

## The Earth Charter as a pedagogical tool for sustainability at Yerevan State University, Armenia

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### Introduction

Professor Karine Danielyan<sup>62</sup> has been an educator all her life. She decided to make 'sustainable development' – a highly disputable semantic novelty in the early 90s – part of her personal teaching practice in 1994. She made the hard decision to resign from her position as Environment Minister in the first post-Soviet democratic government of independent Armenia, and to return to academia, her former professional career. The decision cost her many a sleepless night, as well as heated discussions with members of the Armenian government and with her friends and colleagues. It was a tough decision for her, as she had represented her country at the pivotal Rio Summit in 1992, and was committed to the Agenda 21 document as a blueprint for governance, planning and policy making.

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## Development of new educational materials

There were no educational materials on sustainable development available in the entire post-Soviet territory in early 90s, so Professor Karine Danielyan had to start from scratch. In 1994, she wrote a textbook, *Theory and Practice of Sustainable Development*, which later became the foundation for a new university course with the same name, taught by the faculty in the Department of Geography at Yerevan State University. The book became the first educational publication on sustainable development in the country. It was not easy to convince the administration of the university to introduce such a new, revolutionary pedagogical approach to a traditional and rigid education process, but Karine would not take 'no' for an answer; thus her first textbook was formally adopted as an official educational publication.

In 1998, Professor Danielyan participated in a workshop for the post-Soviet countries-in-transition about the principles of sustainable development and the Earth Charter, which was held in Moscow. This was her first encounter with the document, one which would have a big impact on both her personal and professional life. She thought it was very inspiring and comprehensive, and, in 1999, she decided to include an additional chapter on the Earth Charter in her textbook. Karine also integrated the Earth Charter into the content of her university course on sustainable development.

Since 1994, her textbook, *Theory and Practice of Sustainable Development*, has been re-printed three times: with the help of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) office in Armenia; the Earth Council in 1999; and the UNDP office in Armenia again, in 2000. Karine is happy to see that her textbook has been in high demand over the past decade and is still widely used by many universities in Armenia, Georgia, Belarus, the Russian Federation and the countries of Central Asia in their own courses on sustainable development.

In 2003, the UNDP office in Armenia commissioned Yerevan State University to develop a new textbook, *Human Development*, in the Armenian language for use

at the national universities. Professor Danielyan contributed two chapters for that textbook, entitled "Global environmental problems," and "Sustainable Development." Since 2003, this textbook has been the main educational publication in the Masters of Science programmes in all of the departments of natural sciences at Yerevan State University.

Professor Danielyan's students and alumni are also involved in the development of educational materials. They actively participated in the adaptation process of the "The Earth Charter for Children," and created a brochure of this that has been published in the Armenian, Russian and English languages. The Earth Charter for Children is a three-page brochure, written in the poetic and instructive style of a fairy tale, and quotes the beautiful words of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in *The Little Prince*: "...get up in the morning, wash yourself, tidy up yourself, and right after that, tidy up your planet."

### In simple and clear language, the Earth Charter for Children brochure teaches children that:

Wisdom comes when you realize power brings not only rights, but also great responsibilities. And, first of all, we have the responsibility to our brothers — yes, our brothers and sisters on this planet — the animals and plants.

Together with beautiful pictures and posters drawn by students and pupils, The Earth Charter for Children is very popular in Armenian schools and kindergartens.



The Earth Charter for Children in Armenian, Russian and English languages.

## **Methodological aspects of the university course on sustainability**

Professor Danielyan began teaching her new course with only two hours available per semester, which later became four hours. Presently, there is a complete 72-hour course available for 50-60 third year students in the baccalaureate programme of the Department of Geography, and an additional 25-30 students coming from the baccalaureate programme in the Department of Chemistry, every year. There is also a 170-hour course for second year students of the Masters of Science programme.

The courses offer an opportunity to analyze, reflect and discuss the principles of universal ethics and their importance for re-shaping our lifestyles in a sustainable way.

Professor Danielyan also supervises two to three students who are writing their graduation thesis papers per annum, as well as students who are writing term papers on sustainable development that always have Earth Charter ethics integrated into them.

She starts her course by handing out the Earth Charter brochure (in Armenian, Russian and English languages) to the students, so that they can read this at home. In her classroom, discussion is encouraged. To facilitate practical exercise, she breaks students into four working groups in accordance with the four main pillars of the



The oath of the University freshmen.

Earth Charter to discuss their part within each group. After discussion, all the students present their part, thus sharing their key findings and reflections with the whole group, which initiates a wider class discussion. Professor Danielyan explains that this approach helps her students to get to know the Earth Charter text very thoroughly. **After this activity, she offers to hold discussions on the following themes:**

- The implementation of the Earth Charter principles in the modern world (problems and roadblocks, possibilities to overcome them, prospects for the future)
- The implementation of the Earth Charter principles in the Republic of Armenia (problems and roadblocks, possibilities to overcome them, prospects for the future)
- The connection of the Earth Charter with global conventions signed by Armenia; as well as its connection with the UN Millennium Development Goals
- The ways each of the students can use the Earth Charter in their daily lives and as professional educators in the future.

### ***From university auditoriums to school classrooms***

Most of Professor Danielyan's university graduates become schoolteachers and she made it a rule to know as much as possible about their professional lives. While it is much easier for her to keep in constant contact with those who find jobs in the capital – contacts are more difficult to sustain with alumni who work in distant rural regions of Armenia – she systematically shares with them the latest materials for use in their schools and invites them to participate in Association activities.

Thus, the project "Earth Charter for Children" started in November 2000 during the Regional Earth Charter Workshop held by the Earth Council in Yerevan by its' late director, Maximo Kalaw Jr., and the Newly Independent States (NIS) Area Manager, Marina Bakhnova, in cooperation with the Association. It included an art exhibition, "Earth, Our Home." The children were inspired to present

pictures, drawings, and posters illustrating one of the Earth Charter principles that had impressed them most. Awards were given to the winners, but no participant was left unnoticed.

A school theatre play was written by senior high school students and teachers, called "Earth Charter Saves the Beautiful Earth," which was also first presented at the Regional Workshop in November 2000. The school pupils and their parents made attractive costumes and presented the participants of the workshop with beautiful songs and poems devoted to Earth, Nature and a brave knight named the Earth Charter – who saves the Earth from disaster by showing people how to protect and love Earth and each other. This performance became very popular and is still being presented by the students of different schools in Yerevan and in other Armenian cities. There have also been several national contests for the best children's art work, poems, songs and plays devoted to sustainable development and the Earth Charter, held by the Association with active participation from Professor Danielyan's students.

### ***The Association for Sustainable Human Development of the Republic of Armenia (ASHD)***

Although Professor Danielyan had worked on these issues in earlier years, the Association for Sustainable Human Development (ASHD or the Association) was officially registered in April 1996. The ASHD Coordination Council consists of 21 members, among them representatives of the Armenian Geographical Society, the Armenian Republican Women's Union, The League of Armenian Women, the Fund against the Law Arbitrariness, The Scientists Union, the Armenian Statistical Computer Society, as well as professionals in different fields of knowledge – environmentalists, geographers, chemists, economists, psychologists, writers, journalists and engineers, among others.

There are six commissions in the Association working on issues of: environment; economy;

society and democracy; human rights; education and spiritual-psychology; information; and international relations. The Association has nine branches in different regions of Armenia. The main goals of ASHD are to raise awareness and openness to the notion of sustainability, and to promote changes in people's lifestyles, behaviours and the influences on decision-making processes from within key groups of Armenian society.

There are many educators among the ASHD members, who work at universities and schools; most of them integrate the Earth Charter into their teaching practices.

### ***Educating for Sustainable Development with the Earth Charter in non-formal settings***

Since 1998, the Association has been publishing brochures and magazines to promote the understanding of the concept of sustainable development. Much of this effort is undertaken using the Earth Charter as an instrument and as an ethical framework that clarifies the vision of a sustainable society. They also disseminate the international experience among different stakeholders of Armenian civil society: parliamentarians and youth, educators and governmental officials, women and local authorities, scientists and academia, and local communities in rural areas.

The Association also uses the national mass media as a very important tool for their educational efforts. Professor Danielyan, and other members of the Association, make regular public appearances on national television and radio programmes, publish articles in national and local newspapers and magazines, sharing their thoughts on the Earth Charter and explaining its importance for present and future generations.

The principles of sustainable development and Earth Charter ethics were the main themes at several high-level roundtables held at the Armenian Parliament, in governmental agencies and in the

Armenian Constitutional Court. In these settings, Professor Karine Danielyan shares Earth Charter brochures and facilitates discussions on the importance of changing government and public approaches to the very concept of 'development' – urging the use of the Earth Charter as a framework and guiding document to steer development in a sustainable direction.

It should be mentioned that, influenced by the Earth Charter ethics, two participants of these roundtables later wrote the book, "The Guide for Higher Education, The Ecological Individual Culture" (in Armenian); the full text of the Earth Charter is included in this book. One of the authors of this publication is a former Deputy of the Parliament and an incumbent Rector of the Polytechnic University of Yerevan, and the other author is a professor at the Institute for Business and Politics. All major universities in the country received this book free from the publisher.

In 2007, the Association published the Russian translation of the Earth Charter Guidebook, "Bringing sustainability to classrooms" for schoolteachers, developed by the Earth Charter Initiative. At present, the book is being disseminated among teachers at Russian-speaking schools in Armenia and is being translated into Armenian for wider use. The Association is also distributing the Guidebook in the Newly Independent States (NIS) through seminars, training workshops and conferences that have taken place in Yerevan, Tbilisi (Georgia), Moscow (Russia) and Dushanbe (Tajikistan) during the first semester of the 2007 academic year. It has also been mailed to educators in Belarus and Moldova.

Professor Karine Danielyan and her colleagues are also planning to develop and publish "The Guide for Decision-Makers," with the Earth Charter as a framework and an integral part of the book.

**The following are a few of the many publications of the Association for Sustainable Human Development:**

1. *The Sustainable Human Development Concept: Theory and Practice*. Dr. Karine Danielyan, Yerevan, First edition, 1996. Second edition, 1998. Third edition, 2000.
2. *Armenia from the viewpoint of the Sustainable Human Development Concept Valued by NGOs*. Edited by Dr. Karine Danielyan, Yerevan, 'Lusakn,' 1997. (Armenian, Russian).
3. *Towards Sustainable Development of Armenia*. 2 volumes. Edited by Dr. Karine Danielyan and Dr. Lemvel Valesyan, Yerevan, 1999, (Armenian, Russian, English).  
**Volume 1.** Basic Materials and Experience of Developed Countries (84 pages).  
**Volume 2.** Experience and Problems of Countries in Transition (100 pages).
4. *The Earth Charter for Children*. Author Dr. Karine Danielyan. Prepared by Youth section of the Association for Sustainable Human Development. (Armenian, Russian, English). Yerevan, 2002.
5. *Experience of Higher Education for Sustainable Development in the RA*. Dr. Artak Sahradyan. Proceedings of the International Conference, 'Higher Education for Sustainability,' UNESCO, Luneburg University, Germany, 2006.

## **Conclusion: moving forward**

Professor Karine Danielyan sees her personal commitment to the vision of sustainability as an opportunity to help her students become 'change agents for the future,' – multipliers of the Earth Charter principles and ethics, which will be necessary for changing existing lifestyles in order to ensure a sustainable future for Armenia.

Along with her colleagues from the Association, Karine believes that their mission is to sensitize individuals and groups about sustainable development principles, and raise awareness of the Earth Charter at all levels, from

the members of the Parliament to the participants of local training workshops. The Association for Sustainable Human Development has been working on this mission since 1998, with projects that target students, decision-makers – government officials, local and municipal authorities, judicial officials and legislators – and pupils, from primary school to high school.

Karine reflects that, during the initial years of the project, the majority of those who had read the Earth Charter for the first time expressed their doubts about its dissemination, let alone its endorsement, by the Armenian people. However, in spite of the multitude of different international declarations, the Earth Charter found its way into the hearts of the Armenian people. A big role in this process of acceptance belongs to a new generation of 'change agents' who were educated and brought up by Professor Karine Danielyan and her colleagues from the Association for Sustainable Human Development. Many of her students continue to refer to the Earth Charter in their scientific work, thesis papers and in their everyday activities long after they leave the university halls.

Professor Karine Danielyan and her colleagues work voluntarily with the Earth Charter (without funding), and intend to continue working as volunteers, integrating the Earth Charter into present and future sustainable development projects. For example, the Association has reached an agreement with the Ministry of Education of Armenia to include the Earth Charter Guidebook "Bringing Sustainability into Classrooms" as an officially recommended guidebook for the teachers. However, the Ministry believes that the mere distribution of the guidebook will not be effective – for wider distribution and more impact, the guidebook should be translated into Armenian and, in the future, a series of teacher's training workshops should be held all over the country.

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