

The Earth Charter and Responsible Reproduction

The Earth Charter calls for sustainable patterns of human reproduction and for universal access to healthcare that fosters reproductive health and responsible reproduction. However, the Earth Charter does not address the issue of abortion. It does not take a position for or against abortion.

1. The Scope of the Earth Charter

The Earth Charter is the product of a decade-long, world-wide, cross-cultural dialogue on common goals and shared values. Its purpose is to articulate the consensus on shared values that is taking form in the emerging global civil society.

The Earth Charter sets forth general ethical principles and strategic guidelines for building a just, sustainable and peaceful world. The Earth Charter Commission intended to say in the text of the Earth Charter just what is stated and nothing more.

The Earth Charter Commission and International Council recognize that there will be an ongoing debate over how to implement the Earth Charter's various ethical principles and that different cultures and communities will adopt diverse approaches to achieving the goal of sustainable development. The Earth Charter focuses attention on the critical ethical issues and frames the debate. The Earth Charter does not try to prescribe answers to the many complex questions about what means and mechanisms should be chosen in the effort to realize its goals and values.

However, the Commission and International Council do recognize that the ends actually achieved by an initiative are constituted and shaped by the means adopted and that worthy ends do not justify unprincipled means. All means should be consistent with Earth Charter values.

It is helpful to keep in mind that the Earth Charter is made up of principles, not rules. Rules give instruction on exactly what to do in specific situations. Principles advise us on what to think about when we are trying to decide what to do.

2. Sustainable Patterns of Reproduction

The first principle of the Earth Charter is the imperative to "respect . . . life in all its diversity", and Principle 1a states that "every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings."

Principle 7 calls for patterns of human reproduction that are sustainable and "safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being." It should be noted that the Earth Charter does not use the term "population control," and when referring to patterns of reproduction, it explicitly states that these patterns should be pursued in ways that safeguard human rights. In short, the Earth Charter principles are opposed to coercive methods of regulating population growth.

In accord with the international consensus worked out at the UN summits on population in Cairo (1995) and on women in Beijing (1997), the Earth Charter recognizes that the most effective way to achieve sustainable patterns of human reproduction is to promote gender equality and to empower women in and through "universal access to education, healthcare, and economic

opportunity." These values are affirmed in Principle 11 as a matter of social and economic justice as well as sound sustainable development policy.

3. Reproductive Health

The Cairo and Beijing UN summits also specifically emphasize the critical importance of reproductive healthcare for the achievement of sustainable development. The Earth Charter in Principle 7e, therefore, states, "Ensure universal access to healthcare that fosters reproductive health and responsible reproduction."

The Beijing Platform for Action (1997) defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." (Annex II, IV.C.89) According to the Beijing Platform reproductive health involves well-being "in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions and processes." Achieving reproductive health means "that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so." (Annex II, IV.C.94)

4. Responsible Reproduction

As indicated above, Principle 7 makes clear that "responsible reproduction" involves patterns of reproduction "that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community wellbeing." It is the position of the Earth Charter that the goal of responsible reproduction should be achieved through gender equality, the empowerment of women, and universal access to healthcare, and in ways that respect humanity's fundamental human rights and freedoms.

Within the framework of the Earth Charter's general principles, different cultures and communities may adopt diverse approaches to the provision of health care that fosters reproductive health and responsible reproductions. The Earth Charter does not enter the discussion and debate on this matter.