

# 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  
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UNESCO Chair on Education  
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and the Earth Charter



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# From Inside Prison Walls, the Earth Charter Builds a More Peaceful Future.

## The experience at La Reforma Prison in Costa Rica

Geannina Herrera, Lorena Ramos and Marialidia Marcotulli

### Introduction

The Earth Charter was put into practice as the focus of an education programme for inmates at Costa Rica's largest prison, El Centro Penitenciario La Reforma. Building upon the success of an earlier prison literacy programme, two educators in the prison education system organized inmate literacy instruction around the pillars and principles for sustainable living described in the Earth Charter document. The educators found that instruction with the Earth Charter not only supported the goal of successfully reintegrating inmates into society, but also provided important lessons on sustainable living, and fostered positive change among programme participants, other inmates, and prison staff.

### The Setting

El Centro Penitenciario La Reforma is the main prison in the Central American nation of Costa Rica. La Reforma houses inmates serving sentences from three to fifty years, for convictions including theft and drug trafficking. Education levels vary among La Reforma's inmates, and many inmates possess limited reading and writing skills. La Reforma provides an instruction programme to improve reading and writing skills among inmates to better position them for successful reintegration into society upon their release.

In the early days of her work, prison educator Geannina Herrera found that inmates lacked activities that would build their sensory, physical, social, and cognitive abilities. "... in addition to depriving them of their liberty, every type of sensory stimuli is diminished including sight, hearing, taste, smell, and even touch, because the walls of the prison are filled with emptiness and overflowing with need". In 2005, Ms. Herrera began literacy instruction, building upon the success of an earlier inmate literacy programme supported by the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Public Education.

Ms. Herrera found the prisoners needed more than simple language instruction. The overcrowding and violence in La Reforma made for hard living conditions. "Prisoners also downgrade their capacities because of the prison conditions. So the idea was to change their attitude." She wanted to go beyond simple literacy instruction and create opportunities for her pupils to regain a sense of dignity, purpose, and hope for their future. As Ms. Herrera says, "the objective of this programme was to provide the best tools for their eventual release."

From her own study of the Earth Charter, Ms. Herrera saw the document's principles as a valuable basis for her curriculum. Not only would the Earth Charter be a solid foundation for literacy instruction, but she could also use it in hands-on activities to teach positive life lessons.



2006 group of participants and educators Rita Tortós (left) and Geannina Herrera (right)

## Implementation

From the beginning, the Earth Charter served as an activities guide for the education programme. The principles supporting the document's four pillars were put into practice inside and outside the classroom. Some examples of activities and the principles they implemented:

- In support of Pillar One, Principle Two, "...care for the community of life with understanding, compassion and love," students shared uplifting messages on prison notice boards, and built a butterfly garden.
- In support of Pillar Two, Principle Seven, "...adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being," students built picture frames from recycled materials and attended workshops on responsibly managing water resources.
- In support of Pillar Three, Principles 11 and 12, "...ensure universal access to education" and "uphold the right... to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity," students refurbished their classroom using donated materials and were awarded certificates of recognition for completing the Non-Formal Education Programme in Environmental Education and Eco-literacy.
- Pillar Four, Principles 14 and 16 state "...integrate into formal education and life-long learning the knowledge, values and skills necessary for a sustainable way of life," and "...promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence and peace." In support of these principles, students celebrated Civic Week in September, during which they performed plays, cooked traditional food, and played traditional games. They also practiced nonviolence in their interactions with other inmates and visitors from outside the prison.



Several corporate partners in both the public and private sectors have supported the programme's efforts. Public power utility Fuerza y Luz provided a member of staff to facilitate monthly environmental education workshops. The Coca-Cola Company supported the programme's plastic bottle recycling project, exchanging recycled bottles for educational materials to be used in the workshops and other capacity building projects.

Instruction using the Earth Charter proved successful, and in 2006, Ms. Herrera's colleague Rita Tortos joined her in educating inmates using the principles of the Earth Charter. The programme ran from 2005 to 2011, and options for resumption in the future are open.

## Lessons Learned

Participants gained knowledge and skills in the eco-literacy programme based on the Earth Charter. They were eager to share their experiences with family during visits. They saw new options for their lives upon release from prison, including leading environmental advocacy like recycling programmes and natural resource management.

Participants gained more than just knowledge. They also grew personally and collectively, building community within the inmate population and cultivating nonviolent interaction.

This improved climate in the prison encouraged the continuation of the programme, and supported the rehabilitation of programme participants and the general inmate population. Through the improved outlook and atmosphere amongst the inmates, guards and administrators saw the value of the programme, and even contributed their own energies to ensure its success.

The education programme at La Reforma demonstrates that the Earth Charter can be a powerful educational tool, not only for teaching environmental sustainability, but also for promoting positive personal growth amongst students. Amidst the violence and deprivation at La Reforma, the Earth Charter formed and nurtured a culture of peace and hope for the future.

### Resources

View a brief video about the programme, including conversations with the instructors, here: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Whe\\_y47SGtg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Whe_y47SGtg)

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