

The Earth Charter: An Ethical Foundation

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On a bright December day in 1998, deep in the interior of Brazil, 4,000 school children with "Carta da Terra" t-shirts lined up, linked arm to arm, over a two mile stretch of road that crossed towering mountain cliffs. As a band played, participants in a week-long Earth Charter Continental Congress of the Americas hiked along the road, greeting and talking with the children. Gradually everyone descended to a small village. There Amazonian indians offered prayers for Earth, and local government officials and community leaders unveiled an Earth Charter monument and celebrated the promise of the Earth Charter. The monument, which was created by a local artist and university students, conveys powerfully the hopes and aspirations expressed in the faces of the children and shared in the many speeches. In the center of the twelve-foot high sculpture is Earth. Around the planet are children -- girls and boys, representing the racial and ethnic diversity in South America and symbolizing all future generations. They stand in solidarity facing outward, holding broken chains between them and forming a protective circle around Earth.

If we are to keep faith with those children in Mato Grosso, Brazil, and with the many others like them, the emerging global civilization needs a sound ethical foundation formed of values and principles that are widely shared among the world's diverse cultures. Helping to create such a foundation is the special mission of the Earth Charter initiative, which has been inspired by commitment to global partnership, social transformation, and environmental protection. The last decades of the twentieth century witnessed a growing recognition that we live in an increasingly interdependent world and that good governance and well-managed development require a new global ethic. Many individuals, organizations, and commissions have addressed this challenge, generating much productive debate and dialogue. The Earth Charter initiative has been part of these developments, and the Earth Charter document gives expression to a consensus on fundamental values that is rapidly taking form in the new global civil society.

First proposed in Our Common Future (1987), the report of the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), the drafting of the Earth Charter was part of the unfinished business of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. In 1994 Maurice Strong, the secretary general of the Earth Summit and chairman of the Earth Council, and Mikhail Gorbachev, the president of Green Cross International, launched a new Earth Charter initiative with support from Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers and the Dutch government. Ambassador Mohamed Sahnoun of Algeria, a member of the WCED, served as the first executive director of the initiative. An Earth Charter Commission with representation from all regions of the world was formed in 1997 to oversee the project, and an Earth Charter Secretariat was established at the Earth Council in Costa Rica.

The Commission decided not to turn the drafting over to an intergovernmental process and to draft the Earth Charter as a people's treaty, because at the time there was little

interest among most governments in negotiating new and stronger commitments regarding the environment and sustainable development. Thousands of individuals and hundreds of organizations from all regions of the world participated in creating the Earth Charter. The project involved the most open and participatory consultation process ever conducted in connection with the drafting of an international document. Beginning with the Benchmark Draft issued by the Earth Charter Commission in Rio de Janeiro following the Rio+5 Forum in 1997, drafts of the Earth Charter were circulated internationally. Forty-five Earth Charter national committees were formed. Earth Charter dialogues were held in all regions of the world and on the internet. One internet conference in 1999, which continued for two weeks, attracted participants from over 70 countries and 300 universities.

In the course of the consultation and drafting process there were many impassioned debates over principles and language, reflecting diverse cultural, philosophical, and religious perspectives. When wide agreement could not be reached on an idea proposed by a particular group, the recommendation had to be abandoned. However, as the dialogue deepened, participants discovered that they did have many shared concerns and values and that it was possible to find language to express this common ground. Guided by such a process, the Earth Charter gradually acquired its current form. Meeting at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris in March, 2000, the Commission approved release of a final version of the text.

The ideas and values in the Earth Charter reflect a number of especially important influences. These include international law, especially the many declarations and treaties that set forth principles of environmental conservation and sustainable development. The document draws on the wisdom of the world's religions and philosophical traditions. It is influenced by the new scientific worldview that is being shaped by discoveries in physics, chemistry, astronomy, biology, and ecology. It reflects the concerns and aspirations expressed at the seven UN summit conferences held during the 1990s on human rights, population, children, women, social development, and the city as well as the environment. It recognizes the importance of the spread of democracy for human development and environmental protection. It builds on over 200 nongovernmental declarations and people's treaties issued over the past three decades. It has also been shaped by the practical experience and insights of local communities and organizations that have successfully pursued sustainable ways of living.

The Earth Charter is a declaration of fundamental ethical principles for building a just, sustainable, and peaceful global society. It recognizes the great value of cultural diversity and the vital importance of our local commitments. However, it seeks to inspire in all peoples a new sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility for the well-being of the human family as a whole and the greater community of life.

The Earth Charter vision reflects the conviction that caring for people and caring for Earth are two interrelated dimensions of one great task. We cannot care for people in a world with collapsing ecosystems, and we cannot care for Earth in a world with widespread poverty, injustice, economic inequity, and violent conflict. The Earth Charter

rejects the widely held idea that economic development is an end in itself. It supports the view that economic institutions and activities should promote equitable human development and should value and protect Earth's ecological systems and the many services they provide. The Earth Charter is both a people-centered and ecosystem-centered document.

Recognizing that our environmental, economic, social, political, and spiritual challenges are interdependent, the Earth Charter provides a new integrated framework for thinking about and addressing these issues. The result is a fresh broad conception of what constitutes a sustainable society and sustainable development. The partnership of government, business, and civil society is understood to be essential to effective governance in the future.

The Preamble of the Earth Charter briefly describes the cosmological and ecological situation and the major challenges and choices facing humanity. There follow sixteen main principles, which are divided into four parts. Each part contains four main principles with a number of supporting principles that elaborate the meaning of the main principles. The principles in the Charter are formulations of fundamental ethical guidelines and major strategies. The Charter does not attempt to describe the mechanisms and instruments required to implement its principles. This is a task for other international legal instruments and for national and local sustainable development plans.

The four principles in Part I are very broad in scope and provide a brief overview of the Earth Charter vision.

1. Respect Earth and life in all its diversity.
2. Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.
3. Build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful.
4. Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.

The first principle on respect for Earth and all life is the foundation of the other three and of all the other principles in the Charter. Our sense of ethical responsibility flows from an attitude of respect. The Earth Charter challenges us to expand our moral awareness and to respect and value all living beings, including ourselves, other persons, other cultures, other life forms, and nature as a whole. Before the awesome mystery of life, respect can deepen into a reverence for life.

The second, third, and fourth principles in Part I deal with the three major spheres of human relationship and ethical responsibility--relations between human beings and the greater community of life, relations among human beings in society, and the relations between present and future generations. In the second principle, it is noteworthy that reference is made to caring for the community of life "with understanding, compassion, and love." This principle recognizes that our best thought and action flow from the integration of the head and the heart, knowledge and compassion, science and a sense of the sacred. The fourth principle affirms that fundamental to the new global ethics is intergenerational responsibility.

The planets in our solar system all have names. The Charter refers to our planet home by its name, Earth. The recommendation to capitalize the word "Earth" and not to refer to the planet as "the earth" initially came from an astrophysicist. He argued that this is common practice in his profession and commented that when his scientist colleagues speak of "the earth," they are referring to dirt. In adopting this recommendation, the drafters of the Charter were especially impressed by the way a change in language can influence perceptions and attitudes. For example, when one uses the name "Earth," it tends to evoke the image of the planet in space provided by our astronauts--the image of a beautiful, fragile, living whole on which we are utterly dependent and which deserves our love and care. When one refers to the planet as "the earth," there is a tendency to imagine it as merely a thing that can be taken for granted and that exists only to be used and exploited for human ends. This outlook is a major cause of industrial civilization's destructive relationship with the environment and the greater community of life.

The twelve main principles in Parts II, III, and IV of the Earth Charter spell out more fully the meaning of the first four principles. The titles of these three parts--"Ecological Integrity," "Social and Economic Justice," and "Democracy, Nonviolence, and Peace"--indicate the inclusive nature of the Earth Charter vision. Among the issues addressed in these sections of the Charter are ecosystem protection and restoration, the precautionary principle, sustainable patterns of production and consumption, human reproduction and Earth's carrying capacity, the eradication of poverty, gender equality, environmental justice, transparency and accountability in governance, education for sustainability, and prevention of conflict. The whole Charter is understood as a path to peace, and in the final principle peace is defined as "the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part." The conclusion of the Charter, which is entitled "The Way Forward," is a call for commitment and action.

A new phase in the Earth Charter initiative began with the official launching of the Earth Charter at the Peace Palace in The Hague on June 29, 2000. The objectives of the initiative going forward are to disseminate the Earth Charter worldwide, to promote its educational use, and to support its implementation and endorsement by civil society, business, and government at all levels. At The Hague launching, Parvez Hassan, the former chair of the IUCN Commission on Environmental Law commented: "I have faith that, like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Earth Charter will unleash energies and expectations that will change human societies in their relationship not only to each other but also to our planet Earth." The international Secretariat in Costa Rica maintains its own internet website (www.earthcharter.org) and works closely with Earth Charter national committees and a large number of partner organizations around the world. A variety of Earth Charter activities are organized independently by diverse groups at the local level.

The Earth Charter is currently being used widely in schools, universities, faith communities, and other organizations as an educational tool for developing understanding of the critical problems and choices facing humanity. Supporting educational materials are being developed. Businesses and professional associations, such

as the World Federation of Engineering Organizations, are using the Earth Charter to design codes of conduct that promote accountability and transparency. A number of national councils of sustainable development and governments are beginning to use the Earth Charter as a guide to sustainable development and as an instrument for assessing progress towards sustainability. It can also be used as a soft law instrument that clarifies the ethical foundations of environmental and sustainable development law and promotes the strengthening of it.

The document has been endorsed by the Amazonian Parliament in South America, the tenth World Congress of Local Governments, which included the mayors of over 350 cities and towns around the world, and the Millennium NGO Forum, which brought together at the UN headquarters representatives of over 1000 nongovernmental organizations. Many other groups have endorsed the Charter including, for example, the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, the UN University for Peace, and the Sierra Club. An effort is underway to seek the endorsement of the United Nations General Assembly in 2002, the tenth anniversary of the Rio Earth Summit.

In conclusion, the Earth Charter shifts authority from the outmoded ideologies of the last century to a new ecology of shared values. The document closes with these words: "Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life."

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