

Building Support for the Earth Charter Movement



Joan Anderson is originally from Scotland. She has worked since 1997 in the public information office of Soka Gakkai International (SGI), based in Tokyo, Japan. Her career to date has combined work as an editor, writer, and information specialist with experience in development. She first encountered the Earth Charter preparing a supplement on it for the *SGI Quarterly* magazine, and then in January 2000, she spent several weeks traveling around Asia to promote the Earth Charter in Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, The Philippines, Korea, and Japan. This total immersion made her a convert and since then she has often joined international meetings on the Earth Charter and Education for Sustainable Development as a representative of SGI.

Being part of the Earth Charter movement gives those of us in faith-based organizations that are working for social change an important sense of belonging to a wider community of concerns and values. It is a bridge and it builds bridges. It enables us to find and explore our common ground.

In order to examine the question of how to build support for the Earth Charter, I will draw on my experience of doing this within the Soka Gakkai International (SGI) network. SGI is an international lay Buddhist association with the broad aim of spreading peace, culture, and education based on the philosophy and ideals of Nichiren Buddhism. There are currently around twelve million members of SGI around the world, with the largest concentration still in Japan, where the organization began as an educational reform group with Buddhist underpinnings in 1930. The SGI Charter, adopted in 1994, articulates many of the same concerns as the Earth Charter, stating:

We recognize that at no other time in history has humankind experienced such an intense juxtaposition of war and peace, discrimination and equality, poverty and abundance...that humanity's egoism and intemperance have engendered global problems, including degradation

of the natural environment and widening economic chasms.... (Preamble, paragraph two).

Since 1997, when the SGI-affiliated Boston Research Center for the 21st Century began consultations on the Benchmark Draft of the Earth Charter, and the president of SGI, Daisaku Ikeda, first stressed the importance of the Earth Charter in his annual peace proposals, individual SGI members in many countries have been inspired by the vision articulated in the Charter. There are now two main e-networks linking these individuals. One links around seventy SGI members in thirty countries, and the other brings together key Earth Charter people within SGI-USA. Many of the latter group have been actively involved with helping to organize the local Earth Charter Community Summits which take place annually in October in a range of locations throughout the USA, and internationally, to inform, educate, and engage ordinary people, including youth, with the Earth Charter through music, the arts, and dialogue.

Two core principles of Buddhism generally make it easy for SGI members to relate to the Charter – the injunction to respect Earth and life in all its diversity and the recognition of the interdependency and interconnectedness of all life. The call for action as responsible global citizens also resonates with our members as it is in line with our belief that even a single individual's actions do make a difference.

In some cases almost the entire SGI organization in a particular country has become engaged, as in Canada and Taiwan; but, in most cases, it is at the individual and local level that the Charter has affected people most deeply. One SGI member who created a bilingual school in Beijing made the Earth Charter the ethical foundation for the school. Another is creating an Earth Charter-based learning center for sustainable development in rural France and another has worked within SGI-Italy to develop innovative youth forums and talk shows where young people meet in small groups and use the Charter as a tool for reflection on their real-life concerns.

This widely-scattered response is partly indicative of the autonomous nature of respective SGI organizations around the

world. But maybe there are other reasons why the Earth Charter has not yet been taken up by very many SGI organizations as a major theme. As one SGI member who has been using the Charter in her work as an educator said, "There is no simple way to describe it and that is a problem." Another commented, "It's rare that I begin a conversation about planetary ethics and values without a listener's eyes glazing over at some early point in the exchange." And people's initial impressions – that the Charter is just about environmental protection – may also often not be accurate.

After all, the concept of sustainability is barely understood and not skillfully articulated by many, including those who promote it. This is one reason why the Earth Charter resources produced by SGI, such as the "A Quiet Revolution" film and the "Seeds of Change: The Earth Charter and Human Potential" exhibition are aimed at communicating with a wide non-specialist audience and connecting with viewers as individual human beings.

There seems to be a particular kind of person who is typically captivated by the Charter – someone who is concerned about many social issues and aware of the linkages among them, who immediately responds to its holistic vision. It could be said that we are merely "preaching to the choir;" however, based on our experience, the more people are exposed to the principles of the Earth Charter, the more empowered they become.

There are other challenges in the process of spreading the word about the Earth Charter. There may be the suspicion that it was created by one particular group with a particular agenda. It is ideal for Earth Charter events and programs to be jointly conceived and organized by more than one organization and, particularly in the case of religious groups, through interfaith activities.

During the process of learning about the Charter, I would identify several stages. First, comes knowledge and awareness but with no sense of involvement or ownership. Then, either through discussion or a more right-brain activity, such as viewing a cultural performance or artwork inspired by the Charter, there is a moment of conversion where the person concerned begins to feel passionate about its vision and that she or he has the right to be an active proponent of it and its values.

Small dialogue groups or one-to-one discussions are frequently mentioned as the key, as is speaking of the Earth Charter in terms of how it has impacted one's own life. One SGI Earth Charter enthusiast complains, "Westerners take a very theoretical approach to the Charter, as something to get others to do. It is difficult for them to apply the principles to themselves or others personally." She has held "Earth Charter Dinner Dialogues" and says, "I notice that the dialogues develop and grow into other things. So starting very simply, but regularly, is the key."

As SGI President Ikeda said in his message for the Hague launch of the Charter in 2000:

The process by which the Earth Charter has been developed is one of dialogue. Truths arrived at through discussion and dialogue are warm, living truths. Nothing sparks a more profound and lasting transformation in the human heart than such interactions....

My own experience has included heartwarming conversations with youth in Singapore, for whom the Earth Charter caused reflection on their materialistic outlooks. Another experience was listening to emotionally moving stories at a conference in Australia in which individuals shared their personal histories of encountering the Charter and how it had rekindled their hope.

I have found it useful to consider a fifty-year time span over which awareness and practical implementation of the Charter will grow, mainly driven by creative, spontaneous, bottom-up initiatives, which can be amplified by skillful use of the media. Hopefully these will increasingly be matched by recognition and endorsement by professional associations, cities, and even governments. As another SGI member comments, "Bringing the Earth Charter to fruition is like running a marathon instead of a 100-meter dash."

We might ask how important it is that people actually know about the Earth Charter when they may be already living and acting in a way that puts its principles into action. I would argue that it does have an important function as a catalyst in giving people who share common concerns a loose sense of unity. But in today's pluralistic world, it will never be the one vision of a sustainable world, and Earth Charter advocates need to also consider how to join forces with other broad value-based movements.

There is a need to amplify and communicate more widely the message of the Earth Charter and its success stories – something which the "Seeds of Change" exhibition attempts to do. Faith-based groups such as SGI have strong grassroots networks and a wide reach into local communities which offers great future opportunity. Further, with a particular focus on youth and use of the Earth Charter in education during the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, the potential is vast. Let us continue to scatter the seeds of Earth Charter awareness widely, making sure that they land in places where inspired individuals can continue the human connection that enables its values to thrive in people's daily lives. ●