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Email: learn@wilmetteinstitute.org

Voice: (877)-WILMETTE

Sustainable Development and Human Prosperity

Dates: July 24 – September 17, 2024

Faculty: Laurent Mesbah, Arthur Lyon Dahl, Christine Muller, Rebecca Teclmariam-Mesbah

Course Description:

Our headlong pursuit of economic development since World War II to respond to the needs of a rapidly expanding world population has created great wealth and lifted many out of poverty, but also pillaged the planet's natural resources, polluted the environment, and overshot planetary boundaries, while increasing inequality and leaving half the world population struggling to meet basic needs. The UN has called for a fundamental transformation towards sustainable development to assure that future generations can also meet their own needs. The Bahá'í teachings shed useful light on what this alternative should look like and how we might get there. We shall explore the environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainable development and the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the UN. How do these translate into things we can do ourselves and in our local communities to live more sustainably? Combining science and spirituality can help us to work with both our head and our heart to build a more just and sustainable world.

All the materials are included in the course including the readings from the book "The Eco-Principle" by Dr. Arthur Lyon Dahl.

Learning Objectives:

- To gain a deeper understanding of the concept and issues behind sustainable development, how it evolved, why it is important, and how it affects people today and in the future.
- To relate sustainability to the issues of economic development, wealth and poverty, social development, and the environment in an integrated systems perspective.
- To value the relevance of sustainability as a priority for communities, national governments, and the international system
- To build capacity to live more sustainably, consistent with your own spiritual and ethical values.
- To engage in meaningful conversations about Human Prosperity and contribute to the public discourse on related topics.
- To plan ways to use your acquired knowledge to serve your community and to educate others about the material and spiritual dimensions of sustainable development.

Course Expectations:

This course is divided into one-week (or less) sessions beginning with an orientation unit and ending with a unit for review and summary. All units include readings, activities, and an online discussion among course participants. The course has been structured so that it typically requires an estimated 5 or 6 hours per week of reading and discussion.

During Unit 1, you will draft a Personal Learning Plan (PLP) to define the goals you have set for yourself by participating in this course. We suggest you set goals that will help you develop your personal capabilities and will be achievable in and around your other daily tasks.

During the final review unit, you will refer again to your PLP and complete a learning self-assessment reviewing the extent to which you met the goals you set for yourself.

Course Guidelines:

Your instructor will periodically review your progress in the course and be available to discuss things with you. The following guidelines will help you gain maximum benefit from your participation in the course and will contribute toward a rich and rewarding experience through dialogue with others. We recommend that you consider them when drafting your Personal Learning Plan.

Complete the readings and activities for each unit. Your postings in the discussion area should make reference to the readings and activities in such a way that your instructor can tell you read the material and engaged in the activities.

- Post at least 2 message replies in the discussion area for each unit/session. Each post should contain substantive comments (i.e., a comment like “oh, that’s interesting” is NOT substantive).
- Choose at least 2 different days each session when you will participate in the discussions. We suggest posting at least once within the first few days of the session, with your second post at least two days before the next session begins. By contributing more than one post on different days, you will help the group develop rich ongoing discussions.
- If you post on time (i.e., within the time period of each unit on the course schedule), others will be able to read and respond to your post.
- Keep a course journal to help you track your ideas as you work on your final project.

Course Project:

Your Personal Learning Plan (PLP) helps you focus on what you want to learn in the course and on what course project you might be interested in creating. The final project is not a course requirement. You will have an opportunity to share your final project with course participants.

The following is a short list of possible ideas for final projects. Learners may propose other ideas as well:

- Use the material from unit 5 about “Global Solidarity Conversations” to engage in public discourse and reflect on the experience.
- Submit a research/reflection paper (about 10-20 pages including references) on a course-related topic.
- Create an artistic project related to the course with a written explanation about it.
- Alternative final project formats can be discussed with course instructor.

Certificate of Completion:

In order to be eligible to receive a *Certificate of Completion*, you must do the following:

- Participate in two forum discussions
- Engage in some manner in public discourse and share your experiences either in the special forum on public discourse or in a class meeting
- At the end of the course, write a Learning Self-Assessment
- At the end of the course, complete two brief surveys

You will receive a certificate of completion from the Wilmette Institute within three months after course expectations are met.

Preparatory Tasks:

1. Watch the Welcome Video, read about the Technology Requirements of the course, the Technical Assistance we can provide, and our ability to Accommodate Disabilities.
2. Update your personal profile (see instructions in section 4 of the Course Software Tutorial).
3. Tour the course website to get better acquainted with the elements of a course:
 - a. Open and glance through a few of the Unit pages, including the readings and discussion forum.
 - b. Look at the items in the sidebars (columns), especially Local Study Groups and Resources.
 - c. Take a look at the other elements on the course site, especially the instructions in the Reflection and Application Unit, as this will influence your Personal Learning Plan.
4. Read through the Frequently Asked Questions about our Moodle course management system.

Course Schedule:

Unit 1 Welcome and Introduction

Jul. 24 – 30, 2024

During the first week of the course, course participants and faculty, as collaborators in the process of learning, are invited to complete the Wilmette Institute's 2024 Orientation self-study program, called "First Look: a Course on the Wilmette Institute's Approach to Learning." This orientation is designed to achieve two objectives: to familiarize participants with the WI online learning platform (Moodle), facilitate learning, and to provide a solid foundation to understand the Bahá'í "conceptual framework for action" and how course participants might use this framework to contribute to public discourse.

In this unit, you will first review the unit topics and dates, learn how to use Moodle (our course management system), set up your user profile, begin developing a personal learning plan, and learn how to post and reply in the discussion forums.

We encourage participants to complete the orientation by the start of Unit 2 of their course. If one is not inclined to complete the orientation, participants are welcome to start the course anyway.

Unit 2 The Concept of Sustainable Development

Jul. 31-Aug. 6, 2024

Sustainability means to maintain the productivity and wealth of our society into the distant future. Yet no past civilization has done this successfully; all reached environmental or social limits and collapsed. Now, with the rapid evolution of science and technology, humanity has for the first time run up against planetary limits, and we have little time left to change course before catastrophic events from climate change and famine to mass migrations and wanton corruption, and the resulting political instability, become unbearable.

A Wilmette Institute web talk on "The Transition to Sustainability" with Arthur Lyon Dahl Ph.D., author and faculty of this course will help you write your vision of the future by generating visions of an ideal world where sustainability is an integral part.

Unit 2 further provides an introduction to sustainable development, including how the concept has evolved over the last half century through various United Nations Conferences since 1972. Starting from a concern for environmental issues, it has expanded into a general challenge to human society to live with justice and equity within planetary boundaries. The unit introduces the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), discusses a general approach to thinking sustainably, and reviews the spiritual principles and practices of sustainability that can be applied on the community level.

Unit 3 The Environmental Challenge & Bahá'í Approaches

Aug. 7-13, 2024

This planet is our home, and we must learn to live within its environmental limits. At smaller geographic scales we have usually been able to escape our environmental mismanagement by moving to new frontiers, exporting our pollution, or importing additional resources, but at the planetary level that is no longer possible. Science has now defined nine planetary boundaries that we should not exceed if we want to sustain the life-supporting systems of our planet, and we have already gone beyond four of them: climate change, genetic diversity, biogeochemical cycles, and land conversion.

For environmental sustainability, we have to reduce our impact to return within these external boundaries, just as social sustainability requires that we rise above the inner boundaries of unacceptable poverty and injustice. We have to understand how the planetary system works and the operating principles of the biosphere in what is called a systems-ecology approach. We also need to learn to relate the global and local scales and understand how to turn global thinking into local action.

In Unit 3, you will learn about planetary boundaries and the environmental limits for development at global, regional, national, and local scales. A reading and a video by the United Nations Environment Programme about the state of the world environment is followed by a summary of the many environmental factors that can be considered at the community level. The unit ends with a discourse on climate change and the study of quotations from the Baha'i Writings relating to the unit's topic.

Unit 4 Economic Development & Sustainability: Poverty & Wealth Aug. 14-20, 2024

When people think of development, they first think of economic development, which is one of the three dimensions of sustainable development. Yet, while the world has become wealthier, the extremes of wealth and poverty have also increased, a trend that is itself unsustainable. It is difficult for the well-off to imagine the reality of extreme poverty although it is present all around us. In the West, it is the experience of the homeless, the refugees, the elderly and the marginalized. In the rest of the world, poverty is a common experience. For the one third of humanity who suffer its consequences and are increasingly aware of how unjust their situation is, acceptance of the present system is intolerable.

Development is usually equated with economic growth, as measured by an increase in GDP (gross domestic product), and the term "sustainable development" is often considered a contradiction in terms, since endless material growth is contrary to sustainability. In fact, some in wealthy countries advocate "degrowth", since their over-consumption is leading to the rape of the planet and leaves no resources for the poor to have some legitimate growth to meet their basic needs. "Sustainability" is now often preferred to "sustainable development" for this reason.

The unit begins with a video illustrating the ever-widening gap of wealth and poverty. Then you will read a chapter from Arthur Dahl's book "The Eco-Principle" which provides a critique of the Western economic system and its development failures. Another highlight of the unit is the reading "The Prosperity of Humankind", written by the Baha'i International Community, which discusses both economic and social principles and redefines the goals of development and the concept of prosperity based on spiritual and ethical principles,

Unit 5 Social Development: Crises & Solutions Aug. 21-27, 2024

With so much attention being devoted to economic development in our present materialistic world, the human side of sustainability, its social dimension, is often neglected. Our world has become polarized between the economic and the social, the political right and left, as if we had to choose one or the other. Sustainable development tries to bring all aspects of the issue together as complementary aspects of a whole that is human development. Social sustainability requires adequate institutions of governance, participation, an efficient legal system, strong involvement of civil society, and elimination of social inequalities, particularly concerning women who are often central actors in achieving sustainability. Today, with the spread of information technologies and social media, youth are being empowered in new and exciting ways that challenge existing social and political systems.

This unit covers the importance of putting people - our human capital - back in the center of sustainable development. It contains a practical checklist of all the things that might be included in achieving social sustainability at the community level, as well as a video on "Women and Sustainability" and other resources such as Baha'i quotations about the many facets of social sustainability.

This Unit also contains the Forum for Public Discourse and the Global Solidarity Conversations, the materials that can assist you in having meaningful conversations in your community or other settings.

Unit 6 Future Perspectives on the Prosperity of Humankind Aug. 28 – Sep. 3, 2024

Unit 6 discusses the need to integrate all the dimensions of development in one systems framework. One way to learn systems thinking is to imagine what the future will, or should, be like. While we cannot predict the future, we can have a vision of the future we would like to have, and, more scientifically, we can imagine or model various alternative futures by making some assumptions and then using systems thinking and computer modeling to project their consequences to various times in the future.

This unit includes excerpts from the United Nations Environment Programme Global Environment Outlook Reports 5 and 6, and a contribution to a panel on Implementing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Challenges and Responses. The center of the unit is chapter 9 of the book "The Eco Principle" on "Visions of an eco-civilization" which provides a hopeful vision of the prospects for sustainable development, showing that new information technologies combined with spiritual values will make a new, more organic, knowledge-based society possible.

Unit 7 Education for Sustainable Development: individual & Community Action Sep.4 - 10, 2024

Education will change people's lifestyles and consumption patterns, and create the public support and political will necessary to implement the major changes in society and our economy required to become more sustainable. This starts at an early age by developing a spiritual connection to nature and understanding that we and our fellow humans are an integral part of it.

Sustainability is also a topic with great potential to start meaningful conversations with others, linking their immediate preoccupations with spiritual principles and deeper solutions to the problems we all face - principles and solutions that get to the causes and do not just respond to the symptoms. This is also a subject on which you can participate in public discourses, either as a well-informed individual, or on behalf of local or national institutions or organizations.

The materials of this unit encourage us to reexamine individual lifestyles, explain the ecological footprint, and then focus on various aspects of environmental and spiritual education. We know that knowledge should lead to action. This unit should help you to consider some practical steps for yourself, your family, and your community, to live in a more sustainable way.

Unit 8 Reflection & Application of Learning

Sep. 11-17, 2024

The last unit of the course provides the opportunity to reflect about, integrate, and apply your learning. Your Personal Learning Plan (PLP), which you formulated during the early weeks of the course, should include a goal for your final work.