Since the Rio+5 Forum in 1997, the Dominican Republic enthusiasti-
cally became part of the Earth Charter project. This article is a recollection of
the challenges and rewards that this project has left us with. The most
important aspects are the impressions on our thinking, feelings, and daily
practices as professionals and citizens of a country with many great possibilities,
but also with many great social, economic and environmental problems.
We learned that we are unique beings in the universe, but at the same time, we
are an imperceptible speck in this universe. We learned that uniqueness-
dignity, liberty-independence are binomials that constitute our most
profound reality and they remind us that we are part of one single
community of life.

The Dominican Republic, like many
developing countries, faces grave
problems of social exclusion and
inequality, corruption scandals in public
administration, lack of transparency, as
well as a progressive deterioration of
our natural and environmental
resources. We perceived many of these
situations as external; we felt impotent
and lacked hope for the future. In this
context, the ethical proposal of the Earth
Charter was a light that illuminated a
new path, a new call to hope and shared
responsibility. It provided a reminder
that “together we can”; we can take the
reins and assume that we can always do
something rather than simply be
witnesses to the problems. That is the
reason we warmly welcomed this
Project and we took it as a challenge to
society. There was a great integration of
diverse sectors of the Dominican people
and with great enthusiasm students,
educators, mass media, and community
groups joined in.

In early 1998, the National Committee of
the Earth Charter was formed with
ample participation of institutions and
people from civil society, the
government, the private sector and
agencies of cooperation, journalists,
artists, educators, students, and others.
The working tool was the draft of the
Earth Charter. We developed a broad
awareness and socialization campaign
for this document through different
actions: press conferences; interviews
and articles in the major newspapers of
the country; consultations with various
professional groups; meetings in major

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Principle 10. Ensure that economic activities and institutions at all levels promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner.
regions of the country; and drawing, singing, and poetry contests in educational centers; and publication of the local Earth Charter Bulletin. All these activities were realized with our own funds managed by local members. The Committee meetings, which were held twice a month to supervise the program, kept the press informed and contributed to the success of the awareness and the consultation process.

In this process, questions such as the following filled our hearts and minds: “Is it possible to maintain the logic of accumulation, unlimited and lineal growth and, at the same time, avoid the breakdown of ecological systems? Is our paradigm of existential hegemony not antithetical to the conservation of the cosmic earth community? Would it not be irresponsible, and thus unethical, to continue in the same direction?”

We answered our own questions by affirming that we need profound changes in our values, institutions, and ways and styles of life. We are not all, neither are we the only ones. This means that besides us, there must be space left for others who also have rights and autonomy. We assert that we ourselves need an awareness and a sense of mutual belonging that will tie us to an Earth that is our first and last homeland. This process strengthened our commitment to make our country, the Dominican Republic, a country more respectful of its natural and cultural resources, a country more inclusive and democratic, a country more compassionately and humanely habitable.

If it is a fact that the divide between rich and poor has deepened in the country because neo-liberal economic policies are still predominant, it is not less true that, today, we are less naïve, more sensitive, and critical towards the reality of exclusion and impoverishment. We are more conscious of the interdependence between development, economy, environment, and natural resources. We recognize that the globalization that we are witnessing, which is dominated by inequitable economic relationships, is exacerbating deterioration of the lives of human beings and of nature. In response, we take a critical and proactive stance of repudiation.

Since August 2000, we have a General Law of Environmental and Natural Resources and a State Secretariat of Environmental and Natural Resources. Measures to evaluate the environmental impact of new projects, and the compliance of the ones already in place, have been established. In this context, one of the most significant actions was
the social movement “Save the Protected Areas,” which was generated to avoid the approval of a sectoral law for the Protected Areas System that would significantly hurt the ecosystems and extension of several National Parks.

The principles and values of the Earth Charter have contributed in forwarding the process of civil society engagement and public action. Today, environmental problems, as well as poverty and matters of social exclusion, occupy an important place in the mass media, mobilizing public opinion to address these issues. In the most remote communities in the country, groups of people organize to present proposals for action connected to their resources and local problems and also to reclaim their right to a dignified life.

The principles and values have also provided a vision of ongoing commitments and challenges. For example, real incorporation of environmental education as a cross-cutting theme in the Dominican educational system is required to address issues such as the public sphere, the rural-urban relationship, production models, and planetary interdependence. Collaborative research efforts between universities and local environmental groups need to be facilitated to strengthen the integration of local and academic knowledge. The citizenry requires access to more appropriate and timely information from the mass media and through the establishment of a National System of Environmental Information and Natural Resources, in order to make better informed decisions about environmental and natural resource issues. The Society-State-Civil Society relationship on environmental issues requires strengthening through the formation of organizations such as the National Council for the Environment and Natural Resources and through consultation with the citizenry for the implementation of mega-projects. Finally, the challenge remains to further the participation of groups such as ecological societies, non governmental organizations, educational centers, and municipalities in the process of elaboration and implementation of policies for management, such as co-management of protected areas, identification of economic incentives, and economic valuation of environmental services.

These challenges will be more rapidly addressed if we ensure that the activities and economic institutions at all levels “promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner,” as expressed in Principle 10 of the Earth Charter. Society in its totality will have to reorganize the economy using market decisions that clearly manifest actions related to environmental sustainability and to ensure the establishment of mechanisms of social equity.

In order to “promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner” (Principle 10), the market economy will have to appropriately evaluate the goods and services that Mother Earth conveniently provides us and should respect the limitations that nature demands in order to reach sustainable production. We should at least strive to reach what the economist Jeffrey Sachs accurately expresses: “The tragic irony of this moment is that the rich countries are so rich and the poor so poor that a few added tenths of one percent of GNP from the rich ones ramped up over the coming decades could do what was never before possible in human history: ensure that the basic needs of health and education are met for all impoverished children in this world” 1 (author’s emphasis).

The challenge according to Lester Brown, founder of Worldwatch Institute, is not only to alleviate poverty but also, when doing so, to create an economy that is compatible with the planet’s natural systems; an economy that can sustain progress. 2 This implies a reengineering of the food economy and the energy economy, moving away from the use of fossil fuels to the use of renewable energy and the efficient and sustainable use of the limited water resources that we still have available.

Finally, we believe that we can build an economy that “promote[s] human development in an equitable and sustainable manner” (Principle 10), if we manage to foster an economic growth that does not destroy our ecosystems and, in that way, we will be able to achieve one single community of life where the basic necessities of all people on the planet are provided for and a world of which we can feel worthy.

Notes