

Michael Slaby, Germany. [A project descriptive essay which speaks to Principle 12 on youth aspirations](#)

Making Ripples of Change: The Hopes of the Earth Charter Youth Initiative



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Coordinator of the Earth Charter Youth Initiative. Having been actively involved in youth-led initiatives since 1996, Michael can look back on several years of volunteer work focussing on sustainable development, human rights, and refugee aid. Slaby has led several Amnesty International groups at both the local and regional level. In his studies, he concentrates on the religious, cultural, political, and legal dimensions of globalization and has written his master thesis on models of bridging religious differences in interfaith dialogue.

Following from the Earth Charter's emphasis on youth involvement in all strategies to create sustainable communities, the Earth Charter Youth Initiative (ECYI) was launched in 2000. The Earth Charter Youth Initiative (ECYI) disseminates the values and vision of the Earth Charter among young people. The ECYI also provides for youth participation in the national and global Earth Charter processes. With the initial help of staff at the International Secretariat in Costa Rica, an international network was established that brought together youth non governmental organizations (NGOs) and young activists from thirty countries. For the last two years, the

ECYI has been run exclusively by volunteers and coordinated by a core group of five young individuals from different parts of the world who dedicate their free time to serve as international facilitators.

From the very beginning of the ECYI, the internet has been used as the main means of communication, facilitating a sharing of ideas and experiences. The specific contribution of the ECYI is thus to give a human face to the abstract term of "interconnectedness." By using e-mail and internet facilities, youth are in contact with likeminded activists in other parts of the world. Hence, local activism and "global thinking" are combined.

The aims of the Youth Initiative are to encourage young people around the world to bring alive the values of sustainability, justice, and peace as they are outlined in the Earth Charter and to effect positive changes by using the Earth Charter as an ethical guideline. The underlying idea is that the more young people will adopt sustainable lifestyles and engage in projects concerned with sustainable development, the more they will influence their local communities. And, as the whole global society is nothing more than a conglomeration of local communities, by starting on the grassroots level, we can actually start changing the world!

The ECYI strives for a kind of ripple effect – like after someone throws a stone into a lake, each ripple creating

another one until the whole lake vibrates. The more stones are thrown into the water, the more the ripples can transform into waves – waves of healing water to wash the wounds of our fragmented societies and our tortured planet. Grassroots youth activities around the world form the backbone in this process.

Not being an NGO in itself, the ECYI benefits from its loose and creative structure, linking youth around the world who share the ethical vision of the Earth Charter and strive to make it a reality for their local and national communities. These youth have developed a remarkable range of ideas for bringing the Earth Charter into action and spreading its message among their peers: from the Armenian summer camps, focusing on environmental issues and distributing children's versions of the Earth Charter in three different languages; to the Costa Rican Earth Charter Concerts; to the Earth Scout movement, which guides youth through activities demonstrating each of the sixteen main Earth Charter principles and motivates them to earn badges for each.

Similarly, various countries have established Earth Charter Youth Groups (ECYGs)—organisations of youth who educate themselves about the Earth Charter and engage in projects that foster environmental protection, sustainable development, social justice, or a culture of peace. Some ECYGs also function as networks of youth organiza-

tions that foster synergy effects and joint activities. Since the program's launch in April 2003, ECYGs have attracted youth especially in developing countries such as Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Jordan, and the Philippines.¹

Several youth organisations endorsed the Charter and are today using it as an ethical guide in their struggle against HIV, poverty, and environmental degradation. In five different junior secondary schools in Ethiopia, ECYGs have been created to focus on poverty eradication, tree-planting campaigns, and waste collection. Furthermore, the Youth Employment Summits, the Youth Caucus to the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, the Youth Advisory Council of UNEP, and other national and international youth initiatives have endorsed the Earth Charter as their common vision, including it in their declarations.²

I know how hard it can sometimes be to keep up the motivation when there seems to be just a small group of people who cares about specific problems in one's own or foreign societies. Why bother? Why not do something else, something which is more "fun"? Sometimes, the problems and challenges against which one has to struggle seem overwhelming. The question comes to mind: "What can I, as a single individual, do against all this?"

The answer the Earth Charter provides is as striking as it is simple. Each single effort counts in creating a more sustainable, just, and peaceful future. Thousands of people across the planet care for the environment, work for social justice, and struggle for peace. These committed people have a lot in common. Consciously or not, they follow the ethics of the Earth Charter. So, there is a global partnership for the well-being of the human family and the larger living world; and this partnership is growing stronger each day. Each effort, no matter how small it might appear, makes a ripple. The ECYI

encourages youth around the world, both as leaders of tomorrow and as citizens of today, to join hands and hearts "to fulfill their essential role in creating sustainable societies," as the Earth Charter states in Subprinciple 12.c. The Earth Charter Youth Initiative strives to make this global partnership visible by reaching out to youth and empowering them to create synergy based on the Earth Charter's principles, locally and globally.

Events in the five years since the launching of the ECYI have confirmed youths' interest in establishing a sound, ethical foundation for the emerging global society – without any significant financial assistance, but rather nurturing the enthusiasm of dedicated young people ready to spend their free time striving to make the world a better place. Especially in developing countries, youth have demonstrated that the Earth Charter plants seeds of hope in the hearts of people. Young people from those countries, which are directly and adversely affected by economic globalisation, have realised how essential it is to find holistic solutions to these challenges.

Yet, in the Western world, this message still has to be spread. Involving youth of the developed world remains a foremost challenge facing the ECYI. If young people in countries suffering from poverty and the remnants of civil war are able to bring about sustainable changes, how much more should youth in the developed world be able to do?

As violent conflicts and terrorism create an atmosphere of anxiety, the gap between rich and poor constantly widens, and the human family continues committing geo-cide on the natural world, young people around the globe need to find common strategies to make their voices heard. The ECYI network serves as a platform for this process of communication. The more we young people work together, the more the ripples of change created around the world will unite into a wave of hope. ●

Notes

- 1 See also the youth contributions from Alamoosh, Murray, Yap, and Osano in this volume.
- 2 See also the youth contribution by Nyoni.