

A.T. Ariyaratne, Sri Lanka. A thematic essay which speaks to Principle 9 on recognizing the ignored, protecting the vulnerable, and serving those who suffer

Awakening and the Earth Charter in Sri Lanka



A.T. Ariyaratne is the founder and President of the Sarvodaya Movement of Sri Lanka. For half a century the Movement he founded has been advocating a Ten Basic Needs Satisfaction approach to sustainable development—Development from Below. The concept and practice of community self-governance and has been in the forefront of the environmental movement in his country. Dr. Ariyaratne has won many international awards including the Ramon Magsaysay Award, the King Boudouin Award for International Development, and the Gandhi Peace Prize. He is an Earth Charter Commissioner.

Each of us is called to utilize our brief passage on Earth wisely, with awareness of the footprints we leave behind in our journey through life, as well as of the interdependence of causes and effects. Beginning as a teacher and now with the perspective of fifty years with the Sarvodaya Movement, I have come to understand the principles of the Earth Charter, not as beliefs, but as multifaceted gems of wisdom.

Like any lesson, these principles must be shared in practice for them to have the impact for which they were intended. Indeed it is that word *sharing* that has served as the core of the value system which has animated the Sarvodaya Movement. It is the motivating force in thousands of villages – the interconnecting web of understanding that shapes what village people have known for generations.

Today, Sarvodaya is Sri Lanka's largest and most broadly embedded people's organization, with a network covering fifteen thousand villages, thirty four district offices, and over one hundred thousand youth. The aim of the movement is to use shared work, voluntary giving, and sharing of resources to achieve the personal and social awakening of everyone – from the individual, to the village, and continuing up to the international level. "Awakening" means developing human potential, and is a comprehensive process taking place on the spiritual, moral, cultural, social, economic, and political levels. Sarvodaya

strives for a model of society in which there is neither poverty nor excessive affluence. The movement's holistic approach is based on the Buddhist principles of goodness, sympathy, and tranquility; and on the Gandhian values of truthfulness, nonviolence, and self-sacrifice.

Particularly now that the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 26, 2004, has brought worldwide attention to this part of the globe, the application of Earth Charter principles has become urgently imperative. Nature has given us notice, and we can ignore her call to awaken only at our own peril. The humanitarian, political, and economic response has been heartening. But, it also calls for circumspection. Not all the projects generously offered take into account the long-term interests of the affected people and of the living environment. This cautionary note is sounded on the basis of Sarvodaya's experience with sustainable development. Let me give some examples to illustrate how principles of the Earth Charter have been actualised by Sarvodaya, and let me also highlight some of the challenges that face us in the future.

Sarvodaya has long been involved in financing the use of solar power. Our micro-credit scheme and village banking systems undertaken by the Sarvodaya Economic Enterprise Services (SEEDS) are now being called upon more than ever before to construct thousands of homes and set up small businesses. These projects and enterprises could take the conventional course and build unsustainable communities on behalf of tsunami survivors. But, together with its organisational partners, Sarvodaya has consciously opted to follow a different path. Permaculture instructors from the Global Ecovillage Network have assisted us to develop model approaches to housing. As of this writing, more than a thousand homes will utilize solar power and their numbers will increase.

Sarvodaya's Living and Learning Centre in Thanamalwila in the south of Sri Lanka has attracted students from throughout South Asia and the world to its courses on sustainability. After five years, the Sarvodaya Saliyapura Organic Demonstration Farm near Anuradhapura in the North Central Province and our bio-diversity conservation programmes reach out to farmers,

gardeners, agro-foresters, and students who attend training in village and district centres. Sarvodaya produces and distributes effective microorganisms to reduce reliance on pesticides. We have supported the generation of dendro power and other forms of biomass utilisation, composting and recycling, and youth environmentalist programmes to clean up our lakes and waterways.

If one spends more than one hour in any urban centre of our beautiful country, the negative effects of urbanisation and commercialisation become strikingly evident. Air pollution and reliance on non-renewable energy restrict our very ability to breathe. The transportation infrastructure required to move vast quantities of unnecessary and artificial consumer goods from port to village is woefully inadequate. From outer space one can see this island, once covered by rain forests and teeming with wildlife, as a crowded patchwork of roadways choked by a gridlock of people leaving home and family to manufacture clothing and goods for consumption at retail prices far in excess of what those workers themselves can afford. The “Made in Sri Lanka” label on your garments may carry with it a short-term benefit but a long-term curse.

Though one can be paralysed by despair at such trends, Sarvodaya and the Earth Charter are rooted in a distinctly different way of thinking and acting. Instead of giving in to the intense violence of civil war, Sarvodaya has seen that mass meditation involving more than two million ordinary people has, at critical moments, established an overwhelming ambience and psychosocial disposition for peace. Visitors to Sri Lanka’s most notorious prisons are now finding that meditation programmes sponsored by Sarvodaya have loosened the shackles of retribution. Jailed hardcore criminals have become remarkably less violent. Sarvodaya programmes in gender relations and children’s and women’s rights focus on “the spirit of the law” as well as the questionable workings of a legal system that, in general, provides little succour to the poor.

Discussing details of projects, however, does not adequately communicate the fundamental principles of the Earth Charter to masses of Sri Lankans and their counterparts across the globe who endure unspeakable suffering. Just as economic poverty or isolation rob villagers of even a modicum of happiness in their struggle to stay alive from one day to another, a comparable spiritual poverty and sense of alienation render hollow the material comforts of post-industrial societies. That is why the awakening of all which Sarvodaya and the Earth Charter envision is of a more fundamental nature.

Even the best initiatives of governments, and of partisan politics, will not produce desired results if the individual citizen does not understand them or willingly participate in them. We will all benefit if we can help ordinary people to experience the joy and accomplishment of self-governance through participation. Nations can gather deliberate and make declarations. We

can sign ceasefire agreements and stop killing each other in one pocket of violence. The separateness of such efforts will not allow us to nurture the very wholeness that we seem to have neglected.

If we are wise and dedicated, we can turn good intentions to noble acts whose cumulative momentum may well allow all of us a longer and more joyous sojourn on this Earth. We can actualize the hope that all beings be well and happy, even in the briefest moments of that journey. ●