

Giving the Earth Charter a New and More Powerful Voice

A Reponse to Brendan Mackey's "Reflection on the Earth Charter Project and its Mission in the Anthropocene"

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We agree with Brendan Mackey's analysis that the Earth Charter emerged from the optimistic post-cold war era ("a time of hope") and nearly twenty years on faces a "harder road" due to the growing power of the "industrial-military-technological-financial complex." Our time is characterized by unprecedented ecological disintegration fueled by unfettered economic growth, ever-increasing investment in deadly weaponry, eroding political institutions and declining public morality.

There has never been a greater need for promoting, and living by, the values and principles expressed in the Earth Charter movement, a movement that began with the founding of the United Nations, the United Nations Charter and Universal Declaration of Human Rights, surged in 1972 at Stockholm and in 1983 with the UN endorsement of the World Charter for Nature, and continues in many diverse and powerful ways today. The most comprehensive summary text of the movement to date is the declaration launched at The Hague in 2000 under the title of the "Earth Charter."

Yet the Earth Charter movement, the text and the Initiative formally undertaken in its name seem unable to marshal the power required to substantially change the course of world history.

Why is this so? A major reason, in our view, is our failure to adequately identify root causes, dynamics and symptoms of the global crisis. Free market ideology, unprecedented inequality between rich and poor, corporate control, often in league with authoritarian governments, of the global social and economic order, or even such critical environmental matters as climate change are not mentioned in the Earth Charter text, and have not been courageously challenged or constructively addressed by those of us who have assumed positions of leadership in the movement. We agree, however, that such weaknesses

should not lead to an attempt to update and revise the text itself, but rather be rectified by an “addendum,” as Mackey suggests, or authoritative commentary, and by new initiatives for which we all bear responsibility and can contribute.

A second reason is the existence of numerous other global documents, manifestoes, and declarations within the Earth Charter movement, declarations of conscience that inspired the drafting of the 2000 Earth Charter text and its affiliated documents, such as the Draft International Covenant on Environment and Development, and have continued to pour forth in even greater number and urgency ever since. In one way or another all emphasize our responsibilities for other people and towards the Earth. The plethora of global ethical drafts and declarations may have led to competition between them and perhaps even to general ‘declarations fatigue’, thereby weakening the impact and urgency of the Earth Charter Initiative.

We have two recommendations here. First, Brendan Mackey’s call for trusteeship governance deserves strong support. To this end, Klaus Bosselmann’s Earth trusteeship address to the UN General Assembly (21 April 2017) will lead to a proposal by the Planetary Integrity Project (PIP) to the United Nations in 2020. The Earth Charter movement and text give PIP its *raison d’être*. We recommend that the Earth Charter Initiative become a partner of PIP (next to WWF, Oxfam and many others). It is worth mentioning that the new Ecological Law and Governance Association (ELGA) <https://www.elga.world/> will be an official partner of the UNGA Dialogue Harmony with Nature (channeling world-wide Earth jurisprudence initiatives). PIP is going to be one of ELGA’s projects. It is clear that without the Earth Charter movement none of these recent developments would have happened. There is a case, therefore, to argue that the movement and the text that has been its primary standard bearer have gone far to provide the overall framework and stimulus for contemporary efforts towards effective global governance.

Our second recommendation, which speaks to Mackey’s three concerns for ‘education’, ‘governance’ and ‘activism’, is for representatives of the Earth Charter Initiative, in collaboration with others of us who have sought to support the Initiative since its inception, to take leadership in

forming an alliance of global ethical initiatives/movements towards a transformation in the purposes and organization of global governance.

We share the view that the Earth Charter text, even as it stands, in spite of the need for further development along the lines identified above, is the world's most comprehensive expression of the true universal values and principles necessary for a just, sustainable and peaceful world order and is therefore in some sense *primus inter pares* of the many comparable documents and expressions of the Earth Charter movement as a whole. We desperately need to give this shared movement a stronger and more credible voice.

This could be done if the Earth Charter Initiative would join with others in holding an 'Earth Ethics Summit' and participate in the drafting of a declaration supported by as many as possible of the many initiatives seeking a new ethic of care and respect for people and the Earth.

What we have in mind is to reach out to the key people and organizations that have written and sponsored global ethics declarations before and since the 2000 Earth Charter. The list includes, for example, the Universal Declaration of Rights of Mother Earth, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the IUCN Draft Covenant on Environment and Development, the World Declaration on the Environmental Rule of Law and the various declarations on human rights and responsibilities such as the 2006 UNESCO Draft Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities (going back to the 1997 Declaration of the InterAction Council), the 1998 OHCHR Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society.. In fact, there is a long-standing tradition of declarations on human rights and responsibilities since adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. One early example is the 1948 American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. All these declarations have their own independent origins, yet are complementary to each other and arguably convey the same basic message of the imperative of Earth-centered ethics and governance of, for, and by the peoples of the planet.

The Earth Charter Initiative, especially if it evolved into a more participatory membership organization, with members actively involved in the governance and work of the organization, could be seen as the

'spiritual and ethical home' or 'mother covenant' of all these efforts.

A good time for such an inclusive gathering or 'Summit' is 2018 celebrating 70 years of the 1948 UNDHR. Recently, Prue Taylor and Klaus Bosselmann spoke at a roundtable of people in Utrecht/Netherlands who plan a conference in The Hague for 10 December 2018, the date of the adoption of the UNDHR, to highlight the need for an equivalent declaration of universal responsibilities. The group (around coordinator Hans van Willensward) includes people close to, or affiliated with, the Earth Charter and they have welcomed the idea of such an inclusive gathering and declaration. Concurrently, Ron Engel called for precisely the same kind of coming together of contemporary global ethical constituencies in his presentation at the Global Ecological Integrity Conference in Windsor, Canada in June, 2017, a proposal he first presented in his paper "Summons to a New Axial Age -- the Promise, Limits and Future of the Earth Charter" (cf. Laura Westra and Mirian Vivala, eds., *The Earth Charter, Ecological Integrity, and Social Movements*, Earthscan, 2014.)

By building a strong global alliance we would be building a more effective and visible global community of truth-tellers and global ethical norm creators and champions. Working more closely together it would be task of this covenanted alliance to strongly articulate the critical relevance of the Earth Charter vision and values for global governance. This could be done, for example, by visible presence at international as well as selected national and local community fora; a presence which would permit both critiques of the unethical premises of much current global policy and law and the power structures that benefit from them, and courageously advocacy for the implementation of Earth Charter values.

We are calling for the many participants in the Earth Charter movement to come together in a global alliance that will no longer remain quiet about the sources of the evils that are destroying the planet, nor abdicate its role in setting the new norms required for a just and sustainable world civilization to others, whether they be states, international NGOs, religious organizations, or academies. Governance (at all levels) will only begin to be transformed when the peoples of the world demand it. The 2000 Earth Charter text and Initiative, together with the many other declarations and initiatives that preceded as well as

followed it throughout the Earth Charter movement, have with much effort and devotion sought to give the peoples of the world a way of making this demand. We now need to build on this redemptive history and vastly strengthen its voice, presence, and power for change.