

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



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
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UNESCO Chair on Education
for Sustainable Development
and the Earth Charter



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The Earth Charter: A tool to guide community environmental education and action in Seychelles

Michele Martin, PhD

Introduction

Seychelles is a small island developing state (SIDS) located in the middle of the Indian Ocean, just below the equator. Never heard of it? If this is the case, you are not alone! Many people have never heard of this tiny archipelago of some 115 islands although it is the only group of mid-ocean granitic islands in the world. Seychelles boasts a wide diversity of plants and animals found nowhere else in the world, the most famous of which is the Coco-de-Mer palm, which bears the largest seed on the planet.

Those who have heard of Seychelles associate it with paradise and five star holidays in nature for the elite. They are not far off from the truth because, indeed, over 50% of the tiny landmass of 455km² is set aside as nature reserves, and the country's strict environmental laws have, until now, helped to ensure some degree of protection for the mountains, forests, reefs, rivers, beaches, and wetlands, at least compared to many other SIDS. On the whole, Seychelles is considered to be a middle-income country, and has successfully achieved most of the MDG targets, putting it ahead of most other countries in the African region.



However, scratch below the surface and the paradise metaphor starts to fray; you find the usual problems associated with human activity despite well intentioned environmental laws: habitat loss, pollution, scarcity of water, rising consumerism and waste; and then of course the impacts of climate change: water scarcity, floods and landslides, coastal erosion and coral bleaching. Alongside environmental problems we also have socio-economic challenges experienced by many other countries: alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence, underemployment, and health issues associated with an increasingly sedentary lifestyle and westernized diet.

These socio-ecological challenges are what prompted our NGO, Sustainability for Seychelles, to explore how the Earth Charter (EC) could be used as an educational tool to help Seychelles get back on the path to sustainability. I had started using the EC initially as part of my PhD research on environmental education in schools, introducing it to teachers as a tool for the classroom (see the Earth Charter in Action book), but as my focus shifted to communities with my work for Sustainability for Seychelles, I could see how the EC could be extremely beneficial in informal ESD settings as well.

Prior to the 1700s, the Seychelles islands were uninhabited by humans, as far as we know. Now, the islands are home to about 90,000 people, most of mixed (Creole) African, Indian, Chinese, Arab and European backgrounds. There is also a significant resident population of foreign workers, most employed in the tourism and construction sectors. Most people live on the three largest islands while the remaining islands either host exclusive hotels or are uninhabited. The economy of Seychelles is based on natural resources; the two largest industries earning income for the country are tourism and the tuna fishery.

Like most other former British and French island colonies, the early history of the islands tells a story of plantations and slavery. But since independence in 1976, the Creole culture of the islands has provided a sort of unifying theme across race, economic status, and class, with a common appreciation among the inhabitants for Creole foods, the language, music, dance, and religion.

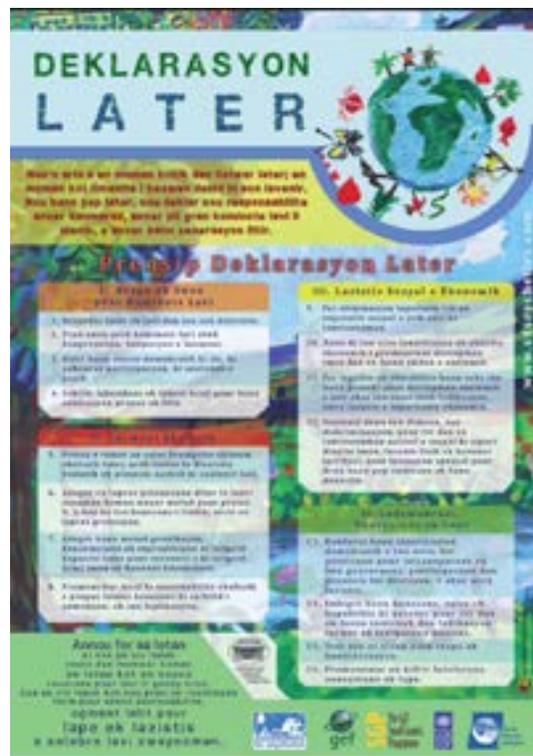
The environmental movement in Seychelles has been active for a couple of decades now, resulting in a healthy number of non-governmental organizations, which today play a significant role in promoting conservation, alongside government environmental agencies. Seychelles has since the early 1990s also had a national environmental management plan to guide efforts to safeguard the environment. Over the years, there has been an increasing awareness of the need for a cross-sectoral approach to environmental management, but this is much easier said than done, and today, we still find that efforts to improve the socio-economic challenges are separate from efforts to ensure ecological sustainability.

Implementation

The beautiful thing about the Earth Charter is that it makes it so obvious that in order for us to create a more sustainable, equitable, and peaceful world, we must address social issues alongside environmental ones. By 2010, our NGO realized that the Earth Charter could help us to improve cross-sectoral collaboration in Seychelles. Our first move was to translate the document into Kreol, the mother tongue of most Seychellois. We also hosted a workshop for members of secondary school wildlife clubs to introduce them to the Earth Charter and create artwork representing the different principles that could be used to illustrate a poster.

The Kreol Institute undertook the big translation task for us, and helped us design a poster highlighting the main principles. In a formal ceremony hosted by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Jean-Paul Adam in 2012, we finally presented the Kreol version of the Earth Charter to the Seychellois people, and invited schools, businesses, governmental agencies, citizens' groups and others to use the Earth Charter to guide their work. The event was well covered by the local media, and we distributed the Earth Charter poster to many organizations and schools.

More recently Sustainability for Seychelles has started working with grassroots community groups, creating education processes to help them organize themselves to take action at community level. We began to use the Earth Charter as a critical tool to help them consider some of the particular socio-ecological challenges in their community and guide the development of action plans that addressed both environmental and social issues.



Earth Charter poster

The CBO (community-based organization) is still nascent in Seychelles. In past years, the government-run district offices had tried to help communities start up environmental clubs, but this approach did not prove to be sustainable as many people associated the groups with politics.

Seychelles is a democracy, but it is a very small community and somewhat polarized politically. Most people are unwilling to stick their necks out to vocally protest an unsustainable development or poorly conceived government policy for fear of offending someone or causing trouble. This goes some way toward explaining why such grassroots groups have not existed in the past. In order for a CBO to be effective in Seychelles, it is necessary that they remain

non-partisan and independent, but at the same time they have to work in collaboration with government agencies if they are to succeed in their projects. Open criticism and direct protest are not necessarily productive strategies in this small island environment.

The Earth Charter is written in a spirit that promotes dialogue, collaboration, and a peaceful society, but also a healthy democracy in which people can voice their concerns and participate in decision-making in their communities. Creating a space for democratic decision-making (where previously all decisions were made by government on behalf of their electorate) is a learning process that Seychelles is now in the midst of. The EC is an ideal tool to help us along the way.

Using the Earth Charter to build capacity on community organizations

In the last couple of years, several CBOs have sprouted up, some independently, and some with the support of an individual or other group. Thanks to a grant from the GEF Small Grants Programme in 2013, Sustainability for Seychelles has been able to work with CBOs to help them build their capacity for participating in sustainable development decision-making and action in their districts. To support this work, in 2014 we printed a new Earth Charter poster, in English and Creole, which has been widely distributed to all of the CBOs as well as to the district administration offices in all communities.

We have developed a methodology, based loosely around the principles of the EC, to help CBOs devise an action plan that can address both social and ecological issues of concern.



The methodology is described below:

- 1) Undertake a community survey, done by members of our NGO in collaboration with members of the community group. The survey gathers information from adult community members about the social and environmental strengths and weaknesses in their community, and what actions they think are needed to make the community a better place to live. We also ask respondents about their involvement in sustainable development decision-making at the community level and whether they feel that there are sufficient opportunities to get involved. Our NGO does the analysis and generates a report, which can then be used as a reference point by the community group. If the community group has the capacity, they can do the analysis themselves, with our support where needed.
- 2) Organize a community action-planning workshop (full or half-day) which centers on the Earth Charter. This workshop is usually held on a Saturday or Sunday in a nice venue to attract participants – often hotels will offer their conference room and even provide refreshments. The participants are sometimes selected by the CBO, or the workshop is advertised and open to the public. During the workshop, we present the findings of the survey and discuss the key issues facing the community. This is followed by a creative group work exercise to introduce participants to the principles of the EC, and then they work in these same groups to devise realistic actions to address concerns raised in the survey. The actions can be organized under each of the four pillars of the EC – (1) respect and care for the community of life, (2) ecological integrity, (3) social and economic justice, and (4) democracy, non-violence and peace. We also help them prioritize the actions, devise a rough time frame for implementation, and consider sources of funding to support their work.
- 3) Once the action plan has been created, it provides structure for the work of the CBO for a few years, and serves as an education tool for communicating what they want to do to other community partners and potential funders. Using the action plan, the group leads the implementation process, and our NGO provides moral support, some equipment and other resources when available, and opportunities for networking with other CBOs in Seychelles.

Lessons learned

Using the Earth Charter as an educational and practical tool to guide holistic and sustainable action for stronger communities makes a lot of sense. The Earth Charter was never meant to be a document floating in cyberspace or sitting on a shelf. It is a call to action, and a guideline to a more sustainable world that can easily be tailored and adapted to different socio-cultural and ecological contexts. Its strength is that it places issues of social justice and concern alongside ecological issues, thus inspiring social and environmental activists to see that they are all working towards the same goals of a better planet for people and the rest of nature, and that collaboration is the best strategy.

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Countrymeters. Seychelles population. Retrieved from <http://countrymeters.info/en/Seychelles>

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