



**The 2030 Development Agenda:  
III Reflection Dialogue on “Defining Transformation within the Sustainable Development  
Agenda (2015–2030)”**

**Transforming our minds and hearts to transform the world<sup>1</sup>**

**Concept Note**

**Context**

In 2015, the United Nations endorsed the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, comprised of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with the promise of transforming the world. However, the meaning of transformation was never defined, leaving open the most important question of this ambitious collective undertaking. In response, in 2015, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) convened the first of a series of reflective dialogues to explore the meaning of transformation within the context of the SDGs. Since then, two encounters of respected policy experts, psychologists, neuroscientists, academics, ethicists, journalists, spiritual leaders, economists, and development workers have taken place. Their collective interest led to the production of a reflection paper, *Enhancing Human Flourishing Within the 2030 Development Agenda: The Spirituality of Global Transformation*, with the main conclusion that sustainable development requires a “spiritual transformation” of ourselves, and the organizations we link to that actively extends to the societal, global, and ecological levels.

**Transformation as a spiritual phenomenon**

Any individual and collective development come from how we, as citizens of the world, can transform our minds and hearts to help humanity to reach the highest standards of human dignity. By focusing on personal and socio-cultural transformation, we have the opportunity not only to change our lives but also to help improve the earth. Spiritual traditions and, more recently, scientific research agree that transformation takes place first in the inner self. Transformation is then in the broadest sense “spiritual” – a concept that goes to the very essence of whom we are and captured through a cluster of words such as dignity, love, compassion, cooperation, humility, kindness, equality, empathy, among others. Therefore, if development wants to be sustainable, it requires a paradigm shift that places its focus on the inner self of human beings as the most transformational resource to achieve peace and prosperity for all while protecting the planet and making people flourish.

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<sup>1</sup> This concept note is based on a previous paper entitled *Enhancing Human Flourishing Within the 2030 Development Agenda: The Spirituality of Global Transformation* developed by Stephen Post.

The 2030 Development Agenda can only succeed as people everywhere advance in the consciousness of a “oneness” that lies within, and from this source gather their energies in practical solutions to address global challenges such as poverty, hunger, conflict and natural disasters, socioeconomic, ethnic and gender inequalities, global warming, among many others.

The deep-rooted current problems of the world that sustainable development requires an underpinning grounded in the enduring wellspring of human spirituality and the related capacity for empowerment, for resilience, for compassion, and for solidarity. An elevation in the experience of oneness, conscience, and love – terms that have become taboo in public discourse and policy - is imperative to respond adequately to human suffering. Also, there is a need to provide the opportunity for secular spiritual strategic action.

### **Enhancing Sustainable Development through Inner Transformation**

The United Nations has a long tradition of spiritual discourse. The Preamble of the United Nations Charter urges us “to affirm the worth and dignity of the human person,” and the Preamble of the UNESCO Constitution affirms: “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defense of peace must be constructed.” Former Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjold asserted that our common purpose and source of resilience as human beings are grounded in a personal identity realized through actions of creative love toward others and that the contemplative life is a pathway to spiritual-political activism.

The Sustainable Development Goals are a universal and transformative agenda. In order to enhance the inner individual transformation that is needed to make lasting changes, the United Nations, in close partnership with its Member States, civil society organizations, including faith-based and spiritual organizations, academia, private sector, among other stakeholders, have progressively introduced concepts that may enhance the transformation of the inner self, such as those of empowerment and resilience. These new dimensions and approaches integrated into diverse development programs, particularly in those working on peacebuilding, humanitarian crisis, and poverty reduction. By now, there are examples of programs that in different ways are grounded in a new understanding of the need to make a stronger emphasis, both conceptually and operationally, on the inner dimensions of the self.

However, despite progress at different levels, there is still a need to integrate further the knowledge, research, and evidence produced by external actors to the U.N. in redefining the importance of investing in the inner self to trigger a transformation in all spheres of social and economic development. For instance, areas such as conscious business and prosperity, neuroscience and emotional education, transpersonal psychology and empowerment, indigenous people’s knowledge and earth preservation, conflict and post-traumatic growth, among many others. Researchers consistently have pointed to spirituality as a positive contributing factor in coping and resilience. In general, there is increasing evidence that more sustainable outcomes are

### **A First Step: How to Build on a Spiritual Narrative on Sustainable Development**

In previous reflective dialogues, the connections between transformation, spirituality and sustainable development were explored and discussed. Besides, we are in collective agreement

that human beings are narrative creatures; therefore, for profound sustainable transformation, we need a global narrative that connects the inner self and sustainability.

This new narrative needs to revolve around the linkages between the subjective experience of internal development and a global-oneness paradigm that responds to the moral imperative to address human suffering and ensure sustainability. That global narrative should move us beyond the numbers to the human experience of confronting loss and disappointment with faith, hope, love, and courage.

In this new reflective dialogue, we would like to explore how the global narrative of the 5 Pillars of the 2030 Development Agenda may align with the spiritual principles, for which we have developed the below proposal for further reflection and discussion.

### **The 5 Pillars of the 2030 Development Agenda**

**People:** We all belong to the human family

*We are determined to end poverty and hunger, in all their forms and dimensions, and to ensure that all human beings can fulfil their potential in dignity and equality and in a healthy environment.*

**Planet:** Life on Earth is sacred

*We are determined to protect the planet from degradation, including through sustainable consumption and production, sustainably managing its natural resources and taking urgent action on climate change, so that it can support the needs of the present and future generations.*

**Peace:** Compassion is the evolution of our solidarity

*We are determined to foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies that are free from fear and violence. There can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development.*

**Prosperity:** Abundance is shared and cultivated

*We are determined to ensure that all human beings can enjoy prosperous and fulfilling lives and that economic, social and technological progress occurs in harmony with nature.*

**Partnership:** Together we prevail

*We are determined to mobilize the means required to implement the 2030 Development Agenda through a revitalized Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, based on a spirit of strengthened global solidarity, focused in particular on the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable and with the participation of all countries, all stakeholders and all people.*

## **Moving Forward**

Likewise, we would like to explore various options to formalize these efforts like calling for a Transformation and Sustainable Development Working Group or Commission comprising policy experts, academics, ethicists, spiritual leaders, economists, and development professionals from different paths. That experts' team may further reflect on the following issues:

- (a) The linkages between spirituality, transformation and sustainable development, including multidisciplinary evidence-based research;
- (b) Identifying existing consciousness-based organizations and programs that are working on sustainable development with a spiritual perspective, and
- (c) Providing policy-oriented recommendations on how to integrate the spiritual dimensions of the inner self in the sustainable development agenda.