

# MIKHAIL GORBACHEV: PROPHET OF CHANGE

FROM THE COLD WAR  
TO A SUSTAINABLE WORLD

Compiled and edited by Green Cross International



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## Steven Rockefeller

### A Visionary Commitment to a Sustainable Future: Mikhail Gorbachev and the Earth Charter

Mikhail Gorbachev will always be remembered for his courageous leadership in transforming the Soviet Union and ending the cold war. Over the past two decades he has also played a unique leadership role internationally in the effort to promote universal ethical values and worldwide cooperation in support of environmental conservation and sustainable development. One prime example of his many contributions in this regard is his role in the drafting and promotion of the Earth Charter.

Raised in a peasant family in a farming community in the south of Russia, he became keenly aware of the interdependence of people and nature and developed early in life a deep sense of belonging to the natural world. 'I grew up in a village and perceived the dying of rivers and land erosion as personal pain,' he writes in *The Earth Charter in Action* (2005). As the problems of environmental degradation worsened in Russia and throughout the industrialised world during the cold war years, he came to firmly believe that environmental protection and restoration are a fundamental moral responsibility of all leaders and people everywhere. Fully aware of the increasing interdependence of all nations, he well understood that reversing ecological decline requires international cooperation as well as local action.

In addition, as the leader of the Soviet Union (1985–91), Gorbachev recognised that building a sustainable global community in an age of weapons of mass destruction means the eradication of poverty and the non-violent management of conflict leading to peace and security as well as safeguarding Earth's ecological integrity. Reflecting on these three major interrelated challenges facing the world, and drawing on his experience with radical political and socio-economic reform in the Soviet Union, he explained in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech in 1990 that 'perestroika and innovative political thinking . . . is of vital significance for human destinies all over the world'. Appreciating the critical role of ethical values in human behaviour and social change, he also realised that forming an effective global partnership for a sustainable future requires agreement on and commitment to shared ethical principles, including new science-based principles.

After resigning as General Secretary of the Communist Party and

President of the Soviet Union in 1991, it was concerns and convictions such as these that led Gorbachev in 1993 to found Green Cross International and in 1994 to form a partnership with Maurice Strong, the Secretary General of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, for the purpose of launching a global initiative to create an Earth Charter.

The Brundtland Commission (World Commission on Environment and Development) had recommended in its report, *A Common Future* (1987), the creation of a new universal declaration or charter that sets forth fundamental principles to guide nations in the transition to sustainable development. With this recommendation in mind, Strong had made the drafting of an Earth Charter part of the agenda of the Rio Earth Summit. However, the Summit failed to reach agreement on the principles for the Earth Charter. With the support of Queen Beatrix and Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers of the Netherlands, Gorbachev as President of Green Cross International and Strong as Chair of the Earth Council agreed to join together to organise and lead a new civil society effort to draft the Earth Charter.

Gorbachev and Strong established a Secretariat for an Earth Charter Initiative at the University for Peace in Costa Rica and formed an Earth Charter Commission of 23 eminent persons from all regions of the world. The Commission, which they co-chaired with Kamla Chowdhry (India), Mercedes Sosa (Argentina) and Amadou Toumani Touré (Mali), oversaw the consultation and drafting process. The leadership of the Commission gave the Earth Charter Initiative credibility and made possible the most inclusive and participatory process ever associated with the drafting of an international declaration. The first meeting of the Earth Charter Commission took place at the Rio+5 Forum in Rio de Janeiro in March 1997. Over 500 NGOs gathered for this week-long conference, designed to assess progress towards sustainable development since the Rio Earth Summit. Gorbachev attended the Rio+5 Forum as President of Green Cross International and co-Chair of the Earth Charter Commission.

After working closely with the Earth Charter Secretariat for two years, I had been invited by the Commission to chair and form an international drafting committee. It was at his headquarters at the Rio+5 Forum that I first met and was warmly received by Gorbachev. Ruud Lubbers introduced us. After Gorbachev shared some reflections on the major issues before the international community, the three of us spent almost two hours discussing the Earth Charter process and the early drafts of the Charter that were taking form in the light of the open consultations on



the document being conducted daily at the Forum. During his four days in Rio de Janeiro, Gorbachev was deeply engaged in the work of the Commission and delivered an inspiring address on the state of the world and the need for the Earth Charter during one of the final sessions of the Forum. At the conclusion of the Forum, Gorbachev and Strong held a news conference and released the first official draft of the Earth Charter, which was labelled the Benchmark Draft.

Over the next year Gorbachev continued to give the drafting of the Earth Charter his close attention. He hosted and presided over two Moscow Earth Charter Round Tables, one in September 1997 and another in March 1998. These Round Tables focused on the scientific basis for the principles of the Earth Charter, considered contributions from religious leaders, and explored ways to improve the Benchmark Draft. Gorbachev emphasised that the Earth Charter should be a 'people's document' and speak to the heart as well as the mind. It should stir 'people's souls', he commented (*quotations taken from personal notes on the First Moscow Round Table, 1997*). He wanted a preamble that clearly communicates the unsustainable nature of current patterns of development, explaining that natural law establishes limits as to what is safe and possible regarding the growth of industrialised societies. The Chernobyl catastrophe, he pointed out, 'showed in the most harsh form that nature does not forgive human mistakes' (*The Earth Charter in Action*). New attitudes and values, and a radical change in how people think and live are essential, explained Gorbachev. This concern was central to the mission of Green Cross International.

It was a special honour and privilege to be invited to chair the international Earth Charter drafting committee and to be given the opportunity to work on this visionary project with Gorbachev, Strong and the other members of the Commission. Chairing the drafting committee was a complex and demanding assignment. It was also a deeply rewarding experience. In this regard, I am especially grateful for and appreciative of the leadership and support that Gorbachev provided as a co-Chair of the Commission. The power of his mind, the passion that animated his engagement, and the depth of his understanding of the urgent need for a new, widely shared global ethic energised and inspired all of us involved in the project. In addition, his strong support of the drafting committee and the international consultation process was extraordinarily helpful at a number of critical points in the evolution of the draft text.

Gorbachev initially had wanted the Earth Charter to be a short and concise document with ten fundamental principles for sustainable

development. However, as the consultation process progressed, it became clear that many leaders on the front lines of the battle for environmental conservation and sustainable development were looking for a more substantial document. They were concerned that an Earth Charter with only ten principles would be too general and would not provide them with the guidance and support needed. In response to this concern, Gorbachev came to support the creation of a more complex document with 16 main principles and additional supporting principles. However, recognising that many people would find a simpler Earth Charter helpful and inspiring, the drafting committee designed the Earth Charter so that the preamble and 16 main principles may be presented as an official abbreviated version. In addition, the first four principles, which are contained in a section entitled 'Respect and Care for the Community of Life' and involve only 39 words, are constructed so as to provide a concise overview of the Earth Charter's ethical vision.

The Earth Charter Commission brought the Earth Charter drafting and consultation process to a conclusion at a meeting at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris in March of 2000. A final version of the Earth Charter was launched at an international meeting at the Peace Palace in The Hague three months later. Queen Beatrix, Gorbachev, Strong, Lubbers and many other international leaders were there to celebrate the occasion. Since then Gorbachev has promoted the Earth Charter actively through Green Cross International initiatives such as 'The Earth Dialogue Forums' and in addresses and interviews that he has given throughout the world. In 2001, he presented the Earth Charter to Pope John Paul II, who congratulated him on 'a work well done in defending our environmental heritage' and who gave him his blessing and encouraged him to continue his 'meritorious effort to bring forth greater respect for the planet's resources'.

Gorbachev has also worked to implement specific Earth Charter principles and to have them incorporated into international law. For example, he has been an outspoken advocate in support of a United Nations General Assembly resolution that recognises 'the right of every human being to safe drinking water and safe sanitation'. The United Nations estimates that 884 million people live without potable water and 2.6 billion people are without basic sanitation. In July 2010 the General Assembly adopted a resolution recognising access to clean water and basic sanitation as a human right.

Over the past decade the Earth Charter Initiative has developed into a worldwide network of organisations and individuals that support and

promote its ethical vision for a better world. Over 5000 organisations have endorsed the Earth Charter, including UNESCO, the World Conservation Union (IUCN), and hundreds of cities and universities. It is being widely used as an educational instrument in schools and universities and the Earth Charter International Secretariat has formed a partnership with UNESCO in support of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. The Earth Charter has become a respected reference document among international law experts, and a growing number of corporations and governments use it as a guide in defining their social and ecological responsibilities and in their sustainability planning.

Gorbachev's understanding of the deeper significance of the Earth Charter reflects his vision of the ultimate purpose of the initiative. Reflecting on the major challenges that must be addressed to achieve the goal of sustainable development, he argues that the Earth Charter is 'the third pillar of sustainable development'. His thinking in this regard is explained in the following statement.

The first pillar is the Charter of the United Nations, which regulates the relations among states and thus sets the rules for their behaviour in order to secure peace and stability. The second pillar is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which regulates the relations between states and individuals, and guarantees to all citizens a set of rights which their respective governments should provide. The importance of these two documents cannot be overestimated. But it has become obvious that another document is missing, one which would regulate the relations among states, individuals and nature by defining the human duties towards the environment. In my opinion, the Earth Charter should fill this void, acquire equal status, and become the third pillar supporting the peaceful development of the modern world ... we founders and supporters should consider our mission accomplished only when the Earth Charter is universally adopted by the international community.

(Mikhail Gorbachev, in *The Earth Charter in Action*)

On Mikhail Gorbachev's 80th birthday many of us will pay special tribute to him to celebrate his exceptional, far-sighted leadership in support of Earth's ecological integrity, sustainable development, and the creation of a third pillar that complements the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.





*Steven Rockefeller is a trustee of the Asian Cultural Council and an advisory trustee of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. He was involved in the Earth Charter from its beginning, serving as Chairman of the Earth Charter International drafting committee from 1996 to 2000, then as a member of the Earth Charter Commission and, from 2006 to 2010, as co-Chair of the Earth Charter International Council. In 2005, he moderated the international launch of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development.*