

# The Heart of the Matter: Infusing Sustainability Values in Education

## Experiences of ESD with the Earth Charter



Celebrating the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



UNESCO Chair on Education  
for Sustainable Development  
and the Earth Charter



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# The Earth Charter Project in Schools: Centro Studi per la Pace Onlus, Italy

Cristina Broseghini

## Introduction

Centro Studi per la Pace Onlus (The Center for the Study of Peace, CSPACE) is a non-profit organization founded on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2010 in Demonte, a small mountain town in the province of Cuneo, Italy. It was set up by five friends who decided it was time to stop talking and to start taking action. After lengthy contemplation, the founding Committee resolved to embark on two important projects: a nutritional project in Africa; and a project to be implemented in Italian schools that would bring the Earth Charter to the attention of young students.

The two projects are essentially closely linked, because the right for all to a healthy future is stated clearly in the Earth Charter. The foundation document of CSPACE includes the Earth Charter principles, and, all of the sixteen principles in the Earth Charter were already on the list of possible activities for the organization.

CSPACE identified education as a key method to foster cultural growth among future citizens of the world, and, accordingly, the project for the schools entailed internalizing the principles of the Earth Charter so that each individual can take responsibility for the future of the planet and be motivated to create change. CSPACE aims to take concrete action through the idea of “humanitarian competition” expressed by the Japanese educator Tsunesaburo Makiguchi: “What is important is to set aside egotistical motives, striving to protect and improve not only one’s own life, but also the lives of others. One should do things for the sake of others, because by benefitting others, we benefit ourselves.”



## Implementation

The project in Italian schools had two main goals: the first was for the schools and the local authorities to endorse the Earth Charter; the second was educational, and entailed endorsing, acknowledging, internalizing, and adopting the Earth Charter principles. The project was presented to the teachers in person, and the presentation revealed that there was a lack of knowledge of the Earth Charter and, as a consequence, a deficiency from an educational standpoint of how it was related to school curricula. The starting conditions weren't all that easy either: there was some concern on the teachers' part as to whether or not they would be able to include this project in the school programmes; a couple of classes were considered “difficult to manage”; in other classes, the relationship between the teacher and the students wasn't optimal; and there was also a trust issue in organizations that propose projects of this kind, due to some negative experiences in the past.

An important aspect to be taken into consideration is that many people in these small mountain areas, fortunately not all, nourish feelings of mistrust and narrow-mindedness when faced with novelty and change. This attitude was apparent first and foremost among the local educational authorities, who were minimally receptive and not at all proactive. But, in spite of these challenges, through heart-to-heart dialogue, confrontation, and reassurance about the total support of CSPACE, the project finally took off.

The teachers of four local secondary schools were contacted, out of which seven classes, for a total of 180 students, took part in the project. The students were asked to develop activities, musical, literary, graphic, artistic, or digital, anything that would elicit the creativity, imagination, innovation, and potential from each single student.

Regarding sustainability topics and information, CSPACE published all the necessary educational materials on its website for teachers and students to download, thus limiting the use of paper.

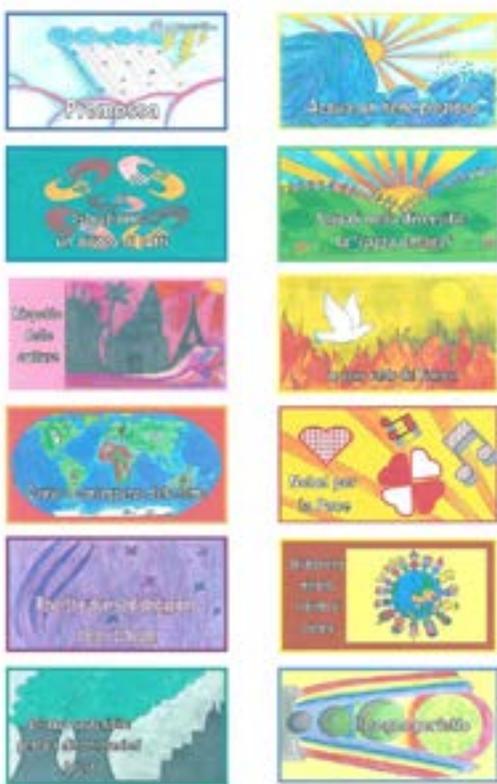
Throughout the process, members of CSPACE took great care in monitoring the progress of the projects, and offered their complete availability to support the classes.

This project aroused the interest of a number of other people in the community, so much so that they wanted to collaborate in some way and share CSPACE's mission, offering their personal skills and talents. These people included several educators, a talented amateur photographer and video producer, an information technology specialist, and a native English-speaking translator and interpreter who volunteered to translate the CSPACE website and other documents related to the Earth Charter. These people are now official members of the organization and have offered to volunteer their expertise for future CSPACE projects, both in Italy and in Africa. This has been another success of this Earth Charter project, making it visible and attracting more people to work towards its goals.



A panel of six people was selected to judge the students' creations and choose the winners of cash prizes (amounting to a total of 1,500 Euros that came from donations and fund-raising activities carried out by CSPACE). The judges were all from the artistic field: an editor/writer; two painters; a director of short films; an actress/director; and a musician. All of the judges were honored to be able to contribute to such a meaningful and inspiring initiative.

To add prestige and excitement to the project, Stefania Belmondo, Olympic Nordic Skiing Champion, who lives in Demonte, took part in the award ceremony and announced the winning classes. The students worked intensely in a serious and conscious manner from October 2013 to March 2014, inventing different creations in different styles, like:



- a calendar rich in food for thought in the form of poetry and ideas on the future of our planet;
- a video newscast giving detailed insights into the Earth Charter;
- a scale model representing a city, one part healthy and the other unhealthy, accompanied by a fast-paced video;
- an e-book on hunting and fishing;
- a video on the hydro-geological risks to the area;
- drawings and reflections.

The works, together with photographs of the scale model, were shared via the internet. The comments made by the judges were highly encouraging:

*"Absolutely admirable, your youth is pure dynamism. You convey optimism for the future... You will be magnificent citizens of the world... You have transmitted information on how to improve our daily lives..."*

The collaboration among the students enabled them to achieve lofty goals: the two winning classes had beforehand been described as being "out of control, difficult to manage, disrespectful" towards the school as an institution as well as to the teachers. A certain amount of conflict and misunderstanding arose at first due to the presence of students from different cultures, thanks to misconceptions and lack of knowledge, considering that multiculturalism in Italy is quite recent, especially in our area. Nonetheless, addressing the

issues related to the project leveled the differences superbly, creating windows instead of walls, highlighting features that different cultures have in common.

To the great surprise of the teachers, the children managed to overcome cultural and ideological barriers with their impressive artistic creations. In one school, the students themselves realized they had formed a group bond, even before their creation was completed, and the work is what represented the group. In another, it was the teachers who found unity of purpose, thanks to the multidisciplinary approach that made it possible to carry out the project. In some cases, the Earth Charter was read before

getting down to planning the project, although in one class the students first expressed their thoughts and considerations on the problems concerning the planet and only then went on to read the Earth Charter, noting that they had foreseen the issues addressed in the Charter. In any case, the teachers were given free rein to work on the projects as they preferred.

No sooner was the award ceremony over, the teachers and students asked us if there would be another project. "Of course", we replied immediately. They wanted to know which issue would be addressed next, and by wondering were already looking to the future.

## Lessons Learned

Having such an enthusiastic response and reactions after the activities that we have organized with the Earth Charter, and knowing that teachers and students were genuinely interested in doing more projects with us is an indication that we have accomplished our goals successfully.

These students' comments show the impact of the Earth Charter and the projects that we have undertaken in schools, and are for us inspiration to continue with our work in schools and high schools:

"This Earth Charter experience has taught us to respect the environment and to give value to everything nature gives us; it has brought the class together. We were really excited about taking part in this initiative right from the start, even if at the time we didn't know if and how many obstacles might hinder our work. But we stood by each other and worked together tackling every difficulty." (Alice)

"The Earth Charter principles will help us to safeguard the environment and to live in a fairer and more peaceful world. This project has made us understand how precious nature is and that if we destroy it, we won't be able to recreate it!" (Giacomo)

"Thanks to the Earth Charter, I've understood the importance of biodiversity. I've learned to save energy and to recycle. Most important of all, I've understood that I have to do my part in order to have a better and more peaceful world." (Laura)

"After having read the Earth Charter, and after having done class work on biodiversity and biological farming, now I'm more careful about what I buy at the supermarket and about what I eat. I've started growing fruits and vegetables in our garden so that I don't risk catching diseases caused by pesticides, herbicides, and other dangerous substances." (Alessandro)

"This experience has meant a lot to me; we've reflected on the environment, on biodiversity, in an enjoyable and engaging way. I've never done anything like this before! The project has taught us to respect the environment, not only for our children but also for the generations after them." (Jin Bei)

And a teacher said: "Thank you so much for this meaningful experience, which I hope will leave a deep mark in the hearts of my "little rascals". I wish you all the best for your important work." (Valeria)



As Nelson Mandela pointed out:

"Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world".

We have decided to invite primary, secondary, and high schools to participate in our next project which will focus on Principle 16 of the Earth Charter: "Promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence and peace."

a. Encourage and support mutual understanding, solidarity, and cooperation among all peoples and within and among nations.

b. Implement comprehensive strategies to prevent violent conflict and use collaborative problem solving to manage and resolve environmental conflicts and other disputes.

- c. Demilitarize national security systems to the level of a non-provocative defense posture, and convert military resources to peaceful purposes, including ecological restoration.
- d. Eliminate nuclear, biological, and toxic weapons and other weapons of mass destruction.
- e. Ensure that the use of orbital and outer space supports environmental protection and peace.
- f. Recognize that peace is 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.

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