

But Ms. Miller-Muro, a Bahá’í herself, has sought to apply other Bahá’í teachings and ideals to the Center’s operation since its founding.

“For example, we are passionately non-partisan, and this position comes from the spiritual principles of the Bahá’í writings,” said Ms. Miller-Muro. “And in Washington, we are known in the advocacy community for our non-partisanship.”

“People come to us all the time and say clearly to us, ‘You are non-partisan — you have friends who are both Democrats and Republicans. But we only have friends who are Democrats. Can you help us reach the Republicans?’ Or vice-versa. So that makes us more successful,” she said.

In its day-to-day operations, as well, the Center strives to use Bahá’í consultation, a distinctive means of non-adversarial decision-making. Among other things, consultation strives to gather information from a diversity of sources, encourages frank and candid but respectful discussion, and requires individual detachment from ideas that are presented, which become the property of the group.

Applied at all levels of the organization, consultation is “a robust tool for maintaining unity and creating widely supported solutions to social problems,” said Paul Glist, chairman of the Center’s board of directors.

A focus on justice at the 36th annual Association for Bahá'í Studies conference

Former Canadian Attorney General and Minister of Justice, Irwin Cotler, MP, addresses the 36th conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies North America, held in Montreal, 9-12 August 2012.



IN BRIEF

- **Former Canadian Attorney General and Minister of Justice, Irwin Cotler, MP, and aboriginal rights advocate Louise Mandell were featured speakers at this year's Association for Bahá'í Studies conference.**
- **Some 1,400 people attended the meeting, which focused on issues of justice and reconciliation — and the centenary of the visit of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to North America.**

MONTREAL — The establishment of justice and genuine reconciliation demands greater attention to the challenging work of rebuilding human relationships on the basis of love and mutual regard across historical barriers of injustice and ignorance.

That was among the messages conveyed by distinguished contributors to the 36th conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies of North America, which attracted more than 1,400 participants here, 9-12 August 2012.

Former Canadian Attorney General and Minister of Justice, Irwin Cotler, MP, gave a personal account of the principles that he has striven to apply throughout his career. His observations ranged from efforts to help dissidents before the collapse of the Soviet Union to initiatives aimed at advancing justice in the Middle East today.

Lawyer Louise Mandell, Q.C. — a renowned aboriginal rights advocate — spoke about the contribution all citizens can make to reconciliation, through their personal, family and community lives.

“Social change happens in the hearts and minds of people, causing them to act differently,” she said. “The force of reconciliation can only be carried out by the society.”

Referring to the presence in Canada exactly a century ago of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Ms. Mandell added, “The key to reconciliation — and 'Abdu'l-Bahá led the way — is through unity in diversity.”

The program of the conference was designed to reflect many of the subjects addressed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá — the eldest son of Bahá'u'lláh and His appointed successor as head of the Bahá'í Faith — during His historic journey to the United States and Canada in 1912.

During His stay in Montreal from 30 August to 9 September 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's talks ranged across a number of issues of public concern, including the rights of women, the elimination of prejudice and racism, universal education, justice, and peace.

Disappointing to some, Rio+20 nevertheless marks further progress in the global movement for sustainable development

IN BRIEF

- **Although many participants were disappointed by the lack of concrete commitments from governments in Rio+20's final agreements, others said the conference nevertheless played a key role in the evolution of the global movement for sustainable development.**
- **The largest UN meeting ever, Rio+20 provided a venue for a global interchange of ideas on sustainable development, such as new institutional frameworks for its promotion and its connection to a "green economy."**
- **Some 700 voluntary commitments from not only governments but also businesses and civil society suggest that non-governmental groups are no longer waiting on the sidelines for government action.**

Rio+20, continued from page one

groups, women, young people, labor unions, and indigenous people.

Indeed, some participants said that the level of participation by non-governmental groups reached a new height at Rio+20, marking a palpable shift in thinking about how best to address the issues of sustainable development.

"The game changer at Rio+20 was that civil society is no longer looking for government to do everything," said Duncan Hanks, a Canadian Bahá'í who participated in the conference.

"We are no longer waiting for governments to define the policy space before action on sustainable development is taken. New actors have arisen in the field, with new experience and enhanced capacities that are the result of some 20 years of education and work on environment and development," he said.

Mr. Hanks and others pointed in particular to the list of some 700 voluntary commitments made not only by governments but also businesses and NGOs. Their total financial equivalent was estimated at more than US\$500 billion. They include actions such as planting 100 million trees by 2017, greening 10,000 square kilometers of desert, empowering 5,000 women entrepreneurs in green economy businesses in Africa, recycling 800,000 tons per year of PVC plastic by 2020, and commitments by dozens of universities to make their campuses more sustainable.

"The intensely negotiated Rio+20 outcome document is not the only Rio+20 outcome," said Olav Kjørven, the United Nations assistant secretary-general for development policy, in a post-Rio blog posting. "What happened outside the negotiation room has potentially changed the nature of UN summitry, largely by redefining



Sha Zukang, secretary-general of the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (right, in suit), and Rio Mayor Eduardo Paes (left, back to camera) plant a Brazilwood tree at the site of the Bahá'í International Community's Peace Monument on 17 June 2012 during its re-dedication.



The “Elimination of Extremes of Wealth and Poverty in a Green Economy Context” was the topic of a panel discussion sponsored by the Bahá’í International Community on 13 June 2012 at Rio+20. Left to right are: Steven Stone, chief of the Economics and Trade Branch of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP); Michael Dorsey, assistant professor of environmental studies at Dartmouth College; Daniella Hiche of the Bahá’í International Community; and Farooq Ullah, head of policy and advocacy at the Stakeholder Forum.

the plurality of actors involved and elevating their ownership of creating the future we want.”

Held 20-22 June, the official Rio+20 meeting was preceded by weeks of parallel meetings and side events. These included some 500 workshops and seminars at the main conference site, specialized forums on “Corporate Sustainability” and “Science, Technology and Innovation,” and a “People’s Summit” at Flamengo Park in downtown Rio that offered a platform for citizens and groups not registered for the official conference.

Global exchange of ideas

Taken all together, these interlocking meetings provided a venue for a global interchange of ideas on the main topics of Rio+20, which were defined in advance by the UN General Assembly as “a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication” and “the

institutional framework for sustainable development.”

Global civil society provided important inputs to the main outcome document, which was nearly two years in the making. Early drafts were drawn from suggestions made by non-governmental organizations, who filed thousands of pages of proposals. At one point, more than 70 percent of the inputs to the main negotiating document had come from civil society, said Sha Zukang, secretary-general of Rio+20.

The final document, titled “The Future We Want,” was adopted by consensus on 22 June by government delegations that included more than 100 heads of state. Among other things, the document reaffirmed principles adopted in 1992 and pledged renewed commitment to “sustainable development and to ensuring the promotion of an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable future for our planet and for present and future generations.”

It also stated that eradicating poverty is “the greatest global challenge facing the world today,” saying “we

are committed to freeing humanity from poverty and hunger as a matter of urgency.” To this end, governments said, they will accelerate efforts to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by their 2015 deadline.

Governments also pledged to work closely with civil society. “Sustainable development requires the meaningful involvement and active participation of regional, national and subnational legislatures and judiciaries, and all major groups.”

For many participants, it was not enough. “Despite over one hundred heads of state attending the conference, no new political will was created,” noted Wael Hmaidan of the Climate Action Network-International. “No treaties were signed nor any more new agencies or funds created.”

Others, however, noted that governments did not step back from the main principles of sustainable development outlined 20 years before — and that some new ideas still emerged, such as a proposal to transition from the soon-to-be-expired MDGs to new “sustainable development goals.”

“The whole concept of sustainable development goals is quite important, because it is so important for policy to have metrics,” said Halldór Thorgeirsson, director for implementation strategy at the UN Climate Change Secretariat.

The document also established a “framework for action and follow-up” in a number of thematic areas, including poverty eradication, food security and sustainable agriculture, water and sanitation, energy and energy efficiency, sustainable tourism and transportation, oceans, forests, biodiversity, health, and employment.

“The first Rio conference was mainly about moving the environmental agenda forward, which it did in very powerful ways,” wrote Mr. Kjørven. “This time, world leaders signaled that they ‘get’ that the systems and behaviors that have taken us to this point in history have to change for the better. It is not about ‘whether’ anymore. It is about ‘when.’ This shift of mindset will challenge orthodoxy and could be transformational.”

At Rio+20, Bahá'ís bring high energy to discussions on sustainable development

RIO DE JANEIRO — Delegates of the Bahá'í International Community, along with representatives of the Brazilian Bahá'í community and Bahá'ís from other non-governmental organizations, participated in a wide range of activities and events at the Rio+20 Conference, reflecting a deep history of involvement in the sustainable development discussion since before the 1992 Earth Summit.

Altogether, more than 30 Bahá'ís attended Rio+20 and its parallel events. In addition to issuing a statement to the conference (*see page 2*), such activities undertaken by Bahá'ís at Rio included:

- The sponsorship of a 90-minute side event at the main Rio Centro conference site on 13 June on the “Elimination of the Extremes of Wealth and Poverty in a Green Economy Context.” The event featured a panel discussion by Steven Stone of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Michael Dorsey of Dartmouth College, and Farooq Ullah of Stakeholder Forum. Moderated by Daniella Hiche, a delegate of the Bahá'í International Community from Brazil, the event drew more than 100 people, making it one of the best-attended side events in advance of the 20-22 June high level meeting.

- The re-dedication of the “Peace Monument,” an hour-glass shaped sculpture built 20 years ago as the Bahá'í International Community’s contribution to the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. Containing the soil from nearly 150 countries, the monument was recently restored in collaboration with the Office of the Mayor of Rio de Janeiro. Present at the re-dedication ceremony on 17 June were Sha Zukang, the UN secretary-general for Rio+20; Eduardo Paes, the mayor of Rio; Laudemar Aguiar,

National Secretary of the Brazilian Organizing Committee for Rio+20, and Siron Franco, the well-known Brazilian artist who created the monument.

- Participation in the “Youth Blast,” a parallel conference for young people sponsored by the UN that was held 7-12 June 2012. The Bahá'í International Community sponsored an interactive workshop on “trusteeship in the context of sustainable development.”

- The sponsorship of two side events at the Rio People’s Summit — the parallel civil society conference to Rio+20. They were on “spiritual principles for development” and the “social role of religions.” The events were organized mainly by the Brazilian Bahá'í community, which sent about 20 participants to the Summit.

- Members of the Bahá'í-inspired International Environment Forum also participated in several pre-conference meetings in Rio. These included the Global Research Forum on Sustainable Consumption and Production, which drew about 80 researchers from around the world to review achievements, identify challenges, and encourage a dialogue on the issue.

- Indigenous peoples gathered in Rio to hold a parallel conference called the Kari-Oca, as they had done 20 years

ago. Ronald Pinto, a member of the Kaingang ethnic group in southern Brazil and a Bahá'í, followed the meeting closely. On 18 June, a delegation of nine Bahá'ís, including May Akale, Mary Aune, and Ms. Hiche from the Bahá'í International Community’s delegation, attended the Kari-Oca for a major ceremony to “reaffirm responsibility to speak for the protection and enhancement of the well-being of Mother Earth, nature and future generations of our Indigenous Peoples and all humanity and life.”



Representatives of the Bahá'í International Community to the UN Conference on Sustainable Development pose in front of the Peace Monument, an hour-glass shaped sculpture created for the Earth Summit 20 years before. Left to right are: Duncan Hanks, Dan Perell, May Akale, Ming Hwee Chong, and Peter Adriance.

Summaries and excerpts of recent coverage concerning the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran in the global news media

Iran intensifies persecution of the Bahá'ís

Deutsche Welle — 24 September 2012 — Germany

“The medals won by Iranian athletes at the Olympic Games in London in 2012 was impressive. With a total of 12 medals, including four gold, Iran ranked in the top quarter of participating countries. It could perhaps have been more — but to be a professional athlete is not sufficient in Iran if you belong to the ‘wrong’ religious group. This was the case of judoist Khashayar Zarei. In his age and weight class, the 19-year-old is one of the best in Iran. But participation in international competitions is denied him by the Islamic Republic because Khashayar Zarei belongs to the Bahá'í Faith. Now he has been excluded because of his religion from studying architecture at the University of Shiraz...”

Iran's Neo-Apartheid

Frontline — 14 September 2012 — USA

“Having grown up with the indignities of the apartheid system in South Africa,” writes Professor Winston Nagan, “I bristle whenever I hear anyone equate a government's treatment of a portion of its citizenry to apartheid. Usually, the claims are exaggerated. But in Iran today, the government's treatment of the Bahá'í community bears striking similarities.”

Iran and human rights: a new landscape

Open Democracy — 9 September 2012 — United Kingdom

“Iranian government officials and state-sponsored media routinely accuse groups they dislike of committing

crimes and posing security threats,” writes Omid Memarian. “Over many years, such charges rarely have proven true, yet Iranians have also tended not to challenge these narratives. Today, a cultural shift is visible, as discussions within civil society about human rights increasingly contest the old, dominant perceptions.” A notable trend, for example, is the marked rise in Iranians' discussion of previously taboo topics such as the Bahá'í Faith.”

Iranian documentary filmmaker exposes Bahá'ís' plight

Screen Comment — 2 June 2012 — USA

“Iranian documentary filmmaker Reza Allamehzadeh has exposed the plight of Bahá'ís in Iran with a new documentary called ‘Iranian taboo.’” writes Ali Naderzad. “Adherents of the faith have been persecuted by the Iranian Islamic Republic because they are considered un-Islamic. Banned from Iran himself (but not a Bahá'í) Allamehzadeh enlisted the help of friends in the country who recorded footage clandestinely.”

World calls for unconditional release of Iranian prisoners of conscience

Gold Star Daily — 11 April 2012 — The Philippines

“The plight of Iran's seven imprisoned Bahá'í leaders has been capturing the public's attention in 12 of the world's major cities, where a day of action marked the combined total of 10,000 days that the seven have so far spent in prison.”

The Plight of Iran's Bahá'ís

Frontline — 1 June 2012 — USA

“I spent two and half years of my life unjustly imprisoned in Iran,” writes Kamiar Alaei, who with his brother was running a public health program for people with HIV/AIDS and drug addicts. “I'm fortunate I was released in the fall of 2010. But for my former cellmates, members of Iran's imprisoned Bahá'í leadership group, freedom has proved elusive.”

Tehran against the Bahá'ís, a cultural genocide

Corriere della Sera — 24 May 2012 — Italy

“A cultural genocide perpetrated with widespread indifference.’ This is how Nobel Peace Prize recipient Shirin Ebadi defines the repression carried out by Iran's Ayatollah regime against the followers of the Bahá'í religion, which for years has continued to grow more severe... Unlawful seizure, dozens of arrests, dozens of disappearances, unpaid pensions, vandalized or destroyed cemeteries, prohibitions on hiring Bahá'ís, incitement to hatred by mullas, burned homes, blocked access to university for those who do not claim to be Muslim on admissions forms, coercion of students to recant their faith, which they refuse to do, with the result that young Bahá'ís are banned from pursuing a higher education...”

Review: How Much is Enough?

Enough, continued from page 16

new thinking about the economics of happiness.

They note, for example, that one prominent “happiness economist” has called for research into the electrical stimulation of the brain’s pleasure centers as one means of maximizing public happiness at the lowest cost.

“If happiness is just a state of mind, how can it at the same time be the supreme good, the ultimate object of all our striving?” they write. “To labor for years on a work of art or on bringing up a child simply so as to enjoy the resultant mental buzz is to betray a very peculiar attitude to life. Yet it is precisely this attitude that underlies the current cult of happiness.”

What is needed are definitions of happiness that include a strong emphasis on moral values. They want to “revive the old idea of economics as a moral science; a science of human beings in communities, not of interacting robots.”

To this end, they compile a list of seven “basic goods,” the “possession of which constitutes living well.” These are: health, security, respect, harmony with nature, friendship, leisure, and “personality” — which they define as “the ability to frame and execute a plan of life reflective of one’s tastes, temperament and conception of the good,” adding that some often simply call this “autonomy.”

The Skidelskys say this list encompasses all of the necessities of life, such as food and shelter, which fall under the health and security categories, and yet also promotes a wider, more philosophically based conception of basic needs. Their idea in this redefinition is to provide policy-makers with broad guidelines for a “non-coercive paternalism” where state powers promote the good life over raw growth.

“Growth might sensibly be pursued as a means to one or more of the basic goods,” they write. “Health requires decent food and medicine. Leisure requires time away from toil. Personality requires a place to withdraw, a ‘room

behind the shop.’ Populations too poor to afford these goods have every reason to seek to become richer. Here in the affluent world, however, the material prerequisites of health, leisure and personality have long since been achieved; our difficulty is making proper use of them.”

Bahá’ís will find much to appreciate in this book. Certainly, the Bahá’í teachings, like other religious traditions, place emphasis on qualities such as love, self-sacrifice, and service to humanity.

Moreover, while material prosperity is surely a component of human well-being, and necessary to satisfy the requirements of justice, Bahá’ís understand that no program of development that fails to account for the spiritual reality that underpins human nature can succeed.

“No matter how far the material world advances, it cannot establish the happiness of mankind,” said ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. “Only when material and spiritual civilization are linked and coordinated will happiness be assured.”

The Skidelskys acknowledge the role of religion, saying the “realization” of their list of basic goods “is probably impossible without the authority and inspiration that only religion can provide.”

Overall *How Much is Enough* is thoughtful and thought-provoking. It surely contributes much to what is becoming one of the chief discourses in sustainable development.



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“Human beings in communities, not interacting robots,” please

How Much is Enough? Money and the good life.

By Robert Skidelsky and
Edward Skidelsky
Other Press, New York

IN BRIEF

- A British political economist and his philosopher son offer thoughts on why an endless pursuit of money and things has failed to foster increased happiness.
- They suggest that the discourse on what it means to be developed and how to attain “the good life” needs to be reexamined to consider more than material wealth.
- They also want to “revive the old idea of economics as a moral science; a science of human beings in communities, not of interacting robots.”

Earlier this year, a UN high-level meeting sponsored by Bhutan brought together hundreds from governments, religious organizations, academia, and civil society to discuss “gross national happiness” instead of “gross national product” as a measurement of progress. The meeting follows last year’s General Assembly resolution on “Happiness: towards a holistic approach to development.”

The events come as part of a general discussion over whether unbridled, consumer-driven economic growth is really delivering on its promise of improving overall human well-being.

As part of this discourse, two accomplished British academics have written a new book that, as its title plainly states, asks: *How Much is Enough? Money and the good life.*

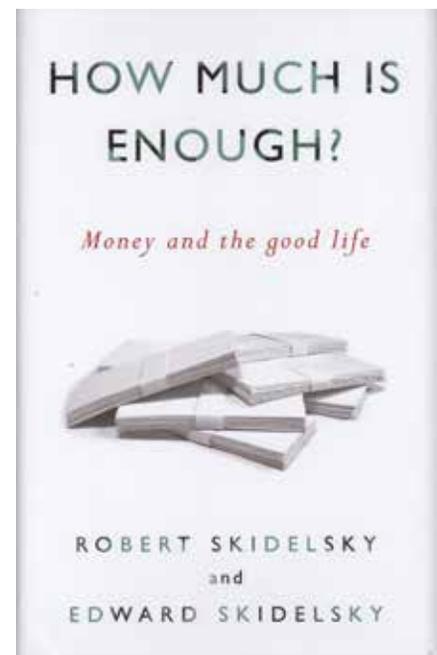
Robert Skidelsky, Emeritus Professor of Political Economy at the University of Warwick, and his son, Edward Skidelsky, a lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Exeter, bring fresh analysis and new insights to the subject of development and well-being, examining first the prevailing assumption that more is always better.

“We are not against economic growth as such, but we may reasonably ask not just growth for what, but growth of what,” they write. “We want leisure to grow and pollution to decline. Both are part of any sane idea of human welfare. But both are excluded from GDP, which measures only that portion of domestic production that is traded in markets.”

The Skidelskys argue broadly that if growing material prosperity has not yet yielded concomitant human well-being, it is because humanity has lost its way in the pursuit of an insatiable, conspicuous consumption that has only created a rat race where individuals work ever

more hours to buy things that do not bring real or sustained happiness.

“To say that my purpose in life is to make more and more money is like saying that my aim in eating is to get fatter and fatter,” they write.



They draw on ancient and contemporary philosophic and economic thought, and also new research on human happiness and economics. They point to mounting data, for example, that shows increased income brings little or no increased happiness beyond a certain floor where basic needs for food, shelter, and comfort are met.

The Skidelskys also analyze the nature of happiness, arguing that the utilitarian definitions of it that are commonly employed by economists today focus too much on maximizing pleasure instead of what brings genuine satisfaction in life, fingering this as what has gone wrong with indicators like GDP — and, even, some of the

Enough, continued on page 15