

THE PROSPERITY OF HUMANKIND

Bahá'í International Community

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Part V - Economy

in simplified language

Prosperity of Humankind - 6

Economic issues

The economic issues facing us need to be addressed in the context of raising the level of human capacity through the expansion of knowledge at all levels. Recent experience shows that material benefits and efforts cannot be seen as ends in themselves. Their value comes not only in providing for our basic needs in housing, food, health care, and the like, but in extending our human abilities.

Economic issues

The most important role of economic efforts in development is to give people and institutions the means to achieve the real purpose of development: that is, laying foundations for a new social order that can cultivate all the potential in human consciousness.

Economics for human well-being

The challenge to economic thinking is to accept fully this purpose of development - and how the economy can provide the means to achieve it. This is the only way to free economics from thinking only of material things, and to reach its potential as a tool to achieve true human well-being. The dialogue between the work of science and the insights of religion can help here.

Poverty

Look at the problem of poverty. We assume that material resources exist, or can be created through science and technology, to reduce and eventually eliminate poverty. This has not happened because the advance of science and technology is not directed to the real interests of most people. A big change in priorities will be needed to end poverty. This requires a search for appropriate values that will challenge both our spiritual and scientific resources.



Poverty

Poverty

Religion cannot help in this joint effort so long as it holds to teachings which cannot see the difference between contentment and being passive, and say that poverty is normal with escape only in the world beyond. For religion to participate effectively in bringing material well-being to humanity, it must find in its Source of inspiration new spiritual concepts and principles relevant to establishing unity and justice in human affairs.

Unemployment

Unemployment raises similar issues. Today the concept of work means employment for pay so as to buy and consume available goods. The system is circular: buying and consuming maintains the production of goods which supports paid employment. Individually, all these activities are essential to the well-being of society. But the overall concept does not work, as seen in the lack of motivation among large numbers of the employed in every land and the demoralisation of the many unemployed.



Unemployment

A new work ethic

What the world needs is a new "work ethic". Here again, only the creative interaction of the scientific and religious systems of knowledge can help us to change our habits and attitudes. While animals depend for their living on whatever they can find in their environment, human beings must express the capacities they are born with through productive work with which they meet their own needs and those of others. In this way they participate in advancing civilization. They fulfil purposes that unite them with others.



Animals depend on their environment

A new work ethic

When that work is consciously undertaken in a spirit of service to humanity, Bahá'u'lláh says, it is a form of prayer, a means of worshipping God. Every individual has the capacity to see himself or herself in this way. Development strategy must appeal to this fundamental capacity of the self, whatever the plans being pursued, whatever the rewards they promise. Only this perspective will call up from the people of the world the great effort and commitment that the economic tasks ahead will require.

Environmental crisis

The environmental crisis is another challenge to economic thinking. The belief that there is no limit to nature's capacity to fulfil any demand made on it by human beings is false. A culture which values endless growth, increasing wealth, and the satisfaction of people's wants must recognise that these are not good goals. Also, present national economic decision-making cannot deal with the fact that most of the major challenges are now global.



Environmental Crisis – Santa Barbara Oil Spill 1969

Environmental management

The hope that this moral crisis can somehow be met by worshiping nature itself is a sign of spiritual and intellectual desperation. Recognition that creation is an organic whole and that humanity has the responsibility to care for this whole, welcome as it is, cannot by itself make people conscious of a new system of values. Only an understanding that is both scientific and spiritual will give the human race the power to take on the responsibility for environmental management now required.

Contentment

All people will have to recover, for example, the capacity for contentment, the welcoming of moral discipline, and the devotion to duty that used to be essential to being human. All through history, the Founders of the great religions have taught these qualities of character to their followers. The qualities themselves are even more vital today, but they need to be expressed in modern ways.

Contentment

Religion's challenge is to free itself from the past: contentment is not accepting whatever happens; morality has nothing in common with the past rigid denial of life's pleasures; and a genuine devotion to duty brings feelings not of self-importance but of self-worth.

Gender equality

Another economic challenge is the refusal to give women full equality with men, where science and religion can help. Science shows that the equality of the sexes is fundamental to all realistic thinking about the future well-being of the earth and its people. It is a truth about human nature that has been unrecognised during humanity's childhood and adolescence.

Gender equality

"Women and men", Bahá'u'lláh has said, *"have been and will always be equal in the sight of God."* The rational soul has no sex, and whatever social inequality may have been necessary for survival in the past, it cannot be justified as humanity reaches maturity. Global development will only succeed with a commitment to establish full equality between men and women, in all parts of life and at every level of society.

Equality of
opportunity for
women



Full participation of women

Progress in gender equality will itself be a measure of the success of any development program. Since economic activity is essential to the advancement of civilization, the extent to which women can access all economic activities will provide visible evidence of the progress of development. The challenge is more than a fair sharing of opportunity, important as that is. It calls for a fundamental rethinking of economic issues in a way that invites the full participation of the human experience and insight of women.

New economic models

The classical economic models of impersonal markets in which individuals make self-centred choices will not serve the needs of a world seeking unity and justice. Society must develop new economic models that reflect our shared experience, the importance of human relationships, and the central place of the family and community in social well-being.

New economic models

Such an intellectual breakthrough will be strongly altruistic rather than self-centred, and must draw heavily on both our spiritual and scientific sensibilities, with women making essential contributions to the common effort.

New Economic Models

