

Maurice Strong and the Earth Charter

Steven C. Rockefeller

Throughout Maurice Strong's extraordinary career as a leader of the international environmental and sustainable development movement, one fundamental challenge that he persistently endeavored to address was achieving international agreement on the ethical values and basic principles that should guide people and governments in protecting nature and building a better world for all. The challenge involved constructing for international sustainable development law the kind of foundation that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides human rights law. Strong's efforts in this regard began in 1972 with organizing and overseeing the drafting of the Stockholm Declaration as the Secretary-General of the first United Nations Intergovernmental Conference on the Environment. His endeavors culminated during the 1990s with the Earth Charter initiative that he started as Secretary-General of the Rio Earth Summit and carried forward as the leader of a path breaking civil society project. I came to know and work with Maurice Strong over a five year period as a participant in the Earth Charter initiative, first as a member of a steering committee and later as chair of the Earth Charter international drafting committee. It turned out to be one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. There follow some reflections on Strong's exceptional, farsighted leadership.

When the Secretary-General of the United Nations, U Thant, invited Strong in 1970 to head up the UN Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, Strong was 40 years old. He had become an accomplished Canadian business leader and was serving as President of the Canadian International Development Agency, which had taken him into the world of international relations that had long been a special interest. As a boy growing up in rural Manitoba during the Great Depression, Strong had found in the natural world a refuge from the poverty that afflicted his family and local community, and he had built a spiritual relation with

nature that stayed with him. As a consequence he was quick to appreciate the significance of the environmental movement that was rapidly taking form in North America following publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1964. He saw U Thant's invitation as a unique opportunity to integrate his interest in the natural environment with his work promoting international cooperation and development.¹

Following the Stockholm Conference Strong remained engaged in helping to build the international environmental movement. In the mid-1980s, he became a member of the World Commission on Environment and Development. The Commission's report, *Our Common Future*, put the concept of sustainable development on the international agenda, and it included a recommendation that a new universal declaration or charter be drafted with the ethical imperatives and basic principles to guide a worldwide transition to a sustainable future.²

When Strong was appointed the Secretary-General of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the Rio Earth Summit, he, therefore, made adoption of an Earth Charter a major goal of the conference. However, at the Summit governments were not able to reach agreement on principles for the Earth Charter that he and others had envisioned. Differences between the North and the South could not be bridged. Strong was deeply disappointed by this turn of events, but he was not one to give in to pessimism or to give up on what he viewed as an urgent and critical need.³

Following the Summit, he created the Earth Council to pursue the unfinished business of the Summit and to empower civil society to promote sustainable development.⁴ The drafting of the Earth Charter very quickly became a high priority of the Council. Further, Strong understood that governments were preoccupied

¹ Maurice Strong, *Where On Earth Are We Going?* (Canada: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), pp. 45-53, 100-106, 115-118.

² *Our Common Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 332

³ "The Earth Charter Initiative: A Proposed Joint Initiative of the Earth Council and Green Cross International, The Hague, April 16, 1994," pp.11-12. Steven Rockefeller Private Papers. Strong, *Where On Earth Are We Going?*, pp. 187-188, 193-194, 212-213.

⁴ See 1994 brochure on founding of Earth Council and newsletter on Earth Council *Background, Program, and Structure*. Steven Rockefeller Private Papers.

with short-term goals and economic development, and they had no interest in participating in another round of negotiations on principles for sustainable development. Therefore, in a dramatic departure from traditional UN practice, he decided to launch a new Earth Charter consultation and drafting process as a civil society initiative. Thousands of NGO leaders had participated in the Rio Earth Summit through the Global Forum, and they had generated over forty peoples treaties, including an Earth Charter, and Strong knew there would be wide support in the emerging global civil society for his Earth Charter project. The long-term goal was to seek endorsement of the proposed new Peoples Earth Charter by the United Nations General Assembly.

Strong's commitment to this innovative undertaking reflects his deep personal belief that a fundamental shift in attitudes and values is essential if humanity is to change course, eradicate poverty, and halt the progressive degradation of Earth's ecosystems. He recognized that arguments based on science and reason alone are not sufficient to motivate society to pursue real change. Spiritual vision and ethical commitment are needed. The goal must be to change hearts as well as minds. In addition, Strong believed that only mounting pressure from civil society throughout the world would generate the political will in governments to implement a transition to sustainability. Drafting the Earth Charter as a peoples treaty supported by a worldwide, inclusive consultation process was one way of mobilizing civil society to pressure governments and business. Strong knew that the international consultation process was going to be as important as the final product.

In his drive to create the Earth Charter, Strong was also guided by a conviction that at the foundation of the world's great religions are universal spiritual and ethical values and that clarifying and elevating these shared values is essential to ending the conflict between the religions and promoting non-violence and peace. As he explains in his autobiography, "I have always seen that the innate spirituality of people, and the common values they share, are the essential foundations for a peaceful, cooperative world."¹ As the world becomes ever more interconnected and interdependent, the need for shared values and cooperation

¹ Strong, *Where On Earth Are We Going?*, p. 181.

becomes increasingly urgent, and Strong saw the Earth Charter as an instrument, like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for giving expression to universal values and inspiring collaboration and peace.

One of the most remarkable things about Strong's extraordinary life is the vast international network of friends and colleagues from the worlds of business, government, and civil society that he built up over the years. Drawing on this network, he was able to attract and assemble an outstanding team of dedicated, talented women and men to advance the Earth Charter project. Among those who joined him as partners were Mikhail Gorbachev and the twenty-three members of the Earth Charter Commission, who represented Africa and the Middle East, Asia and the Pacific, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and North America. A skilled diplomat and master convener and organizer, Strong deeply appreciated cultural diversity, including the wisdom of indigenous peoples, and he thoroughly enjoyed working with women and men from many different cultures and nations.

It was Strong's personal leadership coupled with the leadership of Gorbachev and the Commission that provided the undertaking with credibility globally and a unique prominence among civil society initiatives. All over the world, people were paying attention and were more than willing to participate and help. I will always be profoundly grateful to Maurice Strong for giving me the opportunity to be part of this visionary initiative and to work with him and the many caring, committed women and men who served on the Commission and who supported and participated in the consultation and drafting process.

This carefully planned and orchestrated undertaking took place over a five year period from 1995 to 2000, and it was far and away the most inclusive and participatory process ever associated with the creation of an international declaration. Thousands of individuals and hundreds of organizations from around the world were involved. There has never been anything like this before or since. It is this inclusive process that is the primary source of the authority and legitimacy of the Charter as a declaration on global interdependence and shared values for building a just, sustainable, and peaceful world community. It is also very

important that the Earth Charter principles build on and extend international law.¹

Since the launch of the Earth Charter in June 2000 at the Peace Palace in The Hague, it has been translated into over forty-five languages and endorsed by over 6,000 organizations world wide, including UNESCO in 2003 and the World Conservation Union (IUCN) in 2004 and 2016. Hundreds of cities have endorsed the Charter and used it as a planning guide. In 2015 Pope Francis endorsed and quoted from the Earth Charter in his Encyclical Letter, "*Laudato Si'*: On Care for Our Common Home."² Today many international law scholars regard the Earth Charter as a soft law document, and its stature and influence in the world of international law continues to grow. The Earth Charter is widely used as a teaching tool in schools, colleges, and universities. Hundreds of essays on the document have been published in books and journals.

The United Nations General Assembly has never endorsed a document that it did not write, and to date it has not formally recognized the Earth Charter. However, the Johannesburg Declaration issued by the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Rio+10) uses language from the Preamble of the Earth Charter when it affirms the inclusive ethical vision in the Charter, stating that: "...we declare, through the Plan of Implementation and this Declaration, our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to our children."³ Further, the Earth Charter had a significant influence on the construction of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in 2015 as the centerpiece of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable

1 For more information on the drafting process and commentary on the Earth Charter, see Steven Rockefeller, "Ecological and Social Responsibility: the Making of the Earth Charter" in Barbara Darling-Smith, ed., *Responsibility* (New York: Lexington Books, 2007), pp. 179-197; S. Rockefeller, "Crafting Principles for the Earth Charter" in P.B. Corcoran and J.A. Wohlpart, eds., *A Voice for Earth; American Writers Respond to the Earth Charter* (London: University of Georgia Press, 2008), pp. 3-23; and "Earth Charter Briefing Book" issued by the Earth Charter secretariat and drafting committee at the time of the launch of the Earth Charter in June 2000.

2 "*Laudato Si'*: On Care for Our Common Home," Paragraph 207.

3 Johannesburg Declaration, Paragraph 6. The related wording in the Preamble of the Earth Charter is the following: "...it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations."

Development. Like the sixteen Earth Charter principles, each of the seventeen SDGs begins with a verb and is crafted as a call to action, and adoption of the SDGs by the United Nations is a major step toward recognition and implementation of the Earth Charter's ethical vision.¹

When the history of the second half of the twentieth century is written, one positive achievement that should be recognized and celebrated is the progress that governments and civil society made in clarifying and agreeing upon universal ethical and spiritual values. In this regard, the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration for Human Rights, and the Earth Charter are especially significant documents. They set forth an inclusive vision of solidarity and community and of universal rights and responsibilities that forms the new global ethic so urgently needed if humanity is to build a just, sustainable, and peaceful world. The vision all too often goes unheeded, but it stands as a source of inspiration, guidance, and hope. All who care about human wellbeing and the future of life on Earth owe to Maurice Strong our deepest appreciation and gratitude for his dedication and inspired, creative leadership in the development of a planetary ethic and promotion of international cooperation.

1 Steven Rockefeller, *Democratic Equality, Economic Inequality, and the Earth Charter* (San Jose, Costa Rica: Earth Charter International, 2015), pp. 46-47, 61-68.