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Statement submitted by the Fondation Ostad Elahi: éthique et solidarité humaine, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

Together with the work it is doing on behavioural science and decision theories, the think-tank organized by the Fondation Ostad Elahi: éthique et solidarité humaine supports the idea that vital solutions for sustainable development will be found through discoveries in the social sciences — in particular social psychology, behavioural psychology and experimental economics — and innovative technologies: indeed, the problems caused by human behaviour should be solvable by modifying that behaviour.

At the individual and collective levels, many initiatives have already been taken by Governments and non-governmental organizations to encourage behaviours that promote sustainable development and to discourage harmful behaviours. This minimal ethical standard is insufficient, however, to counteract various forms of inertia — including at the level of industrial production modes — and the many resulting environmental and health-related risks (see the report of the European Environment Agency on “Late lessons from early warnings: science, precaution, innovation” of 23 January 2013). Similarly, good governance is often hindered by some stakeholders’ lack of capacity or even willingness to take into account the views of other stakeholders.

This is why universities and professional schools, in training future world leaders, must develop research and teaching programmes that deal with individual ethics. Ethics do not solely consist of practising behavioural norms which, because of certain constraints linked to the way they are elaborated and the difficulty of dealing with the special characteristics of the human psyche, often prove to be inoperable. Ethics are, above all, related to each individual’s capacity to take into account the interests of others and the general good in his or her choices and decisions, an outcome which is more likely if he or she is aware of the impact of these choices and decisions on others. Ethical behaviour consists, in particular, of not imposing decisions on others that one would not wish to have imposed on oneself.

Courses on individual ethics for future leaders and decision-makers could include case studies, based on actual cases if possible, in areas that concern them and on fieldwork, where the impact of their decisions can be seen. The greater the physical distance between these leaders and the people who feel the effects of their decisions, the less likely they are to be aware of the harmful consequences of those decisions on the individuals and groups concerned. The implementation of actual ethical practices, through self-observation, self-evaluation and a progression programme, is also recommended.

Research should include programmes to promote a better understanding of the impact of unethical behaviours (egotism, scorn, lying, bullying, etc.) not only on the physical and mental well-being of their victims but also on those who practise such behaviours.

Thus, sustainable development will ultimately play a role in reducing environmental risks and social injustice.