

Panamanian Center for Research and Social Action

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When we read the Earth Charter, more questions than answers arise. In my mind there arise a multitude of challenges and calls for action, much more than a sense of achievement, or a satisfied feeling of accomplishment. At the same time there is a recognition of meaning: there is something there that makes sense to me, that reminds me yes, that is why I am doing what I am with my life, yes, that is part of my search and wondering.....

Here in Panama we can recognize many of the Earth Charter principles as true for us. There is a feeling in the air of change, of opportunities, of hope, of the idea that things might be different, that there exists a chance to make a difference. The principles of the Earth Charter can help us guide our choices and make our decisions if we allow ourselves to work within an ethical framework of decisionmaking, something we must learn to do better.

It is true the whole world is becoming expectant about the millenium, the new century, the idea of a fresh start, a new dawn. Panama is at a crossroads literally and figuratively, as the millenium coincides with three simultaneous transitions, which are marking our perceptions and determining our agenda for action.

The first is the handover of the Panama Canal from the United States to Panama, on December 31 this year, in accordance with the Torrijos-Carter Treaties signed in 1977, after 94 years of the United States first building and then operating the Canal,

The second transition is the closing of all the US military bases in Panama, also by the end of this year, which means that we shall have a demilitarized state for the first time in Panamanian history: no soldiers, Panamanian or foreign.

The third transition is the most difficult of all: that of a transition to democracy, which Panama is striving for, even ten years after the invasion of Panama by the United States, which destroyed Panama's Defense Forces, that for many years was the real seat of power. The challenge is still there of putting in place the mechanisms and institutions of government based on local decision-making; and to develop a democratic culture in which people feel they own citizenship and appropriate for themselves their rights to participate.

And if decision-making in the midst of the Canal Treaties implementation were not sufficiently complex, Panama is holding presidential elections in May this year, so a new government team will have to deal with all these changes.

So how and where specifically can we apply the Earth Charter to our reality, and make it relate to us, so that it is truly a living document? CEASPA where I work is an NGO dedicated to human and sustainable development, founded with Christian inspiration and ecumenical action, so we dedicate a lot of attention to ethical principles of development. Here following are some examples from Panama.

For a start we can experience here in a very direct way the "magnificent diversity of life forms and cultures". This little country of 75 thousand kilometers and less than 3 million people, has always been a crossroads for nature, people and ideas, since it finally emerged from the sea and formed a land bridge between the Atlantic and the Pacific, between North and South America 3 million years ago. It shows extraordinary biodiversity in birds, plants, trees, coral reefs, mangroves; and culturally too, with five distinct indigenous peoples, plus a racial mix of people of Spanish descent, from Africa and the Caribbean, China, India, the Middle East, Europe and North America.

Despite our magnificent natural and cultural heritage, we also suffer from the dominant patterns of production and consumption, that overload our ability to deal with their waste. The garbage ends up on our beaches, by the roadside, and in our streams.

Panama is also a country in which we are made aware every day of the idea of global interdependence, and the sense of universal responsibility. What is the Panama Canal if not an example of that? Ships and cargoes from many parts of the world converge here to make the passage between the Pacific and Atlantic oceans safer and shorter: automobiles from Asia to the US market, grains from the US midwest destined for China,

How the Canal is managed by Panama is of great interest to the rest of the world; and similarly Panama needs the international community of Canal users to help pay for the costs of protection and maintenance of the Canal watershed and its forest cover, to produce enough water for the use of the ships and to supply the cities of Panama and Colon with fresh drinking water.

Here is a case in point of decisions and choices that Panama has to make: what to do with this beautiful forest on the west bank of the Panama Canal, the new San Lorenzo protected area. This was part of the Canal Zone, controlled by the United States government since 1903; and has been used for jungle warfare training by the U.S. military for over forty years. It is home to the Jungle Operations Training Battalion. And now, what will be the civilian use of this area? Will there be public access, or will it be fenced off for exclusive use of rich tourists? Will the forests be cut down for development of ports and ship repair facilities, housing or other commercial uses? Will there be encroachment and conversion to agricultural uses by the rural communities who are land hungry, and see here a great opportunity to get some land? Here is a concrete example of the challenge of making environmental conservation an integral part of development planning, and of the importance of citizens' participation in the process. It is another example of a chance to demonstrate shared responsibilities and global interdependence, as tropical forests and tropical biodiversity are important for the world, not just for us here in Panama.

This is an opportunity to take a path of conserving biological diversity, but it has to be done with principles of equity, social justice, opportunities for the local communities, promoting local organizations and capacities to fulfill their dreams for themselves and their children. Somehow also we have to make the principles of opportunity and equity be realized here. The nearby city of Colon, is Panama's second largest city: it has an unemployment rate of over 20%! And in the rural communities surrounding the existing military installations, half the population has no electricity, nor drinking water, nor affordable access to secondary education; no computers, no telephones, no newspapers, many not even a radio. 80% of those living here are officially considered to be living below the poverty line. In Panama, one in three children still don't finish primary school! And Panama has the third worst income distribution in Latin America, after Brazil and Guatemala, It is inexcusable.

Another element that is key in Panama, and all over the world, is the "Polluter pays" principle. Here in the middle of the forest is an area that the United States has used as a firing range as part of their military training: in fact there are three areas like these along the west bank of the Canal- full of unexploded ordnance. The US is cleaning up the open areas to make them safer, but not the forested areas, as they claim they would have to cut down the magnificent forest and cause erosion. So 7,700 acres of land close to the Canal and the metropolitan urban centers will be unsafe for ever for people to walk in..... The problem of contamination on military bases like on the firing range of Piña is one Panama shares with the Philippines, where there are similar problems. Civilians die on the firing ranges and will continue to do so. There are no provisions now for what will happen after the year 1999, despite the recognition that these areas will be off limits for ever. Who will pay the guards and security needed to keep people out? Who will pay to educate people about the dangers? To replace the signs? And for clean-up when new technologies become available? And compensation for the victims? All these questions are unanswered as yet.

We have to ask about the role of science and technology that so many hopes are pinned on. For whom is it? Can what we teach, learn and research in universities be applied to sustainable resource use? To income generating opportunities that don't lead to more destruction of our natural heritage? Will the advances being made in science and technology benefit the lives of the people living here?

I think many of the answers can be found in ethical principles, in a sense of identity, of what it means to be human on this planet.

I agree fully with the Earth Charter where it says "the spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life can be strengthened if we live with reverence for the sources of our being... for gratitude for the gift of life..... with humility regarding the human place in the larger scheme of things." How do we teach that? How do we make that our daily experience? What difference will that make when it is applied to all the challenges we are facing here and around the world?

This central idea in the Earth Charter sounds so simple but is so revolutionary.... that "our best thought and action will flow from the integration of knowledge with love and compassion". Do we dare to try it?