

Nigel Dower, Scotland. A thematic essay on global interdependence and universal responsibility

The Earth Charter and Global Citizenship: A Way Forward



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In this chapter, I make the case for seeing the Earth Charter and global citizenship as complementary to each other. I shall argue that, at one level, one provides the content – the Earth Charter as a global ethic – and the other, the form – the motivating sense of being a citizen of a global community. At the same time, the juxtaposition of the two rather different ideas – both in general thinking and in education – provides the context of critical debate, discussion, and dialogue about both, and thus generally strengthens commitment to each. This, at least, has been my experience as a teacher in trying to teach students at college level to think constructively about global ethics issues, and as someone who has been interested in the Earth Charter and in global citizenship for some time – engaging with others in discussions about global issues. The former has been mainly based on part of what I taught as my contribution to two courses I coordinated from 2000 to 2004 in the University of Aberdeen on “Challenge of the Environment” and “Global Citizenship.” The latter has emerged from lectures and talks I have given which either include or focus on the Earth Charter. The main thrust of this chapter in practical terms is in giving examples of types of issues in which the relationship between the Earth Charter and global citizenship can be focused on mutual benefit.

For the purposes of this discussion, the claim that we are global citizens is a claim: first, that there are certain universal values which are either accepted across the world, or should be so accepted; second, that we all belong in some sense to a global community understood in a variety of ways – moral, political, legal, social, etc. The global ethic generally put forward by global citizens in the modern world is one which has two further features: first, the ethic stresses the idea of transnational obligations or responsibilities; for instance; we have significant obligations of assistance across national borders towards any human being who needs help; second, the global ethic endorsed is one that is accessible to people from many different backgrounds of faith, culture, or philosophy – that is, the ethic is not tied for instance to the theological premises of a particular religion.

The Earth Charter is, in essentials, for the purposes of this discussion, a global ethic in the following three respects: first, it is a set of universal principles which are comprehensive in the sense of covering all the major areas of values applicable to human existence, but not comprehensive in the sense that they are tied to any one comprehensive world view, such as Buddhism and secular anthropocentrism; second, it is global in that it is actually accepted by large number of people from all over the globe; third, it is global also in that it was formed as a result of a wide process of global consultation. Furthermore, the Earth Charter is a public document available for endorsement by individuals who do so in the knowledge that they endorse something endorsed by hundreds of thousands of others. The values of the Earth Charter are not merely shared in the sense that they are the same for different people; they are shared in the stronger sense of people belonging to a community of shared values.

Apart from the fact that the Earth Charter explicitly invites us to think of ourselves *inter alia* as citizens of the world (Preamble, paragraph five), it is clear from the above characteristics of the two ideas that they go closely together. A global citizen who is in search of reasonable global ethic can find it in the Earth Charter, since the latter is wide-ranging but accessible to many viewpoints; she can find in it further reason to endorse it, apart from its inherent reasonableness, the fact that it arises from world-

wide consultation and is, in fact, endorsed by many; and she can find through the Earth Charter a genuine and real community of like-minded people across the world united in its inspirational power. Conversely, someone who is an advocate of the Earth Charter can see that the Earth Charter is at heart a global ethic – though this exact language is not used in it. As such, it is something a global citizen would endorse. She can see, too, that more specifically the Earth Charter, in advocating global responsibility (Preamble, paragraph two and Subprinciple 2.b), stresses one of the key elements that a global citizen is keen to stress – obligations across borders. She can recognise, too, that what global citizenship adds to global ethics, as such, is that we are or should become citizens of the world and in so doing stresses both the inner motivational resources of individuals and the external social structures and institutions which make a global ethic such as the Earth Charter more likely to be realised in practice.

The complementary relationship between the two cannot be assumed though. It is perfectly possible that someone who is an advocate of the Earth Charter rejects the discourse of global citizenship – perhaps questioning its “political” connotations on the grounds that the Earth Charter is about transformation of ordinary lives, not about forms of governance. Or, he may question the “anthropocentric” character of citizenship which may be seen to be restricted to humans, whereas we really belong to an “ethical community” or “commonwealth of life;” or he may even question the whole idea of a “global ethic,” and so not regard the Earth Charter as a global ethic, perhaps because it simply is not – or is not yet – globally accepted. Conversely, someone committed to global citizenship or a global ethic may not be particularly keen to associate this with the Earth Charter if, for instance, he thought the Earth Charter principles were wrong in significant respects; too pluralistic, allowing too much diversity; too idealistic or bland so that in either case it is not relevant to making decisions; or, too detailed to be the right candidate for a global ethic. Responses like these have certainly arisen in discussions I have had in university discussion groups.

Given that for various reasons there could be a perception that they do not go together, one needs to say two things in response. First, whilst such antagonisms are possible and have certainly surfaced in my teaching from some students, it is probable that the outcome of bringing the two together is that they are mutually reinforcing – each providing what may be missing, or at least a weaker element in the other. For most people then, if they start with the one and get to think about the other, the result will be acceptance of the other and through that acceptance the strengthening of both, partly because one has access to a wider range of conceptual tools and ideas for articulating either. A full picture of the form and content of a global ethic is provided. At least from my experience of trying to teach around these ideas, positive responses are more common than negative ones – but this, if generalised, is an act of faith since I have not done or seen sociological confirmation of it!

Second, putting the two together brings out the issues and potential sources of opposition to either and thus creates the context of a more vigorous and constructively critical discussion of the issues. Certainly, an attitude towards the Earth Charter of critical loyalty and of constructive criticism is important to the Earth Charter in maintaining it as a living ethic and not some kind of holy writ about which there cannot be critical debate and interpretation. Likewise global ethics and the advocacy of global citizenship benefit from contestation.

It is also an act of faith, to some extent, to suppose that where there is open debate, the outcome will generally be in the direction of what one believes to be right! But, my general experience of teaching in this area is that although there will always be individual students who reject global citizenship and/or reject the Earth Charter, on the whole most warm to the ideas in the light of critical discussion, and that bringing the two ideas together helps to create a rounded framework for discussion, precisely because each complements the other, as indicated earlier.

One way of putting this point is to note that global citizenship discourse rather more explicitly takes on board the facts of globalisation than does the Earth Charter, which can seem rather detached from the realities of global, socio-political processes. Those interested in global citizenship recognise the processes of globalisation which have given global citizenship many different avenues for expression and embodiment, in non government organisations, and global civil society, and thus helps to embed the Earth Charter in the emerging global community of which it is part.

Conversely, the global citizen can find in the Earth Charter a concrete expression of a global ethic which otherwise might seem too abstract and undefined. Furthermore, insofar as she feels her global ethic should actually be shared by agents from all over the world, and not just be an idea in the mind of the global citizen herself, then the Earth Charter fits the bill perfectly since it is, if nothing else, a global ethic which is actually shared, and perceived to be shared, by people throughout the world. ●