

An Introduction to the Text of The Earth Charter

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Online Conference on Global Ethics, Sustainable Development and the Earth Charter

April 1999

I.

For the past ten years, men and women from all regions of the world have been collaborating in an effort to create an international Earth Charter. Thousands of individuals and hundreds of organizations have been involved.

The Earth Charter initiative reflects the conviction that a fundamental change in humanity's attitudes, values, and ways of living is necessary if we are to achieve social, economic, and ecological well-being in the twenty-first century. A new consensus regarding shared values and goals is emerging in the world today, and it is the objective of the Earth Charter to set forth an inspiring vision of these shared values, with special reference to environmental protection and sustainable development. The Earth Charter project should be seen as part of the international movement to develop a new global ethics, ensuring effective human cooperation in a world that is increasingly interdependent.

The idea for an Earth Charter was first proposed in the report entitled *Our Common Future*, issued in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development, also known as the Brundtland Commission. Efforts were made to draft an Earth Charter during the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, but the time was not right.

In 1994, Maurice Strong, who had served as the Secretary-General of the Earth Summit and Mikhail Gorbachev, the former President of the Soviet Union, came together to launch a new Earth Charter initiative. Jim MacNeill of Canada, the former Secretary-General of the Brundtland Commission, and Ruud Lubbers, the Prime Minister of The Netherlands, played an important role in facilitating the collaboration of Strong and Gorbachev. Ambassador Mohamed Sahnoun of Algeria became the first director of the project. The Earth Council in Costa Rica provided administrative support in collaboration with Green Cross International and other international organizations.

In preparation for the drafting of an Earth Charter, during the years 1995 and 1996, extensive research was conducted in the fields of international law, sustainable development, environmental ethics, and relevant religious traditions. In addition, the Earth Council and other organizations conducted Earth Charter consultations throughout the world.

Early in 1997, an Earth Charter Commission was formed to give oversight to the process. The Commission established an international Drafting Committee. Two years ago, in March 1997, a Benchmark Draft of the Earth Charter was issued by the Earth Charter Commission at the conclusion of the Rio+5 Forum held in Rio de Janeiro. The Benchmark Draft provided the basis for further ongoing international consultations on the Earth Charter during the years 1997 and 1998. A steady stream of comments and

recommendations were forwarded to the Drafting Committee, which established a process for systematically reviewing this material and incorporating new ideas into the text.

In January, 1999, a drafting meeting was held to begin finalizing a new draft of the Earth Charter, to be called Benchmark Draft II. This meeting included representatives from Australia, Brazil, Canada, Costa Rica, Germany, The Netherlands, The Philippines, Pakistan, Russia, and the United States, with contributing members in India and Kenya. Over the past three months, Benchmark Draft II has been finalized, and formally released by the Earth Charter Commission, and I would like to focus the rest of my remarks on the text of the document. Keep in mind that the year 1999 will be another year of international consultations focusing on Benchmark Draft II and that a final version of The Earth Charter will be approved by the Earth Charter Commission in March of the year 2000.

II.

By way of introduction to the text, I would like to make a few general comments about issues that have influenced the way in which the document has developed.

It is important to recognize that the Earth Charter is being drafted first and foremost as a people's treaty and that the drafting of the Charter has not been turned over to an intergovernmental negotiating process. The Earth Charter Commission made the decision to prepare the Earth Charter as a people's treaty for several reasons. First of all, most state governments and their representatives have failed to embrace fully the commitments negotiated at Rio in 1992 and articulated in Agenda 21. Consequently, interest in a new Earth Charter has been very limited. Secondly, the 1990s have seen a strengthening of civil society in many nations throughout the world and the growth of a new powerful international civil society network that includes many influential nongovernmental organizations. The emerging global civil society is in a position to exercise significant influence on governments and international corporations in the twenty-first century, and it can benefit from the kind of strong integrated ethical vision that is being developed in the Earth Charter.

The conception of the Earth Charter as a people's treaty explains why such extraordinary efforts have been made to expand the consultation process into all regions of the world and to extend it over a period of five years. As people become involved in the consultation process, they develop a sense of ownership of the Earth Charter, and the document is grounded in the concerns and aspirations of people everywhere.

Even though the Earth Charter is being designed first and foremost as a people's treaty, it will be taken to the United Nations in the year 2000 for endorsement by the UN General Assembly. It is hoped that this will be accomplished by 2002, which is the tenth anniversary of the Rio Earth Summit. If the Earth Charter is endorsed by the UN General Assembly, it will begin to have the significance of a soft law document, like the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Soft law documents are viewed as statements of

intentions and aspirations and not as binding agreements. However, in the history of international law, soft law tends to become hard law over time. In this regard, the Earth Charter is being drafted in coordination with a hard law treaty that is designed to provide an integrated legal framework for all environmental and sustainable development law. This hard law treaty is being prepared by The World Conservation Union, IUCN, and is referred to as the Draft International Covenant on Environment and Development.

III.

There are, of course, many different ways that one could draft the Earth Charter. Everyone agrees that the preamble and principles should be as clear and succinct as possible. However, there are very divergent views on just what this means.

Many people would prefer a very short Charter with no more than twelve very brief principles. Others strongly argue for a more substantial document like a UN declaration that includes guidelines for implementation. A very short document is more accessible to people and could even be memorized. The problem with a short document is with what gets left out. The major problems humanity faces are complex and interrelated and the ethical guidelines needed cannot in most cases be easily reduced to short phrases of a few words like "think globally, act locally." In addition, many groups who feel marginalized or somehow excluded or oppressed are particularly uncomfortable with the idea of a very short Earth Charter. They believe that those in positions of power will interpret the meaning of a short document as they will and there will be little if any opportunity for objection. These groups want the extra words and the supporting principles that qualify and clarify.

In an effort to address these different concerns regarding the nature and length of the Charter, a layered document has been designed with a Preamble, sixteen main principles with fifty-five supporting principles, and a conclusion, entitled "A New Beginning." The sixteen principles with their supporting principles have been divided into four parts, so that when you look at the structure of the Charter, it reads as follows:

Preamble

- I. General Principles
- II. Ecological Integrity
- III. A Just and Sustainable Economic Order
- IV. Democracy and Peace

A New Beginning

This structure should make clear that the Earth Charter is not just a document about the environment. It has been constructed with the understanding that humanity's environmental, economic, and social problems are interrelated and can only be effectively addressed with integrated global solutions. All the principles in the Earth

Charter are related to environmental issues, but they do not all deal exclusively with environmental issues.

A commentary on the principles is being prepared and will be available early in the year 2000. It will offer an explanation of each main principle and each supporting principle. Where relevant, it will also describe where and how each principle has been used in international law and important nongovernmental declarations and people's treaties.

IV.

I would like now to make some more specific comments about each part of the Earth Charter, beginning with the Preamble.

The first paragraph of the Preamble indicates that the Charter is a declaration of interdependence and responsibility. It also affirms the importance of the diversity that characterizes our interdependent world. Interdependence, diversity, and responsibility are three ideas that lie at the core of the Earth Charter vision.

It is also important to note the way in which this first paragraph of the Earth Charter identifies the major spheres of human ethical responsibility. The moral community is defined as including the relations among people, the relations of human beings to the greater community of life, and the relations of present and future generations. This inclusive moral vision is central to the message of the Earth Charter.

The second paragraph of the Preamble further develops the idea of interdependence and affirms that protection of Earth's vitality, diversity, and beauty is a sacred trust. The third paragraph defines the fundamental problems which the Earth Charter seeks to address. The fourth paragraph describes the critical ethical choice that confronts each and every person in the light of the severity of the social and ecological problems that the world faces.

The fifth and sixth paragraphs describe the creative opportunities that lie before all of us and the need for a sense of universal responsibility. The concept of universal responsibility involves human solidarity and kinship with all life. It is a way of talking about the meaning of what some call global citizenship. Universal responsibility requires an awareness of global interdependence and the identification of ourselves with the larger world of which we are a part.

The concluding paragraph recognizes the need for a shared ethical vision that will give content to the idea of universal responsibility, and it includes a pledge of commitment to the Earth Charter principles and to the task of building a global alliance in support of their fulfillment. In this concluding paragraph, it is also indicated that the Earth Charter principles are principles for "sustainable development." In other words, the Earth Charter principles are to be viewed as a definition of the meaning of sustainable development. There has been much debate about the meaning of this concept, and some people would like to abandon the term. The Earth Charter takes the position that the notion of

sustainable development is of critical importance and that it must be defined very broadly in a way that recognizes the interconnection between social, economic, and environmental issues.

V.

The Earth Charter principles begin with four General Principles. These four General Principles can be printed separately and used as a short version of the Earth Charter.

The first General Principle is "Respect Earth and all life." It is the foundation principle for the other three General Principles and for all the other principles in the Earth Charter. Protecting the vitality, diversity, and beauty of Earth and building just, sustainable, and peaceful communities begins with respect.

A good argument can be made that the most fundamental cause of the environmental problems that afflict the planet is the lack of respect for nature at large that pervades modern industrialized cultures. The problem is that the nonhuman world is commonly treated as merely an object or a thing to be used--a collection of resources to be exploited. It is viewed as having utilitarian value only. In order to address this problem, a profound attitudinal change is required. The first principle on "Respect Earth and all life" highlights and addresses this fundamental problem.

In addition, it is important to recognize that the principle of respect for life applies to relations with persons as well as to other life forms. The sense of ethical responsibility in the relations between people flows from an attitude of respect. In summary, nurturing and cultivating respect for oneself, other persons, other life forms, and ecological systems is our fundamental ethical challenge.

The second, third, and fourth General Principles deal with the three major spheres of relationship and responsibility. These three spheres involve the relations between human beings and the larger community of life, the relations between human beings and society, and the relations between present and future generations. The four General Principles that summarize the vision of the Earth Charter are:

1. Respect Earth and all life.
2. Care for the community of life in all its diversity.
3. Strive to build free, just, participatory, and sustainable communities.
4. Secure peace and Earth's abundance and beauty for present and future generations.

The twelve main principles that come after the General Principles seek to set forth the major values and goals that follow from affirmation of the General Principles. These twelve organizing principles deal with interrelated ecological, economic, and social issues. The four General Principles and the twelve main principles together with a short Preamble and conclusion can be used without the supporting principles as an abbreviated

version of the Earth Charter for those who want a one-page Charter. Such an abbreviated version has been prepared and should be available through this website.

Part II on "Ecological Integrity" contains three principles that deal with the protection and restoration of ecological systems and with the protection of animals and plants from cruelty and wanton destruction. Principle 7, which calls for compassion for all living beings, is especially important because international law only recognizes the moral standing of nonhuman species as distinct from individual living beings. The Earth Charter calls for respect and care for all individual living beings as well as species. However, the intention in this regard is not to oppose all consumption of nonhuman species, because such consumption has historically been necessary for human survival, but the Earth Charter does condemn the unsustainable and cruel use of nonhuman species.

Part III sets forth principles for creating a just and sustainable socioeconomic order. Principle 8 focuses on changing human patterns of consumption, production, and reproduction. Principle 9 calls for an economic system that promotes human development in an equitable and sustainable manner. The point here is that economic development should not be seen as an end in itself. The goal is human development in the fullest sense. Economic activities should serve the goal of full human development, and the opportunity for human development should be made available to all. Human development must also be pursued in a manner that is consistent with the flourishing of Earth's ecological systems.

Principle 10 recognizes the urgent need to eradicate poverty, which is both a cause and consequence of environmental degradation.

Principle 11 is a call for environmental justice. Principle 12 focuses on the role of knowledge and technology in building a sustainable world.

In Part IV, which is entitled "Democracy and Peace," there is an emphasis on the importance of inclusive participation in decision making, transparency and truthfulness in governance, gender equality, and universal education. The final principle calls for creation of a culture of peace and cooperation. The last supporting principle affirms that "peace is the wholeness created by harmonious and balanced relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part." The Earth Charter principles, then, begin with a call for respect, and conclude with a vision of a culture of peace, that includes ecological protection, sustainable living, justice, and participatory decision making.

The Conclusion to the Earth Charter is entitled "A New Beginning," and it is a call to action that starts with inner change--a change of heart and mind.

Over the past two years, the Earth Charter has been used in a variety of college and university courses that are concerned with global ethics, cross-cultural collaboration, environmental protection, and sustainable development. This on-line academic

conference in which we are involved is expanding the debate and discussion regarding these critically important topics. I wish to thank the Earth Council and the organizers of this conference. I look forward to the on-line dialogue with those of you involved in this conference. Also, remember that the consultation process is continuing and that the Drafting Committee will be most interested in your comments and recommendations.

Humanity is at a fateful crossroads. As we prepare to enter a new millennium, we have a unique opportunity to learn from our past and to create a better future for all. With a clear vision and sense of universal responsibility, each of us can make a difference.