

Chamniern Paul Vorratnchaiphan, Thailand. [A thematic essay which speaks to Principle 13 on using the Earth Charter to strengthen local communities in developing countries](#)

Earth Charter Imperatives: Linking the Global and the Local in Developing Countries



Chamniern Paul Vorratnchaiphan brings more than thirty years of experience in community organizing, social and environmental research, teaching, consulting, and project team leading to his current position as Director of the Grassroots Action Program at Thailand Environment Institute. He works with implementation mechanisms such as

Local Agenda 21, Sustainable and Healthy Cities, Earth Charter principles, Millennium Development Goals, and ISO 14001. He strongly supports the participation of local communities and local authorities, particularly in areas of local development and physical planning processes. Mr. Chamniern promotes spiritual maturity as an essence of the principle of deep ecology and the balance and integration of yin and yang as important strategies for understanding the Earth Charter.

Local governments have been asked to endorse the Earth Charter as a means to inspire transformation hopefully leading to developing a deeper culture of sustainability, respect, and equity in their cities and localities. The Local Government Declaration to the World Summit on Sustainable Development was one such step closer to localizing commitments to sustainable development. However, to be successfully implemented, these commitments must result in sustainable, integrated planning, investment in and management of resources, promoting public health and clean energy, as well as adopting socially and environmentally sound procurement policies.

A challenge therefore exists on how to translate the lofty statements of the Earth Charter into concrete local actions. An even greater challenge exists to formulate a “local charter” that truly embodies all the spirit and principles of the overarching document. While some progress has been made by localities in developed countries, the Earth Charter must not become only for those who can afford it, and “exported” as another by-product of globalization. Ways and means are needed for the Earth Charter to establish effective linkages between the good thoughts, ideas, and principles of global sustainability balanced against the reality at the local level, in all parts of the world,

dealing with people’s specific conditions, aspirations, and culture. In the case of developing countries, the Earth Charter needs to be flexible enough to recognize and promote strategic priorities that cannot only be stated at the local level, but also be realistically transformed from a vision into meaningful action.

When looking to the Greater Mekong Subregion, a number of countries are making significant advances in decentralization, bureaucratic reforms and other advances that give increasing responsibility to the local level. Many of these reforms are being driven by a growing demand from communities and other civil society members for action on deteriorating environmental quality and declining health and safety conditions. For example, in 1997 Thailand adopted a new and modern constitution along with a number of organic laws¹ and supporting legislation for decentralization and major administrative reforms. These changes facilitate devolution of authority and resources to local government units and encourage greater public participation in the local management of natural resources and the local environment². As a result, many local authorities are seizing the opportunity presented them and are now defining and implementing their own vision and development priorities that better reflect and address local conditions and needs.

While Thailand is perhaps one of the most economically and democratically developed of countries in the region, similar processes are emerging in many of its neighbouring countries. However, local governments in all these countries remain challenged by deficits in capacity, processes, and tools. These deficits must be overcome to allow local governments to make the transition from centrally controlled units, to being truly devolved entities that can pursue locally-decided development in a balanced, sustainable, and equitable manner. Additionally, as in many developing countries, local development is also influenced by other factors such as globalization, loss of traditional wisdoms, ongoing client-patron relationships, and corruption that threatens the identity and culture of the place by only emphasising economic development at the cost of all other aspects.

While having a relation to the wider Earth Charter, the framework and challenges described above have a mutual impact on

the opportunities and challenges for pursuing Principle 13 on strengthening democratic institutions. Its subprinciples, on access to information, 13.a; on meaningful participation, 13.b; and, on strengthening local environmental management, 13.f; are largely being pursued by Thai and other local authorities and have good potential for adoption and implementation under the various decentralization and reform initiatives. However, when attempting to pursue the remaining subprinciples on protecting freedom of expression, 13.c; on access to administrative and independent judicial procedures vis-à-vis environmental harm, 13.d; and on eliminating corruption, 13.e; it must be recognized that significant work is still required. It is the internalization of all components of Principle 13, more than any other, that will promote sustainable development at the local level in developing countries.

These challenges do not mean that integrating principles and components of the Earth Charter cannot be initiated in such countries. Rather, it is becoming increasingly imperative that the principles and ideologies as expressed in the Earth Charter, and especially Principle 13, must now find a way to seize the opportunities presented by ongoing change in these countries and become meaningful to the local level in concrete terms in order to bring balance to the development process.

A number of important initiatives are underway in many countries in the subregion that promote sustainable development at the local level and can subsequently reinforce the localization of the Earth Charter principles. In Thailand, municipal governments have come together through a grassroots formulation process to establish a set of forty-seven “Sustainable City Indicators” that they are currently using to guide their investment decisions in an integrated and balanced approach, which offers a means of evaluating their progress towards achieving a more liveable and sustainable city. This initiative complemented the national work of Thailand to revise their Sustainable Development Indicators.³ Like all countries, Thailand is required to report annually to the Sustainable Development Committee on its progress.

Other initiatives have sought to introduce strategic management principles⁴ to local Thai governments to support them taking a more holistic and integrated approach to their development planning and management. Supporting frameworks and networks⁵ are being reinforced and energized for local governments both in Thailand and the subregion. Significant work is also being undertaken to localize Millennium Development Goals at the provincial level.⁶ While some of these initiatives are donor driven, there is an overall demonstrated interest by local governments to embrace such interventions and begin to internalize sustainable development principles.

In many ways, the local initiatives and demands emerging from developing countries can be viewed as a “challenge” to the Earth Council to find ways and means of bringing the Earth Charter to be relevant and workable for their local governments

without losing sight of the overall global objectives. Whether through linking with locally based Sustainable City Indicators, or offering ways to realistically transform the Earth Charter principles from local vision into meaningful action, work must be undertaken that can result in generating important lessons that others can learn from and begin to hopefully reverse much of the unsustainable development activity that is plaguing localities in the developing world.

These various ways and means for the Earth Charter to establish linkages that balance between the global and the local should not only inspire local governments, but should also result in their transformation from vision to meaningful action. In pursuing such transformation, a question emerges as to whether any of the resulting instruments, at any level, will be strong enough to protect nature and the rights, culture, and well-being of the people who inhabit it from human-induced degradation and destruction. In the course of attempting to answer this, significant discussion has been pursued that goes beyond scientific, technological, financial, and environmental frameworks by attempting to build an ethical foundation as a core principle to achieve greater sustainability. As a result, the Earth Charter speaks of ecological governance as well as other ethical imperatives to guide conduct at all levels. However, concepts such as governance and ethics tend to remain external to many traditional societies and by themselves cannot restore a lost identity – as is the case of many localities in the developing world. The point to be raised for further discussion is the issue of whether “building an ethical foundation” in society is sufficient to achieve a sustainable way of life. And, if it isn’t, of how we go beyond strengthening ethics to regain a society’s innate spirituality to be at the core of its actions. There is a need to reinforce spiritual maturity while it still exists in our societies and to rebuild spiritual maturity where it has long been lost. ●

Notes

- 1 Subsidiary laws determining the fundamental political principles of the government.
- 2 Specifically sections 56,78,79, 282-284, and 290 of the 1997 Constitution
- 3 As the Thailand Environment Institute (TEI) was secretariat and advisor to both the local (SCI) and national (SDI) processes, significant linkages and synergies were able to be maintained between the two processes.
- 4 This TEI driven initiative was introduced to encourage and train municipalities to undertake a more strategic approach to local development planning that emphasized shifting from an incremental approach in the planning and budgeting process to one that establishes a vision and works to formulate action plans for achieving it.
- 5 TEI is working with SCP/UN-Habitat to establish a “Sustainable Cities Resource Centre” for training and other capacity building supports in Thailand and the Greater Mekong Subregion, as well as to formalize a Regional Learning Network (RLN) that brings together a range of locally and nationally based resources that provide technical and other support for local authorities as they attempt to deal with increasingly complex urban issues.
- 6 With donor support from UNDP and NESDB (2004-2005), TEI is implementing pilot activities to elaborate Provincial Millennium Development Goal Reports and integrate the outputs within the provincial development plan for implementation.