

Education for Sustainable Development as the tool to promote the Sustainable Development Goals : how it is embodied by the work of the Earth Charter

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Introduction

The Preamble of the Earth Charter states that “the choice is ours: form a global **partnership** to care for Earth and one another or risk the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life”¹. These words illustrate the Earth Charter vision on how to deal with the current systemic crisis our societies face. Indeed, with a population of over seven billion people and limited resources to support the growing population, we, as a collective group of people, need to learn to live together with more sustainable patterns².

As a roadmap for these changes, the UN launched the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) frame. To engage in this transformation, the first greatest step will be a mental revolution : individuals and communities need to adapt their way of thinking to a more sustainable pattern. As a result, education is critical for achieving sustainable development. More precisely, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has been developed as an educational paradigm that empowers people to make informed decisions and conduct responsible actions in decision-making processes for the sake of environmental integrity, economic viability, and a just society in the present and future³. ESD encourages critical review of processes and behaviours through the use of action-oriented and problem-based learning. Thus, ESD offers a valuable platform and approach for achieving SDG 4 and other SDGs targets.

The United Nations identified five conditions, “5Ps of Sustainable Development”, to the implementation of the SDGs and ESD. Alongside People, Planet, Prosperity and Peace, Partnership has been recognised as a crucial element to their infusion⁴.

Earth Charter International, through its various programs, tools, partnerships, and network, acts for the promotion of ESD, and has adopted an approach primarily driven by ethical values. The Earth Charter provides an opportunity for individuals seeking to change their lifestyles, attitudes and way of thinking.

¹ Earth Charter International, “Preamble”, in *The Earth Charter* (2001). URL: [The Earth Charter - Earth Charter](#) (accessed: July 03, 2021).

² United Nations' General Assembly, “Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, Department of Economic and Social Affairs - Sustainable Development (2015), 35. URL: [United Nations Official Document](#) (accessed: July 08, 2021).

³ UNESCO, “Education for Sustainable Development”, UNESCO. URL: [Education for Sustainable Development \(unesco.org\)](#) (accessed: July 12, 2021).

⁴ United Nations' General Assembly, “Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, *op. Cit.*

This paper examines how education, and specifically an Education for Sustainable Development, has been recognised as a crucial element to sustainability policies, in which the SDGs framework. We aim to demonstrate how key ESD is to the SDGs promotion, and then how the various Earth Charter programs and the partnerships it created are effective means through which ESD is administered.

Sustainable Development and Education for Sustainable Development

First of all, we should point out how education got linked to sustainable development discussions that started to spread in the 1970s-1980s. More precisely, from the beginning of the 2000s, the international community started to realise that an education focused on sustainability values was key to instil them into present and future communities worldwide. Today, this Education for Sustainable Development approach is becoming more and more popular, recognised as a crucial tool to support the SDGs, and promoted as such by local institutions as well as by international organisations like UNESCO or Earth Charter International.

From the need of sustainability

Sustainable development is no longer a novel concept in the world. Long before now, there have been several discussions on sustainability to define the concept in a consensual way. A international definition was put forward in the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED)⁵, as a "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". This definition has been expanded over the years, such as at the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development, and is still relevant in current discussions around the Agenda 2030. Similar milestones in partnership momentum have marked the history of sustainable development policies.

However, while the concept of sustainable development has been largely promoted by the international community for more than thirty years, the indispensability of linking it to an educational approach is a bit more recent. For instance, the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), organised in Johannesburg in 2002, gathered over 21000 individuals to conduct a ten years review of the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development and to advocate for commitment to action⁶. Although the review produced key outcomes such as the declaration of sustainability as a fundamental global need, the eradication of poverty and the agreement to pay special attention to African countries' needs, "many delegates to the WSSD viewed these outcomes as weak, last-minute compromises that will result in little progress toward sustainability"⁷. Notably, the importance of an Education for Sustainable Development in facilitating the change to a sustainable future was not addressed as a dominant element in the final Political Declaration or the Plan of Implementation.⁸

The importance of building a new educational paradigm, alongside the SDGs

⁵ World Commission on Environment and Development, "Our common future" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 383.

⁶ Tilbury, Daniella, "The World Summit, Sustainable Development and Environmental Education", *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*, vol. 19 (2003): 109-113.

⁷ Clugston, Richard M., and Calder, Wynn, "The World Summit on Sustainable Development and Higher Education for Sustainable Development", *The Declaration*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2002): 1-3.

⁸ *Ibid.*

This initial observation witnessed a different development at the beginning of the 21st century. The United Nations inaugurated a Decade of ESD from 2005 to 2014, coordinated by UNESCO, with the aim “to reorient education towards sustainability, which in turn had the potential to impact the way people think”⁹, “live and work”¹⁰. This initiative had a massive impact on prioritising education in sustainability policies and popularising the specificity of ESD programs.

Following this, the inauguration of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, that were succeeding the Millennium Development Goals as reference targets for global improvement and sustainability for the period 2015-2030, gave to ESD an even greater recognition as a core component to promote more sustainable patterns. Indeed, education was distinguished as an independent objective in the SDG number 4, which recognizes the value and importance of quality education by calling for the attainment of knowledge and skills needed to advance sustainable development, especially “through education for sustainable development and lifestyles”. Goal 4 is made up of ten targets, in which the point 4.7 that insists on the fact that we should “by 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through Education for Sustainable Development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development”¹¹.

The concept of ESD was born from this need for education to address the growing social and environmental challenges the world is facing, and for international and local policies to adjust to them. As put in the UNESCO words, “environmental challenges are intricately intertwined with every aspect of our societies including our social, economic and cultural systems. Therefore, redesigning our societies within the ecological boundaries of ‘one planet living’ will require a whole-of-society approach to transformation, which starts with education and learning”¹².

ESD in practise: pushing for partnerships

Further than that, it has to be said that ESD was born from a great partnership momentum, and deeply relies on them. Indeed, such comprehensive approaches require a common movement, from international organisations gathering different countries and stakeholders, to the local communities that will end implementing the programs. In the final report of the Decade of ESD coordinated by UNESCO, one of the ten findings of the initiative states that “multi-stakeholder partnerships are particularly effective”, and that “partnerships involving civil society organizations, the private sector, schools and governments have been crucial in building ESD capacity in many countries”¹³. Moreover, it defines partnerships at all scales as one of the five priority actions areas for the years following : “advancing policy will require policy coherence

⁹ UNESCO, “UN Decade of ESD”, UNESCO. URL: [UN Decade of ESD \(unesco.org\)](https://unesco.org) (accessed: July 12, 2021).

¹⁰ UNESCO, “Shaping the Future We Want : UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) - final report, summary”, UNESCO Digital Library (2014), 20. URL: [Shaping the future we want: UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development \(2005-2014\): final report:summary - UNESCO Digital Library](https://unesco.org) (accessed: July 12, 2021).

¹¹ United Nations’ General Assembly, “Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, *op. Cit.*: 17.

¹² UNESCO, “Draft Concept Note - UNESCO World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development” (April 20, 2021): 1. URL: [esdfor2030-world-conference-concept-note-en.pdf \(unesco.org\)](https://unesco.org) (accessed: July 14, 2021).

¹³ UNESCO, “Shaping the Future We Want : UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) - final report, summary”, *op. Cit.*: 6-7.

across global, regional, national and local levels aligning education with visions, goals and planning for sustainable development and sustainable development with education”¹⁴.

At the international level, UNESCO has been one of the biggest organisations working on developing and implementing ESD programs, being the lead UN agency responsible for the overall management, coordination and implementation of ESD programs at the UN level. It recognises ESD “as an integral element of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on quality education and a key enabler of all other SDGs”¹⁵. To enhance ESD efforts and align them to the SDGs, the institution launched the new 'Education for Sustainable Development: Towards achieving the SDGs' (“ESD for 2030”) framework from November 2020 to the World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development in May 2021. Earth Charter International was one of the organisations invited to discuss at the event, as one of the core actors dedicated to implementing ESD values.

The Earth Charter and Education for Sustainable Development

Indeed, how the Earth Charter and its movement have worked over the years for the promotion of ESD must be highlighted. Rooted at the core of its principles, ESD has first been incorporated into its text during the drafting process, and is now one of the main missions and drivers of action of the Earth Charter movement across the globe.

ESD in the Earth Charter: where value and will connect

From its drafting process to the outcome text itself, the Earth Charter has incorporated ESD values, and can now serve as a compass in ESD and SDGs promotion programmes.

During the decade the Earth Charter was discussed, its Drafting Committee consulted hundreds of cultural, religious, and geographical communities to put together a text where they would all fit in in matters of ethics, respect, sustainability, peace or democracy. In this unprecedented partnership momentum, integrating education, and specifically a value-oriented education, appeared essential. Principle 14 thus states that we should “integrate into formal education and life-long learning the knowledge, values, and skills needed for a sustainable way of life”, with the first sub-principles precisising that we should “provide all, especially children and youth, with educational opportunities that empower them to contribute actively to sustainable development”¹⁶.

This great effort has been recognised from its launching by various actors, from the civil society, the corporate world, or institutional bodies like the UNESCO. Indeed, in 2003, UNESCO’s General Conference “affirm[ed] the Member States’ intention to utilize the Earth Charter as an educational tool, particularly in the framework of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development”¹⁷. More recently, the 2019 UNESCO’s General Conference

¹⁴ *Ibid*: 17.

¹⁵ UNESCO, “Education for Sustainable Development”, UNESCO. URL: [Education for Sustainable Development \(unesco.org\)](https://unesco.org/en/education-for-sustainable-development) (accessed: July 12, 2021).

¹⁶ Earth Charter International, “IV. Democracy, Nonviolence and Peace”, in *The Earth Charter* (2001). URL: [Democracy, Nonviolence, and Peace - Earth Charter](https://earthcharter.org/en/iv-democracy-nonviolence-and-peace) (accessed: July 03, 2021).

¹⁷ UNESCO, “Records of the General Conference, 32nd session, Paris, 29 September to 17 October 2003, v. 1: Resolutions”, UNESCO Digital Library (2004): 35. URL: [Records of the General Conference](https://unesco.org/en/records-of-the-general-conference).

“encourage[d] Member States to take into account the principles and values contained in the Earth Charter in their efforts on education for sustainable development (ESD)”¹⁸

Turning conscience into action: ESD through the Earth Charter movement

More precisely, it is through its Education Center, inaugurated in 2003 in Costa Rica, that ECI has been able to build educational programmes, tools, courses, and events promoting the Earth Charter and ESD. This Center for ESD’s work is implemented under the ‘UNESCO Chair on Education for Sustainable Development with the Earth Charter’, “which generates educational programmes and research activities at the intersection of sustainability, ethics and education”¹⁹.

The Education Center is currently proposing eight online facilitated courses²⁰. The ‘Leadership, Sustainability and Ethics’ programme is offered in Spanish once a year and in English twice a year : during ten weeks, participants are encouraged by a facilitating team to learn and share about ethics, ESD, the Earth Charter, or sustainable leadership. Following the end of the course, those under thirty who have completed the course’s tasks, in which the final workshop they have to implement in their communities, are invited to join the network as Earth Charter Young Leaders to continue their commitment. Another course, ‘Agentes de la Carta de la Tierra’, is dedicated to younger people between fourteen and seventeen years old in Spanish for them to adapt to the global environment and learn to act on the circumstances they have inherited. To make the Earth Charter movement concrete in the professional lives of its active members, a two-months course in English introduces the participants to ‘Business and Ethical Leadership for Sustainability’ to “equip participants with the knowledge and skills necessary to take business ethics and sustainability practices to higher levels by using the Earth Charter (EC) as a framework”²¹. Another one is focused on professionals of the education field or students, for them to learn especially about ESD during five months and commit as an Educator of the Earth Charter movement. Finally, two one-month courses are specifically dedicated to an ‘Introduction to Systems Thinking’ in English, and a more spiritual one in Spanish discussing ‘Visiones del Mundo y Carta de la Tierra’. The diversity of these programmes allows everyone interested in learning more about the Earth Charter, ESD, and other subjects to join the Earth Charter movement no matter their time, interests, or age.

In addition to the regular programme of courses, occasional free conferences and webinars are recurrently organised by the Secretariat or by members of the movement, delivering interesting and open conversations about various local and international topics related to the Earth Charter, from the need of ESD to the importance of intersectionality, the power of youth, or sustainable spirituality for instance. Those can be hosted in English, Spanish or Portuguese, and correspond to different landmarks throughout the year, such as Earth Day in April, the anniversary of the Earth Charter in June, or Youth Day in August.

[32nd session, Paris, 29 September to 17 October 2003, v. 1: Resolutions - UNESCO Digital Library](#) (accessed: July 16, 2021).

¹⁸ UNESCO, “Records of the General Conference, 40th session, Paris, 12 November-27 November 2019, volume 1: Resolutions”, UNESCO Digital Library (2020): 27. URL: [Records of the General Conference, 40th session, Paris, 12 November-27 November 2019, volume 1: Resolutions - UNESCO Digital Library](#) (accessed: July 16, 2021).

¹⁹ Earth Charter International, “EC Center for Education for Sustainable Development”, Earth Charter. URL: [EC Center for Education for Sustainable Development](#) (accessed: July 28, 2021).

²⁰ Earth Charter International, “Courses”, Earth Charter. URL: [Courses Archive - Earth Charter](#) (accessed: July 28, 2021).

²¹ *Ibid.*

These rich activities are the means for the Earth Charter to get known internationally, but also for its partners to find a concrete way to implement its spirit through dedicated ESD actions.

Education for Sustainable Development through partnership at Earth Charter International

Through the basis of the Earth Charter it relies on, and the educational work Earth Charter International spread across its various platforms, the Earth Charter movement has built different networks that actively promote ESD and the SDGs. These groups are organised and coordinated as partners to frame a common understanding of what ESD encompasses, and of how the SDGs can be adapted to different contexts, communities, and scales. With the support of the ECI Secretariat, these groups and individuals are able to learn, reflect, and put in practise ESD patterns connected to the principles of the Earth Charter and the SDGs.

The Earth Charter movement: embodying the partnership spirit

Thus, depending on their characteristics and desires, individuals and organisations meeting the way of Earth Charter International have joined over the years its different networks. Affiliated organizations, Partner organizations²², ECI Advisors, the Earth Charter Young Leaders (ECYLs) network, and the Earth Charter Educators are different settings in which reflective actions on ESD and the SDGs can be linked to the Earth Charter over the world.

- ECI's Affiliates are organizations that have signed a Collaboration Agreement with the Secretariat, as they share its vision and are committed to promoting the Earth Charter in their sphere of activity and in their specific country. They were eighty seven in 2019²³.
- Partner organizations, thirty in 2019²⁴, also enter a formal collaboration agreement with the Secretariat, to implement actions and initiatives to promote the Earth Charter in their area of knowledge or activity, but not limited to a country. These are organizations that work either in several countries or internationally.
- ECI Advisors²⁵ are twenty individuals designated by the Executive Director of the Secretariat based on their personal commitment to the Earth Charter, identified as a source of expertise and support to ECI.
- The ECYLs network is a movement of about a hundred young people between the ages of eighteen and thirty, alumni of one of the ECI's Education Centre courses: 'Leadership, Sustainability & Ethics'. These young people are implementing Earth Charter projects in their communities and can connect to share and inspire each other on this topic.
- Finally, ECI Educators are alumni of the 'Education for Sustainable Development' online certificate, invited to extend their commitment to the Earth Charter. There are a hundred and ninety seven certified Earth Charter Educators (2019 data²⁶).

The variety of these different groups allows everyone to join the Earth Charter movement and integrate its values into their daily interests and occupations, personal and professional, as they wish to. They all embody the Earth Charter in their communities the way they want and can, and

²² Earth Charter International, "Affiliates and Partners", Earth Charter. [URL: Affiliates & Partners - Earth Charter](#) (accessed: July 03, 2021).

²³ 2019 Annual report of Earth Charter International activities, Earth Charter (January 8, 2020). URL: [2019-ECIAnnual-Report-COMPLETO-1.pdf \(earthcharter.org\)](#) (accessed: July 03, 2021).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Earth Charter International, "Advisors", Earth Charter. URL: [Advisors - Earth Charter](#) (accessed: July 03, 2021).

²⁶ 2019 Annual report of Earth Charter International activities, *op. Cit.*

thus help to promote ESD values and the SDGs. To illustrate these opportunities in practise, two Earth Charter Young Leaders have for instance organised a workshop in March 2021 to engage the international students of Rondine Cittadella della Pace on sustainability, the SDGs, and the Earth Charter principles²⁷. Rondine is an Italian organization that accommodates students from conflict and post-conflict countries for a certain period and educates them on leadership, conflict transformation, and peace building through its own method called the Rondine method. Each student has to develop a social impact project that will be implemented upon return to their home countries. The workshop was designed to introduce the participants to the SDGs and the Earth Charter principles, and for them to incorporate these elements into their projects and citizens' lives. Through similar events, the members of the Earth Charter movement contribute in their own way to building a collective imagination of shared values rooted in Education for Sustainable Development and in the SDGs vision.

Localizing the efforts through partnership with the Mapping initiative

Partnership for the promotion of the Earth Charter principles and the SDGs has thus always lied at the core of the Earth Charter movement, from its drafting process to its current promotion development. To concretise that momentum and centralise all of these efforts, Earth Charter International reached out to the Japanese Soka Gakkai Institute. Together, they launched in 2016 the Mapping social media application, where you can share actions you are taking or witnessing that contribute to the implementation of the SDGs. Mapping localises your SDG actions and connects them with the related Earth Charter principles as you share your pictures and videos, embodying an effective partnership towards the promotion of the SDGs. Furthermore, it offers a platform for taking inspiration, learning in an ESD approach, and interacting around positive actions that are implemented by organisations and individuals around the globe. By creating the means for a global community to share solutions undertaken to make the SDGs progress, Earth Charter International and the Soka Gakkai Institute illustrate how key partnership is, between organisations but also between the community of people actively taking action for the SDGs.

To summarize, it is through a global partnership dynamic that Earth Charter International chose to promote its Education for Sustainable Development actions. Over the years, it built different networks for everyone to be able to join its movement on their own terms, but also worked with outside partners to thicken the SDGs' web worldwide and promote ESD methods as a tool to achieve that.

Conclusion

Since its drafting, the Earth Charter has thus leveraged on the ESD expertise of both local and global actors. As a result, this makes the Earth Charter programs a valuable multidisciplinary educational paradigm for achieving the SDGs and improving and implementing global sustainability. Moreover, through its partnerships, it enables people worldwide to collaborate, learn, and share their best practices with fewer people left behind.

This paper demonstrated how Education for Sustainable Development could be used to promote the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the important role of the Earth

²⁷ Eke-okocha, Phil, "Localizing the SDGs through the spectrum of the Earth Charter", Earth Charter (April 16, 2021). URL: [Localizing the SDGs through the spectrum of the Earth Charter Principles - Earth Charter](#) (accessed: July 03, 2021).

Charter in promoting this Agenda through its various educational programs and partnerships. The study traced the history of the Earth Charter and how its ethical approach to sustainability has helped in the promotion of a sustainable lifestyle. The study is expected to serve as a benchmark on how ESD can be promoted through partnership and through the Earth Charter.

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World Commission on Environment and Development, "Our common future" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987): 383.