

## Using Earth Charter Principles to Assess Social and Economic Justice in Latin America



**Yolanda Kakabadse** has worked for more than twenty-five years towards the national, regional and global environmental agendas. She has served as Minister of Environment in Ecuador, Executive President of the Fundación Futuro Latinoamericano and President of the World Conservation Union (IUCN). She has developed programs and processes to strengthen sustainable development through the integration of multi-sectorial efforts. Dr. Kakabadse coordinated the participation of civil society at the Earth Summit, Rio de Janeiro 1992. She has also been Counselor to the Vice President for Environment and Sustainable Development of the World Bank and Senior Advisor to the Global Environment Facility. She has been a member of the boards of directors of the Worldwide Fund for Nature International, the World Commission on Forests and Sustainable Development, and the World Resources Institutes Global Council. She is an Earth Charter Commissioner.

**P**art III of the Earth Charter, Principles 9, 10, 11 and 12 related to justice in the social and economic realms, was born of the fundamental concern that today's society is characterized by inequity. Social expressions such as racial, cultural, generational, or gender discrimination, as well as the marked differences among the economic classes, are present in all continents and nations. In this essay, I will use the experience of Latin America as a lens through which to view the key concepts in Part III of the Earth Charter.

Have we made progress towards the elimination of these behaviors in Latin America? Are we now in a better situation than ten years ago? In some aspects, we have and we are. In fact, in some issues related to equity, we have gone from commitments on paper to specific experiences which, although not to the full extent, are still part of the agendas of national and international politics within the framework of sustainable development. On the other hand, it is evident that people and societies have difficulty internalizing the true meaning of justice and understanding it as something different from a sense of compassion.

In order to illustrate this apparent progress in the fulfillment of the challenges proposed by the Earth Charter, we can look at some specific processes which, although they illustrate progress, point at the large contradictions that the Latin American continent witnesses.

While Principle 9 suggests working towards the “eradication of poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative,” the reality is that the number of poor people and the level of poverty in the world have risen and become more serious. What are the causes? Primarily, a myopic and short-term vision of development.

The processes of wealth creation in all societies of the world have been based on the use of natural resources. It is difficult to think of a development process without water, sources of energy, without land or any vegetal or animal species. From food to medicines, from textiles to cosmetics, all have their origin in a renewable or nonrenewable source. However, on many continents, as is the case of Latin America, the exploitation of natural resources has resulted in riches for few and poverty for many.

Even today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the common citizen in Latin America is influenced by a culture based on extraction and the irrational use of natural resources that is benefiting only a few. The abundance of natural resources in our region does not help a change of attitude. We have not learned to save and be austere. On the contrary, we have placed our resources in the category of the non-extinguishable and unimportant. In fact, they are part of the national accounts only when they have been totally exploited. The forests of the region, the rivers, the biological diversity, and other resources only now are being considered for their economic value as potential resources for ecotourism.

The positive aspect is that from Mexico to Patagonia important tourist industry, based on the acknowledgement of natural and cultural resources, has been developed. This has fostered new alliances between sectors – the owners of the resources who are generally local communities, and the tourist sector with business acumen – which traditionally, were separated due to social, economic, or cultural differences. The results are already visible.

There has not only been an improvement in the economy of both parties, but an explicit acknowledgement of the value of nature. From the Andes to the mangroves, from tropical forests to marine resources, all have gained a new meaning in the life of the region – their protection has economic value.

However, new contradictions appear in national agendas. The reaction of indigenous and peasant communities of the Andean counties to attempts to privatize water illustrate this situation; it is a rebellion against inequity. It goes beyond the need to define rules to control its use. The fight is not about the resource – it is about the principles and the values related to the ownership of the resource and its use. Traditionally, restriction and distribution systems originated in the communities themselves and have been based on principles of justice and equity. Their protest is born from the attempt to benefit only the wealthy and exclude the poor.

Through their participation in national and international debates about issues such as access and distribution of benefits generated by the use of biodiversity, indigenous peoples are now participating in establishing criteria related to benefits that should derive from the use of indigenous species or from traditional knowledge.

A brief analysis of the conflict in Latin America leads us to estimate that approximately seventy percent of the conflicts in the region are related to natural resources. Land ownership and water distribution, forest exploitation, and air pollution are only a few of the recurrent issues that are connected by the common thread of action or intention to use the natural resource indiscriminately or for personal benefit. The search for equity requires changes in individual behaviors as well as in institutional structures. Principle 10 establishes that we need to “ensure that economic activities and institutions at all levels promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner.”

The governmental programs designed to improve the economic conditions of the poorest people are based on a policy of assistance, but the majority of them are inconsistent with other capacity-building programs. There are, however, some notable accomplishments, especially when they are the result of intersectorial alliances. As a result of the decentralization of development programs, local governments have recharged their capacity to generate and implement participatory processes. These programs do not always achieve direct economic benefits, but they do open spaces that permit different parties to have access to information, to soft-money loans, and to technologies and other capacities that enable the development of non-traditional economic activities. The interesting factor about these processes is that, in many cases, they are born from associations between various sectors – the local government with non governmental organizations and with the productive sector interested in new markets for non-traditional products.

We cannot talk in Latin America about a large productive sector that is visionary and aware of its social and environmental responsibility. However, in each country, there is a formal or informal association of leaders of the productive sector that have formulated, and practice, new values based on equity and solidarity. These processes are characterized by relationships that emphasize human values and reject traditional patterns that perpetuate differences.

In the productive sector, the circle of individuals who are convinced of the need to promote philanthropy is becoming more significant. In the Latin American context, philanthropy is not only about economic contributions, but also about the direct and active participation in the process of generating social and economic change.

In several cities and countries in the region, business councils for sustainable development have clarified their roles and have strengthened their strategies to contribute to socially responsible development. These are slow steps and the impact is not always visible, but it builds towards a vision of long-term development.

In Latin America the numbers are clear. In the last two decades the growth of poverty has been alarming and little has been done for those who are most vulnerable. The growth of urban centers as a result of migration from the countryside is proof of the lack of attention to development policies, to the importance of food production, to the need to assure land ownership for the most needy, and to the imperative need to reinforce the economy of the farmer and small entrepreneur.

In the last years, Central America and the Andean regions have witnessed intense negotiations to establish free trade treaties with the United States of America. Central America has concluded its process of negotiation as a block while Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru are in the final phases of the debate.

The competitive nature of human beings and of nations establishes commercial codes that do not meet the standard set by Principle 10. The search for the well-being of others is not a characteristic of our modern society. On the contrary, we search for immediate benefits without concerning ourselves with the welfare of others. We sense that the tenets of the Free Trade Agreement are not very clear as to what the real benefits are for those in most need. The ones who most benefit will be, once again, a small minority. The risks for the poorest and the least protected are not measured or accounted for in equal terms. On the other hand, the formula of debt forgiveness for poor countries, though appearing to promote solidarity, actually reaffirms relationships of inequality between rich and poor countries. Most of the debt reductions are a new way of control, and, in real terms, they do not affect the economy of the donor country, thus maintaining the inequality.

One of the areas that has made most progress relates to Principle 11: “Affirm gender equality and equity as prerequisites to sustainable development and ensure universal access to education, health care, and economic opportunity.” In political spaces, the obligation to preserve gender equality has been legislated in electoral processes. Beyond the law, the participation of women in the political sphere is more and more noticeable; in the private sector, there has been a growth in the leadership of women who are prominent by their professional qualities. In the academic field, the balance in gender is unquestionable. However, this phenomenon is more common in higher economic classes than among the poor and the marginalized. Access to education for girls and women of meager economic means is still limited.

Finally, let us look at Principle 12: “Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.” Equity among people and nations is one of the most difficult social principles to attain, especially in societies where the concept of charity has been viewed as the way to share. If we critically look at the process of the construction of the agenda and the results of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, we find two situations that clearly show the difficulty of putting equity processes into practice. First, the industrialized nations did not honor their commitment to donate 0.7% of their Gross National Product for the support of the development of poor countries. Its implementation would have made a significant difference in enabling several nations to address conditions that perpetuate poverty. Second, generating more visibility was the decision to contribute to the fight against poverty in Africa through actions that targeted the symptoms of the problems, and not the causes. In conclusion, charity—which does not take great effort—has not improved the situation of the poorest continent of the planet, and justice has not entered the discussion.

In terms of the environment, the rights of indigenous peoples have been rooted in defending their environment and their ecosystem against threats generated by processes of exploitation of natural resources which attack their stability, their security, and their right to live in an integral and secure environment. Oil exploitation, for instance, is progressively more responsible in its use of technologies that reduce the impact on the environment. Consequently, there are fewer attacks against local communities and nature itself. Additionally, there are more spaces for dialogue between the interested groups attempting to define priorities by working together. In the Amazonian countries, the plans for petroleum exploration used to be defined and executed with the exclusive participation of governmental authorities and investors. Today, the law and, for the most part, practice involve those who may be affected by the implementation, to discuss measures for the reduction of social and environmental impact.

If our departing point is the analysis of the advancement of the Principles of Part III of the Earth Charter, it is evident that, even though some processes are taking place in Latin America, much is still needed. The most important aspect is that debate has been generated among development policy-makers and society has become aware of the challenges in recognizing the rights and the obligations of the state and its citizens.

Thus, in Latin America, contradictions are commonplace; the discourse is starting to change, but the political culture moves slowly. We live amidst an array of contradictions that arise from the abyss that exists between what is and what might be. We live in a continent that is characterized by its richness and cultural and natural diversity. However, the very essence of inequity and poverty has not changed in the majority of the continent’s countries. Its rivers and water sources, forests and mountains, marine and coastal resources, and, in general, its great biodiversity should allow the continent to ensure that no inhabitant would endure hunger, insecurity, or ignorance. We have the necessary conditions for its peoples and nations to attain sustainability in development.

In order to achieve change, we must respond to several challenges:

First, the construction of a sense of belonging within a nation or continent, maintaining the cultural values on which our current societies are built.

Second, the challenge in the short run is not to combat poverty, but to administer wealth. There remains, however, the question of whether, in order to manage wealth, must we assign a monetary value to all resources? Can religious, spiritual or cultural values, or even beauty, be valued in terms that are not monetary? The most important step towards the recognition of the values of our environment, and thus the generation of new behaviors to combat inequity, could be to internalize the sense of belonging with our own history and environment.

Third, the weak social investment in education, health, and other needs in almost all the countries of our continent and the perception of this as an expense, not an investment, needs to be the first objective of change.

I feel that the new generations have better conditions to meet these challenges. On the one hand, their rebellion against the patterns of discriminatory and abusive behavior of past generations, and against the way of designing and putting into practice the so-called developmental policies which respond to the interests of the few, is evident. Additionally, this generation has a clear vision for the future and its role in bringing about change. Thus, we have the obligation to invest in the construction of spaces in which to take action. ●