



International Environment Forum

Ethical Responses to Climate Change: Individuals, Communities, and Institutions

10 and 11 December 2011 Hobart, Tasmania

15th Annual Conference Statement¹

At the heart of the climate change issue are a number of fundamental spiritual, moral and ethical concerns that humanity must address. Such concerns cross all boundaries of faith, culture, politics, and science. They include challenging questions about justice, equity, responsibility, and social obligation which, despite the efforts of concerned citizens worldwide, remain unresolved.

Accepting that human greenhouse gas emissions are adversely affecting the climate of the planet and exacerbating planetary warming, climate change can be viewed as a catalyst for positive change. It presents opportunities for personal, community and institutional action that capitalize on the positive attributes of the world's diversity of economics, politics, geography, culture and traditions of faith. There is no single or simple solution to this problem; responses, both by way of mitigation and adaptation, will crystallise from individuals and nations taking mature responsibility for the welfare of the whole planet. Such responsibility will require changes in personal life-style for those living in developed nations, necessitating new choices to lower consumption and a mindfulness of how individual actions can collectively cause adverse impacts to the entire earth. Wealthy nations must also take greater responsibility towards reciprocity with the poor in less-developed nations. Indeed, the extremes of wealth and poverty within and between nations are a root dimension of climate change that must be addressed.

Individuals can see climate change as a call to transform their personal view of morality so as to become more embracing of the needs of future generations and of all nations. Communities can arise to reflect environmental responsibility as a core value, expressing such as a new social norm based on a clearer vision of moderation in light of scientific and environmental evidence. Institutions also can be transformed by the recognition of the reality of climate change, modifying themselves to meet new realities rather than holding to traditions or out-worn social structures, to embrace a process of continual positive progressive transformation. Climate change should not be viewed by individuals and communities as a partisan political issue, but rather as a summons for humanity to unite.

The imminent threats posed by climate change are thus causing nations to debate the future direction of human civilisation and its governance. Climate change may well be the common threat

¹ In December 2011, 90 delegates attended the 15th annual IEF conference, a two day event at the Hobart Bahá'í Centre of Learning, organised with the support of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia, the Regional Bahá'í Council of Tasmania, and the Local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Hobart. The theme of the conference was "Ethical Responses to Climate Change: Individuals, Communities, and Institutions." This Statement briefly summarises some of the key themes arising from the Conference. The International Environment Forum (IEF) is a Bahá'í-inspired international organisation focussing on the environment and sustainable development. Accredited by the United Nations as a scientific and technical organisation, IEF seeks to contribute to the discourses of international cultural, technical and political institutions. It brings the ethical foundations of sustainability to the forefront of public consciousness, and acts as a resource for the Bahá'í community on issues relating to sustainability and the environment.

that forces governments to work together in the collective interest – it is giving humanity the impetus to deal with global issues in a cohesive and united manner. For the first time in history, humanity is able to predict the future impacts of its current decisions through advances in science, and seriously consider the world-wide consequences of the choices we make as individuals, communities and institutions. This is a great opportunity to make a transition from a self-centred and materialistic way of life to one that fully reflects the essential cooperative nature of humankind. This transition requires a deeper embrace of the interconnectedness and oneness of humankind, a transition from a nationalistic model of governance to one that connects us as the inhabitants of one biosphere, the citizens of one planet, and the members of one human civilisation.

The current political impasse on climate change at least partially results from fundamental misconceptions about human nature – that humans are inherently selfish and competitive – resulting in a paralysis of will. In reality, humanity has many times shown its capacity to act decisively and selflessly. Witness for example the Montreal Protocol's success in confronting damage to the Earth's ozone layer. There is a need for humanity and its leaders to develop the ethical and moral capacity to make such models of selflessness the standard for climate change action.

A two-fold challenge confronts the world community. First, a technical challenge must be faced. The world must implement practical and effective solutions to climate change adaptation and mitigation, solutions that have largely been identified, but remain to be applied. Second is the moral challenge. This is the transformation of thoughts and behaviours so as to empower our political and social structures to extend the benefits of environmentally sound development to all people. In addressing challenges posed by climate change, only the full cooperation of all nations, each according to its means, will ultimately enable human society to prosper. Partisan arguments over which nation should sacrifice the most and which nation the least have been, and will continue to be, fruitless. Ultimately it is the concerted efforts of all nations, judged by the measure of their means and resources, that will be the assessment of history.

Of vital importance is reflection and social dialogue on the ethical and spiritual dimensions inherent to our understanding of nature and the environment. In particular, there needs to be a greater understanding of the complementary role that can be played by both religion and science in relation to environmental concerns. Scientific knowledge applied under a spiritually informed ethical code will foster the development of technology that protects the long-term interests of humanity. Only a harmonious and coherent application of the spiritual and intellectual gifts of humanity can realistically address climate change and similar issues that revolve around international and intergenerational use of the resources of our planet.

Outdated methods of decision-making can give way to consultative and collaborative methods that invite and value a diversity of informed views, where contributions are actively sought from all affected sectors, where views are expressed frankly, where decisions follow from identification of relevant moral principles rather than just financial concerns, where decisions once taken result in collective support, and where a willingness to learn ensures wrong decisions are corrected.

The safety and long-term well-being of humanity must be considered as the first priority. We call all people to strive for a transformation in human hearts and minds from a short-term materialistic viewpoint to a viewpoint of long-term ethically-informed sustainability. Everyone, as citizens of an interdependent world, should be active agents of their own learning about climate change, and also share information with others to assist them in their learning. Transcending new policies and technologies, this transformation will need to embrace all people, reflecting shared values of spirit and ethics. We are thus called to no less a task than to build with a deep sense of shared purpose an environmentally sustainable ever-advancing civilisation in which all of humanity, the rich and poor, people of all faiths and of no particular faith, must justly share.