

The Earth Charter and The Johannesburg Summit
An Earth Charter Briefing
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This opportunity to share with you our understanding of the urgent need for the inclusive ethical vision in the Earth Charter is very much appreciated, and I would like to thank all of you attending for your interest in the Earth Charter. All of us from the North and South who have been involved in the Earth Charter Initiative over the past seven years believe that the Earth Charter is directly relevant to the agenda of the World Summit on Sustainable Development. We hope, therefore, that the Johannesburg Summit will receive and recognize the Earth Charter as a valuable civil society contribution to the goal of achieving sustainable development and that the Summit will find inspiration and guidance in the vision of the document.

I would like to consider with you why governments participating in the World Summit should view the Earth Charter

as a very significant contribution to the global ethics movement worthy of special recognition in Johannesburg. It is useful to begin with a brief account of the origins, history, and goals of the Earth Charter.

I. History and Sources

First of all, it is important to keep in mind that the original proposal to create the Earth Charter was made in *Our Common Future*, the 1987 report of the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, often referred to as the Brundtland Commission. (Transparency #1) In addition, the drafting of the Earth Charter was part of the unfinished business of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. (Transparency #2)

In 1994, Maurice Strong, the secretary general of the Earth Summit and chairman of the Earth Council, and Mikhail Gorbachev, the president of Green Cross International, launched a new civil society Earth Charter initiative with support from the Dutch Government. An Earth Charter Secretariat was established

at the Earth Council in Costa Rica, and Ambassador Mohamed Sahnoun became the first director of the new Earth Charter project. The international consultation process on the Earth Charter began in 1995 with a meeting at the Peace Palace in The Hague that involved representatives from over 30 countries. The actual drafting process got underway in 1997. At that time, an Earth Charter Commission of eminent persons with representation from all regions of the world was formed to oversee the project.

Thousands of individuals and hundreds of organizations from Africa, the Americas, Asia and the Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East participated in creating the Earth Charter. Forty-five Earth Charter national committees were formed. Earth Charter dialogues were held in all regions of the world and on the internet. The project involved the most open and participatory consultation process ever conducted in connection with the drafting of an international document.

The ideas and values in the Earth Charter reflect the influence of a rich diversity of intellectual sources and social

movements. (Transparency #3) These include over fifty international law declarations and treaties pertaining to environmental conservation and sustainable development. For example, the Earth Charter builds on and extends the vision of the Stockholm Declaration, the World Charter for Nature, and the Rio Declaration. The document also reflects the concerns and aspirations expressed at the seven UN summit conferences held during the 1990s. In addition, the Earth Charter draws upon contemporary science, especially physics, cosmology, and ecology, the wisdom of the world's religions and philosophical traditions, and over 200 nongovernmental declarations and people's treaties.

II. Mission and Objectives of the Earth Charter Initiative

A final version of the Earth Charter was approved by the Earth Charter Commission during a meeting at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris in March, 2000. A new phase in the Earth Charter Initiative began in June of 2000 with the launch of the Earth Charter at the Peace Palace in The Hague.

The major objectives of the Earth Charter Initiative in this second phase are four (Transparency #4):

1. To disseminate the Earth Charter to individuals and organizations in all sectors of society throughout the world.
2. To promote the educational use of the Earth Charter in schools, universities, faith communities, and a variety of other settings, and to develop and distribute the necessary supporting materials.
3. To encourage and support the use, implementation, and endorsement of the Earth Charter by civil society, business, and government at all levels.
4. To seek endorsement or recognition of the Earth Charter by the WSSD and the United Nations General Assembly in 2002, the tenth anniversary of the Rio Earth Summit.

Regarding dissemination, the Earth Charter has been translated into over 20 languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, and the major European languages. Most of these translations are available on the Earth Charter website

(www.earthcharter.org). The Earth Charter provides a very valuable educational tool and catalyst for dialogue on the major challenges facing humanity and on common values. The text is already being used widely in schools, colleges, and universities in dozens of nations and has been incorporated into UNESCO's multi-media teacher education program entitled "Teaching and Learning for a Sustainable Future." A Commentary on the Earth Charter is being prepared, and it will help to explain the principles and show how the principles build on international law and other sources. Thousands of local, national, and international organizations have endorsed the document. Among them are organizations representing over 1000 local governments, including the United States Conference of Mayors and the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI). These groups are taking steps to promote the use and implementation of Earth Charter principles.

The overall mission of the Earth Charter Initiative is to "establish a sound ethical foundation for the emerging global

society and to help build a sustainable world based on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace.” (Transparency #5)

This mission statement identifies what lies at the heart of the significance of the Earth Charter for the World Summit. Perhaps the most fundamental challenge facing humanity as it enters the 21st century is the need to develop a sound ethical foundation for the emerging global civilization. In this regard, people often speak about the need for global ethics, or they call for creating a moral framework to guide human activity and the process of globalization. It is a matter of understanding the challenges and choices before us and of clarifying our priorities and shared values. The Earth Charter is the most widely supported response to this urgent need.

To date, the Regional Prepcoms have put the primary emphasis on finding ways and means of implementing Agenda 21 and operationalizing sustainable development. With special attention focused on globalization and poverty together with the

environment, the concern is to develop solutions to concrete problems. Why are ethics, and more specifically global ethics, also important in the context of the Johannesburg Summit? What can the Earth Charter add?

First of all, an emphasis on practical action at Johannesburg is very much needed. However, we must also recognize that the will to act decisively in the battle against environmental degradation, poverty, and injustice, requires a firm ethical commitment to fundamental values, and this commitment has often been lacking. If the Johannesburg Summit hopes to achieve its goal, it cannot ignore this ethical challenge.

Second, in an increasingly interdependent and fragile world, global ethics are essential. Interdependence requires collaborative problem solving, and effective cooperation requires agreement on common goals and shared values. If we are to create a secure world and better future for all, we must revise our idea of the good life and our understanding of right conduct, and we must do this together as global citizens. The objective is not to impose the

values of one culture or tradition on everyone else or to create some new monoculture. The goal is to learn from one another and to find common ground through dialogue in the midst of our rich cultural diversity. Global ethics in this sense have become a key to human survival and well-being in a world where no nation acting alone can solve its problems.

In their discussion of the challenge before the Johannesburg Summit, both the Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, and the Secretary General of the Summit, Nitin Desai, have recognized the critical importance of global ethics. For example, in his introduction to the Summit, “Taking Action for Earth’s Future,” Kofi Annan concludes with these words (Transparency #6):

The United Nations and I personally very much look forward to working closely with all concerned—government leaders, nongovernmental organizations, and civil society groups from throughout the world—at Johannesburg and beyond to

put in place a new ethic of global conservation and stewardship.

In addressing the Preparatory Committee for the World Summit last April, Nitin Desai remarked that:

we will never achieve sustainable development unless we can generate a global ethic of responsibility or stewardship. . .

Johannesburg must, in some ways, become an expression of such a global ethic.

The Earth Charter consultation process has provided abundant evidence of strong support, from people in all regions of the world, for the development of a new global ethic. In addition, the Earth Charter is an expression of a consensus on fundamental values that is taking form in the emerging global civil society, and it provides the kind of broad ethical vision needed.

Some of you may agree about the need for a moral framework to guide humanity in an age of globalization, but you may ask why is a new charter necessary? Is not the Rio

Declaration sufficient? I want to speak to that and begin with some general comments about the content of the Earth Charter.

When the United Nations was established in 1945, its agenda for world security focused on human rights, peace, and equitable socio-economic development. The Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment in 1972 led the international community to realize that environmental protection should be added to the international agenda. Over the next three decades, there was a growing realization that humanity's environmental, economic, political, social, cultural, and spiritual concerns and goals are closely interrelated and that holistic thinking and integrated problem solving are essential.

The Earth Charter builds on these developments and involves an especially clear presentation of the interdependence of humanity's major challenges and opportunities. The Earth Charter does focus special attention on the environment. However, the document contains an inclusive and integrated ethical vision that recognizes the interconnections between environmental protection,

the eradication of poverty, human rights, gender equality, economic equity, democracy, and a culture of peace. It is not possible to care for people in a world with collapsing ecosystems and dwindling resources, and it is not possible to protect and restore ecosystems in a world where poverty, injustice, and violent conflict are widespread. Caring for people and caring for Earth are two interconnected aspects of one great task. This is a major message of the Earth Charter.

The result of this outlook is a new broad understanding of what constitutes a sustainable way of living and sustainable development. From the perspective of the Earth Charter, a sustainable way of life includes all the interrelated activities that promote the long-term flourishing of Earth's human and ecological communities.

The Earth Charter principles are divided into four parts to make it easy to understand the big ideas around which the principles have been organized. This structure of the document makes clear the inclusive, integrated nature of the Earth Charter

ethical vision. (Transparency #7) Part I contains four very broad principles that can be taken as a concise overview of the Earth Charter vision. The principles that follow further develop the meaning of these first four. Part II focuses special attention on environmental protection and restoration, the precautionary principle, and sustainable consumption, production, and reproduction. Part III contains principles on the eradication of poverty, economic equity, gender equality, and environmental justice. Part IV includes principles on democracy, participatory decision making, education, tolerance, and nonviolence. The text can be used to support the specific concerns of many different governments and nongovernmental organizations.

The Earth Charter builds on the Rio Declaration, which is a very valuable document, and the Charter includes many principles found in the Rio Declaration. However, it goes further in the direction of developing a broad integrated vision, and it is a stronger document from an ethical point of view.

Perhaps the most striking difference between the two documents is found in the first two principles of the Earth Charter, which are not included in the Rio Declaration. (Transparency #8) These first two principles introduce the ethic of respect and care which lies at the heart of the Earth Charter's ethical vision. All the other principles follow from and further clarify the meaning of these first two principles.

The first principle calls for respect for "Earth and life in all its diversity." The ethical life begins with an attitude of respect—respect for oneself, for other persons, other cultures, other life forms, and nature as a whole.

Respect for nature is the foundational principle of a sound environmental ethics. The Rio Declaration does call for the protection and restoration of ecosystems, but it is silent on the principle of respect. This is a major weakness of the Rio Declaration from an ethical point of view. It is unrealistic to think that people will protect and restore what they do not respect.

If the ethical life begins with respect, it takes concrete form when respect leads to active caring, which involves the prevention of harm and the promotion of well-being. This is the theme of the second principle in the Earth Charter.

In emphasizing an ethic of respect and care, the Earth Charter builds on the 1982 UN World Charter for Nature, the IUCN World Conservation Strategy published in *Caring for the Earth* (1991), the report of the Commission on Global Governance, *Our Global Neighbourhood* (1995), and the report of the Independent Commission on Population and Quality of Life, *Caring for the Future* (1996). It is also noteworthy that the United Nations Millennium Declaration identifies “respect for nature” as “a fundamental value . . . essential to international relations.”

There are other significant differences between the Earth Charter and the Rio Declaration. The Earth Charter includes a principle on the critical role of education in building sustainable communities. It has stronger principles on sustainable production

and consumption, environmental justice, democracy, gender equality, tolerance, nonviolence, and peace as well as other issues.

The Earth Charter puts special emphasis on peace as the long-range goal of sustainable development. Principle #16 on peace is the culminating principle, and all the other principles identify essential conditions for building peace on Earth. This emphasis on peace is consistent with the founding purposes of the United Nations, and it also puts the current war on terrorism in perspective. It makes clear that the only long-term solution to the scourge of terrorism is creation of a global culture of peace, and that will require ecological security, the eradication of poverty, economic justice, and participatory decision making.

In concluding this discussion, I want to stress the importance of building a global partnership for sustainable development that involves civil society and business as well as government.

Governments, business, and civil society each have critical roles to play, and they must work together cooperatively if humanity is to create a just, sustainable, and peaceful world. This is another

important reason for the Johannesburg Summit to receive and
acknowledge the Earth Charter as a uniquely valuable civil society
contribution.