

# 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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Patricia Abuhab

## Introduction

There is a great challenge for educators around the world: create pedagogical practices that facilitate the connection of human beings with the essence of their being and with the whole of which they are part. It is significant to note the scarcity of educational materials and activities that enable a significant and connective learning experience beyond the conventional pedagogical approaches that are extremely rational and almost always fragmented.

Although environmental education is globally established, the impact of human actions on the environment continues to increase significantly as humanity exceeds 50% of the regenerative capacity of ecosystems, according to the Living Planet Report of 2012 prepared by the WWF.

The United Nations' Decade for Education on Sustainable Development (2005-2014), seeks to integrate the principles and values expressed within the Earth Charter in all its aspects of instruction and learning, in order to face the complex social, cultural, and environmental challenges of the XXI century.

The Institute for Harmony on Earth (Instituto Harmonia na Terra – IHT) is a non-governmental organization based in Cotia, São Paulo, Brazil. For the past three years it has researched and developed educational processes for sustainability with primary focuses on Eco pedagogy and the Earth Charter. Throughout its work, it has created diverse educational programmes focused on schools and communities. Since 2001, the IHT has trained nearly 10,000 educators in various cities across Brazil, promoting courses of Eco pedagogy in which the Earth Charter is of fundamental importance.

We concluded that the creation of an educational game would be an excellent strategy to disseminate the content of the Earth Charter and stimulate practices for the actualization of its principles and values. Therefore, the creation of the Earth Charter Game arose from the necessity of developing educational strategies that provide spaces for exchange and contribute to a quality of education that aims for a motivating and lively experience with the Earth Charter.

The game was created by Patricia Abuhab and Guilherme Blauth, of the Institute for Harmony on Earth, as well as by Cláudio Casaccia and Gisela Sartori. It was launched in 2011 in both Portuguese and English. This initiative was led by the Institute for Harmony on Earth with the support of Earth Charter International.

The Earth Charter Game is an innovative and versatile tool for children, youth and adults, and promotes sustainable practices within formal and non-formal educational processes. It is unique in its conception and dynamics, capable of promoting a cooperative, systematic, and inclusive experience.

The game stimulates a joyful and engaging experience of the Earth Charter principles, also cooperation among participants, sharing of personal experiences, dialogue and practice of environmental actions. The entire content is inspired by the four pillars of the Earth Charter: respect and care for the community of life, ecological integrity, social, economic and democratic justice, non-violence and peace.

During the game, participants are encouraged to research, question, and seek relationships between concepts, thereby awakening themselves to a systematic knowledge where the mapping out of relationships is as important as or more important than the quantification of information. The game allows players to notice the various dimensions between local and global, beginning within their own homes and passing through Earth's ecosystems until reaching the center of the game, which is represented by Planet Earth. Ecological concepts such as energy dissipation, recycling, association, cycles, and symbiosis are all considered.



## Theoretical basis:

### *Eco pedagogy*

The Earth Charter and Eco pedagogy converge toward one unified vision of the world: the Earth as our common home, a single planet that we share with all other forms of life. In its epistemological development, Eco pedagogy appointed the Earth Charter as an ethical guide to reflect over which paths we should follow, what knowledge is actually significant in the current context, and what are the most stimulating forms of teaching within a virtuous learning circle.

### *Playfulness*

We must teach and learn based on an Eco pedagogical process that presupposes joy within learning, as the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire always emphasized. Processes of teaching and learning can and should be playful, creative, allowing free expression and inspiration for continuously learning how to enjoy education.

Sustainable education balances reason, emotion, and intuition. The use of games within education has been valued as an excellent pedagogical tool for the integral development of the human being, because through them we can reflect on sociological, philosophical, educational, psychological, and anthropological aspects of reality.

Researchers have found that through play and games, children gain knowledge that will mediate their actions in the world. The games that children participate in will influence their game in life. Depending on the type of game that is offered to children, youth, and adults, we'll be stimulating either competitive strategists or cooperative conciliators. The exercise of playing can incentivize libertarian and pacific behavior directed toward the dissolution of conflicts through good sense and mutual respect, or alternatively an authoritarian behavior that asserts itself through force, confrontation, and exclusion.

### *Cooperative Board Games*

Existing board games are, for the most part, competitive games in which a few win and the majority loses, such as the famous Monopoly. Basically, they stimulate negative values like violence, greed, and pride. In a certain way, contemporary games reflect the values of the predatory and consumerist society in which we live.

The majority of us have diverse experiences with competitive games. However, rarely do we have the chance to participate in cooperative games in a systematic manner. Cooperative board games are games that aim to awaken aspects of cooperation and solidarity within participants. They are an excellent resource to exercise teamwork and the passive solution of conflicts. They may also be used to reunite friends and family around a creative and vibrant enjoyment.



## Implementation

Experiences with the Earth Charter Game reveal that a profound desire to experience cooperation exists in children, youth, and adults. Even though the majority of people have never come in contact with cooperative games, this experience leads to a concrete desire to win collectively. The dynamics of the game require participants to care for one another, establish alliances, and meet collective challenges, as in a particular moment of the game when all players come together, symbolizing the concept of unity.

Intentionally, the game recreates situations similar to those that humanity actually faces, and provokes reflection on the fact that the actions necessary for a more sustainable life are only possible through collaboration between individuals, cultures, and nations.

The illustration on the board of the Earth Charter Game makes reference to the ecological and cultural diversity of Planet Earth, and on it there are paths that are travelled by players without a pre-defined direction. Just as in life, each person chooses her or his destiny and while following it performs diverse activities; innumerable relations and lessons can be realized simply through visualization.

From 2011 to 2014, we organized 85 workshops reaching 3,000 people in 110 Brazilian cities with an extremely diverse public, including teachers, school managers, environmental agents, children, youth, family, and professionals of diverse areas of expertise. The objective of the workshops is to be a pedagogical instrument to strengthen the knowledge, practices, and strategies for the facilitation and better understanding of the Earth Charter Game for different age groups and audiences.



Professionals of diverse fields – Santos/SP.  
Photo by: Fabiana Oliveira

In the workshops, participants learn how to deepen and simplify the experience of the principles and values expressed in the Earth Charter through practice. They learn about its drafting process, as well as the best educational strategies to use the game in the classroom and in other learning spaces. Since the game is an open and flexible tool, it is possible that future facilitators may create and adapt specific content, establishing a dynamic most appropriate to their objectives and audience.

Workshops were established in international conferences of the Earth Charter in Mexico and India, in LEAD (Leadership for Environment and Development) events, and in Canada. In 2011 many people of various ages and diverse areas of expertise participated in workshops on the game at the Open University for the Environment and Culture of Peace (UMAPAZ), São Paulo-SP, at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre - RS, at the "Semear" Programme established by Natura within the Ubuntu network. Many schools, NGOs, and universities' departments of education and environment received this workshop,

along with groups in the SESC system at parks, events, environmental education forums, at the Brazilian Federation of Bandeirantes, among others. We have also facilitated workshops in major socio-environmental events in Brazil during 2012, such as the World Educational Forum in Porto Alegre, the VII Brazilian Forum on Environmental Education in Salvador, and at the Peoples Summit at Rio+20.

In 2012 and 2013, the IHT partnered with the municipalities of Itu, Itatinga, and Sorocaba in São Paulo and Parobé in Rio Grande do Sul to introduce the adoption of the Earth Charter Game as an educational tool working toward sustainability in municipal schools. We also offered training courses for their teachers. In Vitoria, Espírito Santo, we partnered with the Municipal Environmental Department to reproduce the game in giant size as the main attraction at the 23rd Green Fair, as well as after the event in municipal parks and environmental educational centers of the city. The board was produced in a 144 square-meter version, in order to play it by walking around its 74 houses. Some rules were adapted and the players were the pieces and they remained in constant movement, which further highlighted the effectiveness of the game's focus on unity and interconnection.

*"We invited the Institute for Harmony on Earth to adapt the methodology of the Earth Charter Game and produce it in a large format. The game became very attractive, and teams filled it during the fair. Even the team of the Environmental Department, environmental teachers, and artists who together promoted the dynamic of the game, loved it and greatly enjoyed playing. The goal of playing together in a cooperative manner is very interesting, as either all win or all lose. It was the grand attraction of the Fair",* said Priscila Merçon, manager of Environmental Education in the Municipal Environmental Department in Vitoria.

Translated into English, the Earth Charter Game has already reached various countries, such as Costa Rica, Mexico, India, Bolivia, Argentina, Bulgaria, Singapore, England, Canada, United States, Peru, Portugal, and Denmark. In Holland, it was played by Rudd Lubbers, Alide Roerink, and Queen Beatrix, and in Canada, Severn Suzuki played the game in her community.



Queen Beatrix, Ruud Lubbers and Alide Roerink, playing the EC Game in Amsterdam. NCDO.

## Lessons Learned

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In all of the experiences with the game, there has been great motivation, enthusiasm, and involvement from participants. The game offers a collaborative process for learning, enabling an authentic experience, and internalization and knowledge of the Earth Charter.

One of the most efficient forms of teaching and learning is the sharing of experiences. Expressing one's own experiences reinforces the experience, along with strengthening liberty, confidence, and intimacy in the learner. In the Earth Charter Game, players are invited to share their personal experiences related to the principles of the Earth Charter.

One of the main objectives of the game is to collectively accomplish challenges. During the game, new challenges arise that should be accomplished individually and collectively by the participants. The players understand that collective action can be energizing, and players in a position of interdependence have a more enriching and motivating experience.

The game creates a flux of knowledge that flows from the information contained in the game to the experience of each participant. It goes beyond simple questions and answers, involves the subjectivity of knowledge, as well as the sensibility of personal experience.

Each of us have diverse abilities and potential to express what we feel and create in ways that are significant, which further encourage expression and creativity. The game stimulates the formation of the individual and the collective, offering relevant content for participants to express themselves. Furthermore, it awakens abilities previously unknown or dormant within players.

For the game to develop, cooperation between all participants is essential. The game was devised in order for each player to realize the interdependence between the group, himself and the environment. Since all participants are interdependent, the elimination of one causes all to lose. In this sense, cooperation is a fundamental value expressed during rounds, through the idea that all the players need each other. Knowing how to care, as Leonardo Boff emphasizes, is a principle of planetary ethics. The Earth Charter is the document that inspires this ethic by expressing it in its ideas and principles.

The Earth Charter Game promotes expression and creativity, especially at the end of each round, when players collectively create an artistic demonstration based on one of the four principles of the Earth Charter and introduce these to the group that did not participate in the game.

In this way, the game proposes transcending the board by amplifying socio-environmental perception, highlighting links with daily life, and reuniting people from the most diverse natures and ages around a significant experience within the planetary context, that promotes individual and collective transformations toward the new paradigm that we so urgently need.

## Testimonials

"I enjoyed the game as it is a very different gaming experience! I think that many people like to play games as an enjoyable form of social interaction with friends and family and so would welcome this game. In particular, I do think many people will welcome the opportunities the game provides to share intimate and personal thoughts about things that matter."

Brendan Mackey, Australian National University

"I felt very good and very different from when I participated in competitive games. In this game we have the possibility of cooperating to reach a goal and this is how it should be in real life. Why isolate ourselves if we are a single community (local, regional, global)? Furthermore, people learn a fun way of approaching the Earth Charter, such as values important for coexistence, and they share experiences of how they have applied them (sometimes without even knowing it). I believe that the game has enormous educational potential and we should think about translating it to many more languages and figure out how to implement it more in schools. Thanks for the great idea! "

Betty McDermott Dobles, Costa Rica

"I thank you for the opportunity to get to know the EC game, a very beautiful tool with images that in themselves enable many dialogues, exchange of information, and learning. As a fun instrument, it promotes the experience of the Earth Charter as a whole, its values and assumptions. Even with groups that were not familiar with the document, the game triggers curiosity and interest in the Charter."

Rosane Borba, Municipal Department of the Environment of Foz do Iguaçu – Paraná Brasil

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See the Game in Action: <http://vimeo.com/32614822>

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