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Paper

Planetary Environment and Bahá'í Principles in International Affairs and Intellectual History

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Abstract

The environment has emerged in intellectual debate as an existential polycrisis with vast implications for life on Earth, and many have argued that one necessary response would be effective global governance. The scientific contributions to understanding the nature and causes of the current polycrisis are invaluable and have expanded significantly through international collaboration in institutionalised science-policy interfaces. In this paper we briefly describe these, highlight their limitations – such as lacking true universal participation both from scientists and other knowledge holders and being anchored in the dominating materialistic paradigms in science today. We also provide complementary knowledge perspectives from the Bahá'í Writings. We then describe examples of efforts to strengthen global environmental governance through reform and evolving international law where also Bahá'ís are active contributors profoundly inspired by the Bahá'í Faith's understanding of our fundamental relationship with the Earth. Finally we summarise the directly Bahá'í-inspired contributions over many years to the vital public discourse of the environmental crisis and its solutions, as Bahá'í teachings on the spiritual purpose of humans and the need for moderation have become increasingly relevant in public debate. Bahá'í approaches to individual lifestyles, community solidarity and institutions of governance are increasingly seen as practical alternatives in a disintegrating world with environmental crises on every side.

Introduction

Unlike many issues that have challenged humanity for centuries, the environment has only recently emerged in intellectual debate as an existential polycrisis, with climate change being one obvious dimension. New technologies of communications such as the telegraph in 1844 which coincided exactly with the beginning of the Bábí and Bahá'í revelations, as well as developments in transportation, trade, energy, industry and agriculture all improved physical well-being and began to make a united world civilisation technically possible. At first, the very tangible and visible environmental impacts of many of these technologies were disregarded as the inevitable cost of progress. However, as the scientific understanding of the impacts of land conversion and burning fossil fuels progressed, for example, including revealing many at first invisible impacts and demonstrating the complexity of the Earth system and the scale of damage they caused locally and globally on natural capital and life-supporting processes, the intellectual debate over the environment has intensified.

Bahá'u'lláh was known for His love of nature, and He warned about material civilisation carried to excess.[1] 'Abdu'l-Bahá contributed to the public discourse on the environment in His talk on science and religion at Stanford University in 1912 when He asked:

[1] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1952), CLXIV, pp. 342–43.

> "The elements and lower organisms are synchronized in the great plan of life. Shall man, infinitely above them in degree, be antagonistic and a destroyer of that perfection?"[2]

Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, wrote in 1933:

> "We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it."[3]

The Bahá'í teachings on the spiritual purpose of humans and the need for moderation have become increasingly relevant in public debate, with Bahá'ís actively engaging in public discourse and practical action on the environment, demonstrating the complementarity of science and religion. Bahá'í approaches to individual lifestyles, community solidarity and institutions of governance are increasingly seen as practical alternatives in a disintegrating world with environmental crises on every side. Here we explore how the emerging scientific knowledge of our planetary environment and the consequences of our excessive extraction of natural resources and threats to the planet's life-support systems are creating an urgent need for environmental governance, particularly at the global level. We then document efforts to create or strengthen global environmental governance, and then summarise the directly Bahá'í-inspired contributions over many years to this vital public discourse.

Emerging knowledge systems for environmental governance

The history of the industrial revolution, globalisation and modernity writ large illustrates with ample lucidity the Bahá'í perspective on the value of science as a system of knowledge about the material world. On the one hand science is a most precious gift to mankind;

> "[s]cience is the first emanation from God toward man…God has created or deposited this love of reality in man"[4] and through "the power of the rational soul, man can discover the realities of things, comprehend their properties and penetrate the mysteries of existence"[5]

On the other hand, without the complementary wing of religion man would make no progress "but fall into the despairing slough of materialism".[6] Indeed, the gift of science is judged through its results "...every science… is as a tree: if the fruit of it be the love of God, then it is a blessed tree, but if not, that tree is dried up wood, and shall only feed the fire".[7] In the following we briefly review the role of scientific knowledge for understanding and addressing global environmental degradation and how it has evolved in light of the Bahá'í Writings.

'Abdu'l-Bahá testifies that Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation bestowed a new impulse to creation:

> "This is the day when the Day-Star of Truth rose over the horizon of life … Hence do ye witness a new stirring throughout all created things. See how, in this day, the scope of

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2 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 350.

3 Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 17 February 1933, in *Compilation on Social and Economic Development* (Mona Vale: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1988), pp. 10–11.

4 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 49.

5 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 2014), no. 58, pp. 250–51.

6 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1995), no. 44, p. 49.

7 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), no. 154, p. 181.

> sciences and arts hath widened out, and what wondrous technical advances have been made…"[8]

Evidence of these advances can be seen since the mid-1800s and is evident all around us. Innovations in science and its applications have enabled at least a part of humanity to enjoy ample livelihoods, longer lifespans, comfortable lives and basic provisions of human rights, and some to live in abundant luxury. Tragically, these advancements were often made in ways that not only exploited humans in one part of a city, country or the world for the benefit of humans in other parts – but also in ways that exploited the living world: the land, the seas and the air and the life they contain and feed. Poignantly, the environmental sciences and their ability to detect, describe and analyse the implications of the growing exploitation of nature for the planet and humanity have advanced in parallel. An impressive degree of 'unity of thought' has emerged among states on the gravity of some of the most pressing environmental challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss, as evidenced by the adoption of international treaties with ambitious goals to avert them. This unity of thought has been underpinned by scientific evidence that the participating states themselves have made possible. States set up global processes to assess the best available science, most prominently the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES).[9] The assessments that have been published by these bodies – based on hard and often selfless and unpaid work by scientists around the world – have with increasing confidence and depth provided a global overview of both the status of the problems, their causes and their impacts, as well as exploration of measures that can mitigate or reverse them.[10]

We can look at these assessment processes as reflecting a glimpse of the "meticulous investigation of truth" which 'Abdu'l-Bahá extols.[11] The assessments analyse the interrelatedness of biogeophysical and ecological systems, those "realities of things, though in the utmost diversity, are yet intimately connected one with the other…"[12] Over time the assessment processes have become open towards including more disciplines from the social sciences, and also towards including experience-based knowledge from Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities. As a result the diagnosis of what lies behind humanity's destructive treatment of the planet has deepened.

The starting point for the assessments was to establish the physical cause-effect linkages between human activities and environmental degradation, such as between greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation and climate change, or between agricultural practices and biodiversity loss. The first global biodiversity assessment also explicitly identified the indirect drivers in economy and technology, institutions and governance, demography and culture as well as conflicts

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8 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, no. 73, p. 111.

9 Another example of a global science-policy platform is the International Resource Panel set up by UNEP in 2007. The most recent addition to such panels is the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals, Waste and Pollution that met for the first time in early 2026 but its first session was full of disagreements between member states.

10 The reports of these panels can be found at https://www.ipcc.ch and https://www.ipbes.net respectively [accessed 15 October 2026].

11 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, no. 34, p. 155.

12 Bahá'í International Community, Office of Public Information, *The Bahá'í Statement on Nature* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1987), p. 4.

and epidemics.[13] However, the need to look for deeper underlying causes behind these indirect drivers has emerged in parallel to the conclusion that what is really needed to come to grips with such complex issues as biodiversity loss is 'transformative change'. To understand what this involves, a whole separate assessment was launched by IPBES on this topic that was finalised in 2024.[14] In this report, transformative change was defined as "fundamental, system-wide shifts in views, structures and practices…in ways that address the underlying causes of biodiversity loss and nature's decline…"[15] The report identifies three such underlying causes: a) disconnection from and domination over nature and people; b) concentration of power and wealth; and c) prioritisation of short-term, individual and material gains.

At this level the diagnosis of the degeneration of the planet's living systems is starting to align, at least at some level, with the diagnosis from the Bahá'í Writings. Where the assessment stresses domination and disconnection as an underlying cause, we find 'Abdu'l-Bahá identifying that the "...disease which afflicts the body politic is lack of love and absence of altruism".[16] Where the assessment emphasises concentration of power and wealth, the Bahá'í Writings stress the role of justice as a prerequisite for establishing unity, the strongest form of connection we can imagine. And finally, when scientists identify the role of fundamental values as humans individually and collectively prioritise material short term gains over long-term benefits (material and non-material) to the social good, the Bahá'í Writings ask if there is "any deed in the world that would be nobler than service to the common good?"[17]

While these global assessments have made valuable advances to provide knowledge that humanity can use for informed decision-making, they remain limited in several respects. Firstly, they are not free of political influence, with the final summary for policymakers going through line-by-line negotiations among governments, with the risk of messages that are seen as harmful for national interests being softened. Furthermore, the underlying status of scientific knowledge is heavily skewed towards the minority of countries that lead in terms of scientific investment and knowledge production.[18] The unequal scientific capacity among countries and regions limits the

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13 IPBES, *Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*, ed. by E. S. Brondizio and others (Bonn: IPBES Secretariat, 2019) doi: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3831673

14 IPBES, *Thematic Assessment Report on the Underlying Causes of Biodiversity Loss and the Determinants of Transformative Change and Options for Achieving the 2050 Vision for Biodiversity of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*, ed. by K. O'Brien, L. Garibaldi and A. Agrawal (Bonn: IPBES Secretariat, 2024) doi: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11382215

15 IPBES, *Summary for Policymakers of the Thematic Assessment Report on the Underlying Causes of Biodiversity Loss and the Determinants of Transformative Change and Options for Achieving the 2050 Vision for Biodiversity of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*, ed. by K. O'Brien and others (Bonn: IPBES Secretariat, 2024), doi: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11382230

16 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 171.

17 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, 3rd edn (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1975), p. 103.

18 Malgorzata Blicharska and others, 'Steps to Overcome the North–South Divide in Research Relevant to Climate Change Policy and Practice', *Nature Climate Change*, 7 (2017), pp. 21–27; Sylvia Karlsson, Tanja Srebotnjak, and Patricia Gonzales, 'Understanding the North–South Knowledge Divide and its Implications for Policy: A Quantitative Analysis of the Generation of Scientific Knowledge in the Environmental Sciences', *Environmental Science & Policy*, 10.7–8 (2007), pp. 668–84.

participation of scientists in the assessments even if geographic distribution is actively striven for.[19] With this skewness comes a risk for unbalanced, and even biased, outcomes where some perspectives from underrepresented regions and cultures are overlooked.[20]

With regard to including knowledge not identified as 'scientific', IPBES in particular has made significant efforts to broaden the knowledge base to also include highly relevant experience-based knowledge of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities. Nonetheless, much remains for these efforts to result in truly inclusive processes where all relevant knowledge is valued and where all communities have a role in producing knowledge. The importance of such inclusiveness is made clear in the statement *The Prosperity of Humankind,* written by the Bahá'í International Community (BIC):

> "A central challenge…is the expansion of scientific and technological activity…as to permit people everywhere to participate in such activity on the basis of capacity…making it possible for all of the earth's inhabitants to approach on an equal basis the processes of science and technology which are their common birthright"[21]

The Universal House of Justice makes abundantly clear that such universal participation in the knowledge system is a crucial element of justice:

> "Access to knowledge is the right of every human being, and participation in its generation, application and diffusion a responsibility that all must shoulder in the great enterprise of building a prosperous world civilization, each individual according to his or her talents and abilities. Justice demands universal participation."[22]

If there is one area where the value of such radical expansion in the contribution to knowledge is exceptionally high it is for learning how to bring about transformative change as this is largely uncharted waters for humanity. Thus, we need to learn from taking action, reflecting on the result of such action, and adjusting in light of such learning and the study of accumulated knowledge; a process in which the worldwide Bahá'í community is actively engaged.

Another fundamental dimension where the scientific assessments fall short is their anchoring in a materialistic worldview, with the accompanying blind spots they exhibit towards the spiritual dimension of reality. They do not see the true nature of human beings as "mines rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures";[23] their true purpose as being to work towards a twofold moral purpose, to develop their own "inherent potentialities and to contribute to the transformation of society",[24] and the true nature of humanity as being one human family living in "one homeland and one habitation."[25] Not seeing these dimensions makes

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19 Diana Rucavado Rojas and Julio C. Postigo, 'The Cycle of Underrepresentation: Structural and Institutional Factors Limiting the Representation of Global South Authors and Knowledge in the IPCC', *Climatic Change*, 178.2 (2025), 19.

20 Ibid.

21 Bahá'í International Community, *The Prosperity of Humankind* (New York: Bahá'í International Community, 1995), sect. IV.

22 The Universal House of Justice, Ridván Message 2010 (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 2010).

23 Bahá'u'lláh, 'Lawh-i-Maqsúd', in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), p. 162.

24 The Universal House of Justice, Ridván Message 2010.

25 Bahá'u'lláh, 'Kalimát-i-Firdawsíyyih', in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 67.

the diagnosis of the problems partial and superficial. It limits the ability of science to identify the motivations and institutions that are required to drive and govern the transformative change they conclude is required, and it makes the limitations of science itself to play that role clear:

> "Science cannot create this love and unity in the hearts of the sons of men. Science cannot cure the illness of the body politic. Science cannot create amity and fellowship in human hearts…The spiritual teachings of the religion of God can alone create this love, unity and accord in human hearts."[26]

Measures suggested for motivating action are often confined to those changing material incentives, preferably win-win solutions for all actors, as sacrifice for the greater good is not a concept on the horizon of reality. The role of education, and in particular value-based education that can support a different culture, is also minimal in these scientific assessments. For governance, many proposals that assessments identify remain limited to measures within existing economic and institutional systems where, for example, continuous economic growth and national sovereignty provide unchangeable framework conditions. However, when reviewing scientific and other work on visions for the future and scenarios for how humanity could achieve those visions, the scope of what is explored as possible to change expands. The *Transformative Change Assessment*, for example, maps such studies and among the themes they identify in them is "spiritual reconnection for behaviour change" that discusses the role of spirituality in "fostering environmental stewardship and transformative change in human behaviour"[27] and they also refer to scenarios based on alternative economic systems such as degrowth. There is expanding research on such alternative economic systems with at least an opening towards more than material values, including with contributions from Bahá'í scholars.[28] Another example is the field exploring more far-reaching institutional reforms at global and other levels as described in the following section.

Immensely valuable as the work of the assessments is, providing an important foundation for understanding what impact we humans have on the earth we walk on, knowing is not enough. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes abundantly clear: "The attainment of any object is conditioned upon knowledge, volition and action. Unless these three conditions are forthcoming, there is no execution or accomplishment."[29] Sourcing our volition to transform we need to turn to the most underlying Truth of all, in the words of Shoghi Effendi:

> "Surely the world, contracted and transformed into a single highly complex organism by the marvellous progress achieved in the realm of physical science, by the world-wide expansion of commerce and industry, and struggling, under the pressure of world economic forces, amidst the pitfalls of a materialistic civilization, stands in dire need of a restatement of the Truth underlying all the Revelations of the past in a language suited to its essential requirements."[30]

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26 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 171.

27 IPBES, *Thematic Assessment Report on the Underlying Causes of Biodiversity Loss*, p. 74.

28 Hooshmand Badee, *Economics and the Bahá'í Faith* (Great Britain: 2018), https://bahai-library.com/badee_economics_bahai_faith [accessed 9 November 2026]; Nabil M. Mustapha, *Economics: The Historical, Religious & Contemporary Perspectives: A Treatise* (Central Milton Keynes: AuthorHouse, 2009).

29 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 157.

30 Shoghi Effendi, 'The Goal of a New World Order', letter dated 28 November 1931, in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, 2nd rev. edn (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), p. 47.

Current reform work, legal decisions and future vistas

The past several years have seen considerable progress and some improved convergence of scientific advancement, legal breakthrough and institutional imagination in the effort to respond to a rapidly destabilising planet. This section sets forth a number of these developments, in Earth system science, international jurisprudence, and emerging institutional proposals, and considers how several core Bahá'í principles for international affairs resonate with, and might further inform, this landscape, which we can anticipate will continue to develop.

Grounding all of this work is an evolving scientific understanding of the Earth as a single, interconnected system. Organisations such as Common Home of Humanity,[31] and the scientists behind the Planetary Boundaries framework[32] have shown that human activity has already pushed several of the biophysical processes that keep the Earth system stable, including climate, biodiversity, freshwater, and others, beyond safe limits. The Earth Commission's 2023 articulation of "safe and just Earth system boundaries"[33] went further, showing that considerations of justice, which includes protecting the most vulnerable from significant harm, should be factored into these boundaries, beyond only considerations of planetary (scientific and environmental) safety alone. Alongside this, ongoing research into Earth system tipping points, for example, from the Amazon rainforest to polar ice sheets to ocean circulation patterns, has revealed how certain localised or regionalised environmental damage can cascade unpredictably – and inevitably – across the whole planetary system.[34]

This fast-evolving scientific understanding of a deeply interdependent Earth system, which serves as our common home and has to date kept modern humanity in a "safe operating space," gives contemporary force to Bahá'u'lláh's declaration that "The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens".[35] Written more than a century before Earth system science would prominently demonstrate it empirically, this principle now describes not only a largely moral aspiration but an observable physical reality: the planetary system does not function based on national boundaries. The questions this therefore raises for governance are weighty and potentially paradigm-shifting, including: what new capacities – institutional, legal, financial/economic and moral – does humanity need to respond to a rapidly, and more often than not unpredictably, changing Earth system? 'Abdu'l-Bahá's 1919 Tablet to The Hague offers one starting point, insisting that "unity of conscience is essential" if the "edifice" of any lasting peace is to be secure.[36] Applied to planetary governance, this suggests that technical and legal reform, however necessary, cannot alone secure a stable Earth system; it must be accompanied by a shared ethical awareness of humanity's interdependent fate and its responsibility for the natural world, serving, indeed as its common home. Likewise, 'Abdu'l-Bahá consistently urged the necessity of balance between the

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31 Common Home of Humanity, https://www.commonhomeofhumanity.org/ [accessed 15 October 2026].

32 Katherine Richardson and others, 'Earth beyond Six of Nine Planetary Boundaries', *Science Advances*, 9.37 (2023), eadh2458.

33 Johan Rockström and others, 'Safe and Just Earth System Boundaries', *Nature*, 619.7968 (2023), pp. 102–11.

34 Timothy Lenton and others, *The Global Tipping Points Report 2025* (Exeter: University of Exeter, 2025).

35 Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CXVII.

36 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 'Tablet to The Hague', in *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978).

material and the spiritual, and of scientific and ethical/spiritual insight (to illuminate and serve human society).

That ethical dimension has, in fact, recently become an explicit part of the intergovernmental process itself. The Global Ethical Stocktake,[37] launched jointly by Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres ahead of the 30th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP30), deliberately intended to complement the technical Global Stocktake under the Paris Agreement[38] with a series of intercontinental dialogues asking why humanity continues to act against its own scientific knowledge, and what values and behaviours must change. Religious and spiritual voices featured prominently, including a dedicated dialogue at the Vatican's Borgo Laudato Si',[39] drawing on Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical Laudato Si',[40] and reflecting a wider pattern of recent faith-based environmental statements, including the Islamic *Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth,*[41] launched at the United Nations Environment Assembly in February 2024, among others. That an intergovernmental climate process has now formally created space for religious and ethical reflection alongside scientific and economic analysis is itself telling: it suggests a growing, if still incomplete, recognition – one long affirmed in the Bahá'í teachings – that the international environmental crisis is at root also a crisis of values and perspective, and not only of technology, economics or policy.

Parallel to this ethical opening, international law has taken several consequential steps forward. In little more than a year, three international courts issued advisory opinions clarifying states' legal obligations in respect of climate change: the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea in May 2024,[42] the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in July 2025,[43] and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in July 2025.[44] Taken together, these opinions affirm that states have binding obligations under existing international law, including human rights law and the law of the sea, to prevent significant harm to the climate system; that the 1.5°C goal of the Paris Agreement carries real legal weight; and that a state's failure to curb greenhouse gas emissions may constitute an internationally wrongful act, giving rise to obligations of cessation and reparation. In May 2026, the United Nations General Assembly adopted, by a vote with 141 in favour, a resolution

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37 COP30 Presidency / Government of Brazil, *Global Ethical Stocktake* (2025) https://cop30.br/en/brazilian-presidency/cop-30-circles/global-ethical-stocktake [accessed 15 October 2026].

38 Paris Agreement to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, opened for signature 22 April 2016, in force 4 November 2016, UN Doc. FCCC/CP/2015/10/Add.1 https://unfccc.int/files/home/application/pdf/paris_agreement.pdf [accessed 15 October 2026].

39 Borgo Laudato Si' https://www.laudatosi.va/en/borgo-laudato-si-2/ [accessed 15 October 2026].

40 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, Encyclical Letter (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015).

41 Othman Llewellyn and others, *Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth* (Birmingham: Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences, 2024), launched at UNEA-6, Nairobi, 27 February 2024 https://wedocs.unep.org/20.500.11822/44949 [accessed 15 October 2026].

42 International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, *Request for an Advisory Opinion Submitted by the Commission of Small Island States on Climate Change and International Law*, Case No. 31, Advisory Opinion of 21 May 2024.

43 Inter-American Court of Human Rights, *Advisory Opinion on the Climate Emergency and Human Rights*, notified 3 July 2025.

44 International Court of Justice, *Obligations of States in respect of Climate Change*, Advisory Opinion, 23 July 2025.

welcoming the ICJ's opinion and beginning the work of operationalising it, led by Vanuatu and a cross-regional group of states.[45]

These developments resonate strongly with core Bahá'í principles for international affairs. The consultative, cross-regional process by which the ICJ case and the follow-on United Nations General Assembly resolution were built, including years of patient coalition-building led by small and often climate-vulnerable island states, in cooperation with larger powers, echoes the Bahá'í emphasis on consultation as the operating principle of collective decision-making. The courts' insistence that all states, and particularly the largest emitters, bear differentiated but real obligations toward one another and toward future generations reflects the Bahá'í emphasis on justice and unity as inseparable. That is, unity without justice is unstable, and environmental and economic harms are, at root, problems of imbalance between the interests of individual states or other individuals/entities, and those of the whole human family.

These legal foundations, together with deepening scientific consensus, are now informing a wave of concrete proposals for new or reformed global governance capacities. The Climate Governance Commission and its implementation platform, Mobilizing an Earth Governance Alliance (MEGA),[46] have proposed a "two-speed" approach to reform. The first, more urgent track works within existing international architecture. For example, a Risk Response Platform for novel Earth system risk, drawing from the United Nations Secretary-General's Emergency Platform model endorsed in an adapted form in the 2024 *Pact for the Future*, linked to enhanced Earth system risk monitoring and reporting (building on the work of the Earth Commission, the IPCC and IPBES, among others), and paired with an international Climate and Nature Policy Innovation Hub to help proven governance policies cascade more quickly across jurisdictions. The second, longer-horizon track involves "next generation" institutions that require more careful, high-level design: notably a reformed, networked Global Environment Agency, and an International Environment Court being developed with the British Institute of International and Comparative Law. Complementary proposals from other actors point in similar directions: Common Home of Humanity's "condominium" approach to the global commons, President Lula's call for a Climate Council, and The Elders' 2026 statement[47] calling for a United Nations Planetary Council to better coordinate the fragmented landscape of environmental treaties and institutions. On the economic side, the Global Solidarity Levies Task Force,[48] launched at COP28 by France, Kenya and Barbados, is developing new, internationally coordinated levies, for example, on premium air travel, fossil fuel extraction, and high-net-worth individuals, to raise finance for climate and development more equitably. These economic proposals resonate closely with Bahá'í teachings on the extremes of wealth and poverty, and with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's insistence that economic questions be addressed as questions of justice, not merely of efficiency or growth.

What unites these initiatives, from the Climate Governance Commission/MEGA's model of "smart coalitions" to the Global Ethical Stocktake to The Elders' Planetary Council proposal, is a shared recognition that no single institution, treaty regime, or level of governance (local, national, regional or global) can manage planetary-scale risk alone. What is needed instead is a form of

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45 United Nations General Assembly, Resolution A/80/L.65, adopted 20 May 2026.

46 Mobilizing an Earth Governance Alliance, https://earthgovernance.org/ [accessed 15 October 2026].

47 The Elders, 'A UN Planetary Council Could Help Tackle the Global Climate and Nature Crisis', statement (June 2026) https://theelders.org/ [accessed 15 October 2026].

48 Global Solidarity Levies Task Force, *For People and the Planet,* https://solidaritylevies.org/ [accessed 15 October 2026].

harmonious/calibrated interdependence across these levels, matched by a parallel sense of urgency: the diplomatic window opened by COP30 only remains open until Brazil's COP Presidency passes to the next host country in November 2026. Interfaith gatherings, such as the conference in the United Arab Emirates bringing together religious leaders around interfaith harmony,[49] and broader peace-oriented frameworks, such as the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations,[50] point toward a further, often underappreciated dimension of this work: that lasting environmental governance is deeply interconnected with the wider project of building peace and unity among peoples, a central and enduring theme of the Bahá'í teachings on the future organisation of human society.

Bahá'í contributions to the environmental discourse

What the preceding sections make clear is that principles articulated in the Bahá'í Writings find clear resonance in emerging frameworks for environmental governance developed independently by scientists, legal scholars, policymakers and civil society. Rather than being passive observers of this convergence, however, Bahá'ís have often been active contributors to it, bringing those principles and approaches into dialogue with scientific, legal and institutional processes. This section outlines, however briefly, examples of the directly Bahá'í-inspired contributions of individuals, Bahá'í-inspired organisations, and the Bahá'í International Community to the environmental discourse.

One route of impact of Bahá'í principles and approaches has come from those Bahá'ís working professionally in the fields of environment and climate change, as demonstrated by all the authors of this paper. An early Bahá'í voice for the environment was Richard St. Barbe Baker. His work in the 1920s–1950s on reforestation led to the creation of Men of the Trees (now the International Tree Foundation) of which Shoghi Effendi became the first life member in 1930, and he was also responsible for organising World Forestry Charter gatherings in the 1950s to which the Guardian sent messages of support.

Arthur Dahl's professional journey is another example. His Bahá'í values led him to a sixty-year career that explicitly combined public discourse and social action on environment, sustainability and spirituality. As the environment developed as an issue for both scientific research and public concern and action, and drawing on a continuing study of Bahá'í principles and guidance, he started with the basic science of ecology, moved to its applications in advising governments and building their capacity, then to intergovernmental collaboration on shared issues, all the while contributing to global public discourse. His career choices followed the development of the field, including with specific guidance from the Bahá'í World Centre, participating in Bahá'í International Community contributions, working within the United Nations to build its environmental capacity and coordinate global scientific efforts, taking part in interfaith dialogues, encouraging Bahá'í communities throughout the world and participating in their activities locally and nationally, and writing books and publications. His work in the Pacific Island countries integrating science with Indigenous knowledge and worldviews while organising the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, and later in the secretariat of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, influenced and expanded the early conceptualisation of sustainability, and helped to bring

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[49] International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development, 'Global Faith Summit – Interfaith Statement Released in Pre-COP28 Event' https://www.partner-religion-development.org/global-faith-leaders-summit-interfaith-statement-for-cop28/ [accessed 15 October 2026].

[50] United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, https://www.unaoc.org/ [accessed 15 October 2026].

all the island countries together as Small Island Developing States with a shared voice for their common vulnerabilities. This influenced Maurice Strong, Secretary-General of both the Stockholm and Rio conferences and first Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, who visited Arthur in the Pacific region in 1974 to learn of these issues.

Contributions to environmental discourse have been made through publications by Bahá'í institutions and individuals. Early examples of this were the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice preparing and publishing a compilation *Conservation of the Earth's Resources*[51] in 1989, and the UK Bahá'í Publishing Trust publishing *Unless and Until: A Bahá'í Focus on the Environment*[52] by Arthur Dahl in 1990. His 1996 book *The Eco Principle: Ecology and Economics in Symbiosis*[53] published by both Bahá'í and academic publishers, has had considerable impact.

When the World Wide Fund for Nature organised a World Summit on Religions and Conservation at Windsor Castle in 1995, the BIC delegation was led by Rúhíyyih Khánum, and Arthur Dahl was one of the experts presenting the issues to the religious leaders.

More important than individual contributions is the creation of collective voices through institutionalised collaboration providing platforms both for the generation of new ideas and their wider spread. The Bahá'í International Community, which represents the worldwide Bahá'í community, was recognised by the United Nations in 1948 as an accredited observer non-governmental organisation. It then contributed to the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm and issued there its first of over fifty statements on environmental themes, entitled *The Environment and Human Values*.[54] Some other statements included *A Bahá'í Perspective on Nature and the Environment*[55] in 1986, *The Bahá'í Statement on Nature*[56] in 1987, *The Prosperity of Humankind*[57] (1995), several contributions on climate change, and *One Planet, One Habitation: A Bahá'í Perspective on Recasting Humanity's Relationship with the Natural World*[58] (2022).

Bahá'ís have also taken the lead in co-creating organisations with many others that have become highly influential in public discourse, such as the Climate Governance Commission, with a range of Bahá'ís contributing, alongside of course those of diverse backgrounds and traditions, across regions. As another example, in the mid-1990s, a few Bahá'ís in business organised what

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51 Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, *Conservation of the Earth's Resources* (1989), https://www.bahai.org/documents/compiled-research-department-universal-house-of-justice/conservation-earths-resources [accessed 12 November 2026].

52 Arthur Lyon Dahl, *Unless and Until: A Bahá'í Focus on the Environment* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990) https://yabaha.net/dahl/papers/1990.pdf [accessed 15 October 2026].

53 Arthur Lyon Dahl, *The Eco Principle: Ecology and Economics in Symbiosis* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books; Oxford: George Ronald, 1996) https://yabaha.net/dahl/papers/1996EcoPrinciple.pdf [accessed 15 October 2026].

54 Bahá'í International Community, *The Environment and Human Values* (1972) https://iefworld.org/bic1972.htm [accessed 15 October 2026].

55 Bahá'í International Community, *A Bahá'í Perspective on Nature and the Environment* (1986) https://iefworld.org/bicpne.htm [accessed 15 October 2026].

56 Bahá'í International Community, Office of Public Information, *The Bahá'í Statement on Nature* https://iefworld.org/bicnat.htm [accessed 15 October 2026].

57 Bahá'í International Community, *The Prosperity of Humankind* https://www.bic.org/statements/prosperity-humankind [accessed 15 October 2026].

58 Bahá'í International Community, *One Planet, One Habitation: A Bahá'í Perspective on Recasting Humanity's Relationship with the Natural World* (2022) https://www.bic.org/sites/default/files/print_pdf/one_planet_one_habitation.pdf [accessed 15 October 2026].

was then titled the European Bahá'í Business Forum (ebbf) under the responsibility of the French Bahá'í community. As it grew internationally, it was retitled Ethical Business Building the Future (ebbf) as a Bahá'í-inspired professional organisation to accompany members and apply values in the business community, including on environment and sustainability.

Following this model, from 1997, a Bahá'í-inspired professional organisation, the International Environment Forum (IEF), has actively contributed to international discourse on the environment, climate change and sustainability. It was accredited by the United Nations in the Science and Technology Major Group, so it could contribute to major conferences such as the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, and the Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012, as well as climate change conferences of the parties in Copenhagen and Paris, among others. It contributed to the negotiation of the Sustainable Development Goals. It is significant that an explicitly Bahá'í-inspired organisation should be recognised as a scientific organisation and not just as a representative of civil society. Today it has over 700 members and associates in over 90 countries, who receive a monthly newsletter and are involved locally in environmental discourse. The two organisations collaborate closely, and have often held joint conferences and both organisations have often enabled their individual members to enter global arenas where they have been able to contribute to discourses on many topics linked to environment and sustainable development.

Other areas where Bahá'ís have actively contributed to advancing the international agenda include the development of indicators of sustainable development for the United Nations System-wide Earthwatch and the Commission on Sustainable Development, with several United Nations publications.[59] There was also the Partnership for Education and Research about Responsible Living at the University of Brighton with financial support from the European Union 2009–2011, which researched values-based measurements of the impact of education for sustainable development,[60] and contributed to the International Partner Network of the UNESCO Chair on Education for Sustainable Lifestyles held by Bahá'í Victoria Thoresen that produced values-based learning toolkits.[61] More recently the IEF has explored alternatives beyond GDP to assess progress and well-being with scientific measures not converted into monetary values.[62] It has designed and taught online courses on sustainability and on climate change, and holds conferences around the world, often in cooperation with other organisations, to share Bahá'í perspectives. Its website[63] makes a wide variety of resources available, including compilations from the Bahá'í Writings, BIC statements, conference reports, educational materials and case studies.

It is natural that involvement in interfaith activities has been another area where concern for the environment can find wide acceptance. Whether in civil society activities associated with

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59 *Information for Decision-Making and Earthwatch: Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Commission on Sustainable Development, Third Session, 11–28 April 1995, E/CN.17/1995/18; UN Commission on Sustainable Development, *Indicators of Sustainable Development: Framework and Methodologies* (New York: United Nations, 1996); UN Commission on Sustainable Development, *Indicators of Sustainable Development: Guidelines and Methodologies* (New York: United Nations, 2001).

60 WeValue: A Values Based Approach<https://blogs.brighton.ac.uk/wevalue/> [accessed 15 October 2026].

61 University of Inland Norway, 'Values-Based Learning Series' https://www.inn.no/english/ccl/resources-for-teachers/valuesbased.html [accessed 15 October 2026].

62 International Environment Forum (IEF), 'Global Solidarity Accounting' https://iefworld.org/acct_solidarity [accessed 15 October 2026].

63 International Environment Forum (IEF) https://iefworld.org/ [accessed 15 October 2026].

United Nations conferences, or independent initiatives to build public support for action on climate change, biodiversity protection, pollution control or sustainability more broadly, Bahá'í contributions are widely appreciated. Bahá'ís participated, for example, in the Alliance of Religions and Conservation, the Klingenthal Symposia of Pax Christi France, and activities of the Swiss Foundation for the Progress of Humanity with a variety of publications. In 2017, they wrote a Bahá'í chapter for the *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*.[64] A recent example is membership in the Environment Working Group of the G20 Interfaith Forum, contributing to webinars and the drafting of policy papers.

Conclusion

The guidance of Bahá'u'lláh to "be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and centre your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements"[65] leads naturally to a desire to understand and address environmental challenges as they have emerged. Initially this was just individuals responding to issues around them, as with Richard St. Barbe Baker restoring forests, or Arthur Dahl selecting environmental science as a field of service. However, science only describes the symptoms of the environmental crisis and its immediate causes in human society. It can call for the reduction in damaging behaviour, but does not address the underlying "disease" of materialism for which the environment is framed as an externality, and just someone else's responsibility. It is in diverse religious traditions, including explicitly in the Bahá'í Faith, that we find principles of justice, equity, solidarity, human dignity and spiritual purpose, that can show how to use science for human and environmental well-being. Science demonstrates the unity of the Earth system, but religion calls for unity of humanity in the response, for the good of the whole human family.

In engaging with broader processes of scientific assessment, intellectual investigation, and public policy and governance on the environment and sustainability, the prevailing debate seldom if ever considers religion as having any relevance. Values may be seen as being of some practical use, but mostly in a materialistic perspective.

As public debate on the environment took off in the early 1970s, the Bahá'í International Community made many contributions bridging material and spiritual dimensions, starting with the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in 1972, both in written statements and in events associated with United Nations conferences and other international occasions. Then, as the Faith continued to spread and establish itself around the world, building individual, community and institutional capacity, it became possible for environmental issues to be addressed through social action and public discourse at the local and national levels. The increasing number of qualified Bahá'ís in the scientific, social, legal and governance dimensions of the environment has greatly expanded both the engagement with broader processes and organisations, and the practical examples of environmental solutions in a wide variety of cultural, geographic and political contexts. Interfaith collaboration has built momentum and support across most Faith traditions. Books have been published, Bahá'í-inspired organisations created, and networks of like-minded people extended to the highest levels.

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64 Peter Adriance and Arthur Dahl, 'Bahá'í', in *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. by Willis Jenkins, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim (Oxford: Routledge Earthscan, 2017), pp. 88–96.

65 Bahá'u'lláh, *The Tabernacle of Unity* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 2006), sect. 1.4.

As environmental crises contribute to the disintegration of an old world order no longer fit for a globalised world, Bahá'ís are contributing to integrative processes that will ultimately lead to planetary unity of the human family living in sustainable harmony on a regenerating Earth system.

Author biographies

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Dr Sylvia Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen is a co-founding member of the International Environment Forum and serves on its Board. She is Associate Professor in political science at Wageningen University. Her research focus is the legitimation and function of global public governance of the environment. Sylvia has published in leading journals in the domains of global energy, climate change, biodiversity and sustainable development governance. She has followed the UNFCCC process for some 15 years and has been a member of the IPBES Task Force on Scenarios and Models since 2016.

Dr Arthur Lyon Dahl is President of the International Environment Forum, and former Deputy Assistant Executive Director of UNEP where he coordinated the UN System-wide Earthwatch. An environmental scientist specialising in complex systems like coral reefs, he was ecological adviser to all the Pacific Islands, and served in the secretariat of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. He is on the Steering Committee of the Climate Governance Commission, and was co-author of *Global Governance and the Emergence of Global Institutions for the 21st Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2020). His recent work is on United Nations reform and global environmental governance.