

The Earth Charter: An India Perspective

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Hello! My name is Ashok Khosla and I am President of Development Alternatives, a Non-governmental Organisation, based in New Delhi in India.

Development Alternatives was set-up some 15 years ago with the basic premise that sustainable development is a central issue facing mankind today and it can only be achieved if all sectors of society not only governments, private sectors and academic research people but also the civil society the non-governmental sector work in partnership to bring it about. In Development Alternatives we have chosen a number of areas of work which we believe to be fundamental in achieving sustainable development. These include work on designing new kinds of technologies to improve the relationship between people and machines, new kinds of environmental management methods to improve the relationship between people and nature and new kinds of institutions and governance systems to improve the relationship between people and people. In Development Alternatives we believe that you have to do things on the ground but also have impact on policies. Our organisation works on variety of issues relating primarily to sustainable development. In fact, it was the probably the first organisation anywhere in the world that was established specifically to pursue the goals of sustainable development.

The Earth Charter is a product that we believe to be one of the most important initiatives of recent years in our fight for a different kind of development. The Earth Charter is basically a contract, a compact if you like, between people and nature, between society on the one hand and natural ecosystems on the other.

Some 50 years ago, soon after the United Nations was born, soon after the Second World War ended the universal declaration of human rights was adopted by the General Assembly of the UN. This declaration was a wonderful document which describes all the issues that people recently emerging from a major world war who concerned with the time. These issues were to do with peace, democracy, human rights. Unfortunately, nowhere in this document was there any reference to the lives of other living beings. There was no reference the responsibilities of humanity to saving the earth environment. It became obvious after 50 years of uncontrolled industrial development and globalisation of the economy that this was no longer adequate. In the 1970s the World Conservation Union IUCN, put together something we called the Charter for Nature. Charter for Nature was a beautiful poetic statement about what people should or should not do and was placed on the walls of schools and libraries all over the world as a basic statement of faith on what are responsibilities towards nature work. But it was not a commitment, it was not something that went through a whole political process by which we could say that this is a commitment by humanity. It was only in the last few years at the instance of the Earth Council and other organisations which partner it, to say that we now had to institute a whole process by which a global commitment can be made and documented in the form

of a Charter which would represent what we believe to be the important issues, not only of peace and security of humanity but the survival of a life support system of the climate. That is what the Earth Charter about.

Of course, in addition to fundamental principles and stating them we must also identify the instruments by which concrete action on the ground can lead to the outcomes we seek. The fundamental principles that must underlie the relationships between people and other living beings must probably be universal. But at the same time there are differences in culture, in environment, in history and it is likely that these fundamental principles will have to be translated by each society in the meaning of its own context. The reason that Development Alternatives got involved in the whole Earth Charter process is partly because we are a founding member of Earth Council which is responsible for this process, but also because we believe that we have, in India, a number of insights that would enrich such a process. And indeed such a process would in turn help us define how we can bring about a more sustainable development in poor country like ours.

The basic principles of sustainable development are that the world must be more just an equitable, that must be more environmentally sound and harmonious, and that its economies are geared to the needs of all not just for a few rich people and that each and every person on this planet should feel empowered and responsible for their own lives. Such goals can only be brought about by changing the way we deal with each other and with other things in our world. How do we in fact deal with the rest of the world? What the interventions by which we bring about changes in our surroundings? Well the first and foremost is technology, the easiest probably the quickest in impact is, the way we use machines to improve our surroundings. Beyond technology we also have institutions, institutions like organisation, legal systems, our systems of governance and decision making, our economic policies and these institutions can be very different from ones we have today and probably will have to be, if development is to be sustainable.

Beyond these institutions we also have to recognise the way we organise our understanding of the universe, our knowledge structures. To some extent determine the way we deal with our surroundings and with others. And finally of course, there is whole question of value systems. Value systems underlie the way we relate to other people to natural beings, natural things to the whole question of waste and affluents. Value systems in fact, are the deepest and longest lasting interventions of all. The Earth Charter must deal with all these with technologies, with instruments of economics, with institutions design, with knowledge structures and of course with the values and ethics.

In our work over the past 15 years at Development Alternatives we have found that technology today is basically because of many of the problems that faced man-kind and nature. Technologies that have run away with wasteful consumption patterns in production systems, technology that have led to huge waste and problems of the environment. Technologies that have become masters rather than slaves of people. Such technologies have an inherent logic of their own and they often lead to outcomes that are certainly not sustainable in the long run. Our own work has shown that by re-designing our approach to technology, by choosing different kinds of technologies we can bring

about outcomes that are better for everyone. Technologies that create jobs instead of destroying them, that regenerate environment instead of destroying it and jobs that bring meaning and dignity into the lives of people because the technologies underlying them are basically geared to our own needs and not to their own. Appropriate technology of this type does not exist in large quantities around the world today.

One of the outcomes of globalisation and of the industrial revolution over the past 200 years has been that we have chosen very similar kinds of approaches throughout the world to dealing with resources and to making goods and services that we need. However, the future with the planet consisting of more than 6 billion people cannot rely on these approaches. They will be far too destructive of all the natural life support systems as well as of our lives. This looks for instance at a basic need like shelter. Everyone needs a house and without a house it is difficult to see how you can lead a much dignified life. To create houses of the types that we have now got used among our rich in our series where the riches in the advanced, developed, industrialised countries or in the poor countries. We need vast quantities of materials, vast quantities of cement and steel and bricks and timber none of which actually are maintainable in terms of the impact that they have the manufacture, the use on nature.

Our organisation Development Alternatives has been working totally different kinds of construction materials. Materials that are available in large quantity to large numbers people locally and at least cost to nature. Materials like mud for instance something that is available everywhere, mud can be deals to beautiful buildings including the houses in villages as well as monuments in town. We have developed a whole new series of roofing materials most important part of a house for instance we developed a roofing tile which uses local materials in industrial wastes like stone quarry dust a little bit of cement produced locally right in the village with small machine that we supply and this material has now become a major building material in its own right throughout India.

Similarly, we work with recycled materials for instance we make recycled handmade paper not only to remove a pollutant but to create large numbers of jobs. Handmade recycled paper is made in a factory that was designed by us to be used in villages in small towns where recycled waste can be converted into expensive products which can be sold in export markets and elsewhere. For instance the paper has been used for making filter paper for diesel filters is now used in trucks and engines all over the world.

One of the most basic needs of all of course is food and water and these require a totally kind of management of our land resources than we have been pursuing in past. Instead of making big dams like the Narmada dam which basically cause more destruction than the problems they solve. We can use all kind water harvesting structures little dams, little ponds, little ground water recharging systems all of which over time can bring about major changes in water availability and make them available to all instead of a few cities.

Another initiative evolves is called Decentralised Energy System India Ltd. (DESI Power). DESI Power is about bringing electricity generation right into the village. We setup small power plants based on solar or wind or micro hydro and mostly on biomass

using weeds and agrowaste to generate electricity for homes, schools, streets and industries in the villages of India. So, it is possible by changing our whole technological approach to making it much more human friendly by using local resources by creating jobs to have a totally different kind of development which may will be much more sustainable than what we have today.

Development Alternatives has a very special relationship with the Earth Charter. First of course, we were the one of founder members of the Earth Council soon after the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 and we have been closely working with the council in developing many of its programmes including the national councils and sustainable development and the Earth Charter itself. For the Earth Charter process we organised two consultations of the national level one in the southern city of Bangalore and other one in the capital Delhi. Where we brought together more than a 100 people in each case to discuss for whole day the issues that confront us. The Earth Charter will have on the basis of these discussions a huge amount of material which highlights the issues that I have been describing. One of the reasons why the Earth Charter process has taken place all over the world in different countries in different regions is precisely to bring into it these differences from all over the world, so that they can be reflected both in the universality and the range of concerns that people have. The Indian process which was based on a very wide consultation involving people from walks of life in different parts of the country, basically came to the conclusion that the kinds of issues raised in universal declaration of rights which was of course to do with the right of everyone to practice their lives and their faiths in the manner they wish had to be expanded to be able to include the rights of all living being of creatures on this planet to be able to think of inter-generational issues of bringing about a better world not only for today but also for tomorrow and these have all been embedded in the submission of the Indian process to the Earth Council for the next version of the Earth Charter.