Alexander Likhotal, Russia. A thematic essay which speaks to Principle 13 on creating global dialogue on sustainable development

The Earth Charter as a Vehicle of Transformation

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The problems that exist in the world today cannot be solved by the level of thinking that created them.
Albert Einstein

Twenty years after the end of the Cold War seemed to herald a new era of peace, security concerns are once more at the top of the world's agenda. A heightened sense of insecurity, reflected as much in headlines as in opinion polls worldwide, is palpable. Increasing tensions on the world scene, escalating terrorism, religious intolerance, relentless environmental degradation, and the systematic violation of human rights all demonstrate, now more than ever, the need to understand the diverse roots of conflicts, as well as the links between peace and security, poverty, and environmental deterioration.

Unlike traditional threats emanating from an adversary, new challenges are better understood as shared risks and vulnerabilities. Raising military expenditures or dispatching troops cannot resolve them. Nor can sealing borders or maintaining the status quo in a highly unequal world contain them. These "problems without passports" are likely to worsen in the years ahead unless the world arrives at a new global vision of common values, which must underlie the new forms of dialogue and cooperation needed among nations and civilizations.

As a first important step, we must replace the overriding culture of violence and conflict with a new culture of peace. This means not just strengthening and democratising our institutions of peace and security to better respond to and prevent violence, war, and conflict; it means developing, at all levels and in all spheres of life, a complex of attitudes, values, beliefs, and patterns of behaviour that promote not just the peaceful settlement of conflict, but, as well, the quest for mutual understanding, and opportunity for individuals to live harmoniously with each other and the larger community of life. Above all, it means promoting a new global security and sustainability ethic.

At Green Cross, the Earth Dialogues Forums initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev, Chair of Green Cross International, and Maurice Strong, Chair of the Earth Council, are a series of public forums on ethics and sustainable development. We have adopted the following definition to guide our analysis of ethics: a system of accepted beliefs, principles or values which guide human behaviour; a set of rules of conduct or morals of an individual or a group. In building upon this general definition of ethics, we can go further to define "universal ethics" as values and principles that apply across all levels of human diversity.

Much of the world has already accepted ethical principles that are considered "universal." These include the ethical treatment of civilians during war, and the ethical treatment of prisoners of war as found in the Geneva Convention; and the prohibition of slavery, and the prohibition of torture as found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

For several years, a number of prominent civil and political leaders have gone to great lengths to develop moral frameworks for sustainable development. These efforts bore fruition in the form of the Earth Charter, a code of ethics for the planet. The Earth Charter has become an important document in the sustainable development field. Today, the Earth Charter is endorsed by more than two thousand organisations that represent hundreds of millions of people. Yet new environmental

principles which should be universal, including the precautionary principle or the polluter-pays principle which were presented in the Rio Declaration in 1992, still await their adoption. Under current circumstances, it is becoming an extremely pressing task to have this code of basic moral principles observed by governments, business, and NGOs, simply in order to give future generations and our planet a chance to survive.

The recommendations below are built on the findings of the Green Cross International Earth Dialogue Forum that took place in Lyon in February 2002, and in Barcelona in February 2004. These gathered two hundred speakers and over two thousand participants as part of the process of promoting an understanding of the principles of the Earth Charter.

Both forums stimulated process of thinking differently about three interrelated challenges— sustainable development, eradication of poverty, and conditions for peace and security. They were designed as interactive platforms to facilitate dialogue between a wide range of stakeholders, including official decision-makers from civil society, business and industry, religious and spiritual leaders, as well as representatives from international institutions. The key conclusions are focused on the assumption that achieving lasting peace, prosperity, stability and sustainability, will require fundamental changes in the way that the international community addresses and responds to the multi-dimensional root causes of instability and insecurity.

It was found that ethics must serve as a foundation for sustainability. While certain ethical principles are already enshrined in national and international law, it is necessary to ensure that all universal values enjoy the same recognition and status, and that universal principles are universally applied. While ethical values are culturally relative and these differences must be respected and protected, there exist certain universal ethical principles that are beyond diversity. These must be identified and codified into law. Universal ethical principles supporting sustainability must be enforceable by law.

In response to the realities of globalisation, there must be a shift in the perception of national sovereignty. Specifically, there must be greater acceptance of global responsibility that stretches beyond traditional borders. As problems have become trans- and inter-national, so must the solutions. National and international security increasingly depend on sustainable and ethical approaches. Problems such as transboundary pollution, poverty, and social injustice are international sustainability and security issues that can only be resolved through united and cooperative international efforts.

There is an urgent need to change the priorities that promote material wealth over personal well-being and justice. These principles must be effectively reflected by changes in local, national, and international law, and by changes in the regulations and policies of global institutions, businesses, and governments. For example, there must be a real change in the present measurements of country performance based primarily on economic indicators to include more holistic measures such as health, poverty levels, biological diversity, and social justice.

Only freedom and democracy can cope with the new challenges. No other system of government can claim more legitimacy, and through no other system can political grievances be addressed more effectively. We must support the growth of democratic movements in every nation, on the basis of our commitment to solidarity, inclusiveness, and cultural diversity, abstaining from any attempts of "exporting" democracy. Citizens are actors, not spectators. They embody the principles and values of democracy. A vibrant civil society that plays a strategic role in protecting local communities, countering extremist ideologies and dealing with political violence, can be only legitimate one.

Structural inequalities within societies must be reduced by eliminating group discrimination and barriers to socio-economic mobility; and promoting women's education, employment, and empowerment. The impact of rapid socio-economic change must be mitigated by integrating weak globalisers into the world economy using duty-free regimes, membership in international trade organisations, and transfer of key technology by designing long-term aid and investment policies that contribute to sustainable development, help empower marginalized groups, and promote participation. Developing educational systems must be linked to job opportunities. Radical ideology must be countered by promoting the growth of civil society organizations and increasing favourable exposure to democratic societies and thought by exchange and dialogue programs.

Earth Dialogues also stressed that the escalation of global problems is in many ways attributable to world politics lagging behind the real processes unfolding in the world. World politics is skidding, proving to be incapable of responding to the challenges of globalization. It is disappointing that, more than a decade after it was given a new lease of life with the end of the Cold War, multilateralism is foundering.

The world needs leaders who understand that, in the words of the Earth Charter, "when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more" (Preamble, paragraph four). In a world increasingly besieged by corruption, greed, and self-interest, we need leaders who have the moral courage to ground their decisions in this new global ethic.

Modern world politics is not to be based on the conventional principle of balance of powers, but rather on the balance of interests, and that dialogue between cultures and civilizations must become its primary tool. Politics should concentrate on avenues of cooperation and ways to break through deadlocks by promoting just and long-term real-world solutions, not quick fixes or inequitable compromises.

We believe this will require global cooperation in population dynamics, including striving to reach a stable population with high human and social cohesive capacity; consumption patterns that will induce the production of goods and services based on less material-intensive, renewable and recyclable resources; renewable and clean sources of energy; low-waste and low-polluting commodities and services; goods and services that use little space and land area; products and services based on socially- and environmentally-friendly clean technology; delivery of the Millennium Development Goals with equity; policy measures to correct global market and policy failures; consolidating multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations, and the triangle of partnership among governments, businesses, and civil society.

We do understand the challenge. We have to translate it into action. In order to achieve this we need a Global Glasnost – openness, transparency, and public dialogue – on the part of nations, governments, and citizens to build consensus around these challenges. And we need a policy of Preventive Engagement – international and individual responsibility and action to meet the challenges of poverty, disease, environmental degradation, and conflict in an early, preventive, and non-violent way so that military force must not become the only option.

The Earth Charter, which provides a blueprint of relevant ethical principles is perhaps not a panacea, and has never been conceived as such. It is a bold and creative attempt to stimulate the world's transformation in the direction of safe, just, and inclusive future. ●