

Erna Witoelar, Indonesia. A thematic essay which speaks to Principle 9 on using the Earth Charter to eradicate poverty

The Earth Charter and the United Nations Millennium Development Goals



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Only a few months after the Earth Charter was launched, world leaders from 189 United Nations (UN) Member States unanimously adopted the Millennium Declaration in September 2000. It called for a fully-inclusive, people-centered and rights-based approach to development. They thereby reaffirmed the commitment of their nations and the international community to the achievements of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), an ambitious agenda for reducing poverty and improving lives. As UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said, “We will spare no efforts to free our fellow men, women, and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty, to which more than one billion of them are currently subjected.”

The Millennium Development Goals are eradicating extreme poverty and hunger; achieving universal primary education; promoting gender equality and empowering women; reducing child mortality; reducing maternal mortality; combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensuring environmental sustainability; and forming a global partnership for development.

Seven of the eight goals have been translated into quantitative and time-bound targets, thereby allowing measurement and reporting of progress through objectively verifiable and interna-

tionally comparable indicators. The targets are quite specific, unlike in the past when the same goals were set only in rhetorical terms.

The MDGs are not just national governments’ commitments to the UN or the international communities; they are these governments’ commitments to their own people. The Goals are global in their scope, but targets and indicators can be tailor-made to shorter time scales, higher targets, and local circumstances. The Goals are inter-related. The synergy among goals is a unique characteristic of the MDGs. Conversely, lack of progress in one goal is a barrier for achieving progress in another. Since a single intervention will achieve advances in multiple goals, working across sectors is much more effective than working in a single sector.

But the MDGs are not just about targets and statistics – they’re also about values, stated clearly in the Millennium Declaration. The Values stated in the Millennium Declaration are:

Freedom: men and women have the right to a life of dignity, free from hunger, violence, oppression, and injustice.

Equality: no individual or nation must be denied the opportunity to benefit from development. Men and women must have equal rights.

Solidarity: costs and burdens of global challenges must be distributed fairly in accordance with equity and social justice.

Tolerance: human beings must respect one another in all their diversity. Diversity is a precious asset of humanity.

Respect for Nature: current unsustainable patterns of production and consumption must change in accordance with the precepts of sustainable development.

Shared Responsibility: global challenges must be addressed multilaterally. The UN must play the central role.

Reading all these values, one cannot deny that they resemble very much the values shared by the Earth Charter in building a just, sustainable, and peaceful global society.

“Freedom” and “Equality” bear a resemblance to the Earth Charter principles of Part III: Social and Economic Justice. They are the base for achieving the goals of poverty and hunger eradication; of equal access to basic health, education, shelter, water and sanitation services, and of gender equality and empowerment of women. While the MDGs focus on the achievement of economic and social human rights for all, the Charter further elaborates on justice and ethics.

“Tolerance” and “Respect for Nature” have similarities with the Earth Charter principles of Part I, Respect and Care for the Community of Life, and Part II, Ecological Integrity. Diversity of nature and humanity is very important in all attempts to ensure environmental sustainability. This goal is further targeting to integrate principles of sustainable development into country policies and programs; reverse the loss of environmental resources; and significantly increase access to safe drinking water, basic sanitation, and secure tenure for slum dwellers.

“Solidarity” and “Shared Responsibility” are a common force throughout the Earth Charter as well. Both the Declaration and Earth Charter are advocating for the importance of these values at global, national, and local levels. Both instruments seek to inspire in all the people a new sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility for the well-being of the human family, among countries as well as within each country. The Earth Charter widens it to all forms of life in the larger living world, while the MDGs focus more on how to implement this global solidarity. It is stated in Goal 8 that the aims are more and better aid, more open and just trade systems, debt cancellation, access to technology, and more job opportunities for youth. As a whole, both in the long-term vision as well as the underlying principles and values, the Millennium Declaration, including its goals, is very much in line with the vision and principles of the Earth Charter.

The momentum of renewed global solidarity, pledged formally by governments and all international and regional agencies through processes towards and during the MDG + 5 Summit in September 2005, can and should also be used to renew people's commitments to the Earth Charter. By now, most UN member countries realize that successful achievement of the MDGs requires addressing their links with other issues identified in the Millennium Declaration, such as human rights, good governance, peace, and security. These are all concerns strongly declared at the Earth Charter, but received retaliations from many government delegates during the tireless efforts by the Earth Charter Secretariat and Commissioners to seek endorsement of the Earth Charter by the UN.

Even though MDGs do not expressly refer to civic participation in decision-making or the role of civil and political freedoms,

which are strongly stated in the Earth Charter, these are important elements of the Millennium Declaration. Civil society campaigns on MDGs mostly advocate a rights-based approach, with inclusive decision-making involving women, the poor, and the marginalized. The path to achieve the Goals has to be paved by access to information; access to participation in planning, monitoring and evaluating; and access to means of making governments accountable.

The relationship between realization of MDGs with conflict resolution and peace building are also more and more recognized, not only in countries where conflicts exist, but also in many regional and international forums discussing regional and global challenges for achievement of the Goals. Missing the MDG targets and conflict can be cyclical: hardships, especially when accompanied by sharp inequalities, can breed violence; while poverty and unequal distribution of scarce natural resources is a potential cause of conflict. Hence, conflict directly and indirectly weakens achievement of other MDGs. It undermines economies, destabilizes governments, provokes mass movements of people, and destroys infrastructure. Working to achieve the MDGs should align efforts with the Earth Charter campaigners towards peaceful conflict resolution.

What is keeping the world from achieving the Goals is not the lack of finances or technical capability – it is the political obstacles or the lack of political will. This is not news. What is news is that there is now an explicit recognition of this fact in the UN system at the highest levels, and this is symbolized in the conception of the Millennium Campaign. The explicit object of the Campaign is to encourage and facilitate “we, the people,” at a national and international level, to hold their governments and other key actors accountable for their promises in the Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Goals.

The Earth Charter can be used as a tool to advance the MDGs as it promotes environmental sustainability and responsibility for a way of life that can inspire commitment, cooperation, and change. Environmental sustainability, including sustaining the biodiversity of all the world's ecosystems and sustainable provision of water for life, is ensured by the maintenance and protection of the ecological integrity and rehabilitation of degraded ecosystems. Further, sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation for the urban poor can be integrated into all urban slum-upgrading programs – which can also ensure secure tenure for slum dwellers.

One-fifth of the world's population live in extreme poverty while 800 million people are chronically hungry, which is the primary concern of the Millennium Development Goal 1 on Poverty. Again, women disproportionately suffer the burden of poverty. Sufficient clean drinking water and adequate water for other household, agriculture, and economic activities can be instrumental in eradicating poverty and hunger. Urban and rural poor are buying more expensive water than the affluent people.

Provision and pricing of water, therefore, need to give greater weight to increasing access instead of fiscal gain. Water is a basic human right, not a commercial commodity.

The mere fact that poverty, health, education, gender, and environment became the millennium goals is due to a lack of political and resource commitments to achieve them as a whole. In many countries, the policy framework is not yet aligned with the MDGs and the fundamental objective of reducing human poverty. Poverty reduction is still seen as an automatic by-product of economic growth and macroeconomic stability. The Earth Charter can balance this by providing a values framework to translate the concept of “pro-poor policies” into specific and practical policy measures.

Even though the Earth Charter has not been fully endorsed by the United Nations in its totality, it has directly or indirectly influenced UN processes and products in quite significant ways. Unlike the Millennium Declaration, which is a more government-led process, the Earth Charter came about through a very participatory process involving thousands of individuals and hundreds of organizations. There is much to learn from this process to campaign for the MDGs.

The Millennium Declaration, including the MDGs, and the Earth Charter are really complementary to each other. There are cross-cutting issues and overlapping concerns, but each declaration also has its own niche in the segments of society. Even as the MDGs are more acceptable to governments at national, regional, and global levels; so the Earth Charter is more easily adopted by the civil society, media, parliamentarian, local governments, private sector, academicians, religious groups, and so on. These are target groups on which the Millennium Campaign is focusing. Hence, is it then still relevant to seek endorsement of the Earth Charter by the United Nations?

Today’s world has the resources, technology, and knowledge to eradicate poverty with a people-centered and rights-based approach to development, and to integrate principles of sustainable development into national policies and programs. This campaign is about everybody’s participation, and if the Millennium Development Goals advocates and Earth Charter supporters can build synergy and campaign together, then we will be the first generation that can really see poverty eradicated. We have no excuses. ●