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Author	Andreanna Ten
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The Earth Charter Initiative



Youth Forum on The Earth Charter and Rio+20 at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

By: Andreanna Ten

Held under the backdrop of the Earth Charter's "Seeds of Hope" Exhibition which was hosted by the Youth Division from the Soka Gakkai Malaysia (SGM) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, a Youth Forum was held on 24th April 2011, initiated by Andreanna Ten who attended the Earth Charter+10 Conference at Ahmedabad, India last year.

Inspired by the theme of the Earth Charter's Exhibition: "It Starts With One", The Youth Forum discussed how the youth can exert a meaningful influence on the current environmental issues faced by society, the Earth Charter's inclusive ethical framework, its shared values and how it can contribute to the Rio+20 Earth Summit next year.

Kim: The theme of the Earth Charter's Seeds of Hope Exhibition is "It Starts With One". Many people would be keen to hear your views, which represent the diverse spectrum of opinions from youths. I believe your views will also provide a fresh approach on looking at environmental issues in our society.

Andreanna: Participating in the exhibition was a good exposure for me. All these years, sustainability had only been a vague concept. Now, I am able to understand it better and I'm able to appreciate the struggles behind it. Not only has the exhibition exposed me to a more in-depth knowledge of sustainability, but it has also highlighted the various challenges that humanity

faces as a whole to push for the realization of sustainability across all areas of life. In doing so, The Earth Charter's ethical framework and shared values is certainly a very useful guide.

Dinesh: I agree. In saying so, Andreanna has essentially highlighted an important challenge in the realization of sustainability – lack of awareness. For example, during the COP 15, not many Malaysians are aware that the Malaysian Prime Minister had actually pledged to reduce greenhouse emission by 40%. In this, how are we supposed to push for greenhouse reduction when we are not even aware of it? How are we to check the government's efforts in achieving their target?

Wai Kit: True. Nowadays, students are more aware of myths rather than facts. In the university where I study, University Tunku Abdul Rahman, there is a speaker's corner where anyone can share whatever they wish and I've observed that most students are more interested in myths i.e. supernatural stories rather than facts and realities concerning the world that we live in. Furthermore, they do not know much about sustainability. From my experience, it is only through enabling more students to help out in exhibitions like this that we are able to create the awareness of sustainability in them.

Huan Ren: Hence, in this respect, it is very important for us to educate ourselves. However, attending talks and becoming more aware of sustainability is only but 30% of the effort in realizing sustainability. The remaining 70% will depend on the actions that we take.

Chin Way: In the discipline that I'm in i.e. visual arts, recycling items is a popular concept in creating artwork. However, many batches of my seniors have used this concept to present their artwork and because of that, my lecturers are already bored with this concept, thereby advising us to abandon this concept of recycling items to become artwork.

Dinesh: It seems to be nothing more than a fashion statement.

Chin Way: It is. In this, the challenge lies in how we are going to entrench sustainability deeply into our lives so that it would not be just a passing fashionable statement so to speak.

Sin Nee: In addition to that, we also have a habit of waiting for the government to act or for an organization to take the lead. It is time that we stop doing that. We can no longer wait for the government to commit wholeheartedly in moving towards a sustainable lifestyle. The movement has to start from the individual. This issue transcends beyond nations, it affects humanity. Hence, we as fellow human beings, should take heed of the exhibition and 'start with one'.

Pui San: I do agree. Ever since I've helped out with the exhibition, I myself am challenged to play my part in reducing my carbon footprint. I'm a person who is used to air-conditioning. But nowadays I've stopped turning on the air-conditioning when I sleep at night. In addition, I've also managed to influence my family members in cutting down our usage of air-conditioning too. In this, I really do believe in the concept of 'start with one' and that "one" begins with us.

Man Yee: True. As for me, it is my personal belief to reduce my carbon footprint. One way that I am able to do this is through the food that I buy. I believe that I should reduce my purchase of imported food as that would significantly reduce the carbon footprint of transportation etc. After all, when we are eating, we are literally voting three times (breakfast, lunch and dinner).

Arthur: Yeap. Personally for me, ever since the exhibition, I've started planning a more eco-friendly outing with my friends. Instead of hanging out at shopping malls, we're now trying to go tree planting instead.

Morgan: While a sustainability movement should definitely start with every one of us, however it is undeniable that cooperation between others would boost our efforts so much more. Not only does it keep us more motivated in what we do, it also helps us advance further along the path of sustainability. An example of this would be the birth of the Kyoto Protocol through cooperation among all parties.

Andreanna: Yes. During my short stint with WWF, I've garnered a deeper understanding of what they were trying to push for in the forestry sector. And it is indeed true that cooperation between parties from both public and private sector are highly needed in order to achieve greater results in sustainability.

Dinesh: In addition to that, we also see a lacking of youth volunteerism in society. If only us youth are able to manifest the culture of youth volunteerism, and in this case working together with green organizations (such as the Earth Charter International), a lot more can definitely be achieved.

Andreanna: I agree. Another sector that we could possibly reform is the education. As it is, sustainability is not really taught in the school's syllabus. Perhaps we could have a clearer focus on environmental studies in the subject of Geography?

Kim: Do you all know that the UN had declared a decade of education for sustainable development and the decade is ending in 2014?

Wai Kit: Nope.

Kim: Well, it is. And for almost ten years, the UN has tried to cultivate an education for sustainable development but it does not seem to be effective, at least here in Malaysia. Perhaps we could petition for Environmental Studies in our formal education? That would be our local contribution to Agenda 21 (in the spirit of Rio+20, for more information on Rio+20, see: <http://www.uncsd2012.org>).

Chin Way: Yes, that would be a good idea too.

Kim: Well, thank you everyone for your amazing insight and sharing. It has been a very enlightening discussion and it is definitely heartwarming to see youth having such passion for sustainability. The exhibition has definitely taught me that we, as ordinary people are capable of extraordinary things if we put our hearts into it. Once again, thank you very much.

Andreanna Ten, an undergraduate law student from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia contributed this article. She is also an Area Student Division leader in Soka Gakkai Malaysia. The participants in the Youth Forum are the following Student Division members and leaders: Pui San, Sin Nee, Man Yee, Arthur Liu, Huan Ren, Wai Kit, Morgan Tan, Chin Way, Dinesh Chandren (SGM Publications Department) and Kim Hor (HKSGI) **END**