

Mohamed Sahnoun, Algeria. A thematic essay which speaks to Principle 16 on using the Earth Charter to resolve the root causes of violent conflict in Africa

Degradation of the Environment as the Cause of Violent Conflict



Mohamed Sahnoun has had a distinguished diplomatic career serving as Adviser to the President of Algeria on diplomatic affairs, Deputy Secretary-General of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), and Deputy Secretary-General of the League of Arab States in charge of the Arab-Africa dialogue. He has served as Algeria's Ambassador to the

United States, France, Germany, and Morocco, as well as to the United Nations (UN). Mr. Sahnoun is currently Secretary General Kofi Annan's Special Adviser in the Horn of Africa region. Previously, he served as Special Adviser to the Director General of the United Nations Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) for the Culture of Peace Programme, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on the Ethiopian/Eritrean conflict (1998-1999), Joint Representative of the UN and the OAU in the Great Lakes region (1997), Special Representative of the UN Secretary General to Somalia (1992). He was a member of the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission) in the 1980s, as well as Senior Adviser to the Secretary General of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992.

In Somalia there is a young boy. When he goes to the well to water his herd of sheep, he meets another Somali with his herd. They look at each other very suspiciously, and one says to the other, "Who are you?" And the other says, "I am the son of so-and-so, who is the son of so-and-so," and they go through the lineage of their fathers to determine if they are from the same clan. If they recognize that they are from the same great-grandfather, they shake hands and water the herds. But if they don't, then one will tell the other, "Why the hell are you coming here to water at this well? This well goes back to my grand-grandfather, why do you come here and take our water? This is our water, not yours." And so, they start fighting. This is a typical Somali example where the environment is a very important factor in violent conflict. The people there speak the same language, are of the same ethnic group, and are largely of the same religion. But in actuality, Somalis are divided into clans and sub-clans fighting each other over natural resources like

water and grazing land. Before, the fighting was with sticks; now it is with Kalashnikovs. That is the terrible thing about it. There is no difference there; they are the same people.

I am often a witness in my work of the linkage between the degradation of the environment and the spread of violent conflicts. We tend to underestimate the impact of degradation of the environment on human security everywhere. Repeated droughts, land erosion, desertification, and deforestation brought about by climate change and natural disasters compel large groups to move from one area to another, which, in turn, increases pressure on scarce resources, and provokes strong reaction from local populations. It is the issue of insecurity brought about by the prospect of exclusion from resources, or the perceived threat of starvation, that ignite most violent conflicts. This feeling of insecurity is often brought about by degradation of the environment.

It is my conviction that prevention, and prevention only, based on long-term common interests and solidarity, is the solution to the terrible tragedy brought about by violent conflicts across Africa. Prevention includes sustainable development. The Earth Charter will enable us to chart better the path to sustainable development. It calls us to "implement comprehensive strategies to prevent violent conflict and use collaborative problem solving to manage and resolve environmental conflicts and other disputes" (Subprinciple 16.b). The Earth Charter maps a path which minimizes the stress on our environment and encourages us to build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful (Principle 4).

I began my career as an international civil servant as Deputy Secretary General of the Organization of African Unity. I began in the early 1960s in Adidas Ababa, Ethiopia, dealing with the nascent conflicts of that time, such as border conflicts, guerrilla wars, and internal conflicts. From the beginning, I saw the association of environment and security. I was struck clearly by the fact that most often, if not all the time, crises were direct consequences of the degradation of the environment, such as repeated droughts, deforestation, and erosion. When we were tackling the problem of violent conflict, we knew that what we

were doing in resolving this conflict was really only a temporary thing. We were able to get the parties of the conflict into a temporary agreement, but the root causes of insecurity were not tackled.

This insecurity was brought about by the uncertainty of the future. People were not sure what would happen to them in the years to come, in the months to come, and, sometimes, in the days to come. People were not sure about the children – whether they could send them to school, whether they could nourish them, or whether they could feed them. Therefore, because of that anguish and that insecurity, there was a tendency to join a tribal group or a clan to seek refuge and to defend the interest in that clan system or within that tribal system—even if that kind of logic was leading to war, or was not really leading to resolving or giving an answer to their problems. There is no rationale for people who are in that situation; they only look for survival.

Very early on I joined Maurice F. Strong in lobbying for Africa to join the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, Sweden. The great thing which Maurice Strong did was to plead for the headquarters of the United Nations Environment Programme to be established in Nairobi, Kenya. It was the first time that an international organization had its headquarters in the developing world. Until then, the institutions were only in New York, Geneva, or Vienna. From Nairobi, people realized the conflicts are because there is environmental degradation.

The Earth Charter calls for the need to “eradicate poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative” (Principle 9). To eradicate poverty is to address the root cause of the problem of security – through granting to people “the right to potable water, clean air, food, security, uncontaminated soil, shelter, and safe sanitation” (Subprinciple 9.a). That is a very, very important element which the Charter puts right at the beginning of Part III, Social and Economic Justice. That’s one way of doing it, and, of course, Principle 3 is also a very, very essential call for the promotion of societies that are “just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful,” and, therefore, in a sense, tackle the root causes of conflict.

As United Nations Special Representative to the Secretary General on Somalia, and now as Special Advisor to the Horn of Africa, I do a lot of mediation, especially now on the Sudan peace process. A peace agreement was signed in January 2005. But this is the second agreement that was signed, as we had already signed an earlier agreement in 1972 when I was in Addis Ababa. It was signed by the North and South leaders of Sudan, but it only held for eleven years. In 1983, war started again because we did not address the root causes. And now, even after we have signed a new peace agreement, there is no real lobbying and no real interest on the part of the part of the international community, on the part of the big powers of the

developed world, to see to it that some of the root causes of the conflict are resolved. For example, very often the Horn of Africa is subject to erosion and drought. In the high parts of Ethiopia, the rainy seasons can be very cold and people need a heating system. All they can do is cut the trees. The Horn of Africa has lost over fifty percent of its green corridor in just the last half century. Can you imagine the terrible loss of green corridor because, of course, people need wood? They have no alternative. If we don’t attack the root causes of environmental degradation and insecurity, the peace agreement we just signed now in Sudan will be jeopardized in just a few years.

When I was dealing with the Great Lakes region of Africa, I said that if we want peace in the long-term, we need a mini-Marshall Plan—something as we did for Europe after the Second World War. In all the legacies of history, we forget that the Cold War was a terrible, terrible problem for the Third World and for developing countries in general. During the Cold War, the two big blocs fought each other through the people of the Third World. They did not encourage good governance and democracy – they were helping dictatorships. If the dictator was with you, that was the most important thing. “If you are with us, we don’t care what you do to your people. You are our friend, and, therefore, we support you even if you are a dictator.” Human rights and good governance were not at all a priority. It is only now, after the Cold War has ended, that there is really any kind of interest in human rights and good governance.

I believe that by upholding Earth Charter principles, such as “respect Earth and life in all its diversity” (Principle 1), “build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful” (Principle 3), and “secure Earth’s bounty and beauty for present and future generations” (Principle 4), we can respond. I believe the Earth Charter is a very adequate and comprehensive response to the call to resolve root causes of insecurity and violent conflict in Africa. It is my hope that the Charter is adopted and endorsed as widely as possible, so that it becomes like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In a sense, the Earth Charter is about Earth’s rights. One cannot go without the other. We must complete what we have achieved so far in governance and in human rights through the international endorsement of Earth’s rights. ●