

## Building Consensus on Shared Values



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*Biographical note of Peter Blaze Corcoran on page 15.*

The decade of the 1990s was characterized by the increasingly important role of civil society in international policy-making processes, a growing understanding that issues can no longer be resolved in an isolated manner, and the growing spirit of interdependence and collaboration at all levels to ensure the common good. In this essay, we describe the widely-participatory, global process of building consensus on shared values that is the history and provenance of the Earth Charter.

The 1992 Rio Earth Summit, the end of the cold war, and the progress of communication technology were key elements that marked the beginning of this new era. The Earth Summit accredited an unprecedented number of non-state actors. Some 2,400 representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and more than 8,000 journalists attended the official event, and 17,000 people attended the parallel NGO Forum. Beginning with that trend, widespread participation of non-state actors in international affairs has continued to grow over the years. The internet has also enabled groups located in different parts of the world to exchange knowledge and join efforts

making their movements stronger. A unique, innovative outcome of the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development was the launch of partnerships among actors in different fields.

Given this general understanding that the United Nations (UN) and governments can no longer deal with the world problems alone, the value of collaborative efforts has been reinforced as has the role civil society can play. Furthermore, the concept of sustainability involves systemic thinking for bringing together the environmental, social, political, and economic dimensions of policy-making. This means that multiple ways of looking at global governance are necessary and imminent.

In this context, the Earth Charter Initiative has emerged as a collaborative effort and as an attempt to offer a vision of global ethics to guide society in this new period of history. It is part of the worldwide movement which seeks to identify common goals and shared values that transcend cultural, religious, and national boundaries. For over a decade, diverse groups and individuals from throughout the world have been inspired and motivated in the process of drafting the Earth Charter and using it. What could have ignited the interest, enthusiasm, and commitment from people from so many walks of life and different cultural and religious backgrounds to be involved in this process?

We believe it is the discomfort many people have with the current state of the world and their search for an alternative vision of development that ensures a better future for all. Many want to change the way we relate to each other and to the larger living world. Individuals and groups with different concerns such as water, desertification, health care, poverty, human rights, civil society participation, and environmental protection, more and more see the Earth Charter as a meaningful instrument that speaks to their concerns and helps connect to a larger collaborative good. Diverse groups – from indigenous peoples to UN officials, from grassroots activists to scientists, from attorneys to religious and spiritual leaders – have become passionately engaged in the shared ethical vision of the Earth Charter.

The Earth Charter is the result of a worldwide participatory process of consultation and drafting. As such, it is a synthesis of values, principles, and aspirations that are widely shared by a growing number of people and organizations all around the world. As a movement, it is a continuing process that seeks social transformation by incorporating the Earth Charter vision in many areas of activities.

The role and the significance of the Earth Charter can be better understood within the larger continuous efforts of the United Nations to identify the priorities to ensure a safe world. When the UN was founded in 1945, the world had many challenges to address in post-World War II circumstances. Thus, three major goals were identified for the UN – to ensure peace and world security, to secure human rights, and to foster cooperation for social and economic development. It was only in 1972, as the result of the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, that environment protection was considered as the fourth main preoccupation of the United Nations. Furthermore, it was not only until the 1980s that the concept of sustainable development emerged, raising the need to address these various preoccupations with an integrated approach and justifying the need for a new charter.

Much of the development of the Earth Charter derived from the 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development report *Our Common Future*. This report called for the need for “a new charter to guide state behaviour in the transition to sustainable development” and also stated that the charter “should prescribe new norms for state and interstate behaviour needed to maintain livelihoods and life on our shared planet” (p. 332).<sup>1</sup>

The idea of developing an Earth Charter was then included as part of the preparatory process for United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) – the Rio Earth Summit. In 1990 and 1991, several preparatory meetings for the conference took place at the international and national levels, which identified elements for such a charter. This effort sought to develop, through intergovernmental negotiation, a charter which was to provide the ethical foundation upon which Agenda 21 and the other UNCED agreements were to be based. The possibility of such an ethical foundation generated significant enthusiasm, which led a number of governments and non governmental organizations to submit recommendations and proposals on this subject.

However, a few months before the actual Summit, at the fourth and last Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) for the conference, it was clear that intergovernmental agreement could not be reached, and the Earth Charter was removed from the agenda for the Summit. It was decided to write instead what became the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. Nevertheless, during the 1992 NGO Global Forum, held in parallel to the Summit, NGOs from nineteen countries negotiated and drafted an Earth Charter building on the work done in the

preparatory process. This Earth Charter was one of the forty-six non governmental treaties of the NGO Global Forum in Rio de Janeiro. The individuals involved in this are pioneers of the Earth Charter Initiative.<sup>2</sup>

In the closing statement of the Earth Summit, Secretary General Maurice F. Strong said, “We have a profoundly important Declaration, but it must continue to evolve towards what many of us hope will be an Earth Charter that could be finally sanctioned on the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations in 1995.”

In April 1994, the idea was then taken up by Strong, Chairman of the Earth Council, and Mikhail Gorbachev, President of Green Cross International, when a new Earth Charter initiative was launched with support from Queen Beatrix, Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers, and the government of The Netherlands. A management committee was formed to guide the initial phase of the project, and Ambassador Mohammed Sahnoun of Algeria, the first Executive Director of the Initiative, ran the project coordinating office from The Hague.

Therefore, because of the failure in intergovernmental negotiations in the 1992 process, an opportunity for broader involvement of civil society was created through this new project. This also enabled the drafting process to benefit from thoughtful progress in the international community and from the conceptual agreements reached at the UN Summits held over the decade of the 1990s.

This phase of the Earth Charter consultation process began with an international workshop held at the Peace Palace in The Hague in May 1995. This event brought together over seventy participants from thirty countries on all continents and a wide range of cultures and faiths. The workshop served to define the needs, basic elements, and the process of how the Earth Charter should be drawn up. From this first workshop on the basic elements for an Earth Charter came the notion of common, but differentiated, responsibility of all states and individuals; the right of every person to a healthy environment; and the strengthening of people’s participation in decision-making.

During 1995 and 1996, extensive research was conducted in the fields of international law, science, religion, ethics, environmental conservation, and sustainable development in preparation for the drafting of the Earth Charter. In 1996, a compilation of approximately fifty international law instruments entitled *Principles of Environmental Conservation and Sustainable Development: Summary and Survey* was prepared by Steven C. Rockefeller, who was then invited to chair the drafting process. This manuscript was widely distributed in order to gather feedback in this initial phase of the consultation process. Organizations were asked to submit their recommendations by early 1997 in preparation to the Rio Forum+5, a forum organized by the Earth Council as an independent civil society review of the progress of implementation of the Earth Summit agreements. The Rio+5

Forum was held in March 1997 in Rio de Janeiro and drew over 500 representatives of NGOs and some governments. The occasion was an extraordinary platform to start a dialogue with youth, faith, women's groups, and indigenous peoples to assemble their concerns and suggestions on the Earth Charter.

The Earth Charter Commission was formed in early 1997 to oversee the ongoing consultation and drafting of the Charter. The Earth Council, under the leadership of Maximo Kalaw, Jr. of the Philippines, functioned as the Secretariat for the Commission. The first meeting of the Commission took place during the Rio+5 Forum, and on 18 March 1997, at the last day of the event, the Earth Charter Benchmark Draft was publicly issued. The benchmark draft signaled the achievement of a significant milestone, while at the same time it acknowledged that the drafting process needed to continue. The Commission called for ongoing international consultations regarding the text of the document.

Subsequently, numerous meetings and consultations took place to identify the shared values and principles that should be part of such a document and to offer comments on the drafts of the Earth Charter. These consultations were held at the national, regional, and global level, as well as with some specific interest groups. Recommendations and comments generated by these consultations were forwarded to a drafting committee created by the Earth Charter Commission. This exercise was valuable, not only to offer suggestions for the final draft of the Charter, but it was important to engage people in a process of reflection and consensus-building on Earth Charter themes. Thus, the exercise was generating local impacts and contributing to an international effort. We see the Earth Charter consultations as a worldwide, participatory process of building consensus and shared values. Special consultations were held with expert groups in international law, faith traditions, contemporary science, women issues, and education.

Just one example of such involvement is that of indigenous peoples. The Indigenous People's Program of the Earth Council, with the collaboration of partner institutions, made significant efforts to engage the wisdom of indigenous peoples in the consultation process. First, in May 1996, a meeting in Costa Rica brought together indigenous peoples from throughout the Americas. A compilation of suggestions stressed that the Earth Charter should include concepts expressing the values of many different peoples and cultures.

In 1997, Beatriz Schulthess, a member of the Indigenous Peoples Spiritual Consultative Council participated in the meeting of Earth Charter Drafting Committee in order to voice the concerns of those consulted. There was also an opportunity to dialogue during Rio+5 Forum, when a group of indigenous representatives shared their views about the Earth Charter. Further contributions were made through a number of workshops. Significant interest was generated among indigenous groups from

Latin America, such that Earth Charter National Committees in El Salvador and Panama were led by indigenous peoples groups.

In addition, the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC) became deeply involved in the debate concerning the wording of the Earth Charter text; in particular with regard to Principle 7 of Benchmark Draft II, "Treat all living beings with compassion." This was because of the interpretation of the word "compassion." Compassion for animals is a very important notion in many religious traditions, but it was unacceptable among the indigenous hunting cultures as related to animals. After significant deliberation, the notion of "respect and consideration" in relation to animals was accepted by all.

The Earth Charter Consultation also benefited from comments of well-known indigenous representatives such as Oren Lyons, Faith Keeper of the Onondaga Council of Chiefs of the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy; and Henriette Rasmussen, of the Inuit people; and Pauline Tangiora, of the Maori from Aotearoa (New Zealand).

After consulting with such different groups, all involved in the drafting process agreed with recommendations received that the Earth Charter should give special recognition to indigenous peoples, but the question was related to the wording and the location of such principle. The reference to indigenous cultures appears in the final text of the Earth Charter as 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." In addition, as a result of this process, the document is infused with indigenous wisdom.

The IUCN Commission on Environmental Law was closely involved throughout the consultation and drafting process. Among many other occasions was a consultation held in June 1999 with the Working Group on Ethics and Jurisprudence of the IUCN Commission on Environmental Law, where inputs were offered, as well as legal advice in the drafting of the Earth Charter. International lawyers from ten different countries, representing Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, and the Americas attended the meeting and contributed to the discussions. As a result of this effort, the Earth Charter drafting benefited from the highest standards of content originating in international law.

Forty-two national Earth Charter committees were established between 1997 and 2000 in all regions of the world and numerous consultations were held. The levels of commitment ranged from fully operational national committees, as in Australia, Mexico or the United States which were successful in encouraging broad-based participation and involvement in different sectors and in regions within those countries, to a single consultation held in some nations.

Three regional meetings also took place in the Americas; Central Asia; and Africa and the Middle East. In December 1998, the Earth Charter Continental Conference of the Americas was held in Brazil. The conference brought together over one hundred delegates from twenty-two countries to dialogue about the Earth Charter. On the final day of the conference, a Latin American and Caribbean Earth Charter Draft Document was issued. The intention was that it would serve as a basis for continued discussion, debate, and revision in the international drafting process. In June 1999, approximately thirty participants from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, representing National Councils for Sustainable Development, NGOs, governments, academia, and the media, were brought together to learn more about the Earth Charter and comment on it. Participants defined some strategies for implementing Earth Charter values and principles and integrating them into National Sustainable Plans in Central Asia. Twenty participants from various countries of Africa and the Middle East met in December 1999 in Capetown, South Africa, to add significant value and perspectives to the Earth Charter consultation. The three-day dialogue with members of the Earth Charter Drafting Committee provided an opportunity for groups in the region to contribute to the drafting process. Issues regarding gender equality, compassion for animals, indigenous peoples, and respect for cultural traditions, among others were discussed. Participants represented Kenya, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Burkina Faso, Mauritius, Senegal, Niger, Ghana, and Jordan.

In addition, three online conferences on the Earth Charter were held in 1999. Among them, a forum held in October 1999 was designed to facilitate discussion on the content and structure of the Earth Charter Benchmark Draft II. It involved approximately seventy-four representatives of Earth Charter national committees and affiliated groups as well as participants of the Earth Charter Drafting Committee. Two internet-based forums on "Global Ethics, Sustainable Development, and the Earth Charter" were held to encourage dialogue between university students and professors, and to engage different constituencies more deeply on the concept of an Earth Charter. The first of these conferences was conducted in English in April 1999 and involved individuals from over 500 colleges, universities, and organizations from seventy-three different countries. The second one was held in Spanish and Portuguese in November 1999 and gathered individuals from over 250 colleges, universities, and organizations from forty countries.

All these efforts proved extremely valuable in highlighting areas of consensus, as well as areas of conflict, in relation to the structure and phrasing of the Benchmark Drafts. The contributions gathered in the consultation process enabled extensive revisions on the different drafts of the Charter.

The history of all of these consultations – the story of the Earth Charter – is a story of people. Two very special moments of this consultation process are marked in the memory of those who

had the privilege to be there. The first one was during the closing of the December 1998 Earth Charter Conference of the Americas held in Mato Grosso, Brazil. To conclude the conference, participants were taken to a National Park located outside of Cuiabá called Salgadeira (Chapada Dos Guimaraes). Participants were invited to be part of a mobilization effort involving four thousand students wearing Earth Charter shirts, hand-in-hand forming a human chain of over three and a half kilometers in a symbolic embracing of the Earth. Following that, a striking Earth Charter monument was inaugurated. The monument, by artist Jonas Correa, presents the Earth being sustained by the trunk of a tree. In it, five children representing five continents surround the tree holding hands to symbolize protection and security of the planet. It was a moving and unforgettable experience for all participants. The second moment was later, on an evening in December 1999 during the World Parliament of Religions at the Arena of Good Hope in Cape Town, South Africa. The Arena of Good Hope was overflowing with more than five thousand people. Nelson Mandela entered in the room and the audience could not stop clapping; great emotion was in everybody's heart in the presence of such a significant leader of historical social change in his country. In the midst of this very moving moment, the Earth Charter was presented to the conference participants and to Nelson Mandela as a gift of their service.

Three formal International Earth Charter Drafting Committee meetings took place to review the results of these consultation processes, to address key issues identified during the consultation, and to prepare a revision of the draft. These drafting meetings brought together a diversity of scientists, international lawyers, ethicists, and NGO activists representing all regions of the world. Discussions on these meetings were especially important in shaping the document. These meetings were held in 1997, 1999, and 2000.<sup>3</sup>

The length, structure, logical arrangement of principles, and language style were carefully examined at the drafting meetings. Throughout the process, there was a debate about the length. Many believed that a substantial document was essential and that a brief document of a page or so would not fulfill the expectations of many, thus it would be difficult to gain widespread support. Others wanted a short Earth Charter with ten brief principles to be easy to use and circulated. It was concluded that a brief Charter tended to be general, and the generalities often did not address the complexity of the problems from the point of view of many groups. The Drafting Committee opted for a layered document and divided the Charter into four parts. Considering the many concerns that emerged in the consultation process, it was clear that the main principles should be organized in multiple layers of themes, accompanied by supporting principles, in order to be inclusive.

As a result of the worldwide consultation and drafting process, which involved thousands of individuals and hundreds of

groups in various parts of the world, the Earth Charter Commission issued a final version of the Earth Charter after their meeting on 12-14 March 2000 at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris. A consensus of shared values had been reached. The official launching of the Earth Charter took place at the Peace Palace in The Hague on 29 June 2000, when a new phase in the Initiative began.

Upon adoption of the final document, the Earth Charter Commission recommended changes in the structure of the Earth Charter Initiative to adapt to its new phase. The main decision was that the Initiative should no longer function under the joint guidance of the Earth Council and Green Cross International, but was to be overseen by the Steering Committee designated by the Commission itself. The Earth Charter International Secretariat, located in Costa Rica, was given the mandate of promoting the Earth Charter widely and to continue serving as a facilitator and catalyst for Earth Charter activities taking place throughout the world.

One of the first tasks of the Secretariat was to seek support for the Earth Charter. Endorsements of the Earth Charter have come from all continents; they tell us that the Earth Charter message and plea for change is heard and shared. This building of support worldwide is reinforcing the purpose and aims of this movement. Endorsement of the Earth Charter is defined as signifying commitment to the spirit and aims of the document and an intention to use the Earth Charter in appropriate ways, given the situation of the individual or group. To date, the Earth Charter has been formally endorsed by over two thousand organizations worldwide<sup>4</sup>. Many of them have membership of thousands or even millions. Among these groups are national and international organizations, educational institutions, private sector entities, religious groups, and nearly four hundred towns and cities. A significant, recent endorsement was from the World Conservation Union (IUCN) in 2004.

Earth Charter events were organized by the Secretariat at all the PrepComs leading up to the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development. At the last plenary session of PrepCom IV held in Bali, Indonesia, a number of governments expressed their support for including a reference in the Summit Political Declaration acknowledging the Earth Charter. This was recorded in the Chair's summary of the PrepCom. Later, at Johannesburg, the Earth Charter received acknowledgment from governments of Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Honduras, Bolivia, Niger, The Netherlands, Romania, Spain, Jamaica, and Jordan. It had a reference in the opening speech of President Mbeki, in a number of addresses of heads of state, and in the Draft Political Declaration of Johannesburg. Unfortunately, as a result, last-minute, non-public objections from certain governments, reference to the Earth Charter was deleted from the final version. This happened despite the fact that the Earth Charter was also recognized in a number of documents set forth in preparatory meetings for the Summit, including the UN regional roundta-

bles, the Latin American and Caribbean Ministerial Initiative for Sustainable Development, and the report of the Secretary General's High Level Advisory Panel.

In the year 2000, the Secretariat put in place a programme to promote the educational uses of the Earth Charter and to develop educational resources that would help undertake this task. An International Education Advisory Committee was formed in 2001 to assist the development of a strategic plan and overall advise the programme activities. Two on-line forums on education and the Earth Charter were held; the first one was held in 2001 with the aims of articulating an educational philosophy to underpin the educational use of the Earth Charter and identifying strategic educational opportunities, priorities, and partnerships. The second forum, held in December 2003, responded to the need to further the discussions and to advance the education programme's activities. Considering the requests and the need for teaching materials to help educators use the Earth Charter in their practice, an Earth Charter Education Guidebook for teachers in primary and secondary schools has been developed.

Over the past five years, the Earth Charter has been endorsed and utilized by an increasing number of schools and institutions of higher education. A noted achievement was the adoption of a resolution in support of the Earth Charter at the UNESCO General Conference held in October 2003. The resolution recognizes the Earth Charter as an important ethical framework for sustainable development and affirmed member states' intention "to utilize the Earth Charter as an educational instrument, particularly in the framework of the United Nations Decade for Education for Sustainable Development." Moreover, in the Draft UNESCO Implementation Scheme for the Decade, the Earth Charter is recommended to be put in action.

The Earth Charter International Secretariat has also emphasized work with the Earth Charter at the local community level. Work with local communities has been done with the support of key organizations such as the Earth Charter Community



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Summits, Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI), Fundación Deyna and ForoSoria 21 in Spain, Global Community Initiatives (GCI), and the World Resources Institute (WRI). Cities such as Joondalup, Australia, and Toronto, Canada, have utilized the Earth Charter as a tool in their planning. The City of San Jose, Costa Rica, used the Earth Charter vision to undertake a project to train all their staff with regard to sustainability principles.

An important example of local community work is that of Jan Roberts and the Institute for Ethics and Meaning in Tampa, Florida, USA. Earth Charter Community Summits are held annually as grassroots efforts to bring people together to be inspired to make the Earth Charter's principles a reality in their lives and communities. Local summit organizers are volunteers who simply want to bring the Earth Charter to their home towns. The number of cities holding simultaneous gatherings on this topic has ranged from twelve to thirty-three over the past four years.

In late 2003, an Earth Charter Partnership for Sustainable Communities consisting of the World Resources Institute, the Earth Charter Initiative, and Global Community Initiatives was formed to further the development of necessary tools to help local communities use the Earth Charter. An Earth Charter Community Action Tool (EarthCAT) has been developed to provide communities with a guide to develop goals, targets, and strategies to implement sustainable practices and to measure their progress using indicators and reporting systems.

Building consensus on shared values has been a long, thoughtful, and richly human process. The Earth Charter Initiative is a civil society movement working toward a just, peaceful, and sustainable world. Even though much progress has been made, the Earth Charter Initiative now faces the challenge of making the Earth Charter an effective instrument of global governance, and international law, as well as grounding it in peoples' daily lives. The success of this initiative depends upon the cooperation and mutual support of involved groups – and the ongoing enthusiasm of individuals for putting the Earth Charter into action. ●

#### Notes

1 World Commission on Environment and Development. (1987). *Our Common Future* (p. 332). Oxford: Oxford UP. The Commission was chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland and is informally known as the Brundtland Commission.

2 Among them we would like to mention Peter Adriance, who led much of this effort in his capacity as secretary and co-chair of the Citizens Network Working Group on Ethics, Environment and Development; Rick Clugston; Moacir Gadotti; Moema Vizzer; Prue Taylor; and Klaus Bosselmann. All are still involved in the Earth Charter Initiative.

3 A small and informal drafting meeting also took place in early 1998.

4 See [www.earthcharter.org](http://www.earthcharter.org) for further information on endorsements.