

Hermann Garritzmann, Germany. A thematic essay which speaks to Principle 7 on lifestyles that emphasize the quality of life

The Earth Charter on its Way through Germany



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*Our planet is the only home we have.
Where should we go, if we destroy it?*

This simple but provocative question was once raised by the Dalai Lama. The German Earth Charter Team gladly used this line as heading for an advertisement with which we raised awareness for the Earth Charter in more than fifty trains of the German Railway Company. We were given the chance to put our message on the cover of the itinerary-bulletins which were placed on each seat. For four weeks in early 2004, these trains cruised back and forth through Germany and transported the message that the Earth Charter seeks to inspire a new sense of global responsibility based on respect and care for the community of life. Our announcement concluded with the invitation: "Together, we can imaginatively develop the vision of a sustainable way of life and live in a different and better way." Yet for many passengers the question remains: a sustainable way of life – what is it and how does it work?

In a wealthy country like Germany, people listen very closely and critically when in Earth Charter Principle 7 it is said: "Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that

safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being." This especially holds true when Sub-principle 7.f expresses this point even more explicitly: "Adopt lifestyles that emphasize the quality of life and material sufficiency in a finite world."

The task of adopting economic patterns that help to protect and restore the ecological and social systems of Earth poses a special challenge for the developed countries. The "ecological footprint" each citizen of the industrialized countries leaves on this planet gives clear evidence of this challenge: if every person on the planet would live like an average German citizen and consume and waste as much resources as we do, we would need four planets Earth to serve that need. Therefore, sustainable patterns of production and consumption are essential for safeguarding the well-being of our ecosystems. In the meantime, a sustainable use of resources is also a matter of fairness and justice towards the people in the global South who cannot afford a lifestyle compared to ours.

The Ecumenical One World Initiative (ÖIEW), which has served as the German focal point of the international Earth Charter Initiative since spring 2001, was created to assist in achieving exactly this goal. It was established in the mid-seventies when the first wave of awareness for ecology and global interdependence arose. Its aim is to encourage the adoption of a new way of life – a way of life which is dialogical, solidaric, simple, and ecologically sound.

The membership of the ÖIEW is constituted by individuals who perceive themselves as part of the One World with its rich diversity of plant and animal life. And, we perceive ourselves as part of the One Humanity which embraces all peoples, cultures, and religions. Both of these aspects are addressed by the Greek word "ecumene".

As members of the ÖIEW, we meet on the common ground of a certain set of personal commitments, which we consider as guidelines for our lives and which we hope to implement in our communities. These are:

- to contribute to justice, peace, and the conservation of nature through conscious life decisions;
- to take small steps towards peace, justice, and sustainability in our everyday life;
- to develop conscious patterns of consumption and to assist in making the power of the consumers become politically relevant;
- to harmonize personal behaviour and political claims in a trustworthy way;
- to financially support initiatives that focus on ecology, peace, one world issues, and human rights through a freely-chosen self-taxation;
- to engage in non governmental organisations and campaigns that promote a sustainable way of living;
- to strive for making an ethic and practice of sustainability a dominant motive for the personal behaviour of the people, as well as for the economic and political structures.

A workshop held on the perspectives of the Initiative showed that in the future the members of the ÖIEW want to give special emphasis to the following programmatic lines: the endeavour to adopt sustainable ways of living; the dialogue about an ethic of sustainability; and the vivid exchange of ideas about a spirituality of global responsibility.

We have found all these issues in the Earth Charter. The Charter calls on us to *be* the change we want to see in the world; it is an ethical prerequisite to start the global transformation with changing one's own conduct. From early on, our members have translated the first drafts of the Earth Charter into German and discussed its meaning. Serving as the official German Earth Charter focal point since 2001, we are intensely trying to make the Earth Charter known in Germany and our German-speaking neighbouring countries and to also make it become relevant within the structures of local and national decision making.

Together with Friends of the Earth Germany, we publish a German Earth Charter brochure that has reached its fourth edition, which means that by now we have distributed around 35,000 copies in schools, faith organisations, Local Agenda 21 groups, and other institutions of civil society. In the meanwhile, the Earth Charter has been reprinted in numerous other publications such as the German edition of Mikhail Gorbachev's book, *My Manifesto for the Earth*, and it can also be found on various websites on the internet. Additionally, we publish a quarterly news bulletin about the Earth Charter Initiative entitled "Erd-Charta Themen" – "Earth Charter Topics" and have started to train some "Ambassadors for the Earth Charter" to use their unique skills and experiences to bring the Earth Charter into discussion in their personal environments. In this way, we try to enhance the dissemination of the values of sustainable development from the bottom up, starting with the individuals, reaching out to grassroots organisations, and, thus, building the ground for involving more and more people and influencing the conduct of our local municipalities and national governments.

In this regard, a first success was achieved when we were given the chance to introduce the Earth Charter to our National Council for Sustainable Development, which has been established by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder to prepare the German Strategy for Sustainable Development. The Council acknowledged the Earth Charter as an important international people's treaty and dedicated its annual meeting in 2004 to the issue of "values for sustainable development" where the Earth Charter has been discussed.

More governmental support was reached through our participation at two round table discussions organized by the Ministry of the Environment to evaluate the role of faith communities in the public endeavour of protecting the environment. These discussions helped us strengthen our links to various faith communities in Germany which now spread the values of the Earth Charter among its members.

However, lobbying the government does not hold our main priority. The shift towards sustainable development requires the assistance of all members of society. At its core, this shift requires alternative approaches to defining the quality of life, which lies in being more, not in having more, as the Preamble of the Earth Charter holds. Fortunately, various academies and other educational institutions, major religious events like the recently held "Kirchentag" of the Lutheran Protestant Church that brought around 300,000 Christians together, and even the International Horticultural Show in Rostock in 2003, have given us the chance to present the Charter and foster dialogues about the universal responsibility each one of us has as a citizen in the One World. We prepared several workshops for the first National Social Forum in Germany that was held in July 2005.

One highlight of our work in this field, surely, was the seminar on the topic "Does the World have a Conscience? Earth Charter and Global Ethic" held in February 2005 in cooperation with the Protestant Academy Berlin and the Global Ethic Foundation. This workshop helped us to identify the common ground of the Earth Charter Initiative and the renowned Global Ethic Foundation, which seeks to foster understanding between the world religions by distinguishing four broad ethical principles which all the various religions have in common.

Another important partner in these activities is the Club of Budapest International which included the Earth Charter into their campaign "You can change the world." Our joint press release in celebration of the World Ethic Day, which is commemorated on September 22, helped us to attract major public attention.

Another main priority of our work is educating for sustainable living. In 2002, the influential German Catholic Bishops' Organisation for Development Cooperation dedicated a whole edition of their teachers' periodical to the Earth Charter. This cooperation helped us to make the Earth Charter known and used in

schools throughout Germany. Due to unfortunate financial constraints, we had to postpone a project of major importance: With the appropriate resources, we would love to translate the Earth Charter into a language that is relevant for youth and to also invite young people to develop ideas and activities to bring the vision of sustainability to life in their specific contexts.

We are gaining some more support for our educational efforts through participating in the national round table for the United Nations Decade for Education for Sustainable Development where we stress the importance of personal commitments for achieving a sustainable way of life. The Decade can be seen as one example of several positive developments. Other heartening trends are the Ten-Year Action Plan for Sustainable Patterns of Production and Consumption, adopted by the United Nations at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, as well as many inspiring examples where bioregional means of production have been reinforced throughout Germany and other parts of the world. These developments show that the question of sustainable ways of living becomes more and more relevant again, whereas sufficiency approaches to sustainable development were formerly belittled as petty forms of abstinence and asceticism. While the ÖIEW has been working on these topics for so many years against all odds, it is heartening to see how the issue of personal responsibility is gaining new impetus.

In 2006, the ÖIEW will celebrate its thirtieth anniversary. We are still sorting out the most appropriate form for this celebration, yet we hope to bring together women and men who helped to create the Initiative thirty years ago with women and men who were born in 1976 and who then will be thirty years old. It would be hopeful if the quest for a holistic and global ethic, a sustainable way of life, and a spirituality of universal responsibility could thus be passed on through the generations. ●