

International Conference
Religions and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
Vatican City, New Synod Hall, 7th to 9th of March 2019

Our Common Human Future

Swami Agnivesh

(in collaboration with Glen T. Martin)

First Principles

At dawn of human civilization, the divine source of All Wisdom and Science, The VEDAS proclaimed:

Ishavasya Idam Sarvam , Yatkincha Jagatyam Jagat, Tein Tyakten Bhunjeetha , ma gridhah kasya swiddhanam.

God Consciousness pervades every particle of the Universe. O human beings!

Enjoy this wealth in the need based sharing and caring spirit and not in greed

based acquisitive and consumeristic culture. (Yajur Veda- 40th Chapter &

Ishavasya Upanishad)

The Vedas reveal that the world is One. Oneness permeates all things in a vast *Akashic Field* that is holistic to its very core. From this holism comes the commands for love, truth, and justice. *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*: the world is one family. Contemporary science also reveals that the world is One: one interrelated cosmos, one interdependent ecosystem, and one common humanity. Pope Francis affirms that “everything is interconnected” (Laudato Si, LS, 117). He states correctly that “we were made for love” (LS 58).

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are based on a set of political and economic assumptions that violate our planetary and human holism and the command of love. They violate both contemporary science and the deep wisdom of the Vedas. Sustainability demands the emergence of true holism in human affairs, not perpetuation of centuries old institutions that are themselves a fundamental source of the environmental crisis.

Humanity is one species (*homo sapiens*) and every member of our species has basic common needs. Yet the world today is fragmented among multiple conflicting institutions. Pope Francis cites Patriarch Bartholomew that we need a fundamental “change in humanity” so as not to deal “merely with symptoms” (LS 9). A change in humanity requires change in the institutions that condition and help determine human behavior. Yet these institutions go largely unquestioned by the Sustainable Development Document and its Goals.

Our Present Global System

For our dominant global economic system, it is business as usual. One percent of the world's population continues to own more than half of the world's wealth. 50 percent of the world's population lives in the hell of extreme poverty. The World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund continue to measure economic success in terms of growth, in terms of an ever-increasing Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for each nation. Economists worldwide continue to teach students that the foundation of a properly lived human life is "rational self-interest" and that capitalism promotes some mythic "common good" though an "invisible hand." The WTO, the World Bank, and the IMF serve Wall Street and private banking cartels whose primary concern is ever-increasing wealth for the 1% who own them and who care only about themselves, about their ever-increasing wealth and power.

At the same time, the world's dominant political system, deeply intertwined with the global economic system, continues to think in terms of some 193 "sovereign" nation-states who supposedly have control over their internal affairs and are supposedly independent from one another in their external affairs. That this system is clearly a lie and a farce does not matter. Its parameters remain embodied in the United Nations Charter. Each nation is supposed to compete economically with other nations in global "free trade" in order to increase its GDP and its market share. Weapons sales and the resulting wars reach worldwide. Each nation is supposed to have a voice in the General Assembly, while only 5 of them have any real power. Each nation is subject to invasion, economic blockade, or overthrow at the pleasure of the imperial centers and their allies in order to keep their dominant system in place over a broken and disintegrating world, a world full of crime, terrorism, wars, human misery, and despair.

The United Nations

On the other hand, the UN has developed a worldwide infrastructure of agencies and organizations dedicated to a common good that in many ways transcends the structure of militarized sovereign nation-states. The SDG document states that the UN has some 40 agencies promoting sustainability and producing a quasi-governmental culture and database for a sustainable planet. The UN therefore partially embodies a conceptual paradigm shift that has gained momentum since the 1960s: the idea that the global environment is the "common heritage of humanity."

Nevertheless, the UN Charter remains substantially predicated on the Westphalian state system of 1648, fragmenting the planet into autonomous territorial units with supposed authority over their internal affairs and independence in their external affairs. Many thinkers, from the time of Thomas Hobbes on, have correctly called this international system a "war system" because sovereign nations recognize no enforceable laws above themselves. Wars, arms races, terrorism, global political conflict and instability, continue unabated.

Pope Francis correctly declared that "war always does harm to the environment" (LS 57). The UN, therefore, is relatively helpless to ensure a sustainable future for humanity because it has no status as a global public authority that can legislate binding world laws to end war or protect the environment. The big nations continue to do as they please, regardless of the UN (over which they have immense monetary and political influence), and the small nations continue to suffer what they must.

The Sustainable Development Document of 2015

This document adopted by the UN General Assembly, containing the “SD Goals” significantly presupposes the fragmented Westphalian paradigm, and its complementary fragmented economic assumptions, that structurally make its goals unachievable:

- (1) The Document says nothing about a militarized world-system, and nothing about weapons of mass destruction and a continued global arms race, which wastes close to 2 trillion US dollars per year, and contributes immensely to toxic waste production and direct environmental destruction. Goal 16, on “Peace,” pledges work to end only “illegal arms trade,” not the supposedly legal arms trade from the weapons producing nations of the world and sold globally everywhere on Earth. **Unless this gigantic elephant in the room can be addressed it is unlikely that the SDGs can succeed.**
- (2) The SDGs do not seriously address the problem of the exploding planetary population (only referring, in item 11, to the results of the Conference on Population and Development of 1994). Yet without dealing explicitly with this momentous issue, none of the goals can succeed, for progress in efficiency, recycling, education, and increasing employment will be negated by an ever increasing number of people. A significant scientific consensus is that our planet is in *overshoot*, that population and the economy necessary to support it has grown past its ecological carrying capacity (Meadows 2004), portending possible permanent damage if major transformation is not realized very soon.
- (3) The SDGs, in Goal 8 and elsewhere, continue to assume the measure of economic progress is growth (GDP) even though article 17.19 says that measures should be developed to “complement” GDP as a standard of progress. Hence, the SDGs ignore that fact that you cannot grow indefinitely on a finite planet, and that development needs to change from a quantitative measure to a qualitative measure (Daly 2014). **Pope Francis himself affirms the fact that unlimited growth on a finite planet is based on a lie (LS 106).**
- (4) The SDGs affirm and continue the system of international debt to private banking cartels stating that it wants to make this debt “sustainable.” The document says nothing about World Bank and IMF “structural adjustment programs” that directly contradict the ability of people to escape poverty or create forms of increased social security within countries. Item 44 of this General Assembly Document claims that such “international financial institutions” are essential to the process of development, **even though private banking cartels have to date sunk nations and peoples worldwide into unsustainable exploitative debt, as well as unsustainable growth, that enriches the private lending investors while impoverishing the many.**
- (5) The SDGs affirm everywhere the need to act in accordance with “WTO agreements” even though the WTO is a dictatorial organization in which the powerful nations impose economic rules on the majority of the world’s nations, **rules that inevitably favor the powerful nations who are at the same time the world’s worst polluters and producers of greenhouse gasses.**
- (6) Item 18 of the General Assembly Resolution states: “We reaffirm that every State has, and shall freely exercise, full permanent sovereignty over all its wealth, natural resources and economic activity,” thereby affirming the fragmented Westphalian paradigm of sovereign nation-states that makes unified global action next to impossible. **Under this “sovereignty” principle, Brazil has the**

right to destroy the “lungs of the planet” that are in reality part of the “common heritage of mankind” (phrases Pope Francis uses at LS 38). Saudi Arabia has the right to pump as much oil as it wants into the global environment, and the US and China have the legal right to pour the highest rates of greenhouse gasses into the common atmosphere of our planet.

- (7) Item 19 reaffirms that protecting human rights is the responsibility of “states”, in the face of the fact that numerous states, signatory to human rights conventions, torture and repress their citizens. **Again, the Westphalian paradigm makes it impossible to end war, protect universal human rights, establish planetary economic transformation to sustainability, or to limit the population overshoot of our planet.**

Uniting Our Planet for True Sustainability

Pope Francis calls for an “integral ecology” based on “the principle of the common good” (LS 138, 157). He asserts that “interdependence obliges us to think of one world with a common plan,” and that “enforceable international agreements are urgently needed” (LS 164, 173). “What is needed,” he affirms, “is an agreement on systems of government for the whole range of the so-called ‘global commons’” (LS 174).

Similarly, in *Pacem in terris* (1963), Pope John XXIII declared that we require “**public authorities which are in a position to operate in an effective manner on a worldwide basis to protect and promote “the universal common good of humanity.”** He concluded that “the moral order itself, therefore, demands that such a form of public authority be established.” The moral order cited by Pope John XXIII is the same moral order identified by the Vedas: “the world is one family.” A genuine family treats one another according to need, justice, and love. Both our current global economic system and our global political system systematically defeat sustainability, justice, and love. We must move to a higher, more inclusive paradigm if humanity is going to survive. Democratic world law embodies love, justice, and sustainability through institutionalizing our planetary common good.

We can only live sustainably within this common global ecosystem if we place our planetary common heritage under a global public authority representing the common good of the people of Earth. **What is happening today is a classic case of the “tragedy of the commons” in which the oceans, forests, essential resources, and atmosphere of the Earth are open game for private exploitation by nations and corporations and therefore are rapidly being destroyed.**

The *Constitution for the Federation of Earth* is designed to establish sustainability, along with justice and peace, for our planet. Its mandate in Article 1 is to end war and demilitarize the nations, as well as to protect universal human rights. Article 1 also mandates: “to protect the environment and the ecological fabric of life from all sources of damage, and to control technological innovations whose effects transcend national boundaries, for the purpose of keeping the Earth a safe, healthy, and happy place for humanity.” Article 4 of the *Constitution* places vital aspects of our global commons into the public domain to be regulated by the democratic world parliament for the common good. This includes the oceans of the Earth, the atmosphere of the Earth, and the essential natural resources of the Earth (like the Amazon basin or the Earth’s hydrocarbon reserves).

The *Earth Constitution* is designed for unity in diversity, for global family values of love, peace, and justice. It embodies Pope Francis' insight that "peace, justice, and the preservation of creation are absolutely interconnected themes" (LS 92). It establishes a unified economic and political system for the Earth that allows markets to serve the common good, and allows for a planetary economy sufficient to everyone's needs as well as those of future generations. It creates scientific agencies designed to monitor the inputs and outputs of the global economy so that these do not exceed the carrying capacity of the planet. **It ends war and directs economics toward satisfying everyone's basic needs, not simply the greed of the 1%, nor the waste of planetary resources on militarized madness.**

Here the moral law of love and justice unites without practical necessity for survival to offer a genuine solution to our planetary tragedy of the commons. **We, the Parliament of the people of the world need to ratify the *Constitution for the Federation of Earth*.**

- (1) The *Earth Constitution* should replace the UN Charter and integrate all the agencies of the UN as nuclei for the organs of the Earth Federation Government. Thus, the UN General Assembly becomes the nucleus for the House of Nations in the World Parliament, etc.
- (2) The world government is non-military with civilian police and courts. The International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court become the nucleus of the World Court System. UN Peacekeepers become the nucleus for the World Police.
- (3) Only in this way can the world be placed under a well-designed comprehensive sustainability program with the legal authority to ensure the common good. As Pope Francis proclaimed, "interdependence obliges us to think in terms of a common plan" (LS 164).
- (4) All agencies and personnel of the UN would then be empowered with both authority and funding to address the multiple interrelated problems of creating a sustainable planetary system.
- (5) The Earth Federation Government would unite humanity to deal with our most pressing problems, all of which are beyond the scope of sovereign nation-states and demand a global public authority: ending war, removing WMDs, demilitarizing the world, protecting universal human rights, ending the vast disparity between rich and poor, and achieving a sustainable, coordinated, global economy protecting both present and future generations.
- (6) True sustainability demands nothing less than a united, democratic world system premised on our planetary common good. The *Earth Constitution* provides that blueprint.

Brief Bibliography

Daly, Herman E. (2014). *From Uneconomic Growth to a Steady-State Economy*.

Francis, Pope (2015). *Laudato Si Encyclical*. On-line at:

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

Harris, Errol E. (2014). *Earth Federation Now! Tomorrow Is Too Late: Second Edition*.

John XXIII, Pope (1963). *Pacem in terris*. On line at:

http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html.

Laszlo, Ervin (2007). *Science and the Akashic Field: An Integral Theory of Everything*.

Lenton, Tim (2016). *Earth System Science: A Very Short Introduction*.

Martin, Glen T., ed. (2010). *Constitution for the Federation of Earth. With Historical Introduction, Commentary, and Conclusion*. The Constitution is on-line at www.earth-constitution.org

Meadows, Randers, and Meadows (2004). *Limits to Growth: The 30-Year Update*.

UN Sustainable Development Goals at:

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030>