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## INTRODUCTION

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# Earth Charter Education for Sustainable Ways of Living

RICK CLUGSTON

### Abstract

This introductory article frames the sustainability challenges we face and explores the meaning of sustainable development and education for sustainable development through the lens of the Earth Charter, drawing on the experiences of a range of Earth Charter educators. It introduces the reports of projects using the Earth Charter in ESD, including teacher training programs, university reform and community and youth education in Brazil, the USA, Belarus, Costa Rica, Canada and Germany. It describes how Earth Charter education for sustainable ways of living can help realise and deepen the emerging understanding of ESD in the context of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development.

**Keywords:** Sustainable development, education for sustainable development, ecojustice, spirituality, Earth Charter

The Earth Charter, as a document and the focus of a social movement, is making a catalytic contribution to accelerating our transition to sustainable ways of living. Its integrated ethical vision increasingly serves as an inspiration as well as a 'standard by which the conduct of all individuals, organisations, businesses, governments and

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transnational institutions are to be guided and assessed' (Earth Charter Commission 2000: Preamble, paragraph 6).

2010 is the 10th anniversary of the completion of the Earth Charter document at UNESCO in Paris, and the launch of the 'Earth Charter in Action' at the Peace Palace in The Hague. Next year will be the 20th anniversary of the beginning of the drafting process for an Earth Charter in the preparations for the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio.

This special issue of the JESD is a contribution to the celebrations and critical reflections occurring in this EC+10 year. It focuses on the contributions of the Earth Charter to understanding sustainable development and implementing education for sustainable development (ESD).

Many of the authors in this issue find that the Earth Charter guides them towards a deeper and fuller vision of what sustainability really requires. Its 16 main principles and 61 supporting principles provide a framework for sustainable development, or 'good globalisation', developed through a broadly inclusive and participatory consultation process. Most of the articles in this issue describe innovative educational programs and practices based on the Earth Charter.

## **SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGES**

As the recent failure at Copenhagen illustrates, we have not arrived anywhere near an agreement on the requirements and responsibilities for dealing effectively with climate change. Despite 20 years of global chatter about sustainable development, climate change, poverty alleviation, biodiversity loss and so on, little substantial progress has been made. In fact, on the majority of indicators of sustainability, things are getting worse.

The Earth Charter challenges us to ask some difficult questions: How can we create conditions so that the soon to be 9 billion humans can lead decent, healthy, productive lives, while enhancing biological and cultural diversity and preserving opportunities for future generations to live full lives? How can we create a financial system that respects and cares for social and environmental wellbeing as well as economic growth, and no longer discounts the future? How can we live in a way that all can live, eliminating poverty and violence and 'awakening a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace and the joyful celebration of life'?

The Earth Charter (see Appendix in this issue, pp. 317–24) also points us to a set of tasks that we must accomplish if we are to make the transition to a carbon-manageable future and more broadly, to a truly just, sustainable and peaceful future:

1. Achieve consensus that we face a clear and present danger that is a priority for personal and collective action. Many do not know, or agree, that we 'stand at a critical moment in Earth's history' (paragraph 1) and that 'fundamental changes are needed in our values, institutions, and ways of living' (paragraph 4). We face many 'misinformation' campaigns from those who see their short-term interests threatened by the requirements and responsibilities of creating a truly just, sustainable and peaceful future.

- We also face remarkable ignorance of the current state of the world and the root causes of our sustainability challenges.
2. Build 'bright green' infrastructure including the technical capacity for a wind, water and solar energy system that provides for all our energy needs. This retooling of our buildings, transportation and energy systems should be a major social policy priority akin to the Manhattan Project, landing on the moon, retooling our industrial capacity to respond to Pearl Harbor and building the internet.
  3. Shift our economic indicators to a true triple bottom line, 'internalizing the full environmental and social costs of goods and services into the selling price' and reflecting commitment to future generations and the community of life. Unless we revise our economic system we can make little progress towards a sustainable future. Corporations are increasingly recognising the need for social and environmental responsibility and have incorporated, to varying degrees, goals and reporting on these areas. But the fact remains that profitability—the economic pillar of the triple bottom line—trumps all other concerns.
  4. Motivate the entrenched interests that heavily influence political systems at the national and local levels to embrace the sustainability policy framework and ensure its implementation. Greed, violence, intolerance and corruption permeate many communities and countries, which are increasingly drawn into the narrow obsession of our globalising economic order to increase short term economic growth and consumption.
  5. Accept and embody an understanding of the good life that reorients production and consumption to what one Earth can bear, so that all members of the life community can thrive. Many of us who advocate for a sustainable future have a large responsibility to make the shifts required, to reduce our ecological and carbon footprints and to demonstrate, as the Earth Charter states, 'after basic needs are met, life is about being more, not having more'.

To accomplish these tasks we need a fundamental paradigm shift in our understanding of development, and a reorientation of lifestyles, organisational practices and social policies to embody and support truly sustainable ways of living for all. And we need a significant educational effort, not only in schools and universities, but in professional development and through the media. We need a better understanding of what sustainability really requires and we need to educate for this deep sustainability. The framework of the Earth Charter can help us develop this understanding and the many approaches to Earth Charter-based education offers content and process for ESD, as the articles in this issue illustrate.

## **THE EARTH CHARTER VISION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

Many articles in this issue explore the Earth Charter's understanding of sustainable development. The development of an Earth Charter originated in the call of the

World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987 for the creation of 'a universal declaration' that would 'consolidate and extend relevant legal principles' creating 'new norms needed to maintain livelihoods and life on our shared planet' and 'to guide state behavior in the transition to sustainable development' (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987, p. 34). Drafting an Earth Charter was part of the process leading to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, but the time for such a declaration was not right. The Rio Declaration articulated the governments' agreement on environment and development possible at the time. However, many felt that a deeper vision of sustainable development was needed.

In 1994, Maurice Strong (Secretary-General of the Rio Summit) and Mikhail Gorbachev, working through the Earth Council and Green Cross International respectively, launched an initiative (with support from the Dutch Government) to develop an Earth Charter as a civil society initiative. From 1994 to 2000, the drafting and consultation process drew on hundreds of international documents and a world-wide participatory consultation process involving thousands of individuals and hundreds of organisations from all regions of the world, different cultures and diverse sectors of society.

The Earth Charter was approved by the Earth Charter Commission at UNESCO in Paris in 2000. The Chair of the Drafting Committee, Steven Rockefeller, stated:

The Earth Charter is centrally concerned with the transition to sustainable ways of living and sustainable human development. The four major themes of the Earth Charter are expressed in its four parts: Part I, Respect and Care for the Community of Life; Part II, Ecological Integrity; Part III, Social and Economic Justice; and Part IV, Democracy, Nonviolence and Peace. The Earth Charter vision reflects the conviction that caring for people and caring for Earth are two interrelated dimensions of one great task. It supports the view that economic institutions and activities should promote equitable human development and should value and protect Earth's ecological systems and the many services they provide. The Earth Charter is both a people-centered and ecosystem-centered document. Recognizing that our environmental, economic, social, political, and spiritual challenges are interdependent, the Earth Charter provides an integrated framework for thinking about and addressing these issues. The result is a fresh, broad conception of what constitutes a sustainable society and sustainable development. (Earth Charter International 2008: 8)

The Earth Charter affirms the three pillars of sustainable development—social, environmental and economic wellbeing—as well as a commitment to future generations. But it articulates and refines what these pillars mean and shows their inextricable interconnections. It deepens the triple bottom line, strengthening the importance of people and planet. It also replaces our narrow and short-term anthropocentrism with a framework which draw us to 'respect and care for the community of life'.

Many of the authors in this issue use the Earth Charter in their educational efforts because the Charter emphasises themes they regard as essential to building a sustainable future, such as the four major themes described above, and others including interconnectedness, systems thinking, being a part of—not apart from Earth, ecocentrism, ecojustice, spirituality, sufficiency and sustainable livelihoods.

## ECOCENTRISM AND ECOJUSTICE

In his article, Noel Preston (see pp. 188–89) describes two central themes emphasised by many Earth Charter educators, namely, ecocentrism and ecojustice:

The vision of the Earth Charter, implicitly and explicitly described in its many clauses, derives from an ecocentric understanding of reality and a social analysis which assumes that conditions of ecojustice are necessary for global sustainable development. The ecocentric perspective challenges anthropocentric priorities which have dominated relationships in the community of life. Ecocentrism challenges a human-centred approach to ethics, economics, religion and culture. Ecocentrism lies behind the moral sentiment named by Albert Schweitzer as 'reverence for life'. ... Ecojustice embraces a double-edged urgent challenge: to achieve environmental sustainability on the one hand and a fairer, more equitable distribution of resources and life opportunities in the human community on the other... ecojustice assumes that to address environmental degradation in our world we must also challenge the exploitation of the poor. In other words, one part of the world cannot live in an orgy of unrestrained consumption while the rest destroys its environment just to survive.

Kusumita Pedersen, who coordinates Earth Charter activities for the Interfaith Center of New York, comments on this eco- or, as she calls it, biocentrism:

The Earth Charter as a global ethics statement seeking to be normative for a 'global community' clearly proposes to expand the understanding of moral community beyond the global in the sense of 'the human family' to the global in the sense of 'the Earth community' of all life. This biocentrism is perhaps its greatest innovation as a document seeking to be recognized by governments, and still may prove to be an obstacle to its wider acceptance. The commitment of those involved in the consensus-building consultation process to nevertheless preserve this language grew not only from a conviction of its truth. It came also from the perception that without such a radical change in shared moral vision, the energy and will to deal adequately with the worsening global environmental crisis surely cannot be mustered in time. (Pederson 2008: 7)

Rose Marie Inojosa, in her article in this journal, describes a process of teacher training for 800 educators based on the Earth Charter in the municipal area of São Paulo, Brazil. This process was developed by UMAPAZ, the Open University of the Environment and a Culture of Peace, which is part of the city's Department of Environment:

Sustainability was considered an emergent quality arising from sets of relationships in a system, whether viewed at the macro or micro scale. While designing the course, the activities, reflections, text readings and videos chosen to be part this module immersed the participants in this kind of vision, offering a glimpse of how we can create the opportunity for people to imagine and work toward life-centred forms of development.

The Earth Charter was adopted as a guideline to this module because it represents an important contribution for a holistic and integrated vision of the social and environmental problems of humanity. It does not consider ecology as a technique to manage scarce natural resources but as a new paradigm to relate to nature, looking at all interconnected

beings as forming an immense and complex system. The Earth Charter encourages everybody to search for common ground in the midst of human diversity and to embrace a global ethic that is shared by an ever growing number of people throughout the world.

## SPIRITUALITY

A number of the articles specifically refer to the spiritual dimension of life as essential to progress towards a sustainable future, and emphasise cultivating values and virtues that are associated with a positive spirituality, such as awe and wonder, compassion and reverence, and simple living.

Ruud Lubbers, an Earth Charter commissioner and former Prime Minister of the Netherlands, states:

It is remarkable to consider the appreciation of the spiritual dimension of life, as expressed in the Earth Charter. Among the universal spiritual values recognized in the Earth Charter are reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, reverence for life, compassion, love, hope, humility, peace, appreciation of beauty, 'being more not having more' and the joyful celebration of life.... Spirituality can blossom in a world in which people, planet and profits balance the importance of the market economy with corporate social responsibility, and where the Earth Charter complements the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We might even begin to speak about the four P's [the quadruple bottom line]: People, Planet, Profit and 'Pneuma'. (Lubbers et al. 2008: 31)

Part of the reason we have made so little progress in creating a truly sustainable world is that we have approached sustainability primarily as ecoefficiency and sustained economic growth. We have somewhat greened our voracious globalising economy, but we have not altered its course to embrace a genuine triple (or quadruple) bottom line.

Earth Charter-based ESD is about cultivating a range of spiritual capacities that are not part of most mainstream educational efforts, but which are essential to sustainable ways of living. These include:

1. *Awakening a sense of wonder and awe.* Understanding the immensity and intricacy of all that is and the processes that have brought us into conscious being. ESD must awaken us to the astounding story in which we exist—understanding the cosmological, evolutionary and developmental saga, helping us appreciate the mystery of natural and human creativity, and the delicate and resilient ecology that makes life possible.
2. *Accepting necessary suffering.* Tolstoy said that 90 per cent of human suffering is caused by us trying to avoid the 10 per cent that is necessary. We cannot avoid physical and emotional pain, or escape death. Advertising constantly promises that by purchasing a particular product we will experience pleasure and avoid pain. ESD should enable us to embrace the transformative process that underlies all of evolution and development—a process in which every personality and civilization needs to confront its

- limitations and contradictions, and adapt to a new way of being responsive to the developmental challenges of our moment in time.
3. *Living in a way that all can live.* This should be the touchstone of a true commitment to sustainable development. ESD should help us choose and embody a way of living that all 6.8 or soon to be 9 billion humans can live, without further undermining ecological integrity, biological and cultural diversity and the opportunities for future generations. What would this way of living be? What sort of house would I live in? What food would I eat? How much energy would I consume? What would be my ecological and carbon footprints? Of course, this is not only about greening our lifestyles, but is about changing our social policies and institutional practices to support ecojustice.
  4. *Finding our vocation, our great work.* The concept of vocation is perhaps best described as the experience of connecting our passions with real needs in the world around us. In his 1987 Encyclical on Social Concern, Pope John Paul II observed, 'There are some people—the few who possess much—who do not really succeed in 'being' because they are hindered by the cult of 'having' and there are others—the many who have little or nothing—who do not succeed in realizing their basic human vocation because they are deprived of essential goods' (Pope John Paul II 1987: Section 28).

In our little Earthly space and time, our great work is to act as best we can to contribute to the greatest good for the greatest number of all sentient beings.

## EARTH CHARTER EDUCATION AND ESD

Most of the articles in this issue are descriptive reports of projects the authors have been involved with, using the Earth Charter in ESD. These include teacher training programs, university reform, community and youth education in Brazil, USA, Belarus, Costa Rica, Canada and Germany.

UNESCO is responsible for coordinating the United Nation's efforts to shape education for sustainable development and serves as the Secretariat of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. Their background material on ESD observes that:

education at all levels can shape the world of tomorrow, equipping individuals and societies with the skills, perspectives, knowledge and values to live and work in a sustainable manner. Education for sustainable development (ESD) is a vision of education that seeks to balance human and economic well-being with cultural traditions and respect for the earth's natural resources. ESD applies transdisciplinary educational methods and approaches to develop an ethic for lifelong learning; fosters respect for human needs that are compatible with sustainable use of natural resources and the needs of the planet; and nurtures a sense of global solidarity.

ESD integrates concepts and analytical tools from a variety of disciplines to help people better understand the world in which they live. Pursuing sustainable development through education requires educators and learners to reflect critically on their own communities;



identify non-viable elements in their lives; and explore tensions among conflicting values and goals. ESD brings a new motivation to learning as pupils become empowered to develop and evaluate alternative visions of a sustainable future and to work to collectively fulfill these visions. (UNESCO 2010: 2)

UNESCO realises that 'Many, perhaps most, formal educational institutions, as well as many nonformal and media based educational/advertising enterprises, are not promoting ESD. Rather they are conditioning individuals to work for other ends, whether that be overconsumption or the promotion of fundamentalist and intolerant social projects' (UNESCO 2010: 4).

Casagawa and Toh describe the synergies between peace education, ESD and the Earth Charter, seeing these and other transformative education approaches as different currents in the same stream sharing common values and a commitment to dialogue, critical empowerment (or conscientisation) and partnership learning. They comment:

Across diverse fields of education for transformation, there is a strong consensus that the desired goals and purposes of teaching and learning cannot be accomplished only on the basis of appropriate content. Equally important is how that content is taught and learned. As summarized by UNESCO, various principles and processes have been identified as relevant and essential in ESD, namely: interdisciplinary and holistic, values-driven, critical thinking and problem solving, multi-method, participatory decision making, applicability, and locally relevant. These call for pedagogical processes that are participatory, creative... They also lead to the outcomes of personal and professional transformation of learners through daily integration of their understanding into practice.

The Paulo Freire Institute has been using the Earth Charter in its approaches to eco or Earth pedagogy for over a decade. Its director, Moacir Gadotti, writing in this issue, comments:

Without nourishing a dialogue among the community, developing a curriculum of clean technologies is impractical. We must integrate the local economy (sustainable consumption); energy efficiency (green technologies, renewable resources, responsible consumption); human interactions (human rights, shared principles, power relations); biodiversity (ecological interactions). Finally, these elements are gathered into a systematized knowledge and into new habits for sustainable living.

Gadotti further observes that 'one impediment to more sustainable schools is the rigidity of "prescribed" curricula and of official examination systems, which prevent teachers' creativity and innovation in teaching/learning'. The descriptive reports of Earth-Charter-based education reform in Germany, Brazil and Belarus demonstrate different strategies for transforming this rigidity. In the case of Metodista University in São Paulo, much of the teaching/learning, and the university's operations as well were reoriented to embody the principles and processes essential to ESD. The Belarusian experience, as well as e-Glo (the Earth Charter Global Learning Opportunity), illustrate how youth, using social networking technologies, can enhance ESD.

David Gruenewald provides a useful perspective on the Earth Charter's potential contribution to education for sustainable development. He states:

The Earth Charter's educational proposals appear to recognize that the disciplinary boundaries, norms, routines, and standardizations that characterize conventional education work against the experiential, collaborative, interdisciplinary, action-oriented, and transformative goals of the Earth Charter.

...from an educational perspective, the power of the Earth Charter is in its potential to engender conversations, to interrupt our discourse, and to challenge our norms and routines with a comprehensive, socioecological vision for society and education. For if Bowers (2001) is right and we need to replace the destructive metaphors of modernism with new, and old, ecological metaphors, we desperately need conversations out of which these metaphors can emerge and circulate. As a cross-cultural people's treaty for global interdependence and shared responsibility, the Earth Charter is a text around which these conversations might begin (Gruenewald 2004: 105)

Reading the articles in this issue, it is clear that most of the authors use the Earth Charter in their educational efforts because they believe that the values the Earth Charter articulates are foundational for creating a just, peaceful and sustainable future. These values include an ecocentric sense of human embeddedness in the community of life, which is, as Thomas Berry described 'a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects' (Berry 2006: 26). They also include drawing forth capacities such as awe and wonder, humility, gratitude and reverence, and a deep commitment to ecojustice. Ecojustice requires the reframing of our economic, legal, religious and political institutions in this ecocentric world view (see the review of Bosselman's book) and a reorientation of our lifestyles and organisational practices to providing the basic conditions for all to realise their full potential and to being more, not having more, once these basic needs are met.

The dream of creating a just, sustainable and peaceful future is perennial, and the way forward to realise it has been articulated in a rich diversity of cultural and historical contexts. The Earth Charter is an expression of this dream, articulated in our increasingly globalised world. Many are translating this dream into action through educational approaches that increase our ability to respect and care for the community of life and Earth, our common home.

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