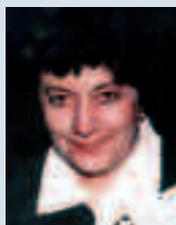


Karine Danielyan, Armenia. [A project descriptive essay which speaks to Principle 13 on strengthening democratic institutions at all levels](#)

Five Years with the Earth Charter in Armenia: The Development of Democratic Institutions



Karine Danielyan was a candidate of biological sciences, and is a Doctor of Geographic Sciences, and an academician at the International Academy of

Ecology. She is Professor of Yerevan State University. Dr. Danielyan is Chairperson of the Association for Sustainable Human Development of the United Nations Environment Program National Committee of Armenia, and of the Earth Charter National Committee of Armenia. She has also served as Minister of Environment in Armenia.

*Dedicated to the memory of
Maximo Kalaw*

In Armenia, the Earth Charter is perceived as a document closely connected with people because Armenian citizens actively participated in discussions of the very first drafts of the document, argued, presented their recommendations, and saw their ideas incorporated in the new versions of the Earth Charter. Consequently, those students who studied the Earth Charter at Yerevan State University deliver lectures on the Earth Charter today. For more than five years, the youth section of the Association for Sustainable Human Development has worked with schools and organizes summer eco-camps; and the Earth Charter always has its special place at all lectures, discussions, and

contests of compositions, paintings, and posters.

The Association published the Earth Charter four times, including the brochures that, along with the text of the Charter, contained articles and essays about it written by famous political and public figures and Armenian reporters. The brochures also contained Armenian translation of articles by two of the Co-chairs of the Earth Charter Steering Committee, Professor Steven C. Rockefeller and Mrs. Kamla Chowdhry. For the past eight years, the Association has conducted numerous seminars, conferences, and roundtables dedicated to sustainable development issues at local, national, regional, and international levels, and almost always the theme of the Earth Charter was built into the agenda.

The version of the Earth Charter for children developed by the Association was republished thrice; the last booklet was published in the form of the message of the Association. In addition, children have performed a play about the Earth Charter.

At the end of 2004, we prepared an Earth Charter poster aimed at demonstrating the close connection of the document with the people. Indeed, we see the Earth Charter process as a unique “bottom-up” experience: from discussions at local communities, local and national NGOs, University departments up to the Johannesburg Summit; then, witnessing its adoption by United

Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the World Conservation Union (IUCN); and, finally, watching its inclusion into the plan of implementation for the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development as one of the key tools of such education.

Principle 13 reads, “Strengthen democratic institutions at all levels, and provide transparency and accountability in governance, inclusive participation in decision making, and access to justice.” The period of disseminating this ideology of the Earth Charter in Newly Independent States coincided with the transition period of the early 1990s when our countries became independent from the Soviet Union and democratization processes establishing human rights principles raised the awareness and participation of civil society. These processes have unfolded with great difficulty.

Among the documents influenced by the ideas and principles of the Charter are “Sustainable Development Concept of the Republic of Armenia, 2002”; “Main Principles and Approaches of the Sustainable Development Concept for South Caucasus, 2002”; as well as “Guidelines on Local Agendas 21 for Cities of Countries in Transition,” including the example of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, 2003. All three documents, which are significantly focused on formation and role of the civil society and public participation in decision-making, are broadly dissemi-



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nated in Armenia and in the region of South Caucasus in general, and are actively used.

Provisions of Principle 13 of the Earth Charter are accordant with the pillars of the Aarhus Convention. In 2003-2004, a European Union Program dedicated to implementation of the aforementioned Convention was conducted in six post-Soviet countries, including Armenia. The Association actively participated in the Program; and during the trainings conducted in the framework of the Program, we distributed the Charter and allotted time to its presentation. Finally, in October 2004, the Association organized a roundtable in the Parliament on issues related to sustainable development. Members and experts of Parliament received brochures with the text of the Charter and posters.

Modest but tangible results have already manifested with the Razdan city local government, the second city in Armenia, where we conducted a roundtable on the Earth Charter in 2000. The city government has become our good partner in all subsequent events and programs in the sphere of sustainable development. A course of lectures on

Sustainable Development has been delivered over the last four years at Ruzdan University (based on textbooks published by the Association and Yerevan State University). In the framework of the course, students study the Earth Charter as well. It is appropriate that Razdan city is the only city in Armenia, and the first one in South Caucasus, to officially join the European Union of Sustainable Cities, as well as the International Council of Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI).

Currently, Armenia is preparing a new version of a constitution for the country. There have been discussions within the commissions involving the civil society representatives. There are ongoing the discussions in the Parliament. After Parliamentary approval of the project, it will be put to public referendum at the end of 2005. Owing to active lobbying by the non governmental organizations sector, we managed to include, in the constitution draft, provisions on sustainable development and articles that reflect environmental rights of citizens, including their right to access environmental information. These articles are absent in the current Constitution; it contains only articles on

general rights on information and freedom of speech. This represents a major shift in the content of our constitution, which will be reflected at many other levels. It was a more participatory process than ever before, though not yet a perfect one.

For some years, we have used the Earth Charter as an instrument to raise awareness among our youth to help them understand the challenges we face. As a consequence, their generation thinks more freely, and they are more ready to endorse democratic values, in general, and environmental democracy, in particular.

At the same time, the chaos of the transitional period poses significant hurdles toward establishing sustainable development principles. Socio-economic problems, drastic income polarization of the population, and absolute power of the newly-emerged oligarchs do not promote development of democratic institutions at all, and often democratization processes and formation of a valid civil society are merely imitative. Economists explain this phenomenon with the specificity of the transitional period related to initial accumulation of capital. Thus, I would like to hope that this complicated and difficult period will soon be over and we will manage to activate democratic reforms and ensure a real transition to sustainable development. It is certain that education will play a key role in this challenging process of building an enduring democratic post-Soviet Union Armenia.

In 1991 when Armenia declared its independence and sovereign state, we found ourselves in a situation which we had to start from the scratch but with an advantage of highly educated citizens. Independent Armenia entered a transition period in 1992, which gradually brought about significant changes in the country in economic, social, political, institutional, and psychological realms. With the aim of developing an open and democratic society and free market economy,

Armenia undertook important political, economic, and institutional reforms. The establishment of democratic institutions, the adoption of a legal framework and constitutional guarantees for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the creation of a modern public administration were prerequisites for breaking from the old system and building a new, democratic society.

However, the pace of democratisation is rather slow and in many instances Armenia still falls short of internationally accepted democratic principles. The civil society of Armenia has a long way to go to become a “hefty watchdog” controlling the distribution of powers in the country. On the other hand, the successive governments of Independent Armenia have failed so far to identify the country’s priorities and development strategies in all spheres.

In 1999, in the framework of the project “Lobbying the forming of sustainable development policy of Armenia,” we issued a two-volume edition of “Towards Sustainable Development of Armenia,” in which the draft Earth Charter was published for the first time in Armenian. After that the Association participated in the online conference on the Earth Charter consultation and held national consultations on the Earth Charter, among many others activities. We have conducted a number of seminars in Yerevan and in various regions in our country. I have included the Earth Charter in my university lectures on sustainable development.

I share a quite interesting reaction of one of my students: “It will be dangerous to our nation to take [the] Earth Charter in faith and put it in action at once. As we have bitter experience: we were the first nation to adopt Christianity as an official religion and two thousand years we have paid for it – for ages we have been slaughtered with requirements to deny the Christian faith. We were longing for the world to recognize the genocide of 1915; we never heard from our butchers, nor from

their offspring: “we were wrong, excuse me.” We did not get even moral satisfaction. How can it be possible having such heavy and aggrieved heart to feel ourselves as an equal part of the united world community? And yet, this is not only our problem – it is a moral problem of all humanity. The same idea is expressed by famous film director Taron Kaplanyan: “We have still a serious problem with world community...”

I understand my students, understand my friend Taron, but I hope we shall surmount this obstacle also, and when we get rid of this pain, shall sense ourselves as an equal part of modern humanity.

I am certain that the upcoming United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development should play an essential role in positive transformations for our country. Under the coordination of our Association, NGOs of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia have developed an Action Plan for this Decade in which the Earth Charter has a special role in the system of formal and informal education.

Jointly with the Center of Constitutional Rights and Aarhus Center, the Association intends to organize a roundtable on sustainable development with the support of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. The roundtable will be held at the hall of the Constitutional Court for members and experts of the Court, as well as judges of the Republic of Armenia. Special attention, in presentations and discussions, will be drawn to issues related to public participation and access to justice.

Indeed, the Earth Charter faces many obstacles, primarily of moral nature. Nevertheless, I am certain that everything depends on us, each inhabitant of the Earth. Further preservation of our remarkable planet in its unbelievable harmony for our next generations is conditioned by our level of morality. So will we succeed in this objective, or will we destroy the bases of our

existence and disappear as a kind? The biosphere will remain, of course, it will recover and continue its development, but without us.

It is difficult to estimate or measure the role and the significance of the Earth Charter, but in Armenia it has generated significant impact. I am very happy the Earth Charter proclaims “Earth, our home, is alive with a unique community of life” (Preamble, paragraph two). We are obliged to take the path outlined by the Earth Charter; there is no other alternative. And may God help us to overcome all impediments on the way. ●