



The Earth Charter and the Green Economy

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Summary:

This document discusses a potential synergy of goals and efforts between two major attempts at solving the environmental, social and economic challenges facing humanity today: the Earth Charter – an ethical framework for sustainable development; and efforts to promote a green economy – a practical approach to managing the economic change towards sustainability.

I Crossroads

1. As humanity struggles to find its path in the new century, our growth – in both numbers and capacities – causes an exponential increase of crises and challenges. Environmental disasters of mounting magnitude, unsustainable patterns of production and consumption, and social inequalities worldwide continue to breed violent conflicts, destabilizing national and global social systems. Human inability to demonstrate a concerted effort to “*protect and restore the integrity of Earth’s ecological systems,*”¹ on which our entire infrastructure is dependent, renders maintaining our current lifestyles into the future impossible.
2. At the same time, green technology, greatly underestimated and underfunded by the world’s governments and businesses, is not being developed quickly enough. To a certain extent, a retroactive approach to environmental challenges cannot bring success, no matter how advanced the technology may become. A comprehensive shift in development policies, including the introduction of a strong ethical component, is urgent and required.
3. Consequently, the previous century has witnessed both an unparalleled rise in the power of human beings, and also a rising interest in the challenges caused by the mishandling of that power. From Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* and the first Earth Day celebrations, through to the 1992 Rio Summit, there have been a number of efforts to address human-made environmental and social problems. These alarming signals, coming from different actors and on different scales, have mostly addressed a very limited set of challenges.
4. The Earth Charter offers an integrated approach to the multiple challenges threatening our common future. Efforts to develop policies and plans on a green economy will need to be articulated with an integrated approach and guided by an ethical framework composed of broadly shared values and principles.

¹ Excerpt from Principle 5 of the Earth Charter.

II Green economy and the Earth Charter

5. According to UNEP, the concept of green economy is identified as, “resulting in improved human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities.”² “It implies realizing growth and employment opportunities from less polluting and more resource efficient activities, including in energy, water, waste, buildings, agriculture and forests.”³ This approach requires a fundamental shift in thinking – instead of treating the natural environment as a storehouse for commodities, the green economy proposal affirms the inclusion and valuation of ecosystem services into the economy as a fundamental variable. The international community should consider if efforts should be focused on purely economic growth, or on humanity and the long-term well being of the community of life.

6. The call to change this unsustainable development paradigm lies at the heart of the Earth Charter, as highlighted in its principles. The four opening principles of the Earth Charter⁴ could help define the ultimate vision or purpose of a green economy. As an example, the first part of the Earth Charter articulates principles related to “*Respect and Care for the Community of Life.*” How would an economy look like if it takes this principle seriously in its policies and decision making processes? The Charter’s Principle 1a asserts that “all beings are interdependent,” while Principle 5a motivates us to “*adopt at all levels sustainable development plans and regulations that make environmental conservation and rehabilitation integral to all development initiatives.*”

7. The green economy proposal must place human well-being at the core of its activities, and recognize the impossibility of reaching such a goal without the active protection of Earth's ecosystems. The concept of the green economy could offer a wide range of solutions to the environmental challenges from an economic perspective if it is well conceived. Entire new *green sectors* of development will have to be introduced, while the current 'brown economy' should be redesigned in order to align with the integrated vision of sustainability. This includes, among other shifts, the move towards renewable energy, which should generate major changes in transportation systems, as well as the promotion of energy-efficient buildings and 'smart' cities.

8. Along these lines, a number of Earth Charter principles directly address the need for redesigning existing energy and city systems. Principle 7, for instance, articulates that humanity needs to, “*Adopt patterns of production, consumption and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights and community well-being,*” and it continues in more detail with principle 7b stating, “*Act with restraint and efficiency when using energy, and rely increasingly on renewable energy sources such as solar and wind.*”

² UNEP 2011. What is the "Green Economy"?

<http://www.unep.org/greeneconomy/AboutGEI/WhatisGEI/tabid/29784/Default.aspx>

³ UNEP 2011. Green Economy - Driving a Green Economy Through Public Finance and Fiscal Policy Reform. Working Paper, version 1.0.

http://hqweb.unep.org/greeneconomy/Portals/88/documents/ger/GER_Working_Paper_Public_Finance.pdf

⁴ Earth Charter Principle 1 – Respect Earth and life in all its diversity.

Earth Charter Principle 2 – Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion and love.

Earth Charter Principle 3 – Build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable and peaceful.

Earth Charter Principle 4 – Secure Earth’s bounty and beauty for present and future generations.

9. In practical terms, a real green economy will require new technology in different fields. This makes the notion of transfer of technology essential. This concern is articulated in a number of United Nations policies, and in the Earth Charter it reads as follows: “*Promote the development, adoption, and equitable transfer of environmentally sound technologies*”⁵. This can be reinforced with principle 2b of the Earth Charter, which says, “*Affirm that with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good,*” reaffirming the principle of “common but differentiated responsibility,” expressed in the Rio Principles.

10. Apart from a wide range of regulatory and information-based measures, the transition to a green economy requires a strong ethical framework that articulates shared values and principles essential in the outreach to societies, as well as in reaching a political consensus on the costs and benefits of such shift. This includes changing the current erroneous view of the economy as an end in itself, to instead considering it as a sphere of human activity that can help ensure the building of a sustainable, just, bountiful and peaceful world. A number of efforts are being undertaken to clarify this.

11. The Earth Charter is a document that offers the necessary scope and integrated approach to function as this type of ethical platform, declaring our need to “*join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace.*”⁶ It can also reinforce the concepts and understanding of the green economy, contributing to the wider acceptance and implementation of its policies and solutions.

III. Ethical framework and practical tools

12. An ethical framework offers a set of values and principles that should help decision makers in taking the right path towards the common good. This constant concern regarding what is right and wrong, or good and bad, in human decisions and conduct should be present when policies are being developed and implemented at all levels. Here lies the need for such ethical guidelines, to serve as an inspiration and guide to sustainability and the green economy policies, strategies and implementation.

13. The vision of a green economy proposes several steps to be implemented on a regulatory level. These include the integration of ecosystems in the business framework and plans (the internalization of environmental and social costs), payments for environmental services, and increased accountability and taxation linked to environmental pollution (an improved version of the polluter-pays principle).

14. These policy instruments and guidelines correspond well with the vision of the Earth Charter. As an example, Principle 7d emphasizes the need to: “*internalize the full environmental and social costs of goods and services in the selling price, and enable consumers to identify products*

⁵ Earth Charter Principle 7c

⁶ Earth Charter – Preamble.

that meet the highest social and environmental standards.” This notion and many others in the green economy can find inspiration in Earth Charter principles such as Principle 2a “Accept that with the right to own, manage, and use natural resources comes the duty to prevent environmental harm and to protect the rights of people”.

15. The Earth Charter, as a comprehensive framework, goes more into detail on the following supporting principles that are relevant to the policies and implementations related to green economy. Principle 6 highlights the importance to, *“Prevent harm as the best method of environmental protection and, when knowledge is limited, apply a precautionary approach.”*

Principle 6b, c and d states:

b. Place the burden of proof on those who argue that a proposed activity will not cause significant harm, and make the responsible parties liable for environmental harm.

c. Ensure that decision making addresses the cumulative, long-term, indirect, long distance, and global consequences of human activities.

d. Prevent pollution of any part of the environment and allow no build-up of radioactive, toxic, or other hazardous substances.

16. Supporting principle 7a offers basic guidelines for a green economy reinforcing the need to, *“Reduce, reuse, and recycle the materials used in production and consumption systems, and ensure that residual waste can be assimilated by ecological systems.”* This concept should also be considered when policies and strategies on the green economy are being developed.

17. The development community, in collaboration with other partners, should evaluate ecosystem services by a broad variety of indicators, as well as by the indicators of sustainability and ethics applied to decisions and practices made by public and private organizations. Ideally, these indicators would offer prompt feedback to the decision-makers using them, as well as to the general public. They could be based on the Earth Charter ethical framework,⁷ while at the same time containing practical recommendations from the green economy applicable to each sector and actor.

IV. Noticing ecosystems

18. An essential element of the green economy, as well as the first principle of the Earth Charter, is the 'noticing of ecosystems,' and the interdependence of all of Earth's life forms. This requires a fundamental shift in thinking: in economic terms, ecosystem services – the indirect and

⁷ Principle 7 - Adopt patterns of production, consumption and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights and community well-being.

Principle 10 – Ensure that economic activities and institutions at all levels promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner.

direct contributions of ecosystems to human well-being and a healthy economy - must be included into business models, possibly seen as the 'dividend' that society receives from natural capital.⁸

19. Nature and its life support systems are invaluable, considering that without the systems that exist within the soil, the air and the water, among many others, life could not exist, let alone any economic system. There is no possible monetary value that could express the essential importance of these ecosystem services. Nonetheless, considering the current production patterns, environmental services must be acknowledged. This means that they can, and should, be somehow measured and valued. On a deeper level, noticing the ecosystems, proposed as part of the green economy vision, represents the Earth Charter's prime goal of rediscovering humanity's dependency on nature.

20. Valuation of the most conspicuous ecosystem services should help to internalize the costs of nature into economic decision-making through the use of specially crafted indicators. The indicators and mechanisms formed as part of the green economy ought to meet this goal. The policies on green economy should be seen as an opportunity for making the natural environment really meaningful to economics and finance.

V. Addressing poverty – the social dimension

21. Although “the concept of green economy focuses primarily on the intersection between environment and economy,⁹” addressing many social dilemmas remains crucial in the successful transition to a sustainable future. Improving human well-being and social equity within the carrying capacity of the Earth, with a deep sense of respect and care for all its life systems, should be considered one of the basic tenets of the green economy efforts. It is therefore appropriate that the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development has set as a key theme “green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty alleviation,” to stress that poverty reduction ought to be a major goal for the development of green economy policies and strategies. The importance of extreme poverty eradication is also emphasized in Goal 1 of the UN Millennium Development Goals. This makes clear that the attempt of green economy policies should not be focused on economic growth alone.

22. The strong social dimension required in all decision-making processes is expressed by the Charter's second pillar on *Social and Economic Justice and the principles articulated in this section*. Principle 9 of the Earth Charter affirms the much-needed ethical commitment to “*eradicate poverty as an ethical, social and environmental imperative.*” The consequent sub-principles urge us to “*guarantee the right to potable water, clean air, food security, uncontaminated soil, shelter, and safe sanitation, allocating the national and international resources required.*”¹⁰ As the poorest of the world are at the same time the most affected by, and vulnerable to such challenges as climate change, food scarcity and economic crises, the ensuring of their development rights should take priority in the efforts to mainstream the notion of green economy. As indicated in the United

⁸ United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) 2009. *Global Green New Deal – Policy Brief*.

⁹ United Nations General Assembly - Objective and Themes of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development. Report of the Secretary-General. 7-8 March 2011.

¹⁰ Excerpt from Principle 9a

Nations Secretary General Report of March 2011, “poverty eradication and enhancement of the livelihoods of the most vulnerable deserve priority in measures promoting a green economy transition.”¹¹

23. The social dimension and tackling poverty is also stressed by the United Nations Secretary General March 2011 report on the UN Conference on Sustainable Development which recommends the following seven track approach under this theme: *a green stimulus package, increasing the eco-efficiency, greening of markets and public procurement, investment in green infrastructure, restoration and enhancement of natural capital, better accounting for externalities, and the eco-taxation reform.*¹² Each of these tracks finds an equivalent supporting principles in the Earth Charter. As an example, principle 10 suggests in general terms the importance to “*Ensure that economic activities and institutions at all levels promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner.*”

24. At the same time, it is essential for green economy not to be used nor seen as a new form of trade barriers, aimed at maintaining the current status quo of developed countries dominating the global geopolitical and economic situation. Rather, green economy efforts should follow the Earth Charter concept, also found in a number of international policies to *promote equitable distribution of wealth within nations and among nations*, empowering people around the world to contribute to the wellbeing of their families, communities, and their planet. As green economy is not an end in itself, but a path towards sustainable development, its policies should reflect all three pillars of sustainability.

VI. Education for sustainability

25. The existing common misconception asserts that there is an inevitable trade-off between economic development and environmental stewardship. This approach, deeply ingrained within the current unsustainable economic model, originates from insufficient and inadequate education on sustainability issues. While humanity, thanks to modern technology, is becoming more powerful in modeling our environments, our outlook on ecosystems remains as a continuation of the outdated, 18th century view of nature as something to be conquered, or at best selectively conserved, for the benefit of the society.

26. At the same time, any contribution to nature's conservation is seen by many as a loss of human progress and liberty, and a waste of business opportunity. In order to change this biased and wrong perception, knowledge of issues related to sustainable development must become a major part of inter-disciplinary education at all levels. Efforts such as these should also aim at tackling the failure of many who still do not see the interconnections between human activities and the natural and social environment.

¹¹ UN General Assembly 2011. Objectives and Themes of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development - Report of the Secretary-General. <http://www.uncsd2012.org/files/prepcom/SG-report-on-objective-and-themes-of-the-UNCSD.pdf>

¹² Idem 11

27. Within this context the United Nations declared the 2005 – 2014 Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD), with the overall goal “to integrate the values inherent in sustainable development into all aspects of learning to encourage changes in behavior that allow for a more sustainable and just society for all.” Following this, in October 2003, UNESCO adopted a resolution “*recognizing the Earth Charter as an important ethical framework for sustainable development.*” The resolution affirms Member States' intention to, “*utilize the Earth Charter as an educational instrument, particularly in the framework of the United Nations Decade for Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD).*”¹³ There is much potential to forge collaboration in this area.

28. The education effort should not only address youth, seen as the future policy-makers, but also other sectors of society: business leaders, government officials and others. The most prevailing misconceptions about the trade-offs between environmental protection and the progress of economic development have to be addressed, securing public commitment to a sustainability vision. This emphasis on continuous learning as a life-long process is expressed by Earth Charter principle 14.¹⁴

VII. Hopes for the future

29. As never before, humanity is facing a choice of its future. While the threat of politically-motivated conflicts between states still exists, the basis of such clashes will increasingly be shaped by the scarcity of resources and worsened by the decline of ecosystems pushed far beyond their carrying capacity. As the natural infrastructure fails, the global human infrastructure, dependent on it, will follow, unable to survive without the ecosystem services sustaining its existence.

30. In order to prevent this, a tremendous effort aimed at redefining most of human systems and behavior is needed. The effort to build a global sustainable community requires a worldwide inclusive cooperation and coordination of activities on a scale unparalleled in the history of humanity. The ethical framework articulated by the Earth Charter principles offers the necessary foundation and guide to the wide range of practical solutions for policies and practices offered by the green economy effort. Having green economy policies developed based on such a comprehensive ethical foundation is crucial in contributing to the transition to a sustainable way of life, and ultimately the preservation of humankind on Earth.

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¹³ Resolution Reference 32C/ Resolution 17

¹⁴ Principle 14 – Integrate into formal education and life-long learning the knowledge, values, and skills needed for a sustainable way of life.