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## Unifying Our Efforts: Using the Earth Charter to Support the SDGs



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It was a beautiful summer day in my part of the northern hemisphere. The sun was beginning to warm the air. I noticed the wind blowing gently across my face. The river in the distance moved effortlessly along its winding path, and birds flew in circles above the surface of the water. Nearby baskets of flowers - reds, yellows, purples, and whites - created joy inside me. It was a wonderful moment.

These kinds of feelings and experiences cannot always be quantified but are real, nonetheless. They align us with the deepest parts of who we are. We resonate with a sense of connection that brings the external world together with our inner experience. I believe that this deep sense of connection helps to integrate and activate our actions in the world. There is an embodied sense of alignment that integrates who we are, our core values, and our intentions with purposeful actions in the world.

When we bring the intangible and tangible together, we create a dynamic unity that has energy and power. For me, one of the real strengths of the Earth Charter is how it addresses sustainability from the inside out. It demonstrates the alignment between values, core beliefs, and actions. Whether we are educators, activists, or policy makers, part of our task is to shape a new consciousness of hope and possibility. The Earth Charter unifies multiple actions and movements under a common set of values, commitments, and responsibilities.

My purpose in this essay is to show how the Earth Charter and the SDGs are complementary aspects of a singular unity. While each is unique in its own right, they



can work together with greater effectiveness when their distinctions are understood and honored. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are part of a UN effort to create common goals to work toward within a designated time frame. The Earth Charter was created as a common vision expressed by the peoples of the world. It is a civil society document, meaning that it is open and available to all people to be brought to life in as many contexts as imagination allows. In very important ways, the Earth Charter can enhance and support meeting the SDG targets.

The chart below contrasts what I believe are important differences between the Earth Charter and the SDGs. The discussion that follows will elaborate on how these distinctions point to the significance of the Earth Charter and why it needs to be at the forefront of multiple efforts around sustainability including the SDGs. The Earth Charter is a movement that charts a course toward a re-imagined future. This is transformative work that goes to the heart of global citizenship and planetary well-being.

<b>Earth Charter</b>	<b>SDGs</b>
Toward a New Worldview	Maintains the Same Worldview
Vision	Goals
Values	Objectives
Actions	Outcomes
Being/Creating	Achieving/Producing
Holistic/Systemic	Multidimensional/Additive



## Toward a New Worldview

The neurosciences show us that perception and action go together (Fuster, 2002). How we see the world matters. We act upon the world according to our perceptions. If we perceive nature as merely a resource, then our actions will be defined by that perception and everything surrounding those actions will seem logical and true based on that way of seeing the world. If we perceive the natural world as a reciprocal kinship and a sacred trust, then our decisions and actions will be quite different.

The Earth Charter creates a picture of humanity as interconnected with other communities of life. Our actions affect the whole because of this relationship. We cannot be separated from this connection, nor can we escape our inherent responsibility. Our thoughts and actions have consequences, not just for ourselves but for all of life, for other people and cultures, for future generations, and for the

well-being of the planet. Humanity as portrayed in the Earth Charter, is perceived as part of an interconnected web of life that shares a common destiny. Everything we do inside this web of relationships affects us and all of life. We are not separate. Who we are and our relationship with justice, economics, the environment, and peaceful cooperation among peoples and nations are seen from the undeniable perspective of connectedness.

This way of perceiving the world is the foundation for a new vision of the future. While the SDGs speak to important issues needing to be addressed, they tacitly accept the current worldview. Our current perception of the world has set the stage for the scripts leading to the particular crises we face. It sets up a contradiction between the current societal worldview and the regenerative future SDGs hope to secure.

By combining the Earth Charter with the SDGs, the work of alignment is put into



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motion. Awareness and intention become tools that help us move beyond where we are to new visions of possibility. This is a continuous process of authentic leadership and service.

## Vision

Vision is among the most powerful and practical things we can do and should not be underestimated. Visioning isn't just a step in strategic planning, where it is often ignored or superseded by goal statements and targeted measurements. Nor is it a "one and done" event, rather it is a continuous process of bringing intention and creative energy into each step. We return to it again and again, to see anew, to re-imagine, to inquire from different perspectives. Visioning is seeing with intention from the deepest parts of our being.

Vision does not happen analytically. It occurs receptively. Close your eyes for a moment and imagine yourself waking up



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to a community that embodies the Earth Charter worldview and values. You look around, go outside, walk to a public place. What do you see? How do you feel? What is going on around you? When we share these "visions," noting commonalities and differences, we have created a context for our work, our goals. There is a big picture that informs our choices and actions.

The Earth Charter represents a common vision stated in values and actions. We should celebrate what an amazing accomplishment this was! Six years of dialogue and receptive listening to the peoples, cultures, and nations of the world. Goals follow vision and lose their foundation if they are only held together by agreements. A common vision built upon a worldview of radical connectedness and the values of compassionate care, relatedness, and responsive action takes the SDGs to another level.

## Values

Values are broad; objectives are narrow. Values are internal; objectives are external. Values live inside context; objectives are isolated and originate from goals. Values are existential choices; objectives are analytical reductions. Values are non-linear; objectives are linear and sequenced. Values invite dialogue; objectives are instrumental.

When values are implicitly and explicitly recognized, the greater the focus and



direction. This kind of action is not driven solely by external circumstances, rather it becomes an inner journey and outward expression.

This contrasts with set outcomes which can remain fixed and arbitrary. Outcomes are good watermarks and indicators of our progress; they alone do not necessarily drive action. They can be useful in several ways but in and of themselves outcomes have no energy. SDG outcomes are good descriptors of ends. Earth Charter action principles give direction to where this leads and what we can do. These form a natural partnership.

## Being/Creating

Being is not the same as achieving, and creating is qualitatively different than producing. Notably, these are not in opposition to each other. These areas of emphasis once again point out the inner and outer categories of attention. The SDGs tend to prioritize external areas of concern without addressing the inner world of one's humanity that makes these goals a reality. It is the creative impulse within us that builds models and alternatives, that pushes the limitations of our imaginations, that approaches the gravity of our circumstances with a kind of joy and even play.

This may seem unimaginable given the serious conditions of the world. But when one is sustained from the inside out, the relationships, collaborations, inspiring stories and even small successes that make a difference create an inner joy of deep gratitude and appreciation for all of life.

purpose are likely to be. Values indicate and point to what really matters - in terms of both process and outcome. Values help establish identity as well as ethical responses. Objectives alone, on the other hand, can act similarly to factoids that present information devoid of context or meaning.

The Earth Charter is value-oriented; its values include openness, inclusion, respect, and care. These are not imposed; they represent a way of being in the world. Earth Charter values do not negate other ways of being; on the contrary, they create a foundation for dialogue and inquiry. Earth Charter values and SDG objectives amplify each other.

## Action

The Earth Charter principles are designed and written to lead to action, whether that is in terms of policy, soft law, strategic planning, project-based community organizing, sustainable business practices, social entrepreneurship, educational curriculum, or activism across multiple sectors. Advocates of the Earth Charter want to "bring it to life" within these intersectional environments. When its values and principles become part of the cultural space, the transformative possibility of the Earth Charter takes shape and form.

Taking action in alignment with one's core beliefs and values with intention and purpose builds a lasting sense of commitment within us. There is a constant source of energy because it comes from within. The action is flexible and authentic and allows for fluid responses and shifts in



Being and creating are continuous sources of energy and purpose. Achieving and producing certainly can be motivating, but once achieved, there is always something more to be done. It is never enough. This feeling of “lack” leads to stress and burnout.

Then, is it not better to enjoy the journey, even when it is serious? How much better to create a just, sustainable, and peaceful world as we go - within us. The epilogue of the Earth Charter refers to the joyful celebration of life. This is joyful work because we are constantly bringing our deepest values and intentions into the world as the future is created in every moment of the present.

## Holistic/Systemic

The Earth Charter contributes to a holistic vision of sustainability. It recognizes that creating an ecological civilization needs to address every facet of society. It implies an open systems approach to the issues we face and serves as an umbrella for multiple

civil movements operating with various and specific emphases. Its pillars form a unified whole; they intersect and are part of the same tapestry. This can be seen in the last statement of the Charter before its epilogue: “Recognize that peace is the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth and the larger whole of which all are a part” [Earth Charter, 16f].

Certainly, the SDGs are multi-dimensional but not necessarily holistic. They come across more independently and additive rather than woven within the web of systems dynamics. This is characteristic of the current paradigm. Such a worldview must shift, for it can never lead us to a sustainable future. The SDGs need the Earth Charter, and the world needs both.

Importantly, the Earth Charter extends beyond the SDGs and similar attempts to work towards sustainability. The Earth Charter can be infused within the environments of institutions and



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organizations. It shapes-shifts into ways to think about sustainable cities and ways of living. It helps address the role of universities and educational curricula during this time in history. Aligning pedagogical approaches with its values and content, the Earth Charter becomes a canvas for holistic education and re-imagining what it means to learn.

## Conclusion

As I look out upon the hanging flowers that bring beauty and joy to my life, I am reminded of the significance of care and its relationship to responsibility. Caring is born inside relationships. When we see ourselves as everything and see everything as ourselves, caring is a natural response to the world. Responsibility is not the same as obligation. It embraces a natural reciprocity, a sense of value, a perception of some undefined unity, and a recognition of a primal instinct for kinship, not only with others but also with the natural world. An expanded sense of self that resides in primordial love.

The seemingly intangible aspects of our humanity really matter. The challenge of showing how the Earth Charter's emphasis on values and a shift in consciousness is essential to the work of sustainability, justice, peace, and planetary well-being. I hope this essay helps in some small way support the wonderful and amazing work so many of you are doing throughout the world.



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## References

- Earth Charter Commission (2000). The Earth Charter. [www.earthcharter.org](http://www.earthcharter.org)
- Fuster, J. (2002). *Cortex and mind; Unifying cognition*. Oxford University Press.