

Earth Charter Day 2020  
Reflections on Rethinking Education in Shaping the 'new normal'

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I would like to thank the Executive Director of the Earth Charter International (ECI) Mrs. Mirian Vilela and her team for inviting me to take part in this unique Earth Day celebrations. I am already full of inspiration and new knowledge from the earlier speakers and I will like to thank them profusely for the words of wisdom they have shared so passionately and convincingly.

I am also thankful to God Who Has preserved our lives and is giving wisdom to doctors, nurses, researchers, volunteers, leaders, and care givers all over the world to reduce the pain and impact of COVID-19. My heart goes out to all those who have lost loved ones in this trying season. Wa do o. Oghene jo Kugbo wai (Isoko Language).

I will be sharing a few reflections on Rethinking Education in shaping the 'new normal'.

We have never had an Earth Day Celebration like this. The whole world was practically shut down and we watched, peeping out of our windows animals from the wild feeling secure to visit our tarred streets and empty office edifices. We also saw the skies completely blue again and the air clean and fresh. Locked in with ourselves we saw demonstrations of love and sacrifice all over the world as relationships got healed, children saw their parents again and could share meals together, parents home-schooled their children with guidance from their teachers, workers in some care homes volunteers to stay with their wards to ensure they were protected from the virus, an elderly priest in Italy gave up on his ventilator so a younger patient could use it. The priest died. The young patient lived. Heroic medical workers who saved lives in the face of death to themselves due to unavailability of personal protective equipment (PPEs). There were many more heart-warming deeds that keeps our earth alive.

However, we also witnessed a rise in domestic abuse, rape, and the scrambling among nations for limited supplies of essential drugs, ventilators, personal protective equipment, and others. Within some countries, we witnessed the disappearance of donations given to equip hospitals; and politicians taking over the donated PPEs for themselves and their families while health workers were left exposed to the virus.

According to Su-ming Khoo in her reflections in her recent article in the Development Education Review *'Governments and people could have done a better job if the assumptions, world views and power relations embedded in their scientific and policy models were critically questioned. A focus on marginalised and underrepresented groups would have shone a light on those who are more vulnerable, and unjustly so, including black and minority ethnic people, people facing gender-based violence, migrant workers, indigenous peoples and low-paid workers.'*

For some countries in Africa, funds would have been better managed and medical equipment's distributed to the critical health sectors who are battling the Disease to prevent its current wild spread and avoidable transmission of the disease amongst health workers.

How do we really educate for a generation that is pro a more just, sustainable, and peaceful world? A generation that will at the same time be pro-environment, pro respect for the diversity of our beautiful world and pro responsibility for our actions and future generations! Ummmmm

Can we be that generation?

Our present debacle gives us the opportunity for a reset. We may never have another opportunity like this.

I am proposing that the principles of the EC are a useful model in transforming education and the way we learn as we shape the 'new normal'.

There have been many educational frameworks since 1972 to realise sustainable development in our world. What has been missing is the soul of education itself. That which makes us human and if missing in the education equation we are at risk of behaving at best like technologically versatile and wealthy brutus. I would add that, as much as environmental education, climate change education and others are important and required, and as much as the sustainable development goal 4.7 reflected some aspects of values, education in ethics is even more important because it deals with the problem from the roots, which is the heart and mind of the human being. Ethics is what connects whatever we learning to the earth, to our neighbours, to other cultures, to other races, to today and to the future.

Yes, the world has advanced in scientific models and algorithms, in scientific research and artificial intelligence and we saw all these science in the response to the pandemic. But, we also saw the dark side of growth, civilisation without ethics, medical science without equity, governance without justice. These responses are all products of our educational systems and priorities.

A lot has been said about the Earth Charter (EC).

The key point is that the EC 'offers a high and legitimate standard for measuring ethical commitment and performance' (EC-Access, 2008).

I will touch on four key words that have remained with me since my first encounter with the EC through Emeritus Prof. Peter Corcoran. These are:

Respect, Responsibility, Justice, humility, and Care

Respect... for diversity in all its forms, for people, for the rule of law

Responsibility... for use of environmental resources, conducting ourselves for safety of others, apply restraint and control of desires for more of everything, use of excessive power and advantage, reactions to opposing views, for when we have uncomfortable conversations, responsibility in exercising our freedom knowing that our rights stops where the rights of others begin, being resilient, responsibly demonstrating the comeback spirit which helps us remain standing after Covid-19, restraint in preventing abuse in all its shapes - domestic, political, corporate etc

Humility... there is need for humility on the part of everyone. None of us has passed this path before. There is still so much to learn. No one science has the answer to everything. Indigenous science and others are all needed.

Justice.... human rights, equality, peace are central to the future we want.

Care... for the environment, for each other, for the future, helps us empathize with others, helps us do good things, overcome barriers - racial, gender, class etc.

These values are to be demonstrated at the;

Individual and family level  
Corporate level  
Social level and at every strata of society

According to Peter Brown and Geoffrey Garver in their book on building a whole earth economy, “Only a call to our higher values and their integration into our socioeconomic system can achieve what is needed.”

People are the key to Securing the future we want. People are also the key to winning the battle over Covid-19. Rethinking our educational processes across board in redefining a new normal where everyone takes full responsibility for their actions, respect and care for others and apply a sense of responsibility in our use of resources, apply restraint and equity in our production and consumption is critical. This will diffuse the ecological, relational, and political climate in our world and we would have won the battle without going to war.

The evergreen Delors reports to UNESCO International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century captures it as learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together; and what Charles Hopkins refers to as UNESCO’s 5th pillar: learning to transform oneself and society: Holistic approach, ethical, (I will put ethical first) academic, mental, physical, emotional.....

I am presently taking a virtual course offered by the Earth Charter International Education Center on Business and Ethical Leadership for sustainability. The course is facilitated by Dr. Chris Beehner. It was during this course that I was introduced to the EC-Assess, a very effective user-friendly open source tool for evaluating sustainability of organizations, projects, initiatives and individuals. It can also be used by educational institutions to evaluate their curriculum to improve both the level of their *declared commitment and performance in pursuit of a more just, sustainable, and peaceful world (EC-Access, 2008)*. It helps every organisation, leader, individual to a process of continuous self-education, reflection, and rethinking to turn our conscience into actions that will transform for world.

Permit me to share this story in closing:

At the beginning of the year, I had a programme I was running at the Paris Business School and some other meetings to attend in Barcelona Spain. This was to take me up to March. So instead of going back and forth I thought I would stay in London with my daughter in between the meetings so as to reduce my carbon footprints if I undertook each trip from Abuja. That was my plan. God Had His. COVID-19 happened, and I was locked in in London. And that began my romance with the Northala Fields near my daughter’s home.

One early evening as I was walking home after climbing the hills at the park  
I saw a picture that made my day

George Floyd, had just been savagely killed in full view of the public. The pain and hopelessness such degeneracy brings was still very fresh in my heart. The call for end to racism and humans inhumanity to humans was loud and emphatic. As these thoughts twirled in my mind, I looked up and saw this beautiful Caucasian woman holding unto a young African man. The woman was probably in her thirties. And the young man in his early twenty’s. The young man evidently had what looked like an acute form of cerebral palsy. He walked with difficulty in spite of being held firmly by his care giver. But his face was lit up so beautifully!

He had this big smile that you could tell came from his belly. He must have been thinking ‘Oh to be in nature. In this beautiful park with families picnicking with their loved ones

Grandparents, parents, young children, babies... Some climbing hills, some learning to walk  
Some riding bicycles and some on scooters... And yea look at the ducks in the lake  
O so beautiful... Look at the lilies and their bright flowers... And the sky so blue  
The air so sweet... My God! I am so happy... It's so good to be alive'

As I read all these thoughts from his big smile.

My first thought was that he would have missed all this fun if he had not been born.  
Then the love being showered on him by his Caucasian caregiver was so amazing (She also would have missed the opportunity to discover her capacity to love). Oh she was so devoted and you could see tenderness written on her lovely face. A stark contrast to the George Floyd and Derek Chauvin narrative.

Humans are made to be humane  
Colours beautify our world and not divide  
Different manifestations of strengths and physical endowments and limitations  
Provide avenues for love to be demonstrated in its varied modes  
All blending to form the best tapestry of humanity  
Proving that we are all one flesh  
Adorned in Joseph's coat of many colors

Let's celebrate our colors  
Let's celebrate our strengths and weaknesses  
Let the strong embrace the weak  
And the weak endear the strong  
Let's love each other  
Let's live and let live  
Let's give of our best to each other  
And never look back!

Finally, values are fundamental, they are meant to be lived- those ingrained values in humanity which the supreme Court Judge referred to in Oposa's case as basic rights which need not even be written in the Constitution "for they are assumed to exist from the inception of humankind". The great sage Mahatma Gandhi put it this way "I have nothing new to teach the world. Truth and non-violence are as old as the hill." We need values that work when life does not.

The COVID-19 debacle has given the world an opportunity for a reset. We do not have the future we want yet. But it's within everyone's reach because it comes with the choices we make every day and with the governments we choose to govern us. We can choose to give the powerful more power and the despots more leeway. And we can also choose to live and let live, to build a world where respect, responsibility, humility, justice and care will be the oil that drives education, technology, economy, governance, community, the environment into the 21 century. If we are bold to choose right, we can match forward confidently.

My account today is about a future that is possible. It is about the great possibilities, which sound ethics and values bring to the table in rethinking education.

Happy Earth Charter Day!