

## **Interview: Maurice Strong on a "People's Earth Charter"**

Maurice Strong

Chairman of the Earth Council and Co-Chair of the Earth Charter Commission

Transcript of interview conducted March 5, 1998

Q: Mr. Strong, could you share with us why you think an Earth Charter is so important?

A: The Earth Charter is important as an expression of the commitment of people throughout the Earth to evoke their own deepest moral, spiritual and ethical principles in the task of ensuring a sustainable future for those who inhabit the Earth now and those who will follow us on the Earth.

People act in accordance with their deepest motivations, and therefore to undertake major programs and activities, which we must do, they have to be rooted finally, in the priorities of people, and those priorities stem from their moral, ethical and spiritual values. So, the Earth Charter will attempt to articulate these in rather universal terms. And by articulating them and ensuring that they represent the voice and the feelings of millions of people from all over the world, they can have an immense value in terms of motivating our political leaders to do what is necessary to ensure a sustainable future for our children.

Q: How could support for a People's Earth Charter help to create the political will necessary to ensure that this issue is part of the UN agenda?

A: The whole question of an Earth Charter was in fact on the UN Agenda at Rio. We didn't quite make it. We did make some progress. At the Stockholm Conference, which was the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972, governments agreed to a historic declaration, which moved the world community towards what we now call an Earth Charter. Then, at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, as the Secretary General of that conference, I **challenged** governments to produce an Earth Charter. They made progress. They created a *Rio Declaration*. But, they did **not** complete the job of agreeing on an Earth Charter, and therefore **people** are now taking up this. People, through their organizations and through the Earth Council, who is working with many others around the world to help ensure that this task of formulating a universal Earth Charter, ...will command the support of people throughout the world and by commanding their support, as the true voice of people -- after all, the United Nation's Charter begins "We the People..." Well, the Earth Charter is going to be a product of **people's** commitments, and those commitments will clearly serve to motivate governments.

The Charter will stand on it's own. It will be in effect, to use an Anglo-Saxon term, the *Magna Carta* of the people around the Earth. But, it will also, we hope, lead to action by the governments through the United Nations.

Q: What is the aim of the process at this point?

**A:** The aim of the process is to bring the Earth Charter to people everywhere; to enlist the cooperation and the help of organizations of every kind: citizen's organizations, non-governmental organizations, educational organizations, youth organizations, and of course religious and spiritual organizations -- to enlist **all** of them in this task of trying to ensure that the Earth Charter reflects the thinking, and the concerns, and the values of people everywhere.

Now of course, people are different; people have different perceptions and different values. But, out of this we want to distill those **universal values** which we all must share in order to ensure our common future. And, to put it language that speaks to people everywhere but also ensures that people are the source of the Charter. And, therefore **we need** and **we invite** the help and the participation of organizations and people throughout the world to ensure that the Charter has the most universal possible acceptance, and that it is rooted in the true participation and the contributions of people everywhere. And we want those contributions. The more contributions, the more participation, the more will be the **credibility** and the **validity** and the **political influence** of the Charter.

**Q:** Why or how is a People's Earth Charter going to make a difference?

**A:** Of course, charters don't solve everything. We know for example, those of us who follow the Christian faith, know the *Ten Commandments*. We embrace them. We value them. We try to live up to them. But, we know that it has never been totally possible for people to do that. But that does not stop us from **striving**. Now, we know that the Earth Charter will contain values and principles concerning how people must relate to each other, how they must treat each other and how they must relate to the Earth. And these principles will be **principles to which we must aspire**, principles that will motivate our conduct. But, we also know that those principles won't come immediately into force. Everybody will not suddenly embrace them. But we hope that everybody will respect them, everyone will try to base their lives on these principles and only by doing that can we ensure that the Earth will remain a safe and hospitable home for those who follow us on it.

**Q:** There has been a lot of concern about the role the Earth Charter will play in the UN negotiations. Is one of the ultimate goals of the project to receive an official endorsement by the UN?

**A:** Well, it does not depend on that. Let me be **very** clear, this is a **People's Earth Charter**. It will have its power, it will have its influence because it comes from people. That's why we want to ensure that people throughout the world, the **maximum** number of people, are involved. That is what will give it its authenticity. That is what will give it its credibility. That is even **more** important than putting it on the UN Agenda. But by doing that, then that will make it inevitable that the UN will take note of it, and hopefully it will then lead to a process of producing a formalized Earth Charter.

But, let us be **very** clear, the UN action is not going to be the only goal. The **real goal** of the Earth Charter is that it will in fact become like the *Ten Commandments*, like the

*Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. It will become a symbol of the aspirations and the commitments of people everywhere. And, that is where the political influence, where the long-term results of the Earth Charter will really come.

Of course, as someone who has served the UN for many years, I hope very much that the UN will embrace this and that it will be translated into a formal commitment on the part of governments. But the *a priori* purpose is to get the commitment of **people**, and the political commitment of governments, hopefully through United Nations action, will follow inevitably from the commitment of people.