

The Heart of the Matter: Infusing Sustainability Values in Education

Experiences of ESD with the Earth Charter



Celebrating the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development



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UNESCO Chair on Education
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Educating and Creating Awareness about the value of life and Sacred Nature among Maya Q'eqchi youth in Guatemala

Marleny Rosales Meda and María Susana Hermes

Introduction

This case is from the Lachuá Ecoregion, located in the northwest of Alta Verapaz in Guatemala. This region is a declared RAMSAR International Wetland Convention site. Fifty five Maya-Q'eqchi' indigenous communities live in this area, and their survival depends on the responsible use of natural resources. This region is highly vulnerable currently due to strong social and economic pressures that are accelerating the loss of biodiversity and threatening the traditional way of life of these communities. It is imperative to sensitize the local population about the importance and value of the natural and cultural wealth of the region, through an integral and objective way, oriented to empower the youngest inhabitants who, in the short term, will be the ones responsible for making decisions regarding use and management of their lands.

With this objective, since 2009, we, the Nature Conservation and Community Development Organization (ORCONDECO), created and implemented the Environmental and Cultural Scholar Education Programme (PEACE in Spanish) with Maya-Q'eqchi' children and youth in 56 schools. PEACE has been working to create a strong connection between the importance of nature conservation and traditional knowledge, the Mayan worldview and spirituality, and whose focus and efforts are achieving important and positive changes in families, schools, and communities.

In 2010, we learned about the Earth Charter Movement and became an affiliate of Earth Charter International. We find that the Charter is a very valuable tool that integrates and agrees with all the values and aspects that we work with. We have integrated the content of the Earth Charter in the training and sensitizing activities that we offer annually to over 2,200 children and youth of the 56 primary schools and basic institutes. The following details our experience with the Earth Charter at PEACE and some of the main results and developments achieved.



Girls from Xalaché school in front of a mural that presents environmental problems in their community and some solutions. They presented this mural to local authorities. Photo by: Marleny Rosales, ORCONDECO.

Context

ORCONDECO is a civil society organization formed by young professionals and specialists in different areas from Guatemala that have decided to join efforts towards respect and conservation of nature, sustainable use of biodiversity, and the recognition and promotion of cultural, environmental, social, and economic values in Guatemala.

Our area of work is the Lachuá Ecoregion (535 km²), which has one of the highest rates of biodiversity in Guatemala. It is located northeast of the Alta Verapaz state, and contains the Laguna Lachuá National Park (LLNP) and 55 indigenous communities of the Maya-Q'eqchi' indigenous people. It is a tropical wetland of high international importance recognized by the RAMSAR Convention and is a part of the Ibero-American Model Forest Network. The LLNP and neighboring regions north, east, and west provide continuous habitat for a high diversity of priority species for conservation due to their status as threatened or endangered. In 2002, we started to work and our team included biologists, researchers, and environmental educators in the Lachuá Ecoregion and neighboring regions.

Most human communities that inhabit the Lachuá Ecoregion and neighboring villages belong to the Maya-Q'eqchi' indigenous people, and their subsistence is primarily based on the production of corn and beans. During the 1980s, this region was strongly impacted by internal armed conflict. Most of the local inhabitants are victims and survivors of this war, during which they were stripped of and forcefully removed from their ancestral lands. Following their displacement, they settled in national lands and large private existing estates surrounding the PNLL where they struggle to survive.

Currently, our area of work is highly vulnerable due to the strong economic and social pressures that are accelerating the loss of natural resources and biodiversity. Political pressure and development of mega-projects that promote the massive sale of lands, oil exploitation, the establishment of large hydroelectric plants, massive harvesting of African palm monoculture for biofuel production, the establishment of lands to generate extensive cattle raising, and drug trafficking are exerting a great amount of pressure and demand on natural resources, thereby threatening the local communities' traditional forms of living, as well as exacerbating cultural identity loss amongst the local youth due to transculturation.

As a response to these threats, during 2008-2009, we created and implemented two new educational programmes: The Bilingual Participatory Environmental Education Programme (focused on adults, communities, and indigenous authorities) and the Environmental and Cultural Scholar Education Programme (PEACE; focusing on children and local youth participation). These programmes have raised awareness about the importance of the region's natural and cultural wealth in an integral and objective way, and are oriented to empowering local inhabitants to safeguard those resources in the near future by making informed and conscious decisions in favor of nature conservation, sustainable development, and the strengthening of cultural identity and human dignity.

Every year, our target population has been around 2,200 Maya-Q'eqchi' students in primary, basic, and diversified levels of 56 educational establishments from three counties in Alta Verapaz. During this period, we also trained local residents to become environmental educators in their own communities. Also, PEACE has had, since it started, a systematic, multi-scale evaluation process to measure the project's impact on students, educators, and teaching, which helps to adapt the process to local needs. We can highlight the following main achievements: a) sensitizing children and youth about the integral value of nature, which involves a shift away from a utilitarian vision; b) revaluing and rescuing oral history, social-cultural identity, traditional values, and the Maya-Q'eqchi' worldview; c) the empowerment of children and youth by increasing their knowledge and strengthening the values needed to actively participate in the conservation and defense of their natural resources; d) government support obtained by the legal accreditation and certification offered by the Ministries of Education and Environment of Guatemala.

Implementation

Since 2010, ORCONDECO has included the Earth Charter in an average of two to three annual PEACE educational trainings. We have made a pedagogical interpretation and contextualization of the Earth Charter principles so that they can be understood by children and youth. Through such contextualization we adapt the Earth Charter to the reality and needs of the local residents and suggest concrete collaborative actions to improve the quality of life in the Lachuá Ecoregion wetland, in the community, school, family, and in day-to-day life. Subsequently, we translated the Earth Charter to the Maya-Q'eqchi' language and we socialized it with teachers and principals in all 56 schools that participate in PEACE by giving them a copy of the contextualized Earth Charter and sharing the initiatives and affiliation to our Association. In the socialization process, teachers highlighted the importance of following the Earth Charter principles so that they can be learned, internalized, and included in their daily educational activities. All principles are compatible and can be integrated fully with the contents and educational competences that are established by the National Base Curriculum of Guatemala.



Kids from Lachuá Ecoregion after a workshop with the Earth Charter. Photo by: Alfonso Misti, ORCONDECO.

In the educational trainings that we have developed through PEACE, we have integrated several Earth Charter principles into the theme units in which we highlight the ecological, economic, cultural, and existing value of nature and the revaluing and cultural appreciation of the Maya-Q'eqchi'.

For each of these units, we developed specific and contextualized themes according to local needs and, generally, we point out one of the principles of the Earth Charter that is related to the relevant theme. We also share that in this great international effort there are many other people that are working, just like we are, towards having a dignified life by respecting all forms of life that exist in nature and giving value to culture all over the world.

Each PEACE workshop is developed in the Maya-Q'eqchi' language in a participatory way by our environmental facilitators. Also, we have performed knowledge and appreciation evaluations at the end of each workshop in each of the levels and schools involved in PEACE.

In 2012, we used an illustrated presentation that we created as a tool to share the Earth Charter principles and some examples of its local application. In 2014, we used the Earth Charter posters (youth version) that were in part created by the Earth Charter Center for Education for Sustainable Development at the University for Peace in Costa Rica, and we worked with the practical application of each of the principals taught on a personal, familiar, scholastic, and community level. Since 2010, we have obtained an average of 80.8 points in the highschool level and 79.7 points in the primary level in the knowledge evaluation of students on the theme units of PEACE developed with EC. This is a favorable indicator showing that the knowledge and values transmitted and applied in the PEACE programme have been understood and internalized widely by the student population.

Lessons learned

In over 12 years of experiences and valuable lessons in Lachuá, we have learned, amongst other things, that true and transcendent conservation and biodiversity management is a long term process that cannot be done without knowing, understanding, and involving local citizens and their multiple values and cultural, ecological, and economic needs, as they are the real owners and managers of their land and their environment. In the Mayan worldview, nature plays a central role, as "...everything that exists in the Universe is alive, it complements itself and keeps itself in balance. Humans are part of it, it is not out of it and we must be carriers of an ethic that discards the temptation of dominating it." (Matul, 2007). "For the Mayan way of thinking, everything is carefully intertwined, everything is interdependent and seeks the same objective: energetic balance. There cannot and should not be then any supremacy of one kingdom over the other, there must not be a fight of humans against nature. Everyone needs each other. The existence of people who have abandoned nature is simply impossible." (Cabrera, 2007). These principles allow the understanding and appreciation of nature as our Mother, as Mother Earth, to whom we owe respect and have the obligation of caring for and defending. This wisdom is valuable, is alive in many Maya-Q'eqchi' elders, and is manifested through values, advice, ritual, and ancestral practices, among others.



Fourth grade girl doing part of an evaluation exercise after a PEACE workshop. Photo by: María Hermes, ORCONDECO

The Earth Charter integrates these values and many other aspects that are inherent to the Mayan worldview, which is why we consider it a valuable learning-teaching tool. Its ethical vision recognizes the value and care of nature, as well as the respect and appreciation for life in all of its forms, expressing in a simple way actions that we can all implement in our day-to-day lives to contribute to harmonious social-environmental conservation. We think of the Earth Charter as an important support in the educational and sensitizing process that we have developed and shared with the Maya-Q'eqchi' youth, that thousands of people from different cultures and regions around the world are getting involved with and making valuable efforts with the same feeling and intention as their traditional values, and that, little by little, together we are building the future that we desire and deserve.

Our work experience in the Lachuá Ecoregion is an example of viable and contextualized application of the Earth Charter to strengthen an environmental-cultural educational process for the long term. Through PEACE, students and teachers have been able to get acquainted with the international Earth Charter Initiative, they understand the links between these global values and their local context, and, in this way they become an active part of this global movement in their own setting. From the PEACE-Earth Charter trainings, numerous other voluntary conservation initiatives have emerged in educational centers, such as community reforestation trainings, cleaning campaigns of bodies of water, recycling and sustainable consumption campaigns, internal school agreements to avoid hunting and/or hurting wild animals, and presentations on Maya-Q'eqchi' values and cultural identity related to nature, amongst other trainings. This gives us great satisfaction and pride as these have been local efforts that have benefited whole communities and neighboring regions.

One of the weaknesses that we have found throughout this experience is that there is some uncertainty in the permanence of the teachers from the schools where we carried out the PEACE programme, due to changes and movement of working positions. This weakens the follow-up process and application of the themes developed in PEACE and Earth Charter in other subjects and prevents the shared knowledge from being integrated as cross-cutting topics in different subjects of the schools' curriculum. However, we hope that this situation is resolved and stabilized in order to provide continuity to the process and to the initiatives developed by the students in medium and long term.

As an association, we feel very happy and proud of being an Earth Charter International Affiliate. We consider that the Earth Charter can become a valuable education tool if it is contextualized and if the application of the Earth Charter can be discussed on concrete and local objectives so that it can be better understood by the majority of the population by visualizing and valuing its broad implementation and positive impact. In the future, we are interested in integrating the Earth Charter into the Bilingual Participatory Environmental Education Programme (focused on adults, communities, and indigenous authorities) so that these key groups can use the EC as a support and orientation tool in decision making processes on conservation and responsible and respectful management of natural resources at the community and regional levels. We also hope to broadly disseminate the EC and integrate many more sectores of the Maya Q'eqchi' population with whom we work in Guatemala in this valuable process.

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