

Wakako Hironaka, Japan. A project descriptive essay which speaks to Principle 3 on using the Earth Charter in the Japanese House of Councillors

The Aims of the Earth Charter in Japan



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During the twentieth century, humankind has experienced tremendous economic progress, wealth, and an increase in the average lifespan through advances in science, technology, and medicine. The cost of these developments has been environmental destruction and an increase in the scale of damage caused by war.

Economic growth, for all its benefits, has also given rise to irreparable environmental damage, and social injustices caused by the uneven distribution of wealth. Two world wars, the ensuing cold war, and the regional conflicts that

followed have brought about wide-scale loss of life, property, and well-being. War has been the greatest destructive force to the environment. While the twentieth century saw the growth of wealthy countries and prosperous peoples, it also saw growing disparities of wealth among and within nations. People are living longer, but the world's burgeoning population, now reaching over six billion and still growing, puts a heavy burden on Earth's resources.

At present, a mere twenty percent of the nations of the world consume eighty percent of the world's resources. "Global Fairness," the challenge of creating an equitable global society that will break the vicious cycle of conflict and environmental degradation, is the issue of the new century. As members of the human race, we must make the creation of such an equitable society our mission.

Against this backdrop, the Earth Charter was created in an attempt to confront the challenges of building an equitable global society that will break the cycle of conflict and environmental degradation. The Earth Charter sets down principles for preventing further degradation of the environment by amending current patterns of mass production, consumption, and waste disposal; and, by using the earth's limited resources prudently to make society sustainable. The aim is to preserve the entire global environment, while paying consideration to the people, cultures, and ways of life in different regions. Dissemination

of the Charter is a peaceful and democratic attempt to create a society that will protect human rights, eradicate poverty, raise literacy levels, and respect women and minorities.

I was fortunate enough to be invited to participate in the creation of the Earth Charter, from the point of its inception, as a member of the Drafting Committee. In this capacity, I was involved in discussions about what should be included in the Charter and what ideas must be emphasized in order to build a sustainable world. Following the launch of the Earth Charter in The Hague in the year 2000, I was challenged to consider what I could do specifically to realize the goals of the Earth Charter, in light of my position as a member of the House of Councillors of the Diet in Japan.

I recognize and place a strong emphasis on the important role of the individual in implementing the Earth Charter. It is not only through businesses and governments, but also, perhaps more importantly, through the widespread action and support of the individual citizen that restoration and preservation of the environment can be achieved. In order to make the Earth Charter more accessible to the public and to increase awareness of its contents, my first project in Japan was to prepare a pamphlet containing a Japanese translation of the Earth Charter. I distributed roughly fifty thousand copies of the translation to my colleagues and constituents and posted it on the internet. With the coordination of the



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Earth Charter headquarters in Costa Rica, I petitioned signatures in support of the Earth Charter initiative. Roughly 241,000 signatures were collected at this time.

My next step was to form the Earth Charter Committee of Japan. We invited prominent leaders, in various fields, to the United Nations University in Tokyo to participate in discussions about how to spread the ideas of the Earth Charter throughout Japanese society. After some discussion by the Committee, we decided that a more accessible version of the Earth Charter in Japanese was needed. The Committee jointly produced a booklet that explained the Earth Charter in simple terms. The booklet contains the text of the Charter, both in English and in its Japanese translation, a commentary on its ideas and their significance, and advice on how to implement these ideas.

In addition to producing this booklet, the Committee made the following

proposals. First, we would like to see the Earth Charter booklet used as a supplementary reader in schools, with reference to the Charter being made in textbooks across the school syllabus. We aim to spread this trend to universities also, initiating special lectures on the Earth Charter and its implementation. Second, we would like to see the Charter incorporated by businesses in their activities, and thereby introduced to employees. Third, we hope that the Charter will be adopted by prefectural governments, and by city and town administrations, and be reflected in their policy-making processes. Finally, we hope to gain the support of writers and journalists throughout Japan, with a view to seeing the Charter promoted through the media, thus making it better known among the general public.

When creating the above proposals, the Earth Charter Committee of Japan considered the historical path which Japan has traveled. During the post-war period, industrial and economic devel-

opment was given greatest priority and the environment was almost completely disregarded. This led to severe pollution and environmental degradation, leaving detrimental effects. The government, industrial sector, and civilians on all levels made many efforts to repair this environmental damage, and to a large extent these efforts were successful. In recent years, however, pollution and environmental damage has been caused by the excess consumption and waste of daily life of individuals. Japan is a small country with a large population of 130 million people. Unless care is taken, we could easily become a country once again plagued by pollution and environmental problems.

Looking also at the global situation today, we must remember that no country stands alone in the process of sustainable development. Rapid globalization of both economic and human resources, as well as the global scale of pollution, means every country and individual must consider themselves as

Principle 3. Build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful.

but a single member of the greater global society.

When faced with these facts, I, and other members of the Earth Charter Committee of Japan, recognized the benefits and necessity of adopting the principles of the Earth Charter. The powerful and comprehensive message that the Earth Charter contains needs to be internalized by all people and translated into action in their everyday lives.

The aims of the Earth Charter in Japan have also become more important as we have entered the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development in 2005. In order to ensure that the Charter will feature highly in this Decade, and thus increase its influence throughout Japan and the world, practical implementations of the Earth Charter goals are of utmost importance.

Development of a sustainable world is often misconstrued as meaning simply the protection of the natural environment. As the Earth Charter emphasizes, however, a sustainable environment goes far beyond the preservation of the natural world. It involves ensuring the protection of the rights and freedoms of all humans, as is indicated in Principle 3 of the Charter, namely to allow every person to realize his or her full potential and achieve a livelihood that is secure and meaningful as well as ecologically responsible. Specifically, issues such as the protection of women's rights, the eradication of poverty, and the maintenance of democratic governance must all be addressed in order to build a sustainable world.

The Earth Charter Committee of Japan emphasizes the importance of Japanese Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) in implementing the Earth Charter. No individual country is isolated in the endeavor to work towards a sustainable environment. In addressing the issues mentioned above, such as poverty and women's rights, Japan's role in the provision of ODA is crucial.

The Earth Charter Committee of Japan continues to encourage the Japanese government to increase ODA to neighboring countries.

ODA is one area in which Japan has witnessed a change since the collapse of the bubble economy of the eighties. Due to the massive and rapid economic growth during the bubble era, and the consequent strength of the yen, Japan became the world's leading aid donor in 1989. While it retains this position statistically, every year following the collapse of the economy, Japanese ODA has decreased. This may be due, in part, to the fact that many Japanese people believe that in such times of economic recession, the country should put itself first, above the needs of the international community. However, it is my belief that Japan's path to peace will be best achieved by recognizing that we are part of the wider community and by providing support to less fortunate countries. It is towards this end that I, as a parliamentarian as well as part of the Earth Charter Committee of Japan, am urging the government to increase its ODA contributions.

Japan's role in forming a sustainable global community goes beyond these monetary contributions, however. In order to fully realize the aims of the Earth Charter, the Japan Committee is looking to increase awareness of the Charter's values not only within our own country, but also throughout Asia and other parts of the world. In extending the ideas of the Earth Charter to these areas, Japan hopes to help all countries see themselves as part of the whole, and recognize the need to implement strategies that will ensure a sustainable environment on all community levels.

Japan has learned by experience the hard lesson of environmental degradation due to rapid economic and industrial development. Observing a similar process occurring in neighboring Asian countries, we feel impelled to share the lessons we have learned. Environmental protection is often considered a

secondary priority in developing nations. This was indeed the case in Japan during the time of her economic development, when serious pollution, health problems, and loss of life were all results of such rapid development. Japan hopes to build on its own experience and encourage developing nations to prioritize sustainable environmental policies on an equal level with economic growth. In these countries, as within Japan, the Earth Charter would be a valuable tool for stimulating public awareness of environmental protection issues, and providing an impetus for the creation of practical methods by which to improve conditions.

Since the creation of the Earth Charter, Japan has experienced an increasing awareness of the Charter's ideals among leaders in various fields and in the general public. We must continue our progress by further translating our awareness into concrete action. I, along with the other members of the Earth Charter Committee of Japan, firmly believe that the Earth Charter presents important and viable principles. We look forward to seeing its continued implementation in Japan, throughout the Asian region, and globally – thus contributing to building a sustainable world. ●