

“Engaging in Global Dialogue for Sustainable Development”

**Submission for consideration by Richard Chu to GYAN France’s
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By: Richard Chu

“We must imaginatively develop and apply the vision of a sustainable way of life locally, nationally, regionally and globally...We must deepen and expand the global dialogue that generated the Earth Charter, for we have much to learn from the ongoing collaborative search for truth and wisdom.”

- *“The Way Forward” in the Earth Charter*

Hope for a sustainable future—where individuals are empowered towards positive change, and where capitalism and consumerism are not a serious cause for human suffering and environmental devastation—has never been more important than it is today. More people have a greater consciousness of the impact their actions have in the world at large. They are engaging in fruitful dialogues and taking action at the local level to build awareness of the importance of sustainable modes of living and production. In incremental steps, they are taking a stand against negative environmental impact, social discrimination and cultural prejudice. In short, the rise of a global consciousness and a global citizenship is becoming a reality throughout the world. Through grassroots awareness campaigns and dialogues for a sustainable world, with the Earth Charter as a comprehensive guide, local change on a global scale is leading to a dramatic change that can transform the moral and ethical foundations of humanity.

Challenges and Opportunities of Globalization

In our increasingly integrated world, the consequences of our actions are more widely felt than ever before. While shifting weather patterns and the rapidity of breaking news are more common examples of this reality, even smaller-scale actions such as household energy consumption and garbage generation can have a significant impact on people and the environment thousands of kilometers away. One only has to remember the impact of SARS on international travel, or the consequences of an overload on a power transmission line around

Lake Erie that cut power to 50 million residents in Canada and the United States in 2003.

Clearly, globalization and integration have their drawbacks.

At the same time, however, globalization has had an equally significant, positive impact on the world. More than ever, people are recognizing the value of being multi-lingual and using language translation services to breakdown a significant barrier to mutual understanding and collaboration. The internet and wireless communications are greatly expanding the reach of local campaigns for peace, education reforms, environmental stewardship and social entrepreneurship. In addition, greater understanding of, and appreciation for, cultural diversity through cultural, educational and business exchanges have continued to reduce the gap between East and West, Orient and Occident, and to some degree, North and South. And now, more than ever, people are increasingly aware of the need for change in our economies, policies and societies towards sustainable development. Both urban planners and ordinary residents are realizing that insatiable consumption and unnecessary production are not the best foundations for a society, particularly in North America. Clearly, more needs to be done to build awareness and encourage sustainable modes of consumption and production at the local level, everywhere in the world. This can be done on a global scale by increasing awareness of our natural inter-dependence with our environment and with each other—no matter where we live on the planet, using the Earth Charter as a concrete and effective guide.

Earth Charter as a Compass for Sustainable Development

Before describing how to increase awareness of inter-dependence at the local level on a global scale, it is important to first describe the conditions within which such an action is possible. These conditions include understanding what sustainable development is and its scope. It includes an awareness of the scope of the problems we face, and an understanding that it is a

long-term project with incremental gains. It includes a sense of hope that every incremental, positive change by even a single individual can have a lasting impact towards the goals of sustainable development.

So what is sustainable development and what does it mean for an individual living on this planet? The 1987 U.N. World Commission on Environment and Development defined it as “development that meets the needs of the people today without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” On the surface, the term is meant to incorporate an environmental component to economic development. Yet, as a growing number of people are realizing, sustainable development means more than just considering environmental concerns. It also includes issues relating to human rights, social and economic justice, even peace and democracy. Mark Diesendorf of the Sustainability Centre in Australia defines sustainable development as “types of economic and social development which protect and enhance the natural environment and social equity” (3). He expands on this definition saying,

This broad definition conveys explicitly that there are three principal aspects -- ecological, economic and social -- and that the ecological aspect and social equity are primary. Furthermore, this description of avoids trade-offs between environment, economy and society. It says that any type of social or economic development is sustainable, *provided* that it protects and enhances the environment and social equity (3-4).

In its broadest sense, sustainable development means an economic, political, social, even cosmological system that not only meets the needs of people today and tomorrow, but meets the needs of the environment to sustain itself and the needs for all humanity to live valuable lives in peaceful coexistence.

This definition of sustainable development seems excessively grand in scope, yet if we are to make any gains with respect to sustainable development at the local level, it must be all-inclusive in nature to be truly effective. Individuals need to first understand the scope of the

problem in order to establish an effective scope for a solution. In other words, people need to see all the cards on the table before they can realize what's involved in the game. From there, people can then dive in to specific areas of activity and search for appropriate solutions that are not made in isolation to other related issues and concerns.

In this regard, utilizing the Earth Charter as a resource to understanding the scope of sustainable development can be very useful. The Earth Charter provides a comprehensive, ethical framework from which to deal with issues relating to sustainable development, one that has already been adopted by UNESCO in 2003. It recognizes four major, inter-related issues that need to be addressed in order for sustainable development to be achieved. These four are: 1) Respect and Care for the Community of Life; 2) Ecological Integrity; 3) Social and Economic Justice; and 4) Peace, Democracy and Non-Violence¹. Within each of these themes are 60 concrete issues that need addressing. These range from basic human rights, food and water to access to education and an equitable distribution of wealth within and among nations. While the Earth Charter is very complex—incorporating virtually all the major issues affecting the world today—it is an expansive and cohesive framework from which to examine our current state of affairs globally, nationally and personally. It is a document that gives concrete definition to a broad understanding of sustainable development, and offers itself as a roadmap for individuals, organizations and governments to play a role in making society a more sustainable entity in our world.

The value of having a broad understanding of sustainable development lies in establishing “the big picture” with respect to specific issues, as outlined, for example, in the Earth Charter. While some may criticize any broad definition as being wishy-washy and

¹ The four main sections of the Earth Charter and their expanded components can be found at the Earth Charter Initiative website, www.earthcharter.org. The Earth Charter is available for download as a PDF file in 32 languages.

unfocused, having the big picture in mind can be an effective way to orient all parties involved towards a common goal. The need for a common goal is perhaps most apparent when different individuals and groups try to unite towards something that is in their collective interest. When specifics and details that bog down the group arise because of their differences, the bigger picture can reorient and refocus everyone towards achieving their common goal. Grassroots activities are an important example where this can be applied. While many local organizations have their own interests in many activities, in order to bring like-minded groups together, there needs to be a mechanism or resource that can facilitate the gathering of complementary talent and expertise specific individuals and organizations possess. The Earth Charter can be that resource or tool to bring these like-minded groups and individuals together because of its grassroots and non-sectarian orientation.

Grassroots Action as the Source of Change

Local, grassroots activities are perhaps the most significant means of achieving sustainable development because, ultimately, individuals are the ones who will reduce carbon dioxide emissions, reduce the garbage they generate, engage in democracy, exercise their human rights and facilitate a stronger sense of community. As Daisaku Ikeda wrote in his education proposal that was included in the Global Implementation Document at the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development, “In addition to ‘top-down’ reforms, such as the legal and institutional measures, any lasting solution will require commensurate “bottom-up” reforms that build and strengthen solidarity at the people's level. These are the two interlinked prerequisites of change on a global scale.”² People must not only be aware of these issues, but need to take an active role in implementing them in their own lives. Without grassroots support,

² Soka Gakkai International (SGI) President Daisaku Ikeda’s education proposal, “The Challenge of Global Empowerment: Education for a Sustainable Future” is available as a PDF file on the SGI website, www.sgi.org/wssd/04propos/top.htm, 2002.

any policy or treaty aimed at resolving a sustainable development issue will simply be worthless. Without citizen support, nothing will happen, regardless of the amount of time, effort and public money is spent to finding a solution.

With all this in mind—having a broad definition of sustainable development clarified with a comprehensive ethical framework like the Earth Charter, focused on grassroots, local action—we can then begin to discuss how to bring all of these important components together to create a global awareness of the inter-dependence we all share as citizens of the Earth. It would be naïve to believe that the Earth Charter by itself could be that integrating factor. It is, in fact, a tool to promote sustainable development. But simply acknowledging the challenges that need to be dealt with, as described in the Earth Charter, is not, in itself, a catalyst for positive change. What is needed is a change in attitude and in our conscious awareness of the severity our current modes of production and consumption have on the world. As D.H. Lawrence wrote, “What we want is to destroy our false, inorganic connections, especially those related to money, and re-establish the living organic connections, with the cosmos, the sun and earth, with mankind and nation and family. Start with the sun, and the rest will slowly, slowly happen” (Ikeda, Peace, 166).

This is no small task, and one that seems insurmountable. After all, many of the challenges facing greater sustainable development are seen primarily from a political perspective; they are political issues that seem to have merely political responses. As Lloyd Axworthy, former Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs, said in his book Navigating a New World:

Unfortunately, the global system doesn't put much pressure on domestic political systems to meet the bar. International governance on environmental issues is notoriously weak. There are some treaties that have high levels of compliance, such as one dealing with ozone depletion and certain maritime protections, but in

general, the system is toothless, with minimal standards and limited powers of enforcement” (326).

Given this weakness of the international political system, ordinary citizens can feel disappointed in the seeming inability of their leaders to do the right thing. Mixed in with conflicting interests between local and global needs, people’s antipathy can lead to outright hostility towards “big picture” values like sustainable development.

Dialogue as the Key Tool for Local Engagement & Global Awareness

So what is the answer? What can be done? As a starting point at the grassroots level, open dialogue with like-minded and even opposing individuals and groups about sustainable development issues needs to be promoted, nurtured and continued. The type of dialogue encouraged is not simply a discussion of the issue without a concrete purpose, but a dialogue that energizes participants towards brainstorming lasting solutions aimed at relieving the suffering of individuals and societies injured as a byproduct of relentless greed, intolerance and indifference. This type of dialogue is described by Ikeda as a “verbal combat from where there is no retreat, and an intensity that is, in some literal sense, death-defying” (Peace, 41). This type of dialogue is a dynamic way to foster grassroots efforts toward sustainable development because it is a process that can nurture the values of tolerance, understanding, compassion, courage and change – values that underlie global inter-dependence. Dialogue for sustainable development facilitates the creativity of the mind to finding new ways of doing things, building relationships between people and their environment through a natural interaction. As Ikeda states, “it enables us to rise above the confines of our parochial perspectives and passions” (Peace, 43). These types of dialogues are emerging and transforming people’s worldviews. In an Earth Charter article

published in the Canadian magazine *New Century*³, one young woman describes the transformative affect the Earth Charter had in one of her conversations. She writes,

Understanding the Earth Charter as a way to live our lives was something as far off to me as walking on the moon. I agreed with the principles. I understood the motivation behind it. However, to take it into my own life was a line I had yet to cross. This all changed when a conversation sparked between a friend and myself about why we would want to bring children into this world with all of the destructive things going on around us. I had studied the Earth Charter before and had even encouraged people to also, but this dialogue with my friend really made me understand what the Earth Charter meant to me. The conversation during a break at school happened so naturally. It transformed from "Why bring kids into this horrible world?" to "Let's raise our children to be great leaders of the world!" It was really a dialogue of peace and this is what the Earth Charter is all about (Motohashi 20).

As this example illustrates, dialogue with friends, colleagues and opponents can open our minds to different possibilities when engaged from a genuine interest in listening to others and hearing people out to establish a common understanding and goal.

Dialogue can facilitate a growing movement towards sustainable development at home and abroad, acting as the catalyst to creating a tipping point for change. In Malcolm Gladwell's book [The Tipping Point](#), he illustrates how the causes of natural epidemics can also cause mass social movements of change. Using the example of how quickly yawning spreads in a group, or a virus in a community, Gladwell explains:

Epidemics...are strongly influenced by their situation – by the circumstances and conditions and particulars of the environments in which they operate. This much is obvious. What is interesting though is how far this principle can be extended. It isn't just prosaic factors like the weather that influence behavior. Even the smallest and subtlest and most unexpected factors can affect the way we act...The key to getting people to change their behavior...sometimes lies with the smallest details of their immediate situation. The Power of Context says that human beings are a lot more sensitive to their environment than they may seem (27-29).

³ *New Century* is a monthly publication produced by Soka Gakkai International Association of Canada (SGI Canada) which has a regular column by Canadian youth on their experiences and views on their activities that promote the values of the Earth Charter in their respective communities across the country. The magazine is available through local SGI Canada centres and monthly subscription. For more information, visit www.sgicanada.org.

Dialogue can be one of those small actions in a person's environment that can change a person's perspective on whatever is being discussed. One person's experience on the value of environmental stewardship or supporting a community welfare organization can have such an impact that it changes another person's perspective on the issue. Gladwell shared a study on face-to-face dialogue that found "minorities received the highest level of positive attention and had the greatest influence on the private opinions of members in the majority and on the final group decision when they communicated face to face" (274-275). If face-to-face dialogue can foster understanding on challenging minority issues, it is not difficult to see the potential dialogue can have in promoting sustainable development in the local community.

How then can this local dynamic be applied on a global scale? Simply by having dialogues with people from around the world, and promoting the value of dialogue as a catalyst for change in other parts of the world. With the greater reach of communication technology and the relative ease of sharing ideas with people all over the world, the potential for local change happening on a global scale has never been more possible than today. One only has to see the effectiveness of the mobilization of global protest against the war in Iraq that included millions of people all over the world, or the unprecedented outpouring of financial support by citizens in developed countries towards the south Asian tsunami relief efforts, to see how effective modern communications have become in coordinating grassroots efforts all over the world.

Building on Hope, Tipping Towards Sustainability

The more we personally engage in dialogue, both locally and abroad, and the more we promote the values of sustainable development using tools like the Earth Charter, the sooner we can reach a tipping point for positive change in the world. It may seem like an insurmountable task, but as a growing number of individuals and local organizations come together towards the

common goal of sustainable development, the less insurmountable the task appears. Just as Gladwell's tipping point suggests, when the conditions for a mass social movement are right, a wave of sustainable development can emerge. In dealing with insurmountable challenges, Mahatma Gandhi said, "But are not all great and good things difficult to do? Love of the hater is the most difficult of all. But by the grace of God, even the most difficult thing becomes easy to accomplish if we want to do it" (53). Daisaku Ikeda wrote, "A great revolution of character in a single individual will help achieve a change in a society, and further, will enable a change in the destiny of humankind" (Gosho, 185).

Globalization has been seen as a negative force in the world, but at the same time, it can be seen as an opportunity for positive change to the very fabric of our modern civilization. As Axworthy said:

Concerns about globalization are as much about culture as they are about economics. Once the connection is made between the rash of natural disasters, extremes in climate, shortage of resources, poisonous air and the dangers to health and livelihoods of people in all regions; once the interdependence between economic inequality and environmental destruction is recognized...then there might just be a springboard for action (341).

We are at a unique crossroads where the divide between local and global are not as distant as it seemed even a decade ago. The opportunity to bridge the physical and geographic divide with instant communication online will only grow stronger, giving us better opportunities to engage in fruitful dialogue that can lead to local actions applying the values of sustainable development.

Sustainable development is not just a difficult goal to achieve; it is a necessary outcome that can be achieved thanks in part to globalization. No longer with the excuse that other people are evil, or subservient, or irrelevant to one's own wellbeing, individuals around the globe—particularly those in the developed world—need to recognize the inequities that are causing so much suffering around the world. The more people in the developed world take responsibility

for their actions (and inactions), the closer sustainable development can become a reality. It is a long and arduous process that will involve subtle and dramatic changes in the short and long term. Yet, when all is said and done, it will be one of the greatest achievements humanity has achieved – an achievement that can truly transform the psyche of all humankind.

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