

The Earth Charter: Personal Reflections on the Baha'i Role in its Development



7. February 2011 - 15:57 — Arthur Dahl

Papers presented at the 2nd International Conference of the Environment Forum,
6-8 November, 1998, De Poort, The Netherlands

[This paper is as presented at the Conference, and has not been subject to editorial review by the IEF]

The Earth Charter: Personal Reflections on the Baha'i Role in its Development

Peter Adriance
Falls Church, Virginia, USA

Introduction

What is the Earth Charter?

Post-Earth Summit - What Next?

The Benchmark Draft

And Now?

EARTH CHARTER STUDY MATERIALS - Peter Adriance and Sylvia Karlsson

The Earth Charter (working draft)

Introduction

Greetings to all who are attending the 2nd Annual Conference of the Environment Forum (either on-site or on-line). I am delighted to have the opportunity to engage with such a distinguished group on the topic of the Earth Charter. I'd like to thank Sylvia Karlsson for making the oral presentation of my remarks and for working with me in preparing the materials which you have all received.

My aim this morning is to convey to you a sense of the Earth Charter's history and the role that Baha'is have played in its development. Later we will have an opportunity to consult on the text of the latest draft and make recommendations.

I have been a participant in various deliberations on the Earth Charter now for some eight years, since I began working as NGO Liaison for the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States back in 1990. At that time, preparations were underway for the 1992 Earth Summit (also known as the UN Conference on Environment and Development or UNCED). Because of new arrangements for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) at this United Nations conference, the Earth Summit became an extraordinary opportunity for organizations to work together and to try to influence governments in the official process.

My first day on the job as NGO Liaison, I met with some 160 NGO representatives to discuss how we might cooperate to have an influence on the Summit. We formed a network which would facilitate our cooperative efforts, minimize duplication and effectively multiply our impact.

As it turned out, one of the chief expected products of the Summit was to be an "Earth Charter". I had no idea, really, what that meant. I was told that it was to be a "universal ethical framework for living sustainably on Earth", something akin to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but with an environmental focus.

New to the job, I had very little grounding in things environmental other than my own interest, as a citizen of the planet. But through discussions with Lawrence Arturo at the Baha'i International Community's (relatively new) Office of the Environment (formed in 1989), I learned that the Earth Charter was potentially one of the most fruitful areas of focus for Baha'is because of its concern with the values needed for living on Earth.

The Citizens Network, as the new NGO network came to be called, had its first administrative meeting a few days later and through being in the right place at the right time, I became its secretary and co-chair of the Working Group on Ethics, Environment and Development - whose charge was to organize U.S. NGO contributions for the Earth Charter! It was a golden opportunity to jump right in and in so doing to learn.

What is the Earth Charter?

I learned that the Earth Charter was first proposed by the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission) in 1987 in its final report, *Our Common Future*. The Commission had been set up as an independent body by the United Nations in 1983 "to examine the environment and development problems on the planet and to make realistic proposals to solve them, and to ensure that human progress will be sustained through development without bankrupting the resources of future generations." (No small order!) Many consider the Brundtland Commission's report to be one of the most important documents of that decade on the future of the world.

Among its other recommendations, the Commission called for the creation of "a new charter to guide state behaviour in the transition to sustainable development." It proposed that the charter be immediately drafted for adoption in 1988 and followed by the formulation of a convention which would be based on and extend its principles .

While the UN did not draft an Earth Charter for adoption in 1988 as the Commission had recommended, the Commission's report provided the impetus to make the Earth Charter an important part of the 1992 Earth Summit. Maurice Strong, a former Brundtland Commission member and the newly appointed Secretary-General of UNCED, in accordance with his mandate, suggested several main products of the Summit - among them - "an Earth Charter or Declaration of basic principles_to ensure the future viability and integrity of the Earth as a hospitable home for human and other forms of life."

Strong's recommendation was adopted by the General Assembly. The call for such a document caught the imagination of individuals and organizations around the world who began to discuss what it might include. While some governments also took an interest, others, including the U.S., didn't immediately know what to think about the Charter and thus left it alone for the time being, giving higher priority to a wide array of other more concrete and pragmatic Summit topics.

The Baha'i International Community was the first NGO to officially make a statement on the Earth Charter. It did so at the 2nd Preparatory Committee meeting of the Summit in early 1991 in Geneva. I vividly remember receiving a copy of the statement and being overjoyed at its clarity and focus. It was like a sudden breath of fresh air which invigorated the deliberations of our working group. We had been immersed in research and debate on the topic for a couple of months and all that we had done was look back at what had been written previously. Suddenly, here was a current statement that had been presented officially by an NGO, and it included practical suggestions and a far ranging vision for sustainability. Earth Charter became one of the most widely circulated Baha'i statements during the build-up to the Summit with over 100,000 printed in four languages. It was copied and distributed

among many interested parties and several of its ideas appeared later in various texts during the Summit preparations. I heard from a number of NGO colleagues that they felt it was the clearest set of proposals to-date on the Charter. It was a significant contribution.

I was a Baha'i representative at a couple of notable meetings on the Earth Charter in early 1991: One at Chautauqua, NY that included ecologists, economists and ecumenicists and another at Wainright House on Long Island, NY sponsored by the International Coalition on Religion and the Earth (ICRE). Discussions were deepening about the ethical dimensions of the Earth Charter and the role that religion had to play in identifying those values needed for a sustainable future. Robert White's "Spiritual Foundations for an Ecologically Sustainable Society" was another piece that we circulated widely among the Earth Charter crowd who seemed to have a great appreciation for it. I found it extremely helpful in developing my own thinking about Baha'i perspectives on the Earth Charter, and I contacted Robert back then to ask his help in reviewing some early work on a draft that our Working Group was developing.

During those days, the Bahá'í office was the site of many long meetings on the content of an Earth Charter. As co-chair of the Working Group it often fell to me to organize the meetings and facilitate our consultations. During the Earth Summit preparations, Baha'i work was guided by two broad mandates: 1) to bring Baha'i principles to bear on the thinking and deliberations; and 2) to help unify the efforts of NGOs (both among themselves and with governments).

With several 'head-strong' individuals in the Working Group, sometimes meetings got heated. One incident with the group tested all my peace-making powers as the clash of differing opinions erupted into a shouting match that almost destroyed our efforts. (It's embarrassing to think that such behavior would occur among mature adults - especially in the Baha'i offices.) By speaking in a very low voice but with great earnestness and fervent inner prayer, I was able to pull the group back together and restore unity. It was a reminder of the wisdom of the mandate to promote unity and an example of the important and often unique role Baha'is were called upon to play in the Earth Summit process.

After lengthy and arduous deliberations, the Working Group finally produced a draft Earth Charter for circulation among governments and NGOs at the 3rd Preparatory Committee meeting for the Earth Summit. Of course there were many Baha'i principles reflected in the draft. I had spent hours between meetings on the phone discussing the draft with Lawrence Arturo.

In a special meeting to present the completed draft to the U.S. Earth Summit delegation, I described the extensive consultative process the working group had undertaken in preparing the draft. (Despite

our one major eruption, there HAD been many fruitful consultations!) The head of the delegation was clearly impressed with the effort and its results. The meeting was the first time that the U.S. delegation had met on the topic of an Earth Charter, and the delegation head said that the presentation of the Citizens Network Draft Earth Charter had given him new cause for considering the importance of such a document. For the first time, the U.S. government was seriously considering its own contribution to the process, and it found the NGO work to be of great value.

Time prohibits me, but I could go on and on with stories about those early Earth Charter days. I met wonderful people and formed many friendships that continue today. Several subsequent versions of the Charter were drafted by NGOs and circulated to help advance the thinking on its proposed content and composition. Virtually all of the efforts dramatized the importance of consultative and unity-building skills in such a process.

Many of the concepts being put forth by the Baha'is were increasingly appreciated. During the fourth Preparatory Committee meeting for the Summit, NGO-drafted language for a preamble to the Earth Charter was adopted as a negotiating text by the governments. The move was unprecedented and reflected the new attitude of many governments toward NGOs in the UNCED process. As did previous drafts, that draft contained language which conveyed the principle of the oneness of humankind and other principles which Baha'is felt were essential for the Charter.

Despite much progress on the topic, at the fourth PrepComm the governments gave up trying to produce an Earth Charter and decided to produce instead what became the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. The Rio Declaration was a compromise document that captured the middle ground between the North's concern with cleaning up the environment and the South's concern with continuing its economic development.

In his closing statement to UNCED, Mr. Maurice Strong said of the Rio Declaration, "We have a profoundly important Declaration, but it must continue to evolve towards what many of us hope will be an Earth Charter that could be finally sanctioned on the 50th anniversary of the United Nations in 1995." Again, his hopes were not to be realized, but important impetus for the development of a Charter had begun with the Earth Summit.

Post-Earth Summit - What next?

Two years after the Summit, two NGOs, the new Earth Council (headed by Maurice Strong) and Green Cross International (headed by Mikhail Gorbachev), mounted a new campaign to enlist the people of

the world in the continued development of an Earth Charter. In May of 1995, they cosponsored a meeting at the Hague where 70 international NGOs from 30 countries (including a representative of the Baha'i International Community) met to discuss the elements of an Earth Charter and to initiate the next stage in the drafting process. Thus began a new two-year period of regional consultations on the Earth Charter, world-wide, among an extremely diverse field of participants.

As part of the ongoing effort, in October 1996, the Baha'i International Community wrote to Steven Rockefeller, chair of the drafting committee to reinforce three principles already put forth by Baha'is in the process. The points it made are worth mentioning here:

1. The oneness of humanity should be the single most important point of ethical reference in the Earth Charter. Although the principle had been clearly mentioned in the draft Earth Charter report of the Hague meeting in '95 it had not explicitly appeared in a later summary document. The letter stated, "The Baha'i International Community firmly believes that widespread recognition of this principle is central to the establishment of a sustainable pattern of development worldwide. For only upon a foundation of genuine unity, harmony and understanding among the diverse people and nations of the world can a sustainable, planetary society be built. Indeed, only as individuals come to see themselves as members of one human family sharing one common homeland, will they be able to commit themselves to the far-reaching changes, on the individual and collective levels, which an increasingly interdependent and rapidly changing world requires."

It suggested numerous ways the principle could be articulated in the Earth Charter through terms like world-, planetary- or global-citizens. Also, the concept of unity in diversity, might be used, the letter explained, "[It] is not only a fundamental principle governing the operations and processes of the earth's ecological systems, but it is also the foundational principle that must animate human and institutional relations if mankind is to live in peace, justice and prosperity and establish a global civilization which is in harmony with nature."

2. Material progress must reflect spiritual principles and priorities. The letter stated that the majority of the world's population found to be self-evident the idea that human nature has a spiritual dimension - that our fundamental identity is spiritual - and therefore the Earth Charter must appeal to that dimension. It is the source of qualities such as trustworthiness, humility, moderation, service, unity, justice, compassion, love and sacrifice - qualities essential to sustainable development.

3. Sustainable Development requires just and equitable communities. "To flourish such communities require a citizenry which understands that the interests of the individual and of the community are

inextricably linked." Also, the advancement of human rights requires full commitment to corresponding responsibilities. And when women are welcomed into full partnership with men in all fields of human endeavor, families, communities, nations and the entire human family will prosper and advance.

Such principles have been put forth consistently by Baha'i representatives during the many Earth Charter consultations and drafting sessions over the years.

The Benchmark Draft

In early 1997 an Earth Charter Commission composed of distinguished individuals from every continent was appointed to oversee a drafting process. In March of that year, at the Rio+5 Forum, in Rio de Janeiro, the Commission approved for release a "Benchmark Draft" Earth Charter developed through the extensive regional consultations and research of the previous two years. I was privileged to attend those meetings and participate in the drafting sessions as a representative of the Baha'i International Community. It was remarkable to see the progress that had been made in discussions on an Earth Charter. The amount of serious research done and the level of participation in the process had reached a new stage. Nonetheless, the drafting effort was still arduous with an increasing field of participants. The term "benchmark draft" signaled the achievement of a significant milestone while at the same time it acknowledged that the drafting process needed to continue.

Since the release of the Benchmark Draft with its preamble and 18 principles, renewed consultations on the document have taken place all over the world. Earth Charter National Committees have formed in more than 30 countries to advance the development of a "people's" Earth Charter. As a member of the U.S. National Committee I chair the Working Group of the Religious and Spiritual Sector focusing on outreach to stimulate involvement of the religious community. The Earth Council serves as the international secretariat for the effort and has developed the interactive web site (www.earthcharter.org) and related communications tools. Activities have aimed at involving a broad spectrum of civil society in discussion of the values needed for sustainable living on Earth. The intent is to garner popular support for the document and, at the same time, to encourage changes in behavior toward more sustainable ways of living on Earth.

And Now?

Honoring this latest stage in the Earth Charter's development, the Environment Forum conference organizers have set aside time for us today and tomorrow to study and comment on the latest **draft** of

the Earth Charter and to develop recommendations for the international drafting committee. Our [recommendations](#) will be fed into the next immediate step in the drafting process, the creation of Benchmark Draft II which will be released by the Earth Charter Commissioners in early '99.

That document will circulate even more widely than did Benchmark Draft I. Over the coming year, through the programs of dozens of Earth Charter National Committees and with the aid of web sites, electronic communications, and local, national and international consultations the Charter will undergo the next stage of its evolution. By 2000 a final draft is expected to emerge. It will be circulated widely for endorsement and discussed in many forums. The ultimate aim is to develop a "people's" Earth Charter which may be presented to the United Nations in 2001 for its consideration and adoption.

Whether the United Nations adopts the Earth Charter, writes its own, or ignores it altogether, the Earth Charter project will have done much to advance and unify people's thinking and challenge their behavior for living on Earth in the 21st century and beyond. The process of developing the Earth Charter is really about consultation and the independent investigation of reality in a search for truth. It will help to bring about a unified vision and understanding among people and perhaps will play a small part in facilitating the coming of the Lesser Peace. It has been a privilege to have participated as a Baha'i representative in much of the process. Hopefully, through our consultations this weekend, we will be able to make some constructive recommendations from a Baha'i perspective to further the next stage.



Last updated 10 April 1999

- [Baha'i](#)
- [Earth Charter](#)

© International Environment Forum 2015 | [Disclaimer](#)

