

Alide Roerink, The Netherlands. A project descriptive essay on uses of the Earth Charter in The Netherlands as they relate to Principle 13

Living the Earth Charter in The Netherlands



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Major events of 2005 provide evidence of a growing feeling of global commitment to solving global problems. The tsunami that caused such catastrophic devastation at the end of 2004 created an unprecedented response, not just from governments and agencies, but also from individuals all around the world. The build-up to the G8 in July and to the UN Millennium Summit in September 2005 saw the biggest ever international campaign against poverty and for sustainable development. This campaign mobilized millions of citizens around the world in support of policies for a just and fair division of the world's resources.

Can this energy also be harnessed to achieve the goals of the Earth Charter

and to promote its values? What is the contribution of the Netherlands in developing this global sense of responsibility?

The Netherlands has a long and strong tradition of international engagement and global solidarity. This is reflected in the level of the aid budget, the priorities of the policies for international cooperation and the nature of Dutch political engagement. Strengthening of the international rule of law is anchored in the national constitution. In 1974, the Netherlands reached the United Nations target of earmarking 0.7 percent of Gross National Income (GNI) for official development aid (ODA). Since 1997 the ODA has been fixed at 0.8 per cent of Gross National Product (GNP). Until recently, the Netherlands has continued to be a strong international advocate, leading by example, calling upon other rich countries to do the same.

Funding for awareness raising on global issues in the Netherlands is high. Spending on global education remains consistently among the highest in Europe. There is also a tradition in the Netherlands of government support for the work of different constituencies from differing faiths, the humanist tradition, and nonreligious people from different political backgrounds – on the basis that these diverse civil society actors should be supported to engage diverse segments of the public.

At the basis of this tradition is, among other things, the founding of the National Committee for International Cooperation and Sustainable Development (NCDO), thirty-five years ago.

It started as "Committee Claus" as the Dutch answer to the UN's call that all rich countries install national committees to promote international solidarity in their societies. Prince Claus, the late husband of Queen Beatrix of The Netherlands, reached out as chair of the national committee to a wide audience in the Netherlands. With his love of Africa and his passion for development cooperation he brought the message that international cooperation is of concern to everyone in powerful and innovative ways. Although Prince Claus performed this function for a relatively short period of time, his influence was enormous and is still felt. The mission of NCDO, to strengthen public support in Dutch society for international cooperation and sustainable development, is still relevant and has not changed. It is still essential today to realize the Earth Charter principle to "promote meaningful participation of all interested individuals and organizations in decision making" (Subprinciple 13.b).

Prince Claus acknowledged the relevance of broad public support in society to influence the political agenda. He believed a democratic Netherlands with actively engaged citizens would give high priority to international solidarity and development cooperation. And indeed, the Netherlands developed as one of the countries that actually met its promises with respect to global financial agreements and development cooperation promises.

The first encounter of the Netherlands with the Earth Charter goes back to 1992, the process for the World Confer-

ence on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro—the Earth Summit. The first attempt to arrive at an Earth Charter failed in Rio. The initiative was continued in following years and taken outside the United Nations arena, thanks to, among others, Ruud Lubbers - in those years Prime Minister of The Netherlands. Her Majesty Queen Beatrix expressed her interest in the Earth Charter. She was present at the start of the worldwide participatory consultation on the structure and content of the Earth Charter. Five years later, in June, 2000, the Earth Charter was internationally launched and the first copy was presented to Queen Beatrix in the Peace Palace in The Hague. In 2005 the Queen of the Netherlands participated in the celebration of the first Earth Charter lustrum in Amsterdam, linked to the celebration of her being twenty-five years on the throne.

Since 2002, NCDO has taken up the task of serving as the focal point to the ECI in the Netherlands. The National Committee of NCDO endorsed the Earth Charter and integrated it into its policy framework (2002-2006), thereby providing NCDO funds for civil society activities and Dutch projects related to the Earth Charter. In 2002, the Earth Charter document was translated into Dutch and has since then been widely distributed as a flyer, at special meetings such as United World College Youth Action Summit, summer 2002, and via internet. All municipalities received the Earth Charter flyer as a result of cooperation with the Dutch Association of Municipalities.

The National Platform Johannesburg 2002 – a broad coalition of 450 non governmental organizations – selected the Earth Charter as one of the priorities. The Platform endorsed the Earth Charter unanimously. This resulted in a dialogue on the Earth Charter with the Dutch governmental delegation for Johannesburg. As Minister for the Environment, Jan Pronk wrote to his colleagues all over the world with the suggestion that they place the Earth Charter on the Johannesburg agenda. The Dutch position in the WSSD was finally decided by the new

cabinet of Prime Minister Balkenende. The Netherlands contributed to the development of the Earth Charter, but with the chances of UN endorsement or adoption low – perhaps because of a perception of the Earth Charter as a “people’s document” – a more reserved attitude emerged. Only if other countries proposed acknowledging the Earth Charter was the Netherlands prepared to join.

Dutch members of the cabinet in Johannesburg did show interest in the Earth Charter. Agnes van Ardenne, Minister for Development Cooperation, attended an important Earth Charter meeting. Prime Minister Balkenende spoke on the Earth Charter in his speech to the world leaders assembled. He called upon the business community to be inspired by the Earth Charter.

In the run-up to the celebration of five years Earth Charter in 2005, there were several organisations who worked together to lend the Earth Charter further momentum. NCDO, Plan Netherlands and the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) worked together to facilitate the celebration of the fifth anniversary of the Earth Charter. An Earth Charter youth version was developed and distributed to all primary schools in the Netherlands. The Ark of Hope found a temporary home in the Tropenmuseum Junior. Children in the Netherlands have expressed their dreams for the future and added them to the Ark of Hope. Queen Beatrix received the twenty-five most beautiful pages from the children and brought them together in a vessel that she created and decorated herself to be offered to the Ark of Hope.

The Earth Charter provides a framework and source of inspiration for organisations and individuals who want to contribute each in their own way to international solidarity, sustainable development, and building an inclusive multicultural society. The Earth Charter isn’t a faraway dream. Five years after the launch, support can be demonstrated in living the Earth Charter in the Netherlands. Yet, public support is not

automatically translated into a higher priority in policies and politics for solidarity and sustainability. The Netherlands’ internationally renowned reputation for tolerance, engagement, and contributions to healthcare, welfare, and education has come under pressure. Attempts to establish real transitions towards sustainable development are still of marginal influence. Dutch energy consumption is still increasing and initiatives for sustainable investment funds and organic agriculture are not yet mainstream. A breakthrough will entail finding new ways to link practical innovative experiences to higher priorities in policies and politics. For The Netherlands, which is changing and in confusion – partly as a result of the increased fear and vulnerability for terrorism, globalisation, and cultural alienation – the Earth Charter can help provide such a breakthrough.

To really make the difference, more people will have to serve as examples. Research shows that a new engagement is coming up, characterized by a “common shared ethical inspiration.” This movement represents the cross-cultural ideal of access for every person to ethical-spiritual self creation. And since this affects people’s lives as a whole, it involves as much ownership over one’s own life as possible. The new engagement knows no blueprints.

These findings match the NCDO’s experience with a growing group of youth in the Netherlands who call themselves “practical idealists.”

They discover concrete possibilities for responsible consumption and production. They engage others in sustainable lifestyles and practical forms of global solidarity. They do not do this with a moral call to refrain or by threatening with doom scenarios; but by showing with flair that ‘clean clothes’ are beautiful; that fair food is smart; that you can create a new and positive identity based on a combination of elements from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. They show that you can be more by having less. ●