

# 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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# “It Starts With One”:

## SGI’s ESD Initiatives Promoting the Earth Charter

Nobuyuki Asai

### Introduction

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Soka Gakkai International, or SGI, is an association of lay practitioners of Nichiren Buddhism with 12 million members around the world. All of our members live and work in society and strive to put Buddhist values into practice in their daily lives.

SGI works with various partners at local, national, and international levels. One partnership that has been ongoing for nearly 15 years is with the Earth Charter movement. The Earth Charter provides a universal expression of ethical principles to foster sustainable development, and its values are entirely consonant with our own.

In the late 1990s, the SGI-affiliated Boston Research Center (subsequently renamed the Ikeda Center for Peace, Learning, and Dialogue) held a series of consultations on the draft text, bringing together influential speakers to pull together Buddhist perspectives and women’s perspectives on the Earth Charter and analyze how human rights and environmental law relate to the Charter. The impactful phrase “when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more” was apparently proposed at one of the consultations held at the BRC. Consultations were also held throughout SGI-USA.

As the Earth Charter text was being finalized, there was concern that the Earth Charter was not attracting much attention in Asia. Earth Charter Commissioner Mikhail Gorbachev requested the help of SGI to raise awareness of the Charter and its principles through SGI’s existing grassroots network in Asia. One SGI staff was involved in a six-country tour of Asia to promote the Charter together with senior Earth Charter figures.

In addition, SGI President Daisaku Ikeda has consistently promoted the Earth Charter in his annual peace proposals, such as in 2002<sup>1</sup>, stating:

The Earth Charter is not limited in its concerns to environmental issues but contains important language related to social and economic justice, democracy, nonviolence and peace. In this sense, it is a comprehensive statement of the norms and values required for effective global governance. It may be considered a guideline for humanity in the twenty-first century.

### Implementation

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#### Using Education for Sustainable Development to promote the Earth Charter

The SGI has been promoting the Earth Charter Initiative since 1997 as a valuable document for sustainability and educational tool, focusing on the following:

- 1) The birth of the Earth Charter involved a painstaking process of incorporating diverse cultural, spiritual and ethnic perspectives of different peoples around the world.
- 2) The Earth Charter was not a document produced and handed down to the people from the elite but it was born of consultations with and contributions by many grassroots actors.
- 3) The Earth Charter embodies universal values and principles that people can embrace as we coexist in this global community.
- 4) SGI has been engaged in efforts to promote education for global citizenship<sup>2</sup>. The Earth Charter provides important insights for fostering future leaders with a global vision.

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1 <http://www.sgi.org/sgi-president/proposals/environmental-proposal.html>

2 SGI has launched a media project titled “Education for Global Citizenship.” Its website’s URL is <http://www.educationfor-globalcitizenship.net/>.

One hurdle we encountered as we introduced the Earth Charter to a wider audience was relaying the relevance of the Charter in the daily lives of ordinary people. People appreciated the values and goals of the Earth Charter but found it difficult to imagine how they could actually contribute to resolving looming global issues. We heard comments that they felt overwhelmed and helpless and were unsure of the kind of concrete actions they could take. Our challenge was to bridge this gap.

SGL President Daisaku Ikeda offered important insights in his proposal<sup>3</sup> ahead of WSSD (the World Summit on Sustainable Development) held in Johannesburg, South Africa in 2002 to help us overcome that hurdle. He said that education for sustainable development should be promoted with a formula of “Learn, Reflect, Empower” in mind. In other words, he stressed that the success of education for sustainable development hinged on whether or not we can empower each individual to take action. In his 2012 proposal<sup>4</sup>, he further elaborated on this point by emphasizing the importance of focusing our efforts on fostering each individual to take a leadership role. He urged, “The success of our efforts toward the year 2030 will depend on how deeply the movement will empower people, and beyond empowerment, to enable them to exercise leadership, takes root in communities around the world.” SGL’s educational initiatives are therefore directed at empowering individuals and enabling them to become leaders of action.

SGL’s activities are inspired by Buddhist principles. One principle which motivates our movement is the thinking that every human being is endowed with infinite potential and that each change begins with the inner transformation of a single individual. This Buddhist message of individual empowerment, that every person can make a difference, is something we have purposely integrated into our Earth Charter activities to help people understand how each individual can affect a change.

To communicate this message, it was vital to not only impart knowledge about the theories and principles but to inspire people to take action by sharing stories and case studies of those who have made a difference in making their communities more sustainable.

SGL’s strength lies in our wide grassroots network of citizens in 192 countries and regions around the world. Our organization also has vast experience in promoting public education through visual tools such as exhibitions and videos. We employed our past experiences to create effective learning resources that can be used both inside and outside the classrooms to introduce the values of the Earth Charter.

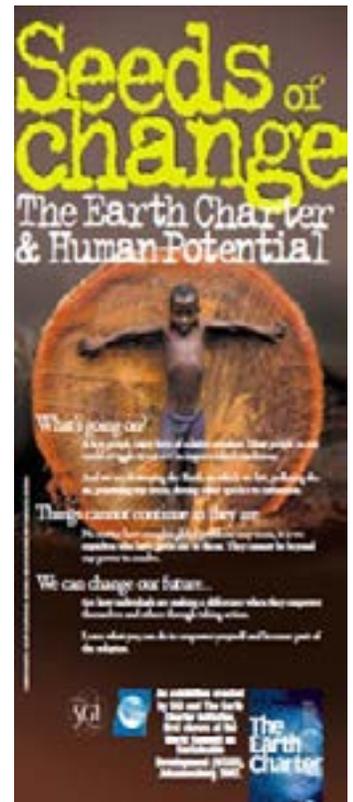
## Educational resources inspired by the Earth Charter

SGL has produced some educational tools based on the spirit of the Earth Charter. Showings have often been sponsored and organized by local SGL groups in cooperation with other NGOs, schools or community groups. Thus, they have contributed to the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UN DESD).

### 1) Film: “A Quiet Revolution”<sup>5</sup>

This prize-winning film, which was produced in 2002 by the Earth Council in cooperation with UNDP and UNEP and supported by SGL, introduces villagers in India restoring ancient traditions of rainwater conservation, citizens in Slovakia tackling chemical pollution and profiles the achievements of Wangari Maathai, who began the Green Belt Movement and initiated a programme through which women in Kenya have planted over 30 million trees while regaining control over their lives. The film urges individuals to take up the challenge of becoming active protagonists in the struggle to create a peaceful, sustainable world.

Narrated by Academy Award-winning actress Meryl Streep and featuring interviews with then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and other experts, the film’s primary message is that even one person’s action can make a dramatic difference.



3 <http://www.sgi.org/sgi-president/proposals/environmental-proposal.html>

4 <http://www.sgi.org/sgi-president/proposals/environment-2012.html>

5 It can be viewed from <http://www.sgi.org/resource-center/video-and-audio/educational-tools/a-quiet-revolution-full-length/>

As of September 2014, copies of the eight-language DVD version are available for free, for educational purposes.

## **2) Seeds of Change Exhibition<sup>6</sup>**

This is an exhibition created by SGI and the Earth Charter International and was first shown at WSSD. Sixteen colorful panels introduce sustainable development, the role of education and the Earth Charter as a set of values and principles for sustainable living. The exhibition has been shown in 17 countries and is available in eight language versions.

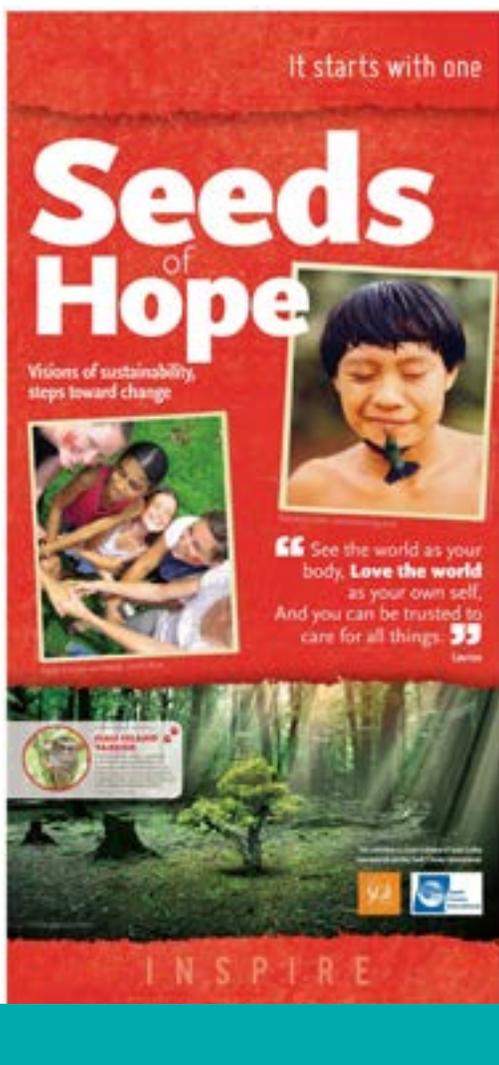
## **3) Seeds of Hope Exhibition<sup>7</sup>**

This is a successor to the “Seeds of Change” exhibition and was created in 2010 as a joint initiative of SGI and Earth Charter International. “Seeds of Hope” is currently available in eight language versions.

The key message is “It starts with one,” the same slogan that Earth Charter International chose for their “Earth Charter+10” campaign in 2010. The structure of the exhibition reflects the “Learn, Reflect, Empower” formula.

This exhibition stresses our interconnectedness with the rest of the community of life and the need to broaden our sphere of compassion and concern. It encourages viewers to overcome feelings of powerlessness and highlights the fact that a single individual can initiate positive change.

It also introduces the positive vision for sustainable living expressed in the Earth Charter and gives examples of eight individuals and groups who have successfully taken action for change, from Africa to the Arctic and Eastern Europe.



These eight panels contain relevant phrases of the Earth Charter itself, which include:

- Protect and restore the integrity of Earth’s ecological systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain life. (Earth Charter Principle 5)
- Honor and support the young people of our communities, enabling them to fulfill their essential role in creating sustainable societies. (Earth Charter Principle 12c)
- Promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence and peace. (Earth Charter Principle 16)

It has inspired many people across different generations, ethnicities and communities to take part in the movement.

### **Case studies of individuals making a difference utilizing our ESD resources**

We would like to introduce a few successful examples of individuals and one project that are making a difference in their own local communities using our resources.

#### **1) Taiwan**

SGI’s women’s group in Taiwan was extremely inspired by the message of our “Seeds of Hope” exhibition and approached local schools to show the panel display on campus. As a result, 60% of the schools in Taiwan showed our “Seeds of Hope” exhibition. Cheng Ying-Hui, a graduate student and a member of SGI in Taiwan, volunteered to work as a guide for the exhibition. She was deeply inspired by the theme of sustainable development running through the exhibition and determined to do something herself. She created an e-book combining illustrations and interactive games to introduce readers to the importance of recycling and environmental protection. This e-book won a prize in the “Creative e-book contest” organized by the Taiwan Ministry of Culture.

6 <http://www.sgi.org/resource-center/ngo-resources/education-for-sustainable-development/seeds-of-change.html>

7 <http://www.sgi.org/resource-center/ngo-resources/education-for-sustainable-development/seeds-of-hope.html>

## **2) New Zealand**

Changwe Chituta of Albany Senior High School saw the “Seeds of Hope” exhibition and decided to show the exhibition at her own school. She formed a committee of approximately ten students to actively discuss what they could do to contribute to education for sustainable development. The students created a panel that they added to the exhibition. They introduced school projects, which had a positive impact on the local community. Students felt a great sense of solidarity and accomplishment as their panels were later showcased at a forum where renowned peace activists gathered.

## **3) India**

A group of junior high school boys, barely 11 years old, from St. Columba School in New Delhi, decided to introduce their schoolmates to the “Seeds of Hope” exhibition. Ten boys volunteered to become guides to introduce the various panels on display to their schoolmates who came to see the exhibition. To emphasize the key message of the exhibition, the children created a slogan, “The Power of One”, which they pasted on noticeboards of the school. The guides were enthusiastic about doing more research and went to the Internet to gather more information that added value to their panel presentations. The school’s director commented that the exhibition was an “eye-opener” for students, helping them realize that children their age could make a difference. One student said, “In the past, I wondered what we children can really do. But if we have the attitude that we can bring a change in our habits for the good of the society, we will be able to change the world one day.”

## **4) Brazil**

In Brazil, SGI promotes extensive activities related to sustainability. One of them is the “Seeds of Change Project” in the municipality of Sao Paulo implemented by Brazil SGI (BSGI). It involves students, teachers, and members of the local community and includes the “Seeds of Change” exhibition, a Trail of Life Workshop, art for peace, an environmental education workshop and the planting of 800 tree seedlings and commemorative trees. The project has reached 50,000 people and trained some 1,500 environmental emissaries in the municipality of Sao Paulo. The project aims to introduce the concept of respect for life and environmental protection to some 140,000 citizens of Sao Paulo.



Harmony Press of Taiwan Soka Association (TSA), Ms. Cheng Ying-Hui on the left

BSGI’s Education Department created the Makiguchi Education Action programme to promote school garden projects and recycling activities in collaboration with public school teachers and students’ parents. This programme has been implemented in approximately 300 schools in several Brazilian cities.

In 1993, BSGI opened the Amazon Ecological Conservation Center<sup>8</sup> near Manaus. For over two decades, the Center has restored degraded forest areas with an emphasis on planting methods that enable human populations and forests to coexist. It also works with local indigenous communities to help them develop their own livelihoods in sustainable ways. The Center, which runs extensive environmental education programmes, has utilized the Earth Charter to inspire students in the local schools with a new awareness about sustainability and the importance of protecting the Amazon forests. This has resulted in better classroom attendance and school grades among participating students.

## **5) SGI members taking initiative through NGOs**

Inspired by the message of the Earth Charter, individual SGI members have taken initiative to form their own NGOs and actively promote education for sustainable development. Our organization is in communication with these groups to support their efforts.

8 Its educational activity is featured in a following footage. <http://www.sgi.org/resource-center/video-and-audio/educational-tools/nurturing-seeds-of-hope.html>

## Lessons learned

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Education for global citizenship is a topic being actively discussed by members of the international community. As issues facing our world become increasingly challenging and complex, there is a need to foster individuals who can transcend geographical borders and national and ethnic identities to view world issues as members of the global community. We need to train global citizens with abroad ethics and worldview who can promote better understanding and coexistence among groups driven by diverse ideologies and beliefs.

In this sense, the Earth Charter provides a universal framework of ethical values that can enable different peoples to work together to tackle issues affecting our planet. For example, the Earth Charter Preamble articulates, “We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.”

Our past experience with ESD has led us to believe it is critical to further promote the Earth Charter as an important tool for humanity’s sustainable future.

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