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INTRODUCTION

We are pleased to present the sixth edition of the Earth Charter Magazine, bringing together the voices of educators, young leaders, and thought leaders from diverse contexts. This edition features six articles:

Steven C. Rockefeller offers a valuable reflection on the intersections, synergies, and complementarity between the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Earth Charter. He explores how the Earth Charter provides an ethical foundation for the emerging movement to recognize the Rights of Nature. As a member of the Earth Charter Commission and chair of the drafting committee, Mr. Rockefeller brings deep insight into these connections.

Joan Anderson, Senior Coordinator for Peace and Global Issues at Soka Gakkai International, brings us closer to the lived experiences of those affected by the devastation of nuclear weapons in Japan. Her article invites us to see this historical tragedy through a humanizing lens, one that centers human faces, stories, and the profound violation of the most fundamental human right: dignity.

Pedro Arrojo, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, reflects on our relationship with water, how we perceive it, and how this connects to the Earth Charter's vision and its pillar of Ecological Integrity.

Rebeca Soares, Earth Charter Young Leader and environmental educator from the Soka Institute of the Amazon, shares her experience facilitating workshops and bringing the Earth Charter to diverse groups in Brazil.

Victor Ayegba Mathew, educator and Earth Charter Young Leader, describes how he integrates the Earth Charter and the Earth Stories collection into his teaching practice with primary school children in Nigeria.

Elisabete Campos, educator and researcher from Brazil, shares insights from a course in which she used the Earth Charter to spark dialogue and reflection, engaging participants in conversations about the global situation, collective responsibilities, local contexts and the ethical foundations needed to drive meaningful change.

These articles and reflections testify to the reach and relevance of the Earth Charter as an ethical reference and educational tool —one that helps expand our planetary consciousness and deepen our ethic of care. After 25 years since its launch, it remains a living instrument of profound importance for our times.

Enjoy the reading!

MIRIAN VILELA & MARIA SOSA SEGNINI
EDITORIAL TEAM

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UNIVERSAL RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES: THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE EARTH CHARTER*

Steven C. Rockefeller

Steven is Member, Earth Charter Commission and Chaired the EC drafting committee. Professor emeritus of religion at Middlebury College, where he also served as dean of the College. He received his bachelor of arts degree from Princeton University, his master of divinity degree from Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and his Ph.D. in the philosophy of religion from Columbia University. His essays appear in many books and journals. In recent years much of his research and writing has focused on global ethics, sustainable development, and the interrelation of democracy, ecology, and spirituality.

*This essay was originally written and presented at a conference in 2009, and revised in 2025.

During the second half of the 20th century, major progress was made by the international community in achieving agreement on the values and principles that should ideally govern the conduct of nations and individuals. This initiative, which began with creation of the United Nations, was inspired by a determination to prevent recurrence of the horrors of World War I and II. The vision of a new global ethic gradually took form, awakening fresh hopes that humanity could cooperate in building free, just, sustainable, and peaceful societies and a flourishing world community. However, the turbulent state of the world in the 21st century has discouraged and dimmed these hopes. In order to secure the future wellbeing of humanity and life on Earth, there is an urgent need to keep hope alive and renew our commitment to the fundamental values that are the promise of a better world.

The cross-cultural, international dialogue that generated the last century's ethical vision commenced with the drafting and adoption of the United Nations Charter (1945) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). The UN process advanced with the development of international law in a variety of fields with wide support from the emerging global civil society. The Earth Charter, which is the product of a worldwide, civil society consultation and drafting process and was launched as a people's treaty in 2000, builds on this work and other sources, including the world's spiritual traditions, contemporary science, and environmental ethics. Its broad, integrated ethical framework expands the vision of humanity's shared values in a number of critical ways. Moreover, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Earth Charter together provide a vision of the fundamental principles that form the core of the new global ethic.

This essay explores the relationship between these two especially significant documents. How are they different? How do they complement each other so as to provide an ethical framework for building a free, just, sustainable, and peaceful world in the 21st century? [1]

A. THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

At the outset, it is useful to note the basic ideas and values that form the foundation of the ethical vision in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was drafted by the UN Commission on Human Rights chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt. The development of the concept of human rights in the west has a long history from which the Commission drew inspiration and guidance. Initially the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was called the International Declaration of Human Rights. The title Universal Declaration was chosen to make clear that its ethical principles are morally binding on every individual as well as all governments. [2] The Universal Declaration was adopted by the UN General assembly "as a common standard for achievement of all peoples and all nations."

The Preamble of the Universal Declaration opens with the affirmation that "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world." If one asks, why should people respect the rights and fundamental freedoms of all other people, the Universal Declaration has a short answer. It declares in Article 1: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." The Universal Declaration affirms this as the basic "faith" on which the document is founded.

The Preamble of the Universal Declaration focuses special attention on the concept of the "inherent" and "equal" dignity of the human person, which is closely associated with the belief in the inherent "worth" of all persons. In Article 1, the Universal Declaration also closely associates the dignity of the human person with the capacity for "reason and conscience," with which "all human beings...are endowed." Recognition of the inherent and equal dignity of all people provides the basis for respecting the rights and fundamental freedoms of each and every person. [3]

These ideas involve the conviction that people share a common humanity which unites them beyond all that differentiates and separates them. Our identity as "members of the human family" is understood to be our most fundamental identity. Therefore, the Universal Declaration states in Article 1 that all people "should act toward one another in a spirit of brotherhood." Eleanor Roosevelt and her colleagues on the Human Rights Commission recognized the importance of a person's cultural identity and appreciated cultural diversity, but they firmly believed that one should not allow cultural diversity to become a barrier to mutual respect and cooperation for peace. They "were not homogenizers," explains Professor Mary Ann Glendon, "but they were universalists in the sense that they believed that human nature was everywhere the same and that the processes of experiencing, understanding, and judging were capable of leading everyone to certain basic truths." [4]

Reflecting the vision of President Franklin Roosevelt set forth in a speech delivered in 1941, the Preamble of the Universal Declaration states: "the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people." The rights set forth in the document are designed to secure these four freedoms. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the Universal Declaration combines political and civil rights (Articles 3-21) together with economic, social and cultural rights (Articles 22-27). The latter include, for example, the right to education, work and an adequate standard of living.

Unlike earlier human rights documents, the Universal Declaration makes very clear that equal dignity and rights belong to every person without distinction of sex, class, race, religion, or national origin. Here lies the radical nature and transformative

“People share a common humanity which unites them beyond all that differentiates and separates them.”

Steven C. Rockefeller

Photo Credit: Eduard Müller

power of the Universal Declaration. It contributed to the end of colonialism and continues to be a force in the struggle against discrimination and oppression.

Further, it establishes the principle that how governments treat their own citizens is not just an internal matter; it makes governments accountable to the larger human family with regard to their human rights record. [5]

B. THE EARTH CHARTER, UNIVERSAL RESPONSIBILITY, AND SUSTAINABILITY

Like the Universal Declaration, the Earth Charter has been designed "as a common standard by which the conduct of all individuals, organizations, businesses, governments, and transnational institutions is to be guided and assessed." (Earth Charter Preamble). There are two general points to be made when comparing the Universal Declaration and the Earth Charter and considering how these documents complement each other. First, while both documents recognize the importance of universal rights and universal responsibilities, the emphasis in the Universal Declaration is almost entirely on human rights, and the emphasis in the Earth Charter is primarily on human responsibilities. Taken together, the two documents provide the balanced understanding of rights and responsibilities and their interrelationship that is needed in the 21st century.

The Universal Declaration recognizes in Article 29 that "everyone has duties to the community" as well as individual rights. The Earth Charter is designed as a declaration of global interdependence

and "universal responsibility" and considers human rights in this context. It reaffirms the vision of human rights in the Universal Declaration as a fundamental part of the new global ethics, emphasizing that the promotion and observance of human rights is a basic responsibility of everyone. Nine principles in the Earth Charter – two main principles (7 and 12) and seven supporting principles (2a, 3a, 9a, 11a, 12b, 13a and 13b) – refer explicitly to human rights.

Second, the Earth Charter sets forth a larger and more inclusive vision of shared values and common ethical standards than the Universal Declaration, reflecting the influence of the international environmental and sustainable development movements that took form during the last three decades of the 20th century. The Earth Charter integrates the human rights agenda into this more comprehensive ethical framework, making clear the interdependence of human rights, respect for nature, environmental conservation, the eradication of poverty, equitable socio-economic development, democracy and peace.

When the Universal Declaration was adopted in 1948, the United Nations was focused on the issues of collective security, human rights, and equitable development. With the founding of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in 1948, there were advocates for creating a convention on the protection of nature.

However, the degradation of the environment was not yet viewed as a major problem by the international community.

This did not begin to change until the UN Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment in 1972. The concept of sustainable development was not introduced into United Nations deliberations until the 1980s. The most important influences in this regard were publication of the IUCN World Conservation Strategy in 1980 and Our Common Future, the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, in 1987.

Photo Credit: Eduard Müller

C. ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE, INTERGENERATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY, AND RESPECT FOR NATURE

The focus of the Earth Charter on universal responsibilities and on sustainable ways of living leads to an emphasis on three very important ethical ideas not found in the Universal Declaration and to a clarification of the limits to human rights. First of all, the Earth Charter expands the Universal Declaration's vision of social justice and human rights with its vision of environmental justice that involves the right to a healthy environment and to essential natural resources such as clean air and water. In the past, there has been tension between human rights advocates concerned about socio-economic development and environmentalists concerned about the impact of development on ecosystems and biodiversity. However, over the past twenty-five years these groups have increasingly found common ground through a deepening understanding of the interdependence of people and ecosystems and a recognition of a basic human right to a safe and healthy environment.

A number of international environmental declarations such as the Stockholm Declaration (1972), the World Charter for Nature (1982), the Rio Declaration (1992), and the United Nations Millennium Declaration have laid the groundwork for recognition of a right to a healthy environment, but they do not contain an

explicit affirmation of such a right. Some regional human rights treaties such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights (1981) and the Aarhus Convention (1998) ratified by the European Community do recognize this right. [6] It is also recognized in sixty national constitutions. Earth Charter Principle 12 contains a very strong formulation of this ethical ideal, which reads: "Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health and spiritual wellbeing, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities."

Earth Charter Principle 9a sets forth certain basic rights regarding the environmental and economic conditions that must be secured in order to protect the right to a healthy environment and eradicate poverty. These rights "to potable water, clean air, food security, uncontaminated soil, shelter, and safe sanitation" include and go beyond those in the Universal Declaration and more recent human rights treaties. Principles 12 and 9a provide an especially good example of the interdependence of human rights and sustainable development.

Secondly, recognition that environmental degradation will have a devastating impact on the quality of life of future generations has led to a concern with intergenerational responsibility as fundamental to the ethics of a sustainable way of life. The Earth Charter, therefore, adds to the vision in the Universal Declaration an explicit call for recognition of the needs and rights of future generations with a special emphasis on preservation of the integrity of Earth's ecosystems. Principle 4, for example, is a call to "secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations."

Thirdly, recognizing the interdependence of humanity and nature, as well as all peoples, the Earth Charter states in the Preamble: "in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and species we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny." The Earth Charter affirms in Principles 1 and 1a that all life forms have inherent value, not just members of the human species, and all are worthy of respect and moral consideration regardless of their utilitarian value to people. The Earth Charter, therefore, expands the vision of ethical responsibilities to include care for the whole community of life, of which humanity is one interdependent part. In addition to protecting human wellbeing and promoting environmental justice, here lies another fundamental reason for ecological responsibility. The Earth Charter's holistic ethical vision is summarized in the Preamble in the statement that "it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations."

By considering human rights in the light of the goal of sustainability and the principles of environmental justice, intergenerational responsibility, and respect for nature, the Earth Charter clarifies the relation between

rights and responsibilities, specifying certain limits to the exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Universal Declaration acknowledges in Article 29 that a person's rights and freedoms may be limited by law in order to protect those of others and the general welfare. In accord with this view and the concept of environmental justice, the Earth Charter in Principle 2a states "that with the right to own, manage and use natural resources comes the duty to prevent environmental harm and protect the rights of people." Along the same lines, Earth Charter Principle 4a asserts, "that the freedom of action of each generation is qualified by the needs of future generations."

Earth Charter Principle 7, which contains a fundamental guideline for achieving sustainability, sets limits to the right to development. It calls for "patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being." The Earth Charter establishes a general guideline directly relevant to the relation between rights and responsibilities in Principle 2b, which asserts, "that with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good." This principle helps to clarify the meaning of the concept of "common but differentiated responsibilities," which is cited as a fundamental guideline in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (1992) and the Rio Declaration (1992).

Photo Credit: Eduard Müller

D. THE RIGHTS OF NATURE

The Earth Charter recognizes that every life form and all living beings are worthy of respect and moral consideration, but it does not refer to animal rights or the rights of nature. During the drafting process, some individuals and groups strongly supported use of such language in the Earth Charter. However, the Earth Charter was designed to include values and principles that had wide support in global civil society, and the Earth Charter Commission concluded that there was not a clear consensus in the 1990s in support of extending the concept of rights to nature at large. Moreover, governments with few exceptions opposed using the concept in environmental law, and there was little support for it among human rights law experts.

Since the launch of the Earth Charter in 2000, support for affirming the rights of nature in environmental philosophy and law has continued to grow. [7] In this regard it is important to recognize that the Earth Charter's ethic of respect and care for the greater community of life provides the ethical foundation for using rights language in relation to nature, and there is nothing in the Earth Charter that opposes affirming the rights of non-human species.

It has been suggested that the text of the Charter be amended to include recognition of the rights of nature. Only the Earth Charter Commission has the authority to alter the text, and it has never considered doing so. It would be a mistake. The text reflects its time and to start making changes in it would create confusion. Moreover, many people have no problem supporting both the Earth Charter and the concept of the rights of nature as a particularly effective way to clarify in law and implement Earth Charter values. It is also noteworthy that the UN has never amended the Universal Declaration of Human Rights even though human rights law has undergone extensive developments since 1948.

E. DIVERSITY, POVERTY, AND GOVERNANCE

There are other ways in which the Earth Charter extends and strengthens the ethical vision of the Universal Declaration. A special emphasis is put on the value of diversity, especially biological and cultural diversity and gender equality. For example, Principle 1 contains a call to respect "life in all its diversity," and Principle 5 sets forth the imperative: "Protect and restore the integrity of Earth's ecological systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain life." The concluding section of the Earth Charter, "The Way Forward," states: "Our cultural diversity is a precious heritage and different cultures will find their own distinctive ways to realize the vision" of a sustainable future.

The Universal Declaration affirms "the equal rights of men and women" in its preamble, but it does not include a principle on gender equality. Reflecting the fundamental importance of the liberation of women for the achievement of sustainable development, the Earth Charter in Principle 11

calls for "gender equality and equity" and "universal access to education, health care and economic opportunity." Earth Charter Principles 12 and 12b give special recognition to the rights of indigenous peoples, which have long been neglected by the international community. Concerned to promote an inclusive society, Principle 12a calls for elimination of "discrimination in all its forms, such as that based on race, color, sex, sexual orientation, religion, language, and national, ethnic or social origin."

The Universal Declaration addresses the problem of poverty by affirming in Article 25 "that everyone has a right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family." The Earth Charter contains in Principle 9 an explicit call to "eradicate poverty as an ethical, social and environmental imperative." In addition, Principle 10 sets forth a basic guideline for economic development: "Ensure that economic activities and institutions at all levels promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner." This principle is designed to make clear that economic development is not an end in itself but should be regarded as a means for promoting just and fair human development.

The Earth Charter also contains principles and guidelines for good governance that are fundamental in the effort to protect human rights and the environment. For example, Principle 13 states: "Strengthen democratic institutions at all levels, and provide transparency and accountability in governance, inclusive participation in decision making, and access to justice." Further, the Earth Charter views promotion of the transition to a sustainable future as the common but differentiated responsibility of every member of society. "The Way Forward" states: "The partnership of government, civil society, and business is essential for effective governance."

F. THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION OF A SUSTAINABLE WAY OF LIFE

Another distinctive aspect of the Earth Charter's vision for a better world is its recognition of the importance of human spiritual development for the achievement of a sustainable way of life and its recognition of widely shared spiritual attitudes and values that support ethical

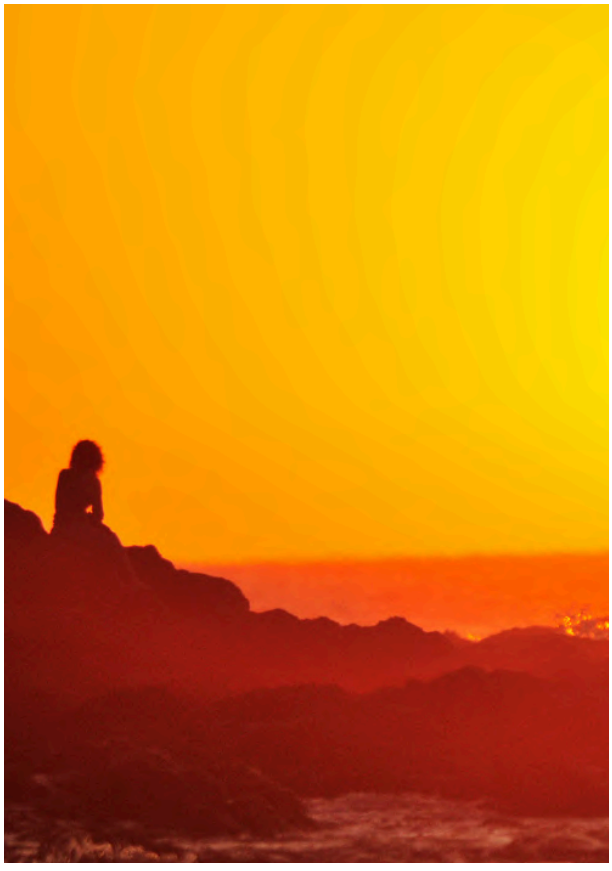


Photo Credit: Eduard Müller

responsibility. The Earth Charter states that "when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more." It affirms "the intellectual, artistic, ethical and spiritual potential of humanity" and calls for "a change of mind and heart." Among the spiritual values cited are reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, humility regarding the human place in nature, compassion, love, and the joyful celebration of life. The spiritual practice outlined in the Earth Charter is about right relationship, and the goal is a culture of nonviolence and peace. Principle 16 on peace is the last principle in the Earth Charter because implementation of the preceding fifteen principles is a prerequisite for the realization of peace. In Principle 16f peace is defined as "the wholeness created by right relationship with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part."

In conclusion, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Earth Charter together provide a balanced vision of the universal rights and social and ecological responsibilities that are at the core of the emerging new planetary consciousness and global ethics. It is these values and principles that should guide decision making as governments, business, and civil society work collaboratively to reconstruct the global economy, eradicate poverty, advance human development, protect planetary ecosystems, and promote collective security and peace.

Photo Credit: Eduard Müller

Endnotes:

[1] In the past, participants in the Earth Charter initiative have on several occasions conducted discussions regarding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Earth Charter. One outcome of these events has been publication of a book of essays by Ruud Lubbers, Willem van Genugten and Tineke Lambooy entitled *Inspiration for Global Governance: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Earth Charter* (Amsterdam: Robert Luckers, 2008). The essays put these two documents in an illuminating historical perspective, describe the development of international human rights law, and provide an instructive discussion of the relation between rights and responsibilities.

[2] Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: Random House, 2001), pp. xvii, 166.

[3] Ibid., pp.144-146, 173-174.

[4] Ibid., p. 230.

[5] Ibid., pp. xvi, 235.

[6] Ruud Lubbers, Willem van Genugten and Tineke Lambooy, *Inspiration for Global Governance*, pp. 40-41.

[7] See for example, *the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth* (2010), which is supported by the governments of Bolivia and the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature. See also Cormac Cullinan, *Wild Law: A Manifesto for Earth Justice* (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2011).

Photo Credit: Mirian Vilela

GIVING THE HORROR OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS A HUMAN FACE

Joan Anderson

Joan worked as a magazine editor in London, then for NGOs for ten years – first with VSO (the UK equivalent of Peace Corps), then with Save the Children UK. She spent nearly 5 years living and working in Cambodia. Already a practicing Buddhist, she then moved to Japan to work for the Soka Gakkai Buddhist organization where she has been for 25 years. She first encountered the Earth Charter in 1999, and became passionate about its inspiring vision of a caring planetary community. For SGI, she has helped create a series of exhibitions that introduce the Earth Charter.

Living in Japan and working for the Soka Gakkai has made thinking about nuclear weapons and the threat they pose part of my daily reality. But for most people, eighty years on from the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, any memory or image of the atrocities is fading, along with it any real sense of urgency regarding nuclear weapons abolition.

The uranium bomb detonated over Hiroshima on August 6 1945, was equivalent to 15,000 tonnes of TNT, and it had caused an estimated 140,000 deaths by the end of 1945. The more powerful plutonium bomb exploded over Nagasaki three days later killed 74,000 people within the year. Both cities and their infrastructure were destroyed, and the survivors, known as hibakusha, whose lives and livelihoods had been devastated, suffered drastically increased rates of cancer and chronic disease due to the effects of radiation.

I have been privileged to visit Hiroshima on several occasions. My mother was with me on my first visit. She had grown up during WWII and was just 17 when it ended. She had trusted what she was told then, that "nuclear weapons ended the war," and believed that the atomic bombs had saved numberless lives on both sides of the conflict.

While we were in Hiroshima, through a series of coincidences, my mother and I were fortunate to meet with Kazue Takuwa, a hibakusha who was the same age as my mother, also born in 1928. Kazue greeted my mother warmly. She shared with us the story of her youngest sister Fumiko, who was horribly injured in the bombing. Their father had searched for three days before finding her, stacked with the bodies of other victims and barely alive. Fumiko's wounds were by then covered in maggots and her skin was torn and burnt. The family did everything they could for her in the absence of all but the most rudimentary first aid services, but she died 24 days later.

Kazue told us that Fumiko's tattered school uniform had just been put on display in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, and we saw it there the following day. My mother's view of nuclear weapons was forever changed, and she is still today a passionate supporter of efforts toward their abolition. "I just felt it was so cruel," she says, "None of us had realized what the real effects on human beings were." My mother was also very moved by the fact that Kazue had no trace of bitterness. In common with all the hibakusha I have met, she only pleads for peace, and for nuclear weapons never to be used again.

Photo Credit: Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum

Since that first visit to the Peace Memorial Museum, the shocking images I saw there have remained seared into my memory. But it was editing a volume of over 50 survivor testimonies collected by our youth members for the book "Hiroshima and Nagasaki: That We Never Forget" that really helped me gain, story by story, a clearer picture of the hideous cruelty and devastation wreaked by nuclear weapons. I felt physically sick at the end of each editing session: The descriptions of the pain, fear and horror wrought upon individual human beings by these most inhumane weapons would not leave my mind.

The abolition of nuclear weapons is a central goal of Soka Gakkai's peace work. In 1957, second president Josei Toda called for their abolition at a large gathering of youth. He said he wished to address "the claws that lie hidden in the very depths" of nuclear weapons, urging: "we, the citizens of the world, have an inviolable right to live. Anyone who jeopardizes that right is a devil incarnate, a fiend, a monster."

Toda's successor, third Soka Gakkai president Daisaku Ikeda (1928–2023), took this work forward, advocating for nuclear weapons abolition in each of his 40 annual peace proposals written between 1983 and 2022. He wrote in a "Japan Times" editorial in 2009, "To put the era of nuclear terror behind us, we must struggle against the real 'enemy.' That enemy is not nuclear weapons, per se, nor is it the states that possess or develop them. The real enemy is the way of thinking that justifies nuclear weapons--the readiness to annihilate others when they are seen as a threat or as a hindrance." These purposefully designed weapons of ultimate mass destruction are indeed a manifestation of the darkest aspects of the human heart, instruments of absolute hatred and mistrust directed against ourselves.

In their destructive and divisive power, and the damage they wreak not only upon humans but the ecosystems on which we depend, nuclear weapons are the antithesis of the vision painted by the Earth Charter, of our sense of being united as

Photo Credit: Joan Anderson

one human family and global society founded on a shared vision of sustainable flourishing for all the community of life. As principle 16 of the Charter states, we need to eliminate nuclear, biological, and toxic weapons, demilitarize national security systems and ultimately "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."

After the end of the Cold War, in the 1990s, there was a window; a time when it made no sense for Russia and the U.S. to have thousands of nuclear weapons aimed at each other, and the world seemed to be heading in a common direction. This was when the extraordinary process of dialogue that created the Earth Charter was taking place around the world, and ideas such as the culture of peace and dialogue of civilizations were being born. It seemed that we were moving beyond extremes of division and hatred toward a place of hope.

The idea of a treaty banning nuclear weapons began to gain momentum, but the weight of the militarized status quo meant there was little progress. Mr. Ikeda urged in a 2006 proposal that there was a need for a huge groundswell of voices from the grassroots and from civil society in order to really push the agenda of nuclear disarmament and, ultimately, abolition, forward.

In response, in 2007, Soka Gakkai launched the People's Decade for Nuclear Abolition, with extensive programs of public education including exhibitions, films and books. We also partnered with the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), and worked closely with many other civil society groups, including those led by the hibakusha themselves. In 2017, a huge step forward was achieved, with the adoption of the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). This groundbreaking Treaty bans the use, threat of use, development, production,

Photo Credit: Mirian Vilela

Photo Credit: Joan Anderson

manufacture, acquisition, possession, stockpiling, transfer, stationing, deployment or installation of nuclear weapons. It entered into force in January 2021, and strengthens the norm against nuclear weapons as the first legal instrument to ban them. Despite this, the nuclear weapon states still resist all pressure to disarm and are even modernizing their arsenals. The need for awareness-raising and political pressure is still acute.

The Soka Gakkai International (SGI)'s latest educational exhibition, produced with ICAN, is called "Everything You Treasure," and it shows the impact of nuclear weapons on all we treasure in life, everything we would stand to lose. The issue of nuclear weapons touches on every area covered in the comprehensive vision of the Earth Charter. It concerns human rights – starting from our fundamental right to life and extending to the discrimination suffered by survivors of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as well as victims of testing through the world. It concerns health issues, livelihoods, environment, gender and our shared future, all of which are threatened by nuclear weapons. The aim is to demonstrate that every individual can make a difference, by starting their own initiatives to communicate the reality of these at once deadly and outdated weapons.

A recent educational initiative that SGI has supported is showings in Japan of the exhibition "Portraits of the Hibakusha: 80 Years Remembered," created by the UK organization 80,000 Voices. This features powerful lenticular (3D effect) black and white photographs of over 50 hibakusha from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, now in their 80s and 90s. The photographer Patrick Boyd met with the aging survivors to take formal portraits. Gina Langton, founder of 80,000 Voices, conscious of the dwindling number of survivors, asked each person what message they would like to convey

to the future, so every photograph is accompanied by a card containing their heartfelt words.

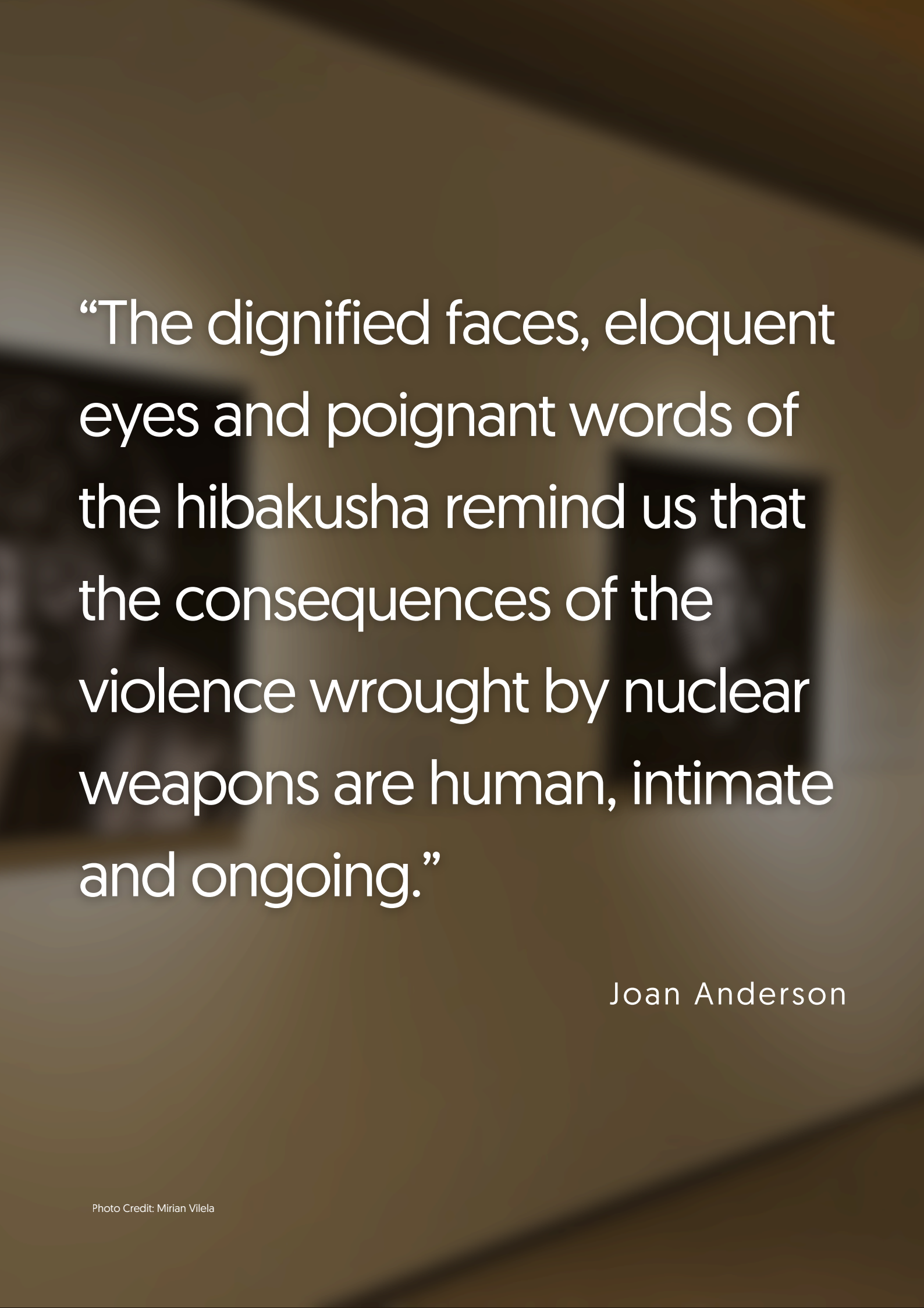
Kuniyoshi Miura, photographed in Nagasaki, said, “I experienced the horror of nuclear weapons and I have never forgotten it, not even for a day. It remains so vivid in my mind. Only those who have experienced the horror of nuclear weapons know what they are. They must never be used again!” Park Namjoo, of Korean origin, who suffered greatly from discriminatory attitudes after the bombing of Hiroshima, stated, “Everyone should get along, without racial discrimination, taking care of each other and living in harmony. I hate war! I can’t forgive nuclear weapons! They are too cruel, dreadful and terrifying. In an instant with a flash of light everyone was killed.”

The portrait of Keiko Ogura, founder of Hiroshima Interpreters for Peace, is also featured in the exhibition. Her testimony in the book “Hiroshima and Nagasaki: That We Never Forget” shows how random choices in the minutes before the bomb exploded shaped people’s experiences of “that day.” She says: “I had gotten bored and gone out of the house to play by myself in the road... I was enveloped in a blinding flash. The next instant, the blast slammed me against the ground and knocked me out. When I came to, all was dark and completely silent.”

Gina reflected on a recent showing of the Portraits exhibition in Wales: “The lenticular portraits shift as visitors move. One moment, the survivors look straight at you; the next, they seem to look past you, as though seeing something beyond this moment.” She stresses the importance of opportunities like this for awareness raising and education: “While many hibakusha can no longer travel to share their stories in person, these portraits travel for them, opening up conversations that might never happen.”

The dignified faces, eloquent eyes and poignant words of the hibakusha remind us that the consequences of the violence wrought by nuclear weapons are human, intimate and ongoing. It is our responsibility to ensure that their cries for abolition of nuclear weapons are not lost or forgotten, and to keep in our consciousness the horrors the use (or testing) of a nuclear weapon unleashes in human bodies, minds and lives. Only by preserving this awareness can we work to prevent such iniquities from ever happening again.

Today’s bombs are many, many times more powerful than those that were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And the terrifying truth is that in all scenarios run by the US Government, once a nuclear war begins, it will not stop. Annie Jacobsen, investigative journalist and author of the 2024 book “Nuclear War: A Scenario”, asked her high-level military contacts about the reality of what would happen if deterrence fails. If a missile were to be launched by North Korea that seemed to be heading for the East Coast of the United States, she details the terrifying reality of the almost certain response. The US president would likely be convinced that he (or she) would have to retaliate before being wiped out, and a catastrophic chain of events would



“The dignified faces, eloquent eyes and poignant words of the hibakusha remind us that the consequences of the violence wrought by nuclear weapons are human, intimate and ongoing.”

Joan Anderson

Photo Credit: Mirian Vilela

be set in motion. Annie comments: "If a nuclear exchange happens involving strategic ballistic missiles, it will not stop until the world ends. And we are talking about in seconds and minutes, not in days and weeks and months."

For decades, scientists have warned of the climate disruption that would follow any nuclear conflict. After the explosion, smoke and dust from firestorms would block sunlight from reaching the Earth's surface and cause an abrupt drop in global temperatures and rainfall, leading to shorter growing seasons and decreasing overall agricultural production and fish stocks worldwide. A study published in Nature Food in 2022 modeled that after a global nuclear war, global average caloric production would decrease by about 90% within three to four years, and the resulting famine could kill 5 billion people. And even though temperatures would drop, a nuclear winter would not reverse the effects of global warming. It would exacerbate ocean acidification and damage to the ozone layer. Higher levels of UV radiation would cause widespread harm to humans, animals and plants, and both the direct and indirect consequences would be devastating for wildlife, plants and entire ecosystems.

The US still has over 1,700 deployed nuclear weapons, Russia over 1,500, with around half of the two countries' deployed weapons estimated by the Union of Concerned Scientists to be on "hair-trigger alert." To Annie Jacobsen and most experts, this is insanity. There have been numerous incidents of incidents that could have sparked accidental Armageddon. Not to mention the vast amount of resources spent on maintaining and upgrading nuclear weapon arsenals that could be so much better spent on ensuring a world with the genuine human security brought by increased investment in healthcare, education and the green infrastructure needed to tackle the climate crisis.

We should all take the issue of nuclear weapons personally. It is through encountering the humanity of individual survivors that we, too, as individuals can be moved to action. Like the Earth Charter, their portraits and their words speak to the human heart. Like the Earth Charter, they can spark conscience into action. When enough of us speak out, insistent that these weapons have no place in today's world, change can come. There are many things that we can do, such as hosting an exhibition or speaker event in our local communities, or working to have the place where we live join the ICAN Cities Appeal.

To quote the closing words of Daisaku Ikeda's last public statement on nuclear weapons, issued in April 2023, to the G7 Summit held in Hiroshima: "Now is the time! Let us once again change the course of history through the power of people, paving a path toward a world free from nuclear weapons, a world free from war."

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Photo Credit: Eduard Müller

ECOLOGICAL INTEGRITY IN WATER GOVERNANCE, FROM THE EARTH CHARTER

Pedro Arrojo Agudo

Pedro holds a PhD in Physics and is a professor at the University of Zaragoza, specializing in water economics. Since November 2020, he has served as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation.

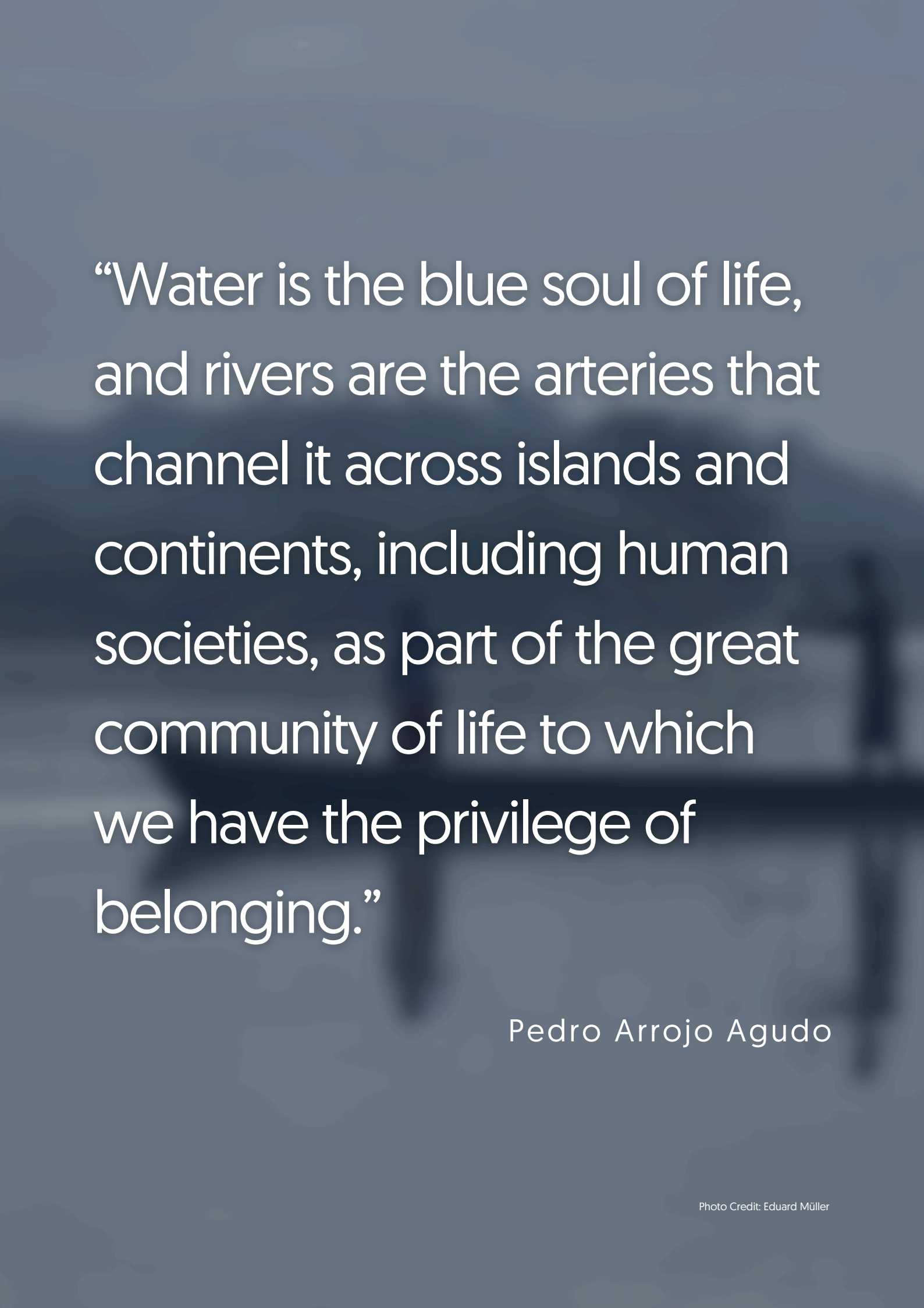
Since I was appointed UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, I have been insisting that the more than 2 billion people without guaranteed access to drinking water are not, for the most part, people who are simply thirsty or lacking water in their living environments. Rather, they are impoverished people who live next to rivers or above contaminated aquifers, or whose waters are captured by powerful actors for their economic activities.

This paradoxical global water crisis on Planet Water, the Blue Planet, is therefore not, in essence, a crisis of scarcity, but the consequence of unsustainable management of aquatic ecosystems and inequitable management of available water. From this basic diagnosis, I have been emphasizing the need to focus our efforts on three central challenges: making peace with our rivers and aquatic ecosystems; promoting democratic water governance, treating water as a common good rather than a commodity; and making water management a driver for peace and cooperation. Focusing my attention on the ecological integrity advocated by the Earth Charter, I will concentrate on the first challenge: making peace with our rivers and aquatic ecosystems by restoring and preserving their good condition and sustainability (United Nations, 2023, p.2).

To confront this global water crisis, one that is worsening and accelerating with climate change, it is urgent to move from resource-based water management to new ecosystem-based approaches that can guarantee the sustainability of rivers and aquifers. We can no longer view rivers, lakes, wetlands, and aquifers as mere channels and reservoirs of H_2O, just as we can no longer manage forests as simple warehouses of timber. They must be understood and managed as living ecosystems whose sustainability underpins not only our ability to access water and wood for ourselves and future generations, but also a multitude of essential values and functions for life, especially human life.

The brutal paradigm of domination over nature is undoubtedly at the roots of this global water crisis. The scientific empiricism that Francis Bacon defended, claiming that “science should treat nature as the Inquisition treated its prisoners, torturing it until it confesses its last secrets” (Fox Keller, 1985), is a brutal conception of science that evokes profiles of patriarchal domination similar to those that characterize the domination of women. A concept that can no longer be explicitly defended, yet survives and is strengthened by powerful economic interests, guided by the shortsighted logic of the market and an irresponsible technocratic optimism that assumes any environmental impact will eventually be solved through technological development.

Overcoming the paradigm of “domination over nature” and transitioning toward a “paradigm of sustainability” requires ending the tyranny of greed. Market forces, today governed by the power of



“Water is the blue soul of life, and rivers are the arteries that channel it across islands and continents, including human societies, as part of the great community of life to which we have the privilege of belonging.”

Pedro Arrojo Agudo

Photo Credit: Eduard Müller

large financial actors, do not open horizons of progress; rather, they generate growing abysses of inequity, social injustice, violence, and unsustainability.

Unfortunately, instead of developing the sustainability paradigm as the foundation for a new concept of progress, we speak of "sustainable development," with "development" placed first, understood as "growth," based on the appropriation and consumption of resources such as water, energy, or minerals. As a result, we end up promoting dynamics of unlimited growth that are as unsustainable and unjust as they are suicidal for humanity.

From this perspective, the sustainability of ecosystems, rather than being a vital necessity, becomes a semantic ornament, or at best, something desirable but postponable in the face of the priorities imposed by the shortsighted, relentless, and unjust logic of the market.

The Earth Charter clashes with this vision of progress, prioritizing principles of sustainability, equity, democratic governance, and peace.

Coherent with the Earth Charter, we do not ignore the importance of the productive uses of water, but above all, we prioritize the functions of water as the basis of life, and particularly for life, health, cohesion, and coexistence within our communities and societies. From this coherence, we need an ethical reflection grounded in the philosophy and the ethics of care—an approach daily cultivated in a particularly profound way by women. We need an ethical reflection on the multiple functions, uses, and values involved in water governance, one that allows us to discern and establish priorities.

Since my first report to the United Nations, I have been advocating for the need to distinguish ethical categories and establish differentiated priorities and management criteria (United Nations, 2024, p.3-4).

Water-Life, referring to functions and uses that sustain life, and in particular the life, cohesion, and coexistence of human communities and societies, must be managed with the highest priority, guaranteeing the human rights linked to water use and governance, as well as the sustainability of ecosystems.

Water for the Common Good, referring to uses democratically considered as serving

Photo Credit: Eduard Müller

the general interest of society, must be managed at a second level of priority.

Water-Economy, referring to productive uses beyond basic needs that legitimately contribute to improving living standards, is extremely important but must be managed at a third level of priority.

Water-Crime, referring to productive activities that contaminate rivers and aquifers with toxic substances, poison populations, and undermine the sustainability of ecosystems, must be outlawed and prevented at all costs, no matter how profitable they may be for those who promote them.

The principle of Ecological Integrity in the Earth Charter supports this highest priority we must assign to Water-Life, guaranteeing the basic needs of populations, and in particular the human rights to drinking water and sanitation, food, health, dignified housing, and even the human right to a healthy and sustainable environment recognized by the UN, among others. Furthermore, preserving the ecological integrity of our aquatic ecosystems ensures natural functions of support and conservation of biodiversity, regeneration of water quality, flow regulation, and other valuable functions that also enable us to develop a healthy economy, a truly sustainable economy.

Under the argument of economic development, it is not legitimate to degrade, poison, or make scarce the Water of Life. It makes no sense to justify that billions of people lack access to drinking water due to scarcity, since guaranteeing 50 to 100 liters per person per day, the vital minimum needed to ensure these rights, represents less than 5% of the water we currently extract for various uses from rivers and aquifers. No river will run dry from removing 5% of the water we already take from it.

Recently, in Belém do Pará, during a speech I gave as UN Rapporteur on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Earth Charter, I offered a brief reflection on what is close to us, our territory, our local context, where we must put the Earth Charter into practice. In the days preceding COP30, I had enjoyed a beautiful corner of the world, a true paradise: a water-rich territory managed by quilombola communities[1], with 180 springs in the middle of the Amazon tropical forest, from which pure, crystalline waters flow. Yet in that privileged space (in the municipality of Acará, in Pará, Brazil), a sanitary landfill is planned, one that could be located in other more appropriate areas, though farther away, which according to authorities would reduce the profits of the private company operating this public service.

I concluded by calling on local authorities, national governments, and private companies involved in projects like this, projects presented as necessities of progress, to reflect on the consequences of short-term decisions influenced by powerful private interests. And I invited them to dialogue with and respect the local communities who live in those territories, who depend on them, and who know them better than anyone: their

natural wealth, their biodiversity, and their living treasures such as those crystalline springs.

Access to clean/drinking water must be considered a fundamental human right, it is the first step to guaranteeing all people a dignified, healthy life free from inequalities derived from the lack of this essential resource. Principle 9a of the Earth Charter calls on us to "Guarantee the right to potable water, clean air, food security, uncontaminated soil, shelter, and safe sanitation, allocating the national and international resources required."

Water is the blue soul of life, and rivers are the arteries that channel it across islands and continents, including human societies, as part of the great community of life to which we have the privilege of belonging.

Photo Credit: Eduard Müller

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[1] Quilombolas are rural communities formed by descendants of enslaved Africans who escaped captivity and organized themselves into small groups or communities to fight for freedom. These communities are characterized by their strong connection to the land, their ancestors, their traditions, and a unique culture of resistance and resilience.

Photo Credit: Eduard Müller

SEEDS OF HOPE AND ACTION: YOUTH INSPIRING CHANGE THROUGH THE EARTH CHARTER

Rebeca Soares Braga

Rebeca is a biologist, with a Licentiate degree in Biological Sciences from the Universidade do Estado do Amazonas, and is completing a degree in Journalism at Universidade Nilton Lins. She works as an environmental educator and communicator at Instituto Soka Amazônia in Manaus, Brazil. Since 2019, she has been involved in Amazon research and environmental education initiatives. In 2024, she began working with Earth Charter initiatives at Instituto Soka Amazônia. She is an Earth Charter Young Leader.

Education is one of the most transformative forces in society — especially when it reaches the hands of young people. It is through education that dreams gain direction, values are strengthened, and new leaderships flourish. With this conviction, I have been building my path as an environmental educator, focusing on the non-formal education of adolescents, youth, and adults in Manaus, at the Soka Amazon Institute. The Institute is located within the Private Natural Heritage Reserve (RPPN) Dr. Daisaku Ikeda, in the eastern part of the city, right in front of the meeting of the waters of the Negro and Solimões Rivers. In the past, a brick factory operated there; and over the course of 30 years, voluntary reforestation work transformed the area into a refuge filled with native Amazonian species. It is a unique place to work.

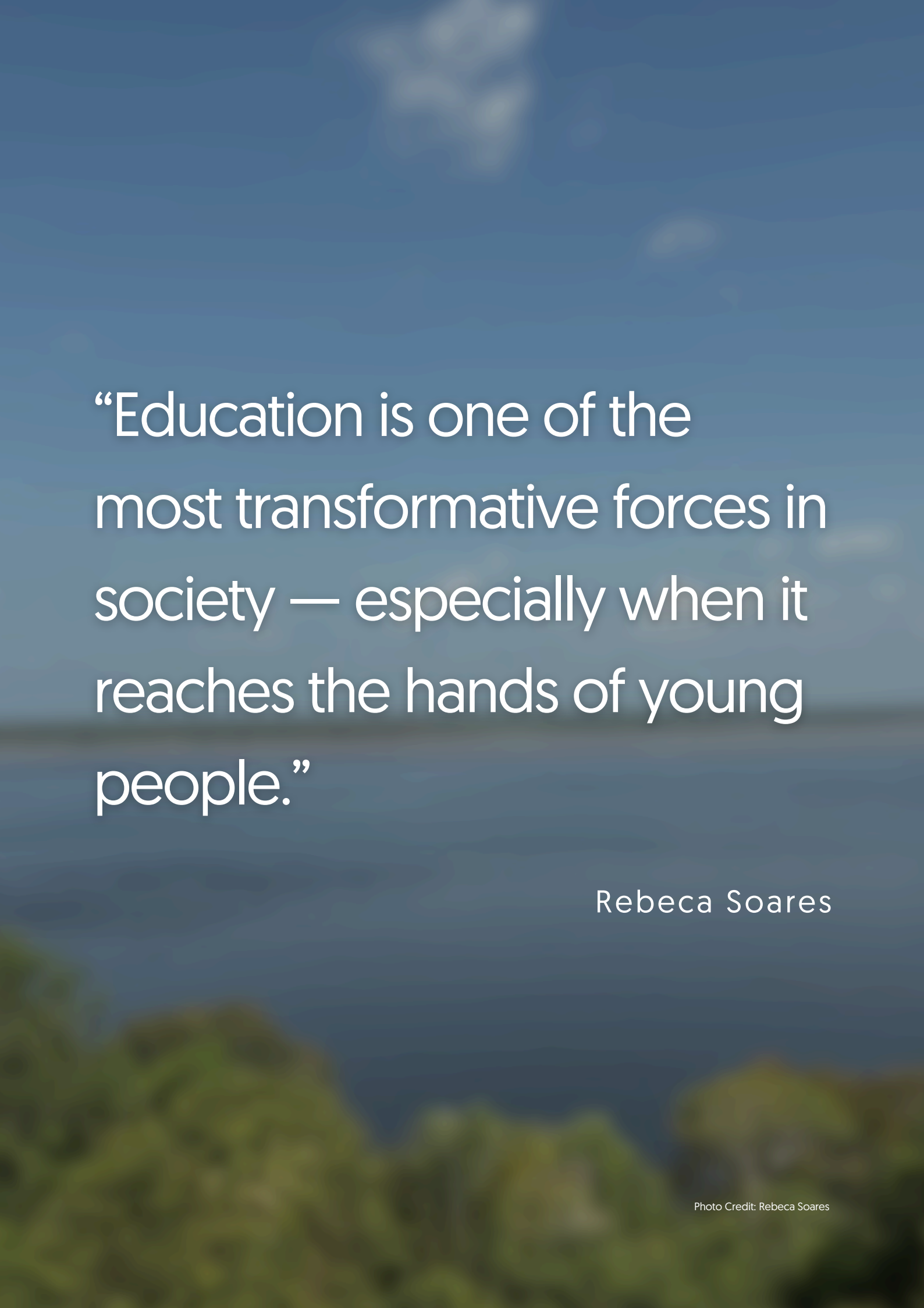
Even though Manaus is in the heart of the Amazon rainforest, this does not mean that all children, adolescents, and young people living in the urban area have direct contact with nature or perceive our deep interdependence with it. This is precisely what motivates me to continue this work — a work that seeks to awaken a sense of belonging, care, respect, and responsibility for the environment, always through experiential learning.

In the past year, I worked on the Environmental Academy project, where I am one of those responsible for guiding and sharing knowledge about Amazonian fauna and flora with students and visitors of the Soka Amazon Institute. The project brings the public closer to biodiversity and the conscious use of natural resources. The activity begins with a presentation of the history of the site and then moves to the seed laboratory, where visitors learn about the importance of germination, adaptation strategies, and the life cycle. Next, they explore archaeological materials found in the area — such as funerary urns, ceramic fragments, European bottles, and the famous “terra preta de índio” (Amazonian dark earth) — understanding the relationship between the peoples who once lived there and the present.

After that, we begin the external visit, where we address topics such as native bees, tree species like Coccoloba and Sumaúma, as well as the unique view of the meeting of the river waters. The public also visits the ruins of the old brick factory and observes how nature has regenerated around it. At the end, visitors are invited to plant a new tree, symbolizing rebirth, continuity, and care for life.

The students served — about two thousand per year, thanks to the Environmental Academy project — come from Manaus’ municipal school system. But we also receive groups from the state system, private schools, companies, universities, and visitors from various parts of the world. It is a job that brings me a deep sense of purpose and joy.

This year, I experienced something unusual: I traveled to São Paulo to conduct a training with young people in a context completely different from what I am used to.


“Education is one of the most transformative forces in society — especially when it reaches the hands of young people.”
Rebeca Soares
Photo Credit: Rebeca Soares

I share here a reflection on that experience, carried out in June 2025. I delivered a training for 17 young people from the Regional Labor Court of the 2nd Region (TRT-2), preparing them to act as guides for the exhibition "Seeds of Hope and Action — Making the SDGs a Reality", developed and promoted by Soka Gakkai International (SGI) and Earth Charter International, with national coordination by the Soka Amazon Institute. This experience reflected much of what I frequently develop in Manaus: youth sensitization processes through human values, intergenerational dialogue, and sustainability. And it reinforced, once again, the transformative power of youth when inspired by ethical and collective principles.

On the first day, I introduced SGI and its partnership with Regional Labour Court (TRT-2), highlighting Soka philosophy and its connections with the ideals of educator Daisaku Ikeda, founder of the Soka Amazon Institute. I also shared the work we carry out in Manaus with environmental education and the popularization of science, explaining how these actions align with the Earth Charter — a document that outlines an ethical, integrative, and global vision for more just, peaceful, and sustainable societies.

Before diving into the exhibition content, I proposed a simple but very meaningful activity. Each participant answered three questions: something memorable from childhood, something they appreciate about themselves today, and a dream or goal for the future. It was a moment of genuine openness, with laughter, memories, emotion, and true listening. Young people between 16 and 19 years old expressed how education represents, for them, a real path to changing their lives and the world around them. Geovana dos Santos' words captured this sentiment well:

"This kind of activity is really cool. I see half of these people every day, but I had never stopped to talk about the future they want or whether we have something in common. I felt closer to them."

I realized then that learning begins with human encounter and listening. Creating that space of trust was fundamental for the following stages of the training to flow with lightness and engagement, reinforcing the Earth Charter's values of peace, tolerance, and empathy.

Photo Credit: Rebeca Soares

Following the schedule, I presented the 24 panels of the "Seeds of Hope and Action exhibition", explaining the content and purpose of each one. Each young person received the mission of understanding and reflecting on these messages, as they would be responsible for conveying them to the public. The exhibition invites people to recognize the interconnectedness between human beings and the entire community of life. Through real and inspiring stories, it reveals how small individual actions can generate global impacts and strengthen commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

We ended the first day with the "Roots and Branches" activity, in which participants related the five pillars of the exhibition — Inspire, Learn, Reflect, Empower, and Act/Lead — to their own experiences. Each group created a word or symbol representing their assigned pillar. A remarkable comment came from Marcos Gabriel:

"Many students don't have the opportunity to attend educational talks, or don't even know what they are. Our group thought that we could create a way to help these students connect with these themes and understand how education can contribute to environmental and social issues."

These reflections revealed the sensitivity, awareness, and sense of responsibility of the young participants, showing that they not only absorbed the content but also connected it to their realities.

The second day was dedicated to the technical preparation for guiding the exhibition: posture, language, interaction with the public, body expression. They received printed and digital materials, such as the Earth Charter book and SDG content, deepening their understanding of socio-environmental themes. During the simulations, they presented parts of the exhibition with enthusiasm, authenticity, and their own interpretations. It was moving to see them becoming spokespersons for a global message of hope and action.

After the training, the young participants officially acted as guides during the 2nd Conference on "Climate Emergency and Climate Justice", held at the Ruy Barbosa Forum from June 9 to 11. The exhibition remained open until July 3, 2025, receiving more than 580 visitors from different regions of Brazil and even other countries. The active involvement of the young people and TRT-2 staff created a collaborative and inspiring environment, expanding the reach of the Earth Charter's message.

Accompanying and guiding this group was a profoundly transformative experience for me. I saw how values-based education can awaken belonging, responsibility, and hope. I also recognized the challenge — and the beauty — of presenting complex content in a light and participatory way. For this reason, I used interactive strategies that encouraged youth protagonism, creating space for questions, debates, and personal connections. Learning became a dynamic and meaningful process. .

In the end, I understood that these young people are ready to lead processes of change. They only need society to offer them opportunities, trust, and space to act. The Earth Charter, with its principles of respect, equity, and care for the community of life, has proven to be an essential guide for inspiring a generation that wants — and is able — to build a more sustainable, caring, and peaceful future.

The experience in São Paulo was much more than a training: it was the planting of living seeds. Seeds of hope, awareness, and action — ready to germinate in each young person who decided, from those days onward, to transform the world with small but powerful actions. In the same way, I remember that I, too, received these seeds when I participated in the Earth Charter International Youth Course and other trainings that marked my path. These seeds continue to germinate within me throughout my journey, especially in the field of education. I have been reflecting more and more on the power of effective communication — both because of my academic background and my practice — and I continue seeking ways to improve not only my own communication skills, but also that of the young people who participate in our trainings. I want to help them better express what they learn about nature, about how we relate to it, and about the stories we need to tell the world.

Photo Credit: Rebeca Soares

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Photo Credit: Victor Ayegba Mathew

INFUSING THE EARTH CHARTER AND THE EARTH STORIES COLLECTION INTO OUR TEACHING PRACTICE IN NIGERIA

Victor Ayegba Mathew

Victor is a Nigerian environmental educator, Earth Charter Young Leader, and Certified Earth Charter Educator with more than seven years of experience. He is the founder of the Vikipedia Initiative and convener of Earthstorytelling Clubs across 30 schools. Through these initiatives, he empowers young people to use storytelling, mentorship, and project-based learning to address climate change, peacebuilding, and sustainable development. Victor has collaborated with Earth Charter International, EarthChild Institute, African Climate Stories and other partners to promote ecological integrity, social justice, and ethical education.

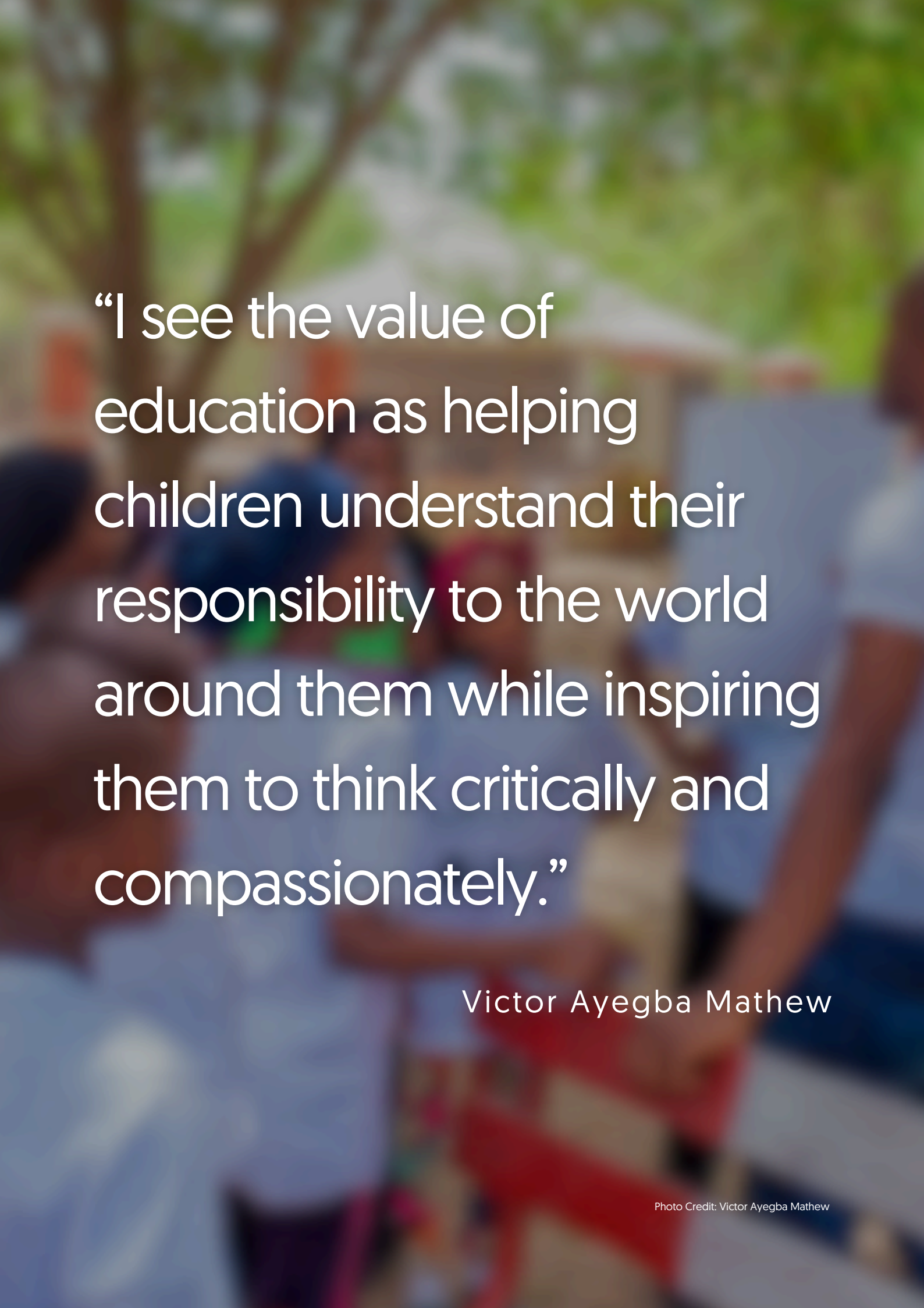
For the past seven years, I have been a teacher in a primary school in Kano, Nigeria. One of the things I have enjoyed the most about my work is watching young learners grow in curiosity each time they interact with nature-based learning. In my context, I see the value of education as helping children understand their responsibility to the world around them while inspiring them to think critically and compassionately. This belief encouraged me to bring the Earth Charter and the Earth Stories Collection to the twelve-year-olds I work with every day.

In 2020, I began my journey of integrating the Earth Charter into my teaching. I introduced its principles through Geography classes, extracurricular activities, and outdoor environmental sessions where students explored themes such as respect for life, interdependence, peace, and responsible decision-making. This approach has helped my students develop empathy for the environment, and I have seen them become more engaged in environmental issues within their school and communities. Many of them now initiate clean-up activities, care for trees, and confidently discuss sustainable practices with their peers.

When I encountered the Earth Stories Collection, I immediately felt inspired to introduce these powerful narratives to my students. I incorporated them into our extracurricular sessions and outdoor storytelling circles, using them as tools to help students connect cultural wisdom with environmental values. The effect has been remarkable. Storytelling created a safe and imaginative space for students to express themselves, and even the quiet ones began sharing ideas and relating the stories to real-life environmental challenges. These stories have helped them build emotional connections to the Earth and strengthened their sense of responsibility toward nature.

I was later privileged to contribute a chapter to the latest volume of the Earth Stories Collection. My writing explored how indigenous stories from northern Nigeria can be used to cultivate environmental awareness among young people. I highlighted the deep connections between cultural narratives and the values of the Earth Charter, showing how local wisdom can strengthen global sustainability education.

Photo Credit: Victor Ayegba Mathew



“I see the value of education as helping children understand their responsibility to the world around them while inspiring them to think critically and compassionately.”

Victor Ayegba Mathew

Photo Credit: Victor Ayegba Mathew

In 2022, we established the Earthstorytelling Clubs. These clubs were created to help young people connect with nature through storytelling, creativity, and outdoor exploration. They give students a platform to express themselves, learn leadership skills, and take practical environmental actions that are meaningful to their communities. Today, the Earthstorytelling Clubs have reached 4,853 students across 31 public and private schools.

Photo Credit: Victor Ayegba Mathew

Looking back, I am grateful for how far this vision has grown. What began as a simple idea to connect young people with nature through stories has grown into a movement that blends cultural storytelling with environmental education. This progress would not have been possible without my dedicated team of teachers and volunteers, the schools that welcomed us, and our partners and mentors who supported the journey. Through creativity, inclusivity and outdoor learning, the Earthstorytelling Clubs have transformed traditional lessons into impactful, student-led experiences that nurture empathy and inspire lasting change.

One of the initiatives that emerged from my teaching is a classroom series titled "Coordinates to Life." During this thirty-minute session held twice a week, my students and I explore principles related to purpose, responsibility, and problem-solving. Together, we learned that while humans often create the world's problems, we also carry the responsibility to solve them. The children discovered that relevance in life comes from solving meaningful problems and that valuable solutions are often accompanied by rewards. We studied the example of Mr. Joshua, founder of Geotek, who is addressing Nigeria's water challenges and has received several grants for his innovative solutions. His story helped my students understand the real impact of environmental responsibility.

The Earth Stories Collection continues to play a key role in connecting hearts to the Earth and reminding us of our shared responsibility to care for the planet. We are preparing to distribute toolkits during the EarthStories for Teachers Conference 2026, which we are organizing to equip educators with storytelling skills and outdoor learning strategies that can transform environmental education in Nigeria.

Photo Credit: Victor Ayegba Mathew

This event represents more than a gathering. It marks the beginning of a new chapter for teachers and storytellers in our country. For the first time, educators and environmental practitioners will come together to explore how cultural storytelling and outdoor learning can inspire young minds and strengthen sustainability education. Participants will experience a four-hour outdoor programme featuring storytelling circles, interactive workshops, nature-based learning sessions, and the official distribution of Teacher Storytelling Toolkits supported by Professor Grian A. Cutanda and The Earth Stories Collection.

With this effort, we hope to inspire many others to reimagine how stories and nature can shape the future of education and sustainability. My team and I are preparing for more outdoor environmental activities that will help teachers and students experience the beauty and transformative power of learning in nature.

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Photo Credit: Victor Ayegba Mathew

Photo Credit: Eduard Müller

THE EARTH CHARTER IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY: DIALOGUES AMONG PORTUGUESE-SPEAKING COMMUNITIES

Elisabete Campos

Elisabete holds a PhD in Education from the University of São Paulo (USP), Brazil, with experience in both basic and higher education, working as a professor and researcher in graduate programmes in Education. She is a member of the Edgar Morin Center for Studies and Research and of the Earth Charter International Association, Brazil. She works in the field of teacher and school administrator training policies, has published academic articles, and explores the theme of the Earth Charter in Education.

We are living in a climate emergency, which can be understood from different perspectives across populations in various countries. One of the factors contributing to this situation is the predominant model of production and consumption within the capitalist system, which normalizes the predatory exploitation of biomes in the name of economic development. This model is grounded in a consumer society, inevitably producing social and economic inequalities.

In order to undertake a critical analysis of this reality, the Earth Charter (EC) presents itself as an essential tool, supporting a political and philosophical understanding of this context, as it offers a set of global ethical principles that go beyond the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proposing the Rights of the Earth and its inhabitants.

To foster critical thinking, I coordinated a course in the second semester of 2025, requested by colleagues from African countries to engage in dialogue with Brazilian participants. With great enthusiasm, we studied, discussed, and celebrated the 25th anniversary of the publication of the Earth Charter (2000), in the same year that COP30 was held in Brazil — a fortunate coincidence.

The Brazilian government proposed, in the activities leading up to COP30, dialogues on the Global Ethical Stocktake (GES), encouraging discussions on the global situation and the individual and collective responsibilities needed to drive the transformations required to build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful. During the course, I proposed the discussion of three questions related to the GES, which I systematized and presented below.

MODELS OF PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION THAT HARM THE MOST VULNERABLE AND ARE NOT ALIGNED WITH THE 1.5°C MISSION

All sectors, although in different ways, contribute to the climate crisis: the energy industry (coal, oil, and gas), chemical industry, textile industry, agriculture and livestock, paper and pulp production, mining, consumer goods industries, and

Photo Credit: Eduard Müller

transportation. These activities cause impacts throughout the production chain and generate solid, liquid, and gaseous waste, as well as waste containing toxic, flammable, and corrosive substances. This model causes atmospheric, water, soil, noise, and visual pollution, as well as radioactive, thermal, and light pollution. It is a scenario that, as the Earth Charter states, leads to "environmental devastation, depletion of resources, and a massive extinction of species" (EC, Global Situation).

In the technological era, the economy, integrating artificial intelligence and automation, has become a sophisticated extension of this mode of production, worsening the climate crisis and its consequences. The planet, a stage of disputes, has been transformed into a construction site of technological innovations, where new desires are generated by algorithmic culture. In this context, the notion of security, control, visibility, and speed shape the architecture of marketing, which in turn intensifies social inequalities both in work and in individual and collective life.

Human civilization is living under a major illusion regarding consumption patterns, establishing an artificial relationship with time, disconnected from natural cycles and from nature as the protagonist of life on Earth. The influence of this model on social behavior is evident, encouraging consumerist practices that intensify environmental harm. However, the consumption of impoverished populations is significantly lower than that of the wealthy, who emit large amounts of Greenhouse Gases (GHG). Thus, "the benefits of development are not being shared equitably" (EC, Global Situation), while the negative impacts fall especially on the poorest and on inhabitants of degraded areas.

The owners of capital, in their pursuit of ever-increasing profits, have not yet understood, or refuse to understand, the magnitude of the crisis we are facing. When confronted with pressure to mitigate environmental damage, rhetoric about sustainable development or green seals emerges; however, in practice, these initiatives are not committed to the 1.5°C Mission. There are also challenges faced by many farmers who depend on traditional farming methods and lack access to resources, technical knowledge, or fair markets. This issue was especially highlighted by a colleague from Mozambique, who emphasized a cycle in which the most vulnerable, even when aware of the need for change, remain trapped in systems that degrade the environment.

In this context of climate emergency, the responsibility of states with the highest emissions of polluting gases must be invoked, ensuring that they bear a fair share of responsibility aimed at supporting the most vulnerable (EC, Principle 10). A model aligned with the 1.5°C Mission requires adopting new perspectives on production and consumption, focusing on economic and social justice, environmental regeneration, and respect for planetary boundaries (EC, Pillar II).

TRADITIONS, HISTORIES, AND (CULTURAL, SPIRITUAL) PRACTICES OF COMMUNITIES THAT TEACH US TO LIVE IN GREATER BALANCE WITH NATURE

Because we were a group composed of participants from Brazil and African countries (Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, and Angola), the reflections refer to different communities in an effort to "recognize and preserve traditional knowledge and spiritual wisdom in all cultures that contribute to environmental protection and human well-being" (EC, 8b).

The cultural and spiritual practices of the Bijagó community (Guinea-Bissau) teach coexistence between human beings, animals, plants, and spirits. The matriarchal traditions of this community are marked by their profound connection with nature: animism and the spirituality of the land; sacred islands and forests; initiation rites; myths and symbolism of the fauna; dances, masks, and rituals; and women as guardians of nature.

In Mozambique, there are communities that teach us about balanced living grounded in the value of solidarity and interconnected existence, a principle in Kimbundu, "ETU MUDIETU," which in Portuguese means "we are among us," similar to what is known in South Africa as Ubuntu.

Brazilian Indigenous peoples show pathways to living in balance with nature. The Paiter Suruí people of Rondônia, Brazil, practice agroecological methods to produce coffee, Brazil nuts, and other foods, respecting the forest and rivers. Nature is not a resource to be exploited, but a living entity of which we are a part. These peoples are caretakers of the Earth, a sacred inheritance from their ancestors, destined for future generations. As Ailton Krenak, a well-known Brazilian Indigenous leader, teaches, we need to create "colorful parachutes," adopting agroecological practices and producing and consuming only what is essential, rather than contributing to waste.

The Bijagó ethnicity gives its name to the group of 80 islands that make up the Bijagós Archipelago on the West African coast — classified in 1996 by UNESCO as a Biosphere Reserve. The way of life they have developed in harmony with nature explains its state of conservation. https://www.geledes.org.br/bijagos-sociedade-matriarcal/

The Paiter Suruí Indigenous People conceived and created the first ethnotourism agency in Brazil — Photo: Emily Costa/g1 RO https://g1.globo.com/ro/rondonia/noticia/2024/04/21/povo-de-verdade-conheca-os-paiter-surui-fundadores-da-primeira-agencia-de-turismo-indigena-do-brasil.ghtml

Farmers in Nampula (Mozambique) teach crop rotation and the use of agroforestry systems to maintain soil fertility and preserve biodiversity. The spiritual dimension — such as blessings before harvest and respect for sacred trees — reinforces the understanding that nature is a partner in life, since culture and spirituality walk hand in hand with the processes that sustain life.

Mozambique has several sacred forests or groves, including Mount Mabu in the province of Zambézia; the Sacred Forest of Chirindzene in the province of Gaza; and the Sacred Forest of Meponha, a place believed to be protected by spirits. Ancestral practices and spirituality invite us to see nature as a living organism within these spaces of great spiritual and cultural importance, whose preservation norms are protected by local communities.

In Brazil, family farming keeps alive traditions of vegetable gardens, and the production of juices, wines, jams, cheeses, lard, fish, meats, and other foods made sustainably, in harmony with the local landscape.

Oceans, seas, and rivers form ecosystems that harbor a vast diversity of life that must be protected. Religious festivals connected to the sea, especially those dedicated to Saint Peter, patron saint of fishers in Brazil, remind us of the gift of life. Community fishing codes and the sharing of the catch are invaluable, emphasizing moderation, mutual aid, and care for the marine ecosystem (EC, 5b).

In this process of group dialogue, participants mentioned groups connected to the natural time codes of the “Synchrometer of Peace”, which activates the mind through another time matrix: cyclical and synchronous. Each day, the universe communicates through the sunlight, transmitting a frequency of light and sound. The purpose is to cleanse and reprogram

the mind to awaken new DNA, through self-observation and inner work, toward a new human race and the creation of alliances with life, intelligence, and the love that is already present on the planet.

The Earth must be recognized as a subject of rights, and human beings must pursue good living in harmony (EC).

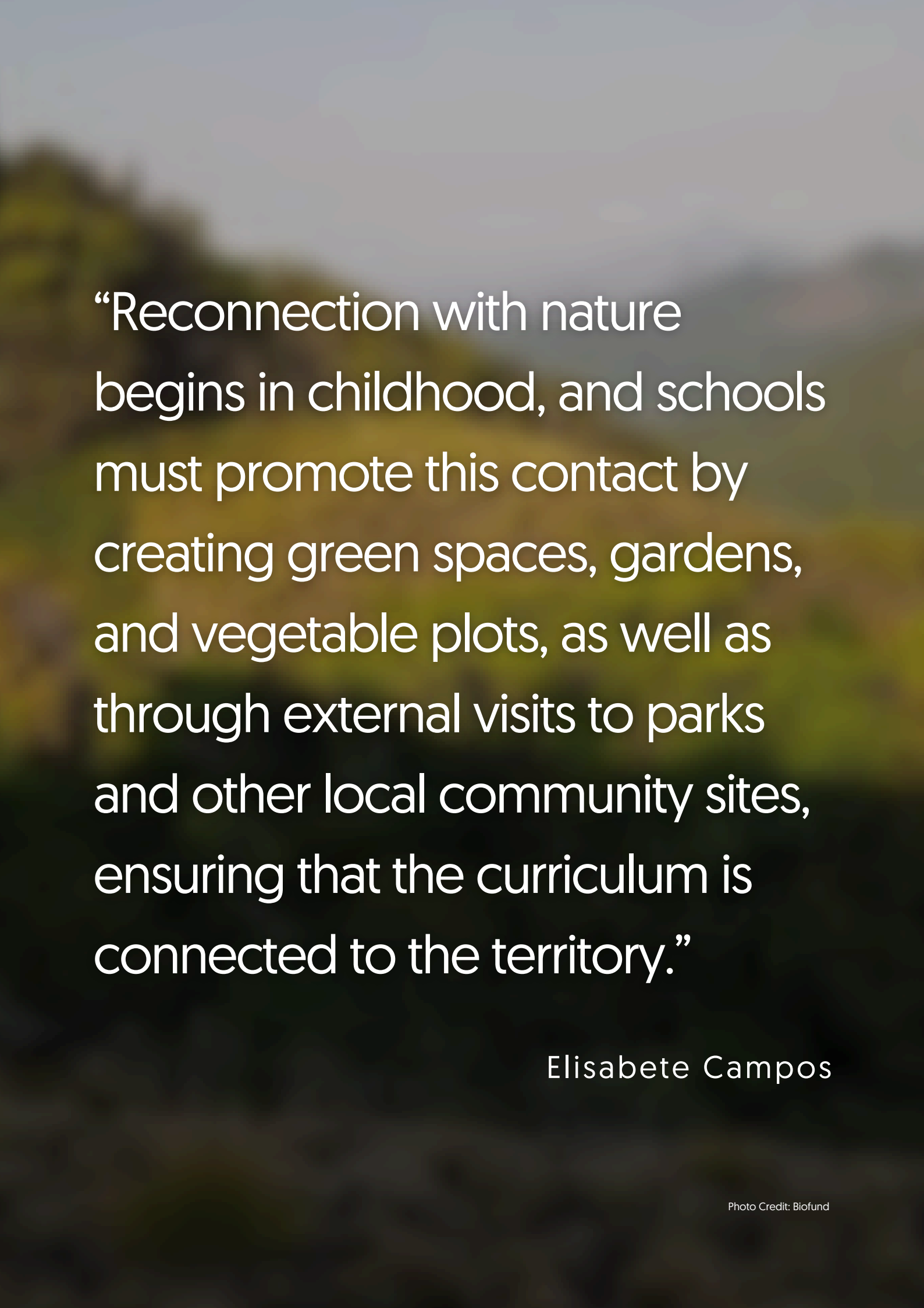
MOBILIZATION OF PEOPLE, LEADERS, CORPORATIONS, BUSINESSES, AND NATIONS TO SUPPORT FAIR AND ETHICAL CHANGES IN COMBATING THE CLIMATE CRISIS

We must recognize that the climate crisis is also political, social, economic, and ethical. The path to a just transition requires a diversity of actions and voices, uniting people, leaders, companies, and nations around a common goal: to protect life and build a balanced future (EC, The Way Forward).

Education plays a crucial role in this process, promoting curricular changes so that the content of school subjects, studied in an integrated manner, serves the purpose of critically observing the reality (Freire, 1979). Information must be accessible to teachers and students, especially for raising awareness about situations that threaten life on the planet (EC, Global Situation), considering the possibilities for change.

Reconnection with nature begins in childhood, and schools must promote this contact by creating green spaces, gardens, and vegetable plots, as well as through external visits to parks and other local community sites, ensuring that the curriculum is connected to the territory. Schools also have the responsibility to teach how to "protect and restore places of outstanding cultural and spiritual significance" (EC, 12d) and to "eliminate discrimination in all its forms, such as those based on race, color, gender, sexual orientation, religion, language, nationality, ethnic or social origin" (EC, 12a).

Mount Mabu, at 1,700 metres of altitude, covers an area of 7,880 hectares, and is a sacred forest — almost intact and protected by the local communities. https://www.biofund.org.mz/promove-biodiversidade-monte-mabu-uma-floresta-sagrada-e-fascinante/



“Reconnection with nature begins in childhood, and schools must promote this contact by creating green spaces, gardens, and vegetable plots, as well as through external visits to parks and other local community sites, ensuring that the curriculum is connected to the territory.”

Elisabete Campos

Photo Credit: Biofund

In civil society, the collective responsibility toward the planet requires actions inspired by values that unite us: caring for the community of life (EC, I); ethics and equity; solidarity to strengthen bonds between communities; innovation to turn challenges into sustainable solutions; and active hope, believing that change is still possible.

If we work together, we can transform the crisis into an opportunity to build green economies, strengthen local communities, promote social justice, and create a habitable planet for future generations. The time to act is now, and the future we want depends on the choices we make today (EC, Preamble). The struggle must be collective, for no one will be free from the effects of the climate crisis.

Pedagogical interventions must be capable of raising awareness for local and global action, aiming to convince and gather people, companies, and other institutions through exemplary actions such as: caring for life in rivers, seas, and oceans; agroecology; agroforestry; zero-waste programmes; urban tree planting; circular economy initiatives; grassroots and community movements; conferences and seminars involving "youth for climate," "youth for the Earth Charter," and other forums with active participation of universities, politicians, scientists, businesspeople, NGOs, international institutions, and civil society.

It is necessary to "support local, regional, and global civil societies and promote the meaningful participation of all individuals and organizations concerned in decision-making" (EC, 13b).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Most course participants were already carrying out actions related to the environment, but a significant portion (65.9%) did not know about the Earth Charter. Those who did were interested in dialogue with others to deepen their understanding of its concepts and relate its principles to the current context.

The exchange of knowledge and experiences enriched the debates and stimulated the creation of new understandings and actions. It was possible to promote the dissemination of the Earth Charter among participants who will certainly become voices echoing throughout their territories in defense of the community of life.

This process was significantly enriched by the pedagogical studies on care by Leonardo Boff (1999), the problem-posing dialogue for building critical consciousness proposed by Paulo Freire (1979), and the interconnection of knowledge articulated by Edgar Morin (2011), as well as Ailton Krenak's (2024) defense of a harmonious relationship with the Earth.

The studies of these authors enabled a deeper understanding of the Earth Charter's principles, grounding actions focused on preserving life on the planet.

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About the Earth Charter:

Crafted by visionaries over twenty years ago, the Earth Charter is a document with sixteen principles, organized under four pillars, that seek to turn conscience into action.

It seeks to inspire in all people a new sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility for the well-being of the whole human family, the greater community of life, and future generations. It is a vision of hope and a call to action.

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