

I have been asked to share a few comments regarding my reading of the process of creating Agenda 2030.

I would like to focus my comments on two specific elements: learning and engagement of FBOs.

On learning:

- This was by far the most consultative process that the UN has ever engaged in.
- We, as humanity, are learning how to reach consensus – some might expect that consensus means ‘our views are reflected’ or ‘the needle has shifted measurably’ in one direction or another.
 - o However, in these still nascent stages of global consultation, it may mean ‘the priorities of all were made clear.’
- What some may call shortcomings in the agenda, others may call strengths:
 - o They are too complicated – complexity could be good or bad
 - o Issues X, Y or Z were never mentioned
 - o Countries can pick and choose – again, this could be of benefit or not.
- Regardless of where you stand on these matters, we must acknowledge that we cannot expect perfection from someone on their first or second attempt, and the UN is no different.
 - o When most people look at their children, they see the future of humanity. But when I look at my 8 month old, I think of the challenges that humanity is facing now in terms of an analogy.
 - o She is learning to crawl. Every time she tries, she ends up rolling onto her back. Is each attempt at crawling a failure? Am I disappointed that she didn’t get it right the first time? Not in the slightest – I am proud that she is learning, and I will always encourage her to do more.
 - o This is how I see the development endeavor: a series of attempts, followed by learning and reflection, and then vastly improved plans.
 - o In terms of global development agendas, I might postulate that one of the greatest successes of the MDGs was allowing us to get to this point.
 - o The SDG process represents a key step on this path of learning.

Engagement past and future for FBOs:

- Regarding the engagement of faith at the UN, I want to focus on two elements – discourse and action.
 - o 1. In terms of discourse, people of faith must utilize the United Nations’ open door policy:
 - I might say that we have not succeeded as yet in this duty. Here is why:

- Religious communities understand individuals are more than the sum of their parts. For example, we recognize that access to formal education does not equate to a sense of purpose, freedom from illness is not guaranteed contentment in life, and a full belly does not mean hope for a better future.
- Humans are more than material inputs. This UN agenda does a great job to articulate the material necessities, but struggles to name those higher concepts that we know to be truly transformative.
- In Agenda 2030, words like selflessness, sacrifice, love, compassion, duty, generosity, and charity are entirely absent – even trust is only there once, and the word religion only exists in the context of non-discrimination.
- This is, in part, because the contributions of many Faith based organizations could not be distinguished from the dominant, secular and materialistic framework – they struggle to reflect the wholeness of the person.
- These are shortcomings on our behalf – we cannot place blame elsewhere. But they represent opportunities for us to grow, to learn to articulate, and to contribute in the future.
- What do I mean? We did not learn how to articulate the scientific reality of the world until relatively recently in terms of human history. It is time we work together - systematically and using a methodology similar to that of science - to articulate the spiritual reality as well.
 - 2. On the second point, we have a responsibility to act at this point.
 - In this interconnected world, no organization acts alone, and the UN is no different.
 - However, we all know that it is individuals and communities who can make lasting change:
 - It is not for me to speak on behalf of the religions here, however I am sure we can all think of examples where the central figures of our faiths have changed hearts, minds, and lives – the course of history – through seemingly small actions.
 - It is these small actions, endowed with purity of motive that, in the aggregate, will change the world. We have the opportunity now to commit ourselves to a global, universal endeavor, agreed upon by the nations of the world. We can take this good start and make it transformational.

If there is one red thread that connects the SDGs and us here today, it is that of universality. Though our language may need work – developed/developing, north/south, rich/poor – this new agenda recognizes that all have a role to play. And it is religion that can galvanize engagement, participation, and commitment – perhaps even more than can material resources.

A precedent was set by virtue of the open negotiation process, and we are continuing in the spirit of that precedent during these two days in Bristol by committing to engaging in this endeavor together.

PRAYER/INVOCATION

I will read three quotes from Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, followed by a prayer revealed by His son:

The All-Knowing Physician hath His finger on the pulse of mankind. He perceiveth the disease, and prescribeth, in His unerring wisdom, the remedy. Every age hath its own problem, and every soul its particular aspiration. The remedy the world needeth in its present-day afflictions can never be the same as that which a subsequent age may require. Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.

– *Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings*

O children of dust! Turn your faces from the darkness of estrangement to the effulgent light of the daystar of unity. This is that which above all else will benefit the peoples of the earth.

– *Bahá'u'lláh, Tabernacle of Unity*

Blessed and happy is he that ariseth to promote the best interests of the peoples and kindreds of the earth.

– *Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings*

Prayer:

O Thou compassionate Lord, Thou Who art generous and able! We are servants of Thine sheltered beneath Thy providence. Cast Thy glance of favor upon us. Give light to our eyes, hearing to our ears, and understanding and love to our hearts. Render our souls joyous and happy through Thy glad tidings. O Lord! Point out to us the pathway of Thy kingdom and resuscitate all of us through the breaths of the Holy Spirit. Bestow upon us life everlasting and confer upon us never-ending honor. Unify mankind and illumine the world of humanity. May we all follow Thy pathway, long for Thy good pleasure and seek the mysteries of Thy kingdom. O God! Unite us and connect our hearts with Thy indissoluble bond. Verily, Thou art the Giver, Thou art the Kind One, and Thou art the Almighty.

– *'Abdu'l-Bahá*