

Rene Ledesma and Josephine Espailat, The Dominican Republic. [A project descriptive essay on equitable and sustainable human development as it relates to Principle 10](#)

The Earth Charter: A Beginning of Sustainable Development in the Dominican Republic



René Ledesma was Undersecretary of Environmental Management from 2000-2004 and represented the Dominican Republic at the

Conference on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2003. At this conference, he was a key figure in motivating the member states of the United Nations to endorse the Earth Charter. As Director of the Fund For Nature (Pronatura) he provided institutional support for the diffusion of the first and second drafts of the Earth Charter. He belonged to the National Committee of the Earth Charter and participated in various consultations and revisions of materials at national and international levels. Today, from the private sector, he is dedicated to the inclusion of an environmental dimension in development projects.



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degree in Social Intervention and Cooperation at the University of Oviedo, Spain. She joined the “family of the Earth Charter” in 1997 at Río +5. In 1998, she became the coordinator of the National Committee for the Earth Charter and is responsible for fostering the first and second consultation on the drafts of the Earth Charter in the Dominican Republic. She participated in the meeting that took place in the city of Cuiba, Mato Grosso, Brazil, giving a presentation of the report on

the Earth Charter Consultation. In 2001, she received the Duarte, Sánchez and Mella Medal for Merit at the level of *Caballero* for her work in this initiative and her constant fight for the incorporation of ethical values in the field.

*hay un país en el mundo,
colocado en el mismo trayecto del sol,
oriundo de la noche*

*There is a country in the world,
placed in the same route of the sun,
that comes from the night*

Pedro Mir

Since the Rio+5 Forum in 1997, the Dominican Republic enthusiastically became part of the Earth Charter project. This article is a recollection of the challenges and rewards that this project has left us with. The most important aspects are the impressions on our thinking, feelings, and daily practices as professionals and citizens of a country with many great possibilities, but also with many great social, economic and environmental problems. We learned that we are unique beings in the universe, but at the same time, we are an imperceptible speck in this universe. We learned that uniqueness—dignity, liberty-independence are binomials that constitute our most profound reality and they remind us that we are part of one single community of life.

The Dominican Republic, like many developing countries, faces grave problems of social exclusion and inequality, corruption scandals in public administration, lack of transparency, as well as a progressive deterioration of our natural and environmental resources. We perceived many of these situations as external; we felt impotent and lacked hope for the future. In this context, the ethical proposal of the Earth Charter was a light that illuminated a new path, a new call to hope and shared responsibility. It provided a reminder that “together we can”; we can take the reins and assume that we can always do something rather than simply be witnesses to the problems. That is the reason we warmly welcomed this Project and we took it as a challenge to society. There was a great integration of diverse sectors of the Dominican people and with great enthusiasm students, educators, mass media, and community groups joined in.

In early 1998, the National Committee of the Earth Charter was formed with ample participation of institutions and people from civil society, the government, the private sector and agencies of cooperation, journalists, artists, educators, students, and others. The working tool was the draft of the Earth Charter. We developed a broad awareness and socialization campaign for this document through different actions: press conferences; interviews and articles in the major newspapers of the country; consultations with various professional groups; meetings in major



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regions of the country; and drawing, singing, and poetry contests in educational centers; and publication of the local Earth Charter Bulletin. All these activities were realized with our own funds managed by local members. The Committee meetings, which were held twice a month to supervise the program, kept the press informed and contributed to the success of the awareness and the consultation process.

In this process, questions such as the following filled our hearts and minds: “Is it possible to maintain the logic of accumulation, unlimited and lineal growth and, at the same time, avoid the breakdown of ecological systems? Is our paradigm of existential hegemony not antithetical to the conservation of the cosmic earth community? Would it not be irresponsible, and thus unethical, to continue in the same direction?”

We answered our own questions by affirming that we need profound changes in our values, institutions, and ways and styles of life. We are not all, neither are we the only ones. This means that besides us, there must be space left for others who also have rights and autonomy. We assert that we ourselves need an awareness and a sense of mutual belonging that will tie us to an Earth that is our first and last homeland. This process strengthened our commitment to make our country, the Dominican Republic, a country more respectful of its natural and cultural resources, a country more inclusive and democratic, a country more compassionately and humanely habitable.

If it is a fact that the divide between rich and poor has deepened in the country because neo-liberal economic policies are still predominant, it is not less true

that, today, we are less naïve, more sensitive, and critical towards the reality of exclusion and impoverishment. We are more conscious of the interdependence between development, economy, environment, and natural resources. We recognize that the globalization that we are witnessing, which is dominated by inequitable economic relationships, is exacerbating deterioration of the lives of human beings and of nature. In response, we take a critical and proactive stance of repudiation.

Since August 2000, we have a General Law of Environmental and Natural Resources and a State Secretariat of Environmental and Natural Resources. Measures to evaluate the environmental impact of new projects, and the compliance of the ones already in place, have been established. In this context, one of the most significant actions was

Principle 10. Ensure that economic activities and institutions at all levels promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner.

the social movement “Save the Protected Areas,” which was generated to avoid the approval of a sectoral law for the Protected Areas System that would significantly hurt the ecosystems and extension of several National Parks.

The principles and values of the Earth Charter have contributed in forwarding the process of civil society engagement and public action. Today, environmental problems, as well as poverty and matters of social exclusion, occupy an important place in the mass media, mobilizing public opinion to address these issues. In the most remote communities in the country, groups of people organize to present proposals for action connected to their resources and local problems and also to reclaim their right to a dignified life.

The principles and values have also provided a vision of ongoing commitments and challenges. For example, real incorporation of environmental education as a cross-cutting theme in the Dominican educational system is required to address issues such as the public sphere, the rural-urban relationship, production models, and planetary interdependence. Collaborative research efforts between universities and local environmental groups need to be facilitated to strengthen the integration of local and academic knowledge. The citizenry requires access to more appropriate and timely information from the mass media and through the establishment of a National System of Environmental Information and Natural Resources, in order to make better informed decisions about environmental and natural resource issues. The Society-State-Civil Society relationship on environmental issues requires strengthening through the formation of organizations such as the National Council for the Environment and Natural Resources and through consultation with the citizenry for the implementation of mega-projects. Finally, the challenge remains to further the participation of groups such as ecological societies, non governmental

organizations, educational centers, and municipalities in the process of elaboration and implementation of policies for management, such as co-management of protected areas, identification of economic incentives, and economic valuation of environmental services.

These challenges will be more rapidly addressed if we ensure that the activities and economic institutions at all levels “promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner,” as expressed in Principle 10 of the Earth Charter. Society in its totality will have to reorganize the economy using market decisions that clearly manifest actions related to environmental sustainability and to ensure the establishment of mechanisms of social equity.

In order to “promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner” (Principle 10), the market economy will have to appropriately evaluate the goods and services that Mother Earth conveniently provides us and should respect the limitations that nature demands in order to reach sustainable production. We should at least strive to reach what the economist Jeffrey Sachs accurately expresses: “The tragic irony of this moment is that the rich countries are so rich and the poor so poor that a few added tenths of one percent of GNP from the rich ones ramped up over the coming decades could do what was never before possible in human history: ensure *that the basic needs of health and education are met for all impoverished children in this world*”¹ (author’s emphasis).

The challenge according to Lester Brown, founder of Worldwatch Institute, is not only to alleviate poverty but also, when doing so, to create an economy that is compatible with the planet’s natural systems; an economy that can sustain progress.² This implies a reengineering of the food economy and the energy economy, moving away from the use of fossil fuels to the use of renewable energy and the efficient and

sustainable use of the limited water resources that we still have available.

Finally, we believe that we can build an economy that “promote[s] human development in an equitable and sustainable manner” (Principle 10), if we manage to foster an economic growth that does not destroy our ecosystems and, in that way, we will be able to achieve *one single community of life* where the basic necessities of all people on the planet are provided for and a world of which we can feel worthy. ●

Notes

1 Sachs, J. (2001, November 21). One tenth of 1 percent to make the world safer. *The Washington Post*, p. A23.

2 Brown, L.R. (2003). *Plan B: Rescuing a planet under stress and a civilization in trouble*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.