

Earth Charter process offers a model for global consensus building

As others consider how to achieve consensus on international issues, the process used by the drafters of the Earth Charter offers an example of how to solicit and incorporate ideas from civil society groups and prominent individuals worldwide.

SAN JOSÉ, Costa Rica - Working out of an international secretariat based in this lush tropical country, the Earth Council is coordinating what may well be the most extensive document drafting project ever undertaken by civil society.

Since 1995, the Council, among others, has spearheaded the effort to draft an Earth Charter - a statement of ethical principles similar to the UN Declaration on Human Rights that its authors hope will guide the conduct of people and nations towards each other and the earth in order to ensure peace, equity and a sustainable future.

Last April, the Council unveiled an updated draft, known as the Benchmark Draft II, and it is currently soliciting comments on it. The plan is to prepare another draft, based on comments received by early next year. That draft will also be widely distributed for more feedback. The hope is that by 2002 a final version can be presented to the UN General Assembly for possible endorsement as an international declaration.

By creating a document that has been thoroughly reviewed and endorsed by as many groups and sectors of civil society as possible, organizers hope that government policy makers will, in the end, find it impossible to ignore.

"The major difference between the Earth Charter process and other such international documents is that this has been a really broad participatory process," said Mirian Vilela, who is coordinator of the Earth Charter Project for the Council. "We want to assure cultural diversity in the result, not only to have a rich document in the end, but to have people's involvement in terms of a feeling of commitment and ownership."

As other non-governmental organizations consider how to achieve consensus on a variety of international issues, the process used by the drafters of the Earth Charter offers an exceptional example of how to solicit and incorporate ideas and information from civil society groups and prominent individuals worldwide.

Ms. Vilela said that groups of NGOs have established national Earth Charter committees in 40 countries, and that ad hoc groups are working on the Charter in 23 more. In all, she said, hundreds if not thousands of organizations have considered and commented on the Charter, as have thousands of individuals.

The drafting committee is a loose aggregation of some 40 individuals in 20 countries who review the comments and determine whether and how to incorporate them into the final draft, said Steven C. Rockefeller, chair of the Earth Charter drafting Committee.

"There are several things that allow this," said Mr. Rockefeller, explaining how worldwide input is gathered and considered. "One is that with e-mail and the internet, we can all communicate with each other in extraordinary new ways, and we can intensify the process of participatory decision making. We are also travelling all over the world, going to conferences and such, so as to make this as inclusive as possible."

Mr. Rockefeller said the effort to include as many groups as possible has paid off in helping to arrive at a draft that is acceptable to as many people as possible. For example, he said, the drafters have long sought the input of indigenous groups. In consulting with groups representing the Inuit people of the far northern regions, they learned of their objections to a line in the draft Charter that spoke of the need to "treat all beings with compassion."

"The Inuit people, in the circumpolar north, are wholly dependent on animals for food - they don't have any agriculture," said Mr. Rockefeller. "And they objected to the term 'compassion' with reference to animals, saying that they didn't think you could hunt animals with 'compassion.' They also feared that animal rights groups would use the language to force them to abandon traditional hunting practices."

After long consultation with the Inuit - and other indigenous groups - the drafting committee has come up with new language, said Mr. Rockefeller. "We took out the word 'compassion' and put in the phrase 'treat all living beings with respect and consideration' - and they were willing to accept that," he said. The new wording will appear in the next draft, due in early 2000.

Part of the process of inclusion has been a simple matter of taking the time to contact and listen to as many voices as possible. As a concept, the Earth Charter was first proposed in 1987 by the Brundtland Commission, and, for a time, it appeared as if governments might approve an Earth Charter at the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit in 1992. When governments could not achieve consensus on a Charter, NGOs decided to continue the drafting process under the coordination of the Earth Council.

Throughout the decade-long process, the Bahá'í International Community has been an active international partner, giving input, hosting and participating in meetings to solicit comments, and serving on various Earth Charter committees.

"The Earth Charter is perhaps the best expression of the principles for sustainable development ever produced in a succinct document," said Peter Adriance, a Bahá'í representative active in the Earth Charter USA Network. "The Charter upholds Bahá'u'lláh's pivotal principle of the oneness of humankind. Given increasing circulation and attention in the years ahead, it should serve as an important guide toward living sustainably on Earth in the 21st century and beyond."

<http://www.onecountry.org/e112/e11207as.htm>