

“Does the Earth Charter Support Socialism?”

From time to time critics of the Earth Charter express a concern that it promotes socialism. This reflects a misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of the document. The Earth Charter highlights the importance of social and economic justice, but it does not advocate socialism as a political and economic strategy for achieving it.

The Earth Charter builds on humanity’s great ethical and spiritual traditions and on international law, and it is the product of a decade long, worldwide, cross-cultural dialogue in search of goals and values that are widely shared by people of all cultures and religions. It has been drafted as an aspirational declaration of fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable and peaceful world. The Earth Charter’s vision for a better world is designed as an urgent call for social change. Its principles have far reaching social, economic and political implications. However, the Earth Charter is focused primarily on the ethical foundations of a better world. It does not attempt to specify—beyond a number of very general guidelines--the political, economic and environmental mechanisms required to implement its principles. The Earth Charter was drafted with the hope that it would help to stimulate a worldwide debate on this highly complex subject. It also recognizes that the world’s peoples will find a variety of ways to achieve a sustainable future.

Following the collapse the Soviet Union and the removal of the Berlin Wall, interest in state socialism as a system for promoting human development and achieving justice, sustainability and peace declined significantly. Partly as a result, there was very little discussion about socialism during the Earth Charter consultation and drafting process. Attention focused on principles about which there is a wide consensus in the emerging global civil society, including ideas that were endorsed by the seven United Nations summit meetings held during the 1990’s. There was extensive discussion about social and economic justice and about the values that should govern economic development. On the political side, there was much discussion about democracy, which the United Nations Commission on Human Rights has come to recognize as a

fundamental human right and as essential to human development. When reflecting on the Earth Charter and socialism, it is also useful to keep the following in mind.

The Earth Charter fully supports the rights and fundamental freedoms of the individual as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international law, and international law recognizes that “everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.” (UDHR Article 17). In Principle 2a, the Earth Charter recognizes “the right to own, manage, and use natural resources” with the critical qualification that with this right goes “the duty to prevent environmental harm and to protect the rights of people.” The Earth Charter, which views the individual and society as interdependent, endeavors to present a balanced understanding of rights and responsibilities.

The Earth Charter recognizes that “the dominant patterns of production and consumption” in the world today are ecologically unsustainable and have failed to prevent mass poverty. However, it nowhere advocates government ownership of the means of production, centralized economic planning, and government control of the distribution of goods as the solution. The ethical principle that it sets forth in this regard calls for patterns of production and consumption “that safeguard Earth’s regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being.” (Principle 7)

Some critics focus on Principle 10a, which calls for “the equitable distribution of wealth within nations and among nations,” as evidence of socialist leanings in the Earth Charter. It is the case that many socialists have focused special attention on the injustice of the gross economic inequity in the modern world, and they emphasize the equitable distribution of wealth as a major goal of a socialist society. However, the Earth Charter presents Principle 10a, not as part of a call for socialism as a political and economic system, but as a basic principle of social and economic justice that is consistent with international human rights law and widely shared among people throughout the world. The meaning and significance of this principle in the context of the Earth Charter becomes clear when one considers why and where it appears in the document.

Reflecting the awareness that most of the world’s wealth is concentrated in the hands of roughly twenty percent of the world’s people and over two billion people live in poverty on two dollars a day or less, the Earth Charter Preamble states: “The benefits of

development are not shared equitably and the gap between the rich and the poor is widening.” From the Earth Charter’s ethical perspective, this is a deeply troubling and unacceptable situation. Poverty denies people their basic human rights. It is both a cause and consequence of environmental degradation. In addition, poverty breeds desperation and resentment often leading to crime, violence and terrorism. Justice, security, and environmental protection are all compelling reasons for the world community to collaborate in ending poverty.

Therefore, in a section on Social and Economic Justice, Earth Charter Principle 9 calls for the eradication of poverty, and Principle 10 states: “Ensure that economic activities and institutions at all levels promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner.” This principle is designed to make clear that economic development is not an end in itself and should be viewed as a means for promoting equitable human development. In other words, the well-being of people and the community as a whole, not profits, should be the overriding concern of economic development. In addition, Principle 10 asserts that development should be ecologically sustainable. The Earth Charter does not question the great social value of well managed private enterprise, and businesses are certainly entitled to make a profit. However, economic activities should serve human needs and protect the environment. It is in this context that Principle 10a appears with its call for “the equitable distribution of wealth within nations and among nations.” The point is that eradicating poverty and equitable human development require an equitable distribution of wealth—of essential resources, useful goods, and beneficial services.

What does the equitable distribution of wealth mean? First of all, it is important to keep in mind that “equitable” means fair; it does not mean equal. Second, international, social and economic human rights law provides guidelines that set minimal standards for an equitable distribution of wealth. For example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states in Article 25:

“(1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate to the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of

livelihood in circumstances beyond his control. (2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.”

In accord with these guidelines, Earth Charter Principle 9b states: “Empower every human being with the education and resources to secure a sustainable livelihood and provide social security and safety nets for those who are unable to support themselves.” The Earth Charter places a strong emphasis in this regard on “universal access to education, health care, and economic opportunity.” (Principle 11). Principles 10b, c and d further develop the ideas in Principles 10 and 10a, calling for international aid for the developing world, progressive labor standards, and a steadfast commitment to the common good and transparency on the part of multi-national corporations. In our increasingly interdependent world, a new spirit of solidarity, compassion, and social and ecological responsibility is essential.

The Earth Charter does recognize that governments have a major role to play in eradicating poverty and promoting a more equitable distribution of wealth in and through, for example, tax policy, regulation, education, and social safety nets. However, it does not advocate the centralization of power in the state. The Earth Charter also recognizes that the business community has a critical role to play in this matter, but it does not support a concentration of power in the business sector and its principles call for a major transformation in the way corporations and markets operate. In addition the Earth Charter strongly supports the rise of a well informed and socially engaged civil society, and it urges promotion of participatory democracy. It is the position of the Earth Charter that “the partnership of government, civil society and business is essential for effective governance” in the 21st century. Responsibility for promoting equitable and sustainable human development is a common but differentiated responsibility of all three sectors.

The members of a variety of religious and secular communities freely opt to abandon their right to private property and to accept collective administration of the goods and resources of the community. It should be noted that there is nothing in the Earth Charter that opposes such a voluntary arrangement. Further, if they choose to do

so, such communities can live in harmony with the Earth Charter's ethical principles, and some strive to achieve this goal.

The growing gap between the rich and poor in the world today is a fundamental problem facing the human family in the 21st Century. The idea that global security and peace is possible under the present circumstances is an illusion. Eradicating poverty and promoting equitable human development must be part of any strategy for building a just, sustainable, and peaceful world.

Steven C. Rockefeller

Co-Chair, Earth Charter International Council