

Professor Brendan Mackey

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Comments on *A Reflection on the Earth Charter Project and its Mission in the Anthropocene*
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The Earth Charter – continued global dialogue

It was with great interest for me to read Professor Mackey's thoughtful and in-depth reflection on the Earth Charter and its missions. His optimism, courage, and faith in the ability of people to make good judgements and to promote justice to counter the bad should also be commended. "The Earth Charter was a child of the optimistic post-cold war era, posing a radical proposition to the world community: could international affairs be as strongly directed by ethical considerations as they are by narrowly defined national self-interest? By definition, ethics refers to considering what is right or wrong regarding our treatment of others." Maurice Strong, also known as environmental diplomat said: "The Earth Charter IS the real world. It is the foundation".

The Earth Charter was completed in 2000 and is still fully valid as a magnificent summary of the ethics. We need it even more in today's globalized world. Take China as an example. The country started opening up to the world under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping in the late seventies. Rapid economic development and four decades of consecutive growth have created a precedent in world economic history. This development helped 700 million Chinese lift out of poverty.

However, this amazing economic success has costed Chinese people a high price as they face major environmental, social and sustainability challenges. They have water shortage and pollution; no blue skies and people wear masks to deal with suffocating air pollution in cities. All this causes serious health problems. People often say "we don't require much but want to breathe clean air". Corruption among government officials was commonplace before the anti-corruption campaign started. This has further destroyed social harmony and worsened moral standards in Chinese society. The living standard for Chinese has been greatly improved, however their happiness level does not follow their improved life. In China, some say: We thought we were unhappy because we were poor. But now a lot of us aren't poor anymore and yet we're still unhappy. What is the problem with China?

In fact, China's economy has been benefited from globalization along with other emerging economies. Therefore, serious challenges China experiences are not only specific to this country but they are natural outcomes from currently prevailing ways of production and consumption in the world. To help with these challenges, China requires a change of people's mind and heart. China requires to change its unsustainable ways of living and production. China requires a new sense of global interdependence and universal

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responsibility. In this context, the Earth Charter provides a set of long-term and comprehensive principles to the problems that China is facing.

The Chinese government is conscious of public health and environmental degradation. They intensify efforts to reduce pollutions and fight against corruption. China signed the Paris Agreement and China's president Xi also appealed at the Davos World Economic Forum in 2017 that "All signatories should stick to it." He also made it clear "It is important to protect the environment while pursuing economic and social progress so as to achieve harmony between man and nature and between man and society. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development should be implemented to realize balanced development across the world." China has passed a number of laws for sustainability and detailed implementation measures. The government also reintroduces Chinese traditional ethics and values, such as fundamental teachings from Confucius, Taoism and Buddhism. Their current major challenge is how to put these into practice. They are also looking for added values from the Earth Charter.

"Perhaps the main problem with the Earth Charter is ... that people find it difficult to use and put into practice". Professor Mackey pointed bluntly the issue the Earth Charter encounters. He also mentioned that a fundamental reason is because "our dominant governance processes and institutions stumble..." For the same sake, a very thoughtful effort to add "the global ethical and spiritual consciousness" as a fourth pillar of sustainable development besides the social, economic and environmental (Rockefeller, 2010) is yet to be realized. "The Earth Charter therefore can still play a significant role in global governance and international relations (Mackey)".

To bring the ethical values and principles of the Earth Charter to the frontline of the transition to sustainability, Professor Mackey suggested "we consider an additional task over the coming years for the Earth Charter Initiative, namely, to review and update the Earth Charter in light of issues arising and our responses since the Earth Charter was launched in the year of 2000."

My suggested approach is to use a two-step approach: first is to undertake a review for the Earth Charter movement and the next is to decide what to do based on the outcomes of the review. The suggested aim of the review is to learn where the Earth Charter movement stands in today's world. Secondary goals of the review include further broadening the ownership and inclusiveness as the people's charter. The content of the review could include a better understanding of:

- 1) Where the Earth Charter stands in terms of achievement and of still fulfilling goals;
- 2) Which are major supporters, such as, individuals, communities, businesses, governments. This also includes what the Earth Charter represents for millennials who were too young for the draft process to include in the consultations;
- 3) How the Earth Charter contributes to building a sustainable, just and peaceful world, which should include good practices. Whether there are ways to make the Earth

Charter more relevant to the sustainability transition. In this regard, Professor Mackey suggested specific tasks “First, new principles are needed that address themes and terms that have crystallised and found a level of international support that was not apparent during the draft process. Second, a review is needed of recent declarations and treaties promulgated by the international community. A third task is to capture new concepts and terms that have become germane to the sustainability agenda.”; and

4) Suggestions for the Earth Charter movement for the next 10 or 20 years.

Among others, the review will be cost effective, mainly on line surveys and discussions, using existing publications and writings, but also can organize side events for conferences on United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, environmental conventions, and others. A report is expected to summarize review outcomes.

The Earth Charter requires us to “deepen and expand the global dialogue that generated the Earth Charter, for we have much to learn from the ongoing collaborative search for truth and wisdom.” Therefore, the review I suggest should be fully participatory and create opportunities to broadly disseminate the Earth Charter. The review should be again an invitation for different cultures, communities and countries in the world to reflect on and eventually enrich to the people’s ethical charter. The review should provide opportunities for young people to find their places in this cross generations document. Overall the review should be a milestone step in the Earth Charter’s continued global dialogue.

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