

# The art of articulating shared vision and global collaboration. A model of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century leader

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The world is always in need of the type of exceptional leadership that can spark the creativity and engagement of people around the world to work for global social betterment, and Maurice F. Strong was such a leader. As a model of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century leader in the public service, he worked vigorously for decades in the high spheres of the United Nations system and the business and civil society sectors, sewing a culture of global collaboration with the goal of a more just, sustainable and peaceful world.

Maurice Strong was a global citizen in the sense that he perceived our planet as a global village with one community, and was committed to promoting a sense of responsibility for Earth and the wellbeing of all. He was among those who spearheaded understanding of the differentiated levels of responsibility required to address global interdependent challenges. As such, he was dedicated to elevating the importance of the principle of *Common, but Differentiated Responsibilities*, articulated in the Rio Declaration, and also in the *Earth Charter* Principle 2b – “Affirm that with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good.” He tirelessly raised awareness on the value of “responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world.” For instance, in 1992 he promoted the *Earth Pledge*, engaging governments and encouraging individuals around the world to “pledge to make this planet a more secure

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and hospitable home for present and future generations." This simple sentence encapsulated a new mental model that considers Earth as our home, and also embraces our responsibility towards future generations, which in itself serves as an educational tool for a paradigm shift.

In many ways, he could be seen as a systems thinker, always looking for the nexus between different areas of knowledge, making bridges between the interests of different groups, and finding strategic places to intervene in a system that would effectively influence the whole. A systems thinker considers the whole as well as the parts in a system and also the dynamic process of interactions with a long-term perspective. Mr. Strong was a forerunner in bringing a systemic approach to 21<sup>st</sup> century leadership.

I have had the privilege of working under Mr. Strong in three different settings: first at the UNCED Secretariat in Geneva, then at Earth Council in Costa Rica and later in the Global Earth Charter Initiative. Through our interactions in these contexts over a span of 20 years, I not only learnt a great deal but also developed deep respect and admiration for him. I would like to share some reflections on my learning and highlight the following three leadership characteristics I saw in him: vision, articulation and sensibility.

Mr. Strong not only had vision himself, but he was also able to articulate diverse interests to build a shared vision with others. He genuinely believed in the importance of engaging various actors across sectors, cultures and regions, and in many ways, he spearheaded the idea of good participatory governance. The now common practice of multi-stakeholder participatory processes of consultation was not always the norm. Bringing representatives of non-governmental organizations, indigenous people and the private sector to the table with governments to hear their perspective on a topic was a new approach at that time and many people still have trouble embracing it today. The section in Agenda 21 on "The Role of Major Groups" which has subsequently opened many possibilities, is due in great part to his capacity to envision new multi-stakeholder processes of decision-making. I can testify that he was always mindful to ensure that various stakeholders would be invited to the table, especially those who normally would not be invited, and made

them feel welcomed and valued in conversations related to their interests.

A natural diplomat, Mr. Strong was gifted with an exceptional ability to communicate with people from all walks of life. Without having gone through formal training in this field, he nevertheless was an outstanding natural expert in building and nurturing strategic relationships with various key actors in order to forge much-needed collaboration.

As the Secretary-General of the 1992 Earth Summit, founder of The Earth Council, The Earth Charter Initiative and many other great organizations and movements, he significantly influenced and initiated historical changes. He utilized his unique capacity in order to pull together the Earth Summit, envisioning it as an agenda for change and an occasion to shift the way nations did business.

Much of the success of the Summit, and its later effects, are due to his vision and ability to articulate goals for change, although he was always the first to remind others that he was not alone in those efforts. We must also put things into perspective here, remembering that the early 90s saw the end of the Cold War, as well as the emergence of strong globalization and democratization. Let us also remember that the Earth Summit was organized before the era of Internet, emails and social media, and it still had an unprecedented global impact (despite the fact that it was organized in a time when all invitations were sent by fax, one-by-one!). Mr. Strong's strategic approach to building support for the Earth Summit resulted in it receiving the kind of backing from government leaders and mass media that has rarely been seen since.

Following his role as a member of the Brundtland Commission and Secretary-General of the Earth Summit, Mr. Strong committed to a) further promote partnerships and collaboration across sectors, nations, civil society, and business, and b) carry the idea of an Earth Charter forward, (which was a recommendation made in the Brundtland Commission Report<sup>1</sup> and according to him, an unfinished piece of business of the Rio Earth Summit).

<sup>1</sup> The commission worked for three years from 1984 in a worldwide consultation to identify the major world challenges, its causes and effects, then launched the historical report "Our Common Future". The report recommended

In his opening address at the Earth Summit he expressed his hope that the Rio Declaration, which was to be approved at that occasion, would serve as the basis for an *Earth Charter*. In his closing address, he again voiced the need to advance beyond the Rio Declaration to the *Earth Charter* as follows:

*Let me mention some of the most important issues as I see them. The 27 principles of the 'Rio Declaration', building on the Stockholm Declaration, clearly represent a major step forward in establishing the basic-principles that must govern the conduct of nations and peoples towards each other and the Earth to ensure a secure and sustainable future. I recommend that you approve them in their present form and that they serve as a basis for future negotiation of an 'Earth Charter', which could be approved on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the United Nations.* (United Nations General Assembly 1992. Maurice Strong opening speech at the Earth Summit)

Although this was initially intended as a charter to guide states and interstate behaviour, as time went by the concept of such a charter was expanded. Mr. Strong saw the limitations of the official negotiation process among governments dominated by strong national interests, and so in 1994, he helped launch the Earth Charter Initiative, together with Mikhail Gorbachev, Ruud Lubbers and others, which was to focus on a civil society process.

It is important to consider that when a process of consultation brings together different actors to collectively build an agenda of priorities and policies, every group will naturally bring their own interests to the table and promote what is good for them, but not necessarily good for the whole. This is when the process often reaches an impasse, and when good leadership is needed to help take it to a next stage and find common ground. The role of the leader in this situation is crucial to help adjust the various perspectives and help the collective interest emerge.

the need for "a new charter to guide state behavior in the transition to sustainable development" ... it was envisioned that the charter should "prescribe new norms for state and interstate behaviour needed to maintain livelihoods and life on our shared planet". (The World Commission on Environment and Development. (1987). P. 332). This process eventually led to the Earth Summit as a way to set up a new world agenda for the 21st century.



MFS at the Earth Charter 1st International Workshop, the Hague, May 1995

Additionally, as time passes many leaders may drop a vision they had embraced, either because they embrace a new one – a newer initiative – or because its achievement is too hard to reach. Others, like Mr. Strong, persist over time with a vision, without allowing it to feel either obsolete or impossible to achieve. Often in his speeches and interactions, he referred to the need for humanity to both make strong decisions to change the course of the future and also to examine the values that underline our decisions. He used to say: "...at the deepest level, our motivations are rooted in our moral, ethical and spiritual being."

In 2005, in a memorable speech at the five-year launch of the Earth Charter, when his health was very frail, he briefly encapsulated the complex factors that have led to environmental degradation and profound social and economic injustice. He said, "We cannot afford to allow materialism and self-interest to ride rough shod over community values and societies. But neither can we make these profound changes alone, we need to work together...We are victims of 'the struggle between ecosystems and egosystems'. It is the egos of people, governments, businesses that prevent solutions and generate a terrible lack of political will." (Earth Charter International. 2005. Earth Charter+5 Report)

In the 90s, I had the opportunity to be with him at international conferences and witness the demands on his time; I then asked him how he handled that pressure. He replied: "I know how to take moments of silence and rest every day to keep me going." He frequently showed me the importance of nurturing our inner peace in order to be able to go through the challenges and stressors of life.

Mr. Strong was a master in the art of building collaboration across sectors and nations, because of both his dedication to practicing it and his passion for it. Let us hope that the current and next generations will be inspired by leaders like him, who are not afraid to envision an alternative and better future for all, or of taking on the responsibility to move that vision forward. The world truly needs to count on such sensitive and passionate leaders like him, who are committed in forging a shared vision of the common good and global values.

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