

SPIRITUALITY – THE HEART OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Statement of the

BRAHMA KUMARIS WORLD SPIRITUAL UNIVERSITY

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Spirituality and values have not occupied a prominent place in the development agenda of recent decades. However, with basic human needs remaining unfulfilled for so many children, women and men, it must no longer escape our attention that the failure to provide for other members of the human family around the world is directly connected to humanity's collective spiritual amnesia and the erosion of moral values.

If development concerns the relationship between people and people on the one hand and people and nature on the other, then sustainable development, that sustains people and respects nature, requires that such relationships be based on and guided by fundamental human values and a spiritual perspective of life.

The ideal of development as a continuing process of growth, creation, improvement and positive change has yielded to a reality more frequently marked by destruction, division, deprivation and depletion. The difference between the cherished ideal and the cruel reality finds its roots in a poverty of values and spirituality. That poverty, hunger and other deprivations persist in an age of global plenty is not an issue of logistics, technology or financing so much as a question of values and morality. Setting a clear and defined course of action that we all agree on with regard to the development agenda is important but we must not forget that the world cannot be changed with words and plans alone: it can only change when our values, attitudes and actions change. The crisis of the non-implementation of action plans is itself a crisis of values.

This is not to decry the important achievements that have been made in recent years in areas such as health, life expectancy and the reduction of poverty. Nevertheless, our world remains under the dark cloud of an excessively materialistic paradigm one of the consequences of which is that development is too often a narrow concept largely understood only in economic terms. This narrow concept of development can find its roots in a narrow concept of the self that neglects the larger reality of heart and soul, dims the inner light of the spirit and values and forgets the essential one-ness of the human family.

Lasting development within society will not happen without development of the individual. We need to move from an overly materialistic approach to one that includes the broader and deeper realities of human life and experience: the inner world of our thoughts and values and the innate spirituality on which our worth and dignity are based. We will not be able to get the outer world in order until we have first learned to get our inner world in

order and transcend short-term selfishness, consumerism, disregard for others and a corruption of values. We will not see the changes we look for in the world around us – such as the elimination of poverty, violence and injustice – until we first bring about those changes in ourselves.

Spirituality lends itself to a holistic perspective in which both spirit and matter, soul and body, are real. Among its many rich fruits, spirituality offers us a methodology to deepen our awareness of our inner being. From this awareness may follow steps to develop or change the self in ways that are conducive to the kind of world society we want.

A spiritual understanding of the self indicates that human worth is not derived from matter and material possessions or measured in consuming, having and doing. We then see poverty not just as relating to a material state; in fact the near-bankruptcy of values such as honesty, love, respect, care and compassion is the greatest poverty afflicting the world today as well as itself causing material poverty. Values and spirituality then are at the heart not just of who we are but also of the political, social, economic and environmental issues we are facing. It is also they, rather than words and numbers, that constitute the foundations of the world we are seeking to build.

At a time of the dehumanising of the individual, it is spirituality that gives worth and dignity back to the individual, and with that, the capacity to discern what is needed and make choices based on notions such as the sacredness of life, respect for others and care for the natural world. Nature is not just a resource to be exploited, a potential source of economic growth, but a sustaining and sacred presence to be treated with respect and care. In a world of social disintegration and individual loss of meaning, spirituality offers us a sense of self and purpose and the ability to reconcile the tensions that challenge our being and living together as we strive for that which is good, meaningful and positive.

Helping us to recognise the common identity we share with fellow members of the human family, spirituality's concept of power is one of sovereignty over the self rather than of controlling others. Distinguishable from religion, and possible doctrinal divergence, spirituality is concerned with the primary challenge of putting our inner house in order. It is not antithetical to material progress but believes that such progress yields a bitter fruit and carries within itself the seeds of its own demise if values such as responsibility, justice, honesty, sharing and respect are not its guiding polestar. It also provides the emerging global ethic with the deep, sustaining foundation that it needs if it is to find its way into our hearts and ways of living.

As development efforts shift their focus to include the human dimension, attention needs to be paid to ascertaining what is it that sustains the human being. Social improvement is inextricably linked with economic growth and material sufficiency but our struggle for development cannot rely on technological revolution alone or be judged in economic terms without also taking account of fundamental human values and the spiritual dimension of the individual. There is a crying need for people's rights to proper water, health care, education, food and a life-supporting environment to be met. But human beings do not live by bread alone and development is to sustain people and life rather than being an end in itself. It is also soon apparent that securing access to basic human needs itself depends on the presence of values and that values that sustain people – such as respect, care, sharing, responsibility, honesty and love – are also values that sustain development.

It is clear, therefore, that sustainable development, and development that sustains all people, depends at least as much on inner transformation and growth as on material progress and prosperity. The role of education in this regard cannot be overestimated as it is education that has the potential for changing the way we think and act, physically forming or realigning the connections within our brains, and changing the nature of the whole person, body, mind and spirit. But to effect the move to a just, sustainable and peaceful world society, it is not just more education that is required but education to develop values, attitudes and ways of thinking that foster constructive human interaction and behaviour. We need to ask ourselves what are the values and principles that underlie our practices and that we would like to be the guiding force in our choices and decisions. Transcending notions of materialism and material gratification as being the essence of life, we may come to higher purposes of developing the inner self, inculcating moral values and expressing our skills and talents in service of others.

Action with regard to such personal and spiritual capacity-building is required within every sector and level of society as both formal education at school but also at home, in the community and workplace. Such education, as a creative and transformational process, will touch the heart as well as the mind and give shape to good governance and policies on crucial areas such as the use of resources, healthcare, industrialization, economic activity and technology.

The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University therefore believes that achieving the goals of sustainable development requires that we place a high priority on learning and education that is not only functional, practical and relevant in content but which also has spiritual and moral principles and values at its heart and the overall development of the whole person and society as its aim. This is the truly indispensable basic foundation of education.

For the past 65 years the Brahma Kumaris have been offering to people of all walks of life around the world a very simple, accessible and yet effective education in self-awareness, spiritual principles and values.

The University – together with UNESCO's Basic and Primary Education Sections, and in consultation with the Education Cluster of UNICEF – also supports *Living Values: An Educational Programme*. The Programme provides materials and guidance to facilitate the integration of values education into existing curricula and textbooks for children and young adulthood, starting from early childhood. It covers twelve fundamental human values such as respect, tolerance, freedom peace, responsibility, love and cooperation. Already in use at approaching 5,000 schools and other sites around the world, results indicate that the Programme's five award-winning activity books, now being translated into about 30 languages, constitute an invaluable tool for personal development. The Programme is part of the global movement for a culture of peace in the framework of the United Nations International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World and Programme coordinators would welcome working with others in this continuing and crucial endeavour.



Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University

The BKWSU is a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and in consultative status with UNICEF. The University was founded in India in 1937 and has over 5,000 branches in some 84 countries worldwide.

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Information about Living Values: An Educational Programme is available from the above and from the LVEP website at:

<http://www.livingvalues.net>