

Welcome to Turning Conscience Into Action, the Earth Charter podcast. Join Mirian Vilela, Earth Charter International Executive Director, in her fascinating conversations with great thinkers, scholars and activists from around the world who are working in the fields of sustainability, ethics, education and social transformation. Our purpose is to generate new insights on how to face current global challenges and inspire informed action.

Okay, so today we have the pleasure of receiving Thomas Legrand for our Earth Charter podcast.

I want to welcome Thomas and thank him for joining us. Let me start by introducing you to Thomas. He is a social scientist and a sustainability practitioner with a PhD in economics. He's also a wisdom seeker. He works on forest conservation, climate change, sustainable finance, and leadership with UN organizations and NGOs and companies. And he's currently leading the UNDP Conscious Food System Alliance. Thank you so much, Thomas, for joining us. I understand you are in France today, right? Indeed, I live in the southwest of France, next to a mindfulness practice center called Plum Village.

Wonderful. So Thomas, you wrote a book not long ago. You published it and it's called The Politics of Being. So I really look forward to having a, using this conversation as an opportunity for us to dig into your book. So in a nutshell, if I may ask you, what do you mean by politics of being? Thank you, Marianne. Well, this book is a very, I think gets at the roots of crises, looking at what's wrong with our development model focused on economic growth, basically showing that's the main problem and proposing that we move all collective bottom line from having economic growth to being.

And the book defines, theoretically, how can we conceive, design a politics of being, what it is, and also very practically what it means in terms of how we organize all societies in many different sectors based on concrete public policies and existing examples from different parts of the world. So what triggered you to write a book on the politics of being? As you know, in the Earthshatter, there is a preamble. There is a sentence that addresses that. And when we saw the title of your book, we immediately linked it with the Earthshatter preamble.

Can you share with us what triggered or sparked your curiosity to write about that? Yeah, well, that has been a long journey, which I think started with my own personal journey and showing how inner transformation can transform oneself for good. And obviously thinking about this huge potential, if we are having the insight of starting to bring this at the collective level and how it could answer many of our problems. And I was looking for, let's say, what a wisdom-based approach to development looks like.

And indeed, I found the sentence in the Earthshatter, which says, when basic needs have been met, modern development is primarily about being more, rather than having more. And I've seen that this sentence has also been, well, a lot of important organization, people endorse Earthshatter. And I think even the interreligious and spiritual movement have referred also to that sentence. So to me, that was a building block. And I was very surprised, you know, the Earthshatter as close to be 25 years old now.

And I was very surprised that it seems to me nobody really unpacked what does that mean, you know, being more. How can we define that? And what does that mean very concretely for societies in the way we think about, you know, education, health, justice, governance, et cetera, et cetera. So yeah, that was the starting point of this book. And I have to say more personally, I've been working in this field of sustainability for, you know, already 20 years, sometimes at very strategic level, you know, looking at country green development strategies, for example, and also as an environmentalist, realizing that their first aid is little we can achieve within that current development paradigm, which emphasize economic growth.

And second, that even working on these very strategic assignments, I feel there was never the space really to go into the deeper questions of, you know, what's wrong with our worldview, with our values, within the hearts and minds of human beings, right? So that's why I decided to spend 10 years to write this book. It was good. Yeah, interestingly enough, predominant modern civilization or society. It's certainly very focused on the heavens, material wealth. And therefore we do have a challenge here in changing this narrative of the heavens and having a successful life is a synonym of having more and changing that narrative to a narrative that really focus on the being.

So coming back, what is it for you? What does that mean, being more than rather than having more? So I define very simply being more in terms of both becoming who we really are, which is, you know, more subjective and personal. And let's say the best version of ourselves, which is a little bit more objective, philosophers have always said, you know, even the purpose of states, governments, societies should cultivate, help citizens cultivate the virtues, right? Cultivate the values of qualities. So that's something, you know, which is very as a strong rationale, right?

It has been advocated for a long time by most philosophers, etc. But at the same time, I think the two balance each other. If a society, you know, have, let's say, a moral framework, very important, at some point, it can create some kind of apocrises or people having to fit in that kind of structure. So it's important to recognize also that everyone has his own specific way of being and of relating to these higher spiritual values. So these are, to me, the two dimensions that are complementary. Another aspect is, you know, that lead to the question of also what is or kind of true nature.

And to me, our true nature is relational and also from a wisdom approach, you know, we know that mystics from all traditions, for example, have had this experience of a, or ultimate nature, and they all refer to this as oneness, unity, interbeing. So they emphasize, you know, this relational nature. And what's very important that the science now much more, you know, starts to emphasize also that. And this also has a way of fulfillment first, you know, because if you look at happiness, science, you know, they emphasize the importance of connection with others, with families, with friends, as a main source of well-being, on connection to self, and also the benefits of connecting with nature.

And that's a whole different narrative about, you know, well-being, which is, you know, a true challenge. You know, I think we have now enough evidence from science to say that, no, it's not about status, wealth, power, you know, that makes people healthy and well, but it's much more about our relationships. And even, you know, it's even good

investing in being is even the good thing that is good for individuals and it's good for society. Because, you know, if we look at some do, you know, at our social and environmental prices as relational prices, the more we invest, you know, in our being, you know, connection to self, the more or so we invest in our connection to others and natures, because we are relational beings.

Now, in your book, you bring together being and politics. So why do you bring politics? Because in the minds of many, politics may go into governments or even the U.S. when. So how did you bring these two words together, politics and being? Well, it almost looks like, indeed, as an oxymoron, right? Something that's not compatible. But just to say to me, the politics of being is about aligning all institutions with or through reason to be here on earth, becoming who we are, the best version of ourselves.

So it just makes me, society should be organized to help us, you know, in our individual journey of fulfillment, which I think is about being. Rather, at the moment, I think many of us have experienced it from a young age, and let's say, you know, as a teenager or young adult, you know, we awaken about, you know, what is going on in society. And we just realized that it's just so organized, so antithetically, you know, there's not, it's not really organized for empathy, for peace, for well-being, etc.

It's organized, putting us in competition in a mindset of scarcity, etc. So to me, it's just about realigning, you know, all societies is organized through politics. And then I can talk, you know, about in this book, I present ways to, for societies to organize in many different sectors to promote being and eventually create a virtual circle by which, you know, society or institutions help grow better and wiser and more fulfilled citizens, which in turn can refine these institutions to create this virtual circle.

Yeah, so it's interesting for me to hear you saying this, because when we have a conversation, when people generally have a conversation around being, the idea of institutions and political organizations are not part of that conversation. So you're basically making a bridge between, okay, yes, we need to look at our inner selves and in higher purpose in our inner life and how we relate to others, but also bring that reflection and examination into the world of how institutions relate to one another.

Is that right? Yeah, exactly. And that's true when we talk about, you know, this collective shift of mindsets that we want to see often we take a more bottom up approach, let's say, you know, people go on their individual journey and they start to change and at some point, the societies should change because of so many individuals changing, right? But, you know, then comes the question, okay, how does the society then change, you know, what different institutions look like? And also, you know, I'm a spiritual practitioner, but I'm also a social scientist and a sustainability practitioner. And I know, you know, how much, you know, the way our society is organized, influence our own mindsets, our own worldview.

So I just think, you know, if we want to bring this change at the scale that is needed in, you know, a relatively short timeframe, which is I think what we need, what we have, we can't ignore the power of institutions and just count on individual changes, you know, because also we have to understand that all societies, the problems we're having is because

our institutions are framed to support exactly the opposite of being of what we need. So we have a problem there that we need to solve.

It's not just something we can add. No, the problem is coming from there because a whole society is framed on the wrong narrative, on the wrong worldviews. And that's we need to change and we need to change the way we are education systems, or, you know, governance system, justice systems, etc. to be able to support this shift of consciousness. So in your book, you identify and you shared some policy recommendations on politics of being. Can you share with us what are these policy recommendations in some concrete examples? Sure. And indeed, in the book, I have nine chapters, nine sectoral chapters, and that are mainly based on existing examples. So, you know, the vision of the politics of being is very deep, but it's also very concrete looking at what is existing already that we can scale up.

You know, of course, you know, if we think about the spiritual evolution of humanity, we could dream of things that are very, you know, we can't see yet, you know, but I was just looking at what we can see already in the world and build on that. So, you know, what's the basis for human flourishing? We know psychologists know that secure attachment, you know, the way the first years of life in family, etc. So, you know, specific policies on that, you know, parenting programs, parental leave, you know, how can we support, you know, parents being there for their children. Education, what is an education for being?

So there are many models, you know, positive education, character education, values education, cooperative learning, topics based learning to foster more systemic thinking, much more personalized curriculum, where the role of the teacher is to support the people's growth on his own path, you know.

So, you know, a whole different education system. The way we look at work, you know, maybe how a guarantee, minimum guarantee income, you know, could free up people to really look forward that are meaningful for them and can contribute more positively to society. How can we, you know, teach organizations, you know, how can we organize the work very differently to empower, decentralize decision making, empower people and build the capacities they need to work, you know, much more autonomously. An important one also, I mean, integrative health, you know, mental health, that's, you know, at the core of it. Nature's rights, I think, is very important, because I need to say that when I mean politics of being, making being our main collective goal, it's not only for human beings, it's also for all living beings.

And I think their nature rights is very much part of this framework of the politics of being restorative justice.

You know, I can go on governance systems, much more participative building, you know, civic virtues that are important for democracies to work much more effectively and avoid polarization. So direct democracy, deliberative democracy, etc. And a complete reframing, of course, of our economic system, basically looking at all the institutions of capitalism right now and how we can evolve them, you know, intellectual property rights, global economic globalization, you know, just coming back to more localized economy, corporate

governance, you know, giving more rights to other stakeholders in decisions making. And with focus really on, you know, an economy of being to me is twofold. One that is ensuring material basic needs for everyone.

And then developing an economy that is much more about, you know, human fulfillment, all the kind of experience of learning, etc. that support these being a general.

So your work, your research or book are very much aligned with the concept and ideas that articulated in the Earthshatter. I see you also articulate this notion of Earth's community. And what we, it's written in preamble of their shot around minds and hearts and Earth's community, and of course, thinking to be more than having more. So can you share a little bit more how your, you see the synergies between your book and the Earthshatter? Yeah, definitely. I feel a strong alignment and the Earthshatter has been a source of inspiration for me with this notion of being more the change of hearts and minds. And yes, Earth's community, which is, you know, very aligned with this kind of relational worldview, right?

And I think, you know, a key step is to move from, you know, the almost economic vision of human beings to one that is a responsible member of the Earth's community, which to me is just simply an ill and healthy individual, because, you know, that's what also fulfillment comes from, you know, from a connection to the Earth and from fulfilling all responsibility as member of this Earth's community. So yeah, definitely a lot of synergy. And what I would like, you know, is, as I said, you know, I've been surprised that I haven't seen really unpacking this important vision in the Earthshatter, you know, being more. So what does that mean? That's what I offered with my book.

And now I like to, you know, partner with you and see how we can, you know, articulate together a vision and a movement around, you know, this vision for a new development paradigm around being more. And, you know, I think we can agree on, many of us can agree on the general or strategic visions for different sectors of societies. And I think that would be a strong message to move to that, down to that level to say, hey, we have this idea, you know, about should be about being more, but also we have a more concrete, tangible vision of how to go about it, you know, we have an alternative enough detail vision of how, you know, we could organize ourselves as societies differently. Yeah, sure.

I actually think that if we can nurture, cultivate more this narrative of being more in this narrative or idea around Earth, we belong to an Earth community in ways in which we could address biodiversity loss or the challenge of climate change. You also talk about this shift of consciousness in a cultural evolution, in the work you do in your research. So the need for shift of consciousness in a cultural evolution to help us address the current challenge we have.

And how do you think this shift of consciousness in cultural evolution can take place?

Can you talk a little bit about that, like in terms of the current models of development and this, what is that shift of consciousness and cultural evolution? So what is that and how that could take place? Yeah, so a shift of consciousness is let's say a shift of values, worldviews or narratives, and also we could say in terms of, you know, more practically

also some human qualities, you know, how we can collaborate to make that happen. So, and you know, there are two aspects of it, you know, it there are some external factors on which we have no, not necessarily an influence that I think will bring us in our direction because, you know, the worst the situation gets, the deeper we need to look into, closer to the roots of the problems.

So I think we are slowly getting there and I think this agenda very, very being more recognized very quickly. You know, you have this, for example, initiative, the Inner Development Goals, which I'm working with, a partner of Initiative I'm Leading with UNDP, that is getting, you know, quite some traction. So this whole agenda of Inner Outer Systematics being increasingly recognized. Then there is a question about, you know, what we can do about it, you know, how we can organize all societies, you know, to support that change of consciousness. So I've already mentioned, you know, how to go about that. And I'm piloting, so my work at the moment is with the UNDP convene Conscious Food Systems Alliance and we're all about this inner transition in the food and agriculture sector.

And I think also this is an interesting model about creating sector world communities. I think the whole, and we see the value, we have seen the value with this work, but a lot of people feel isolated, who could own this agenda, feel isolated, often in their own organization, in their own context. So offering a community to me is really important to find peer support, but also to equip them with the right knowledge, tools, etc. And also, they feel isolated, but sometimes this isolation is artificial. Maybe there are plenty of people around them who think the same, but it's just as it is kind of taboo in their own organization, they don't feel the right to bring that into the discussion.

And that's what we have learned is by, you know, creating the space and UNDP, you know, has quite some legitimacy, bring some legitimacy to that. Then people feel much more entitled to step up. And we see there are much more people, I think that are ready for that. They just need the right conditions, institutional conditions to do that. So you just mentioned this UNDP Conscious Foods Systems Alliance. What is that? Is it a project? Is it a program? Is it functioning only inside the UN? So what is that? And what are you trying to do with this food system alliance? So this is an initiative led by UNDP, but it's it is an alliance. So we have, you know, more than 200 members and more than 1500 affiliates. And we are looking at the tagline is Inner Capacities for Regenerative Food Systems.

And we are bringing together people from different parts of the food system, some from the food system, but also what we call kind of consciousness practitioners, in to, you know, foster a different narrative around food systems transformation, learn from the experience of each other and start collaborating together. And we are looking at different entry points in the food systems.

You know, at the moment, we have discussions on farmers, psychological resilience and well-being, which is such an important issue. We are looking at how to foster more regenerative cultures at the local level. We are looking at how to strengthen ancestral knowledge and traditional wisdom for regenerative food systems. And we have also identified, you know, the work on how to bring that to, you know, approach policy

processes in a different way, maybe from a place of connection to self, others and nature. Looking at also the organizational cultures of public and private organizations.

And finally, also looking at, you know, conscious conceptions, how we can also revalue local food cultures that often, especially in the global south, are being depreciated and social status being associated with more western imported food.

And also recognizing that there is a strong link between mental health and healthy diet, which goes both ways. So we see there is a win-win there potential in terms of, you know, strengthening our consciousness for healthier and more sustainable food habits, right? So this conscious food alliance or effort starts with awakening our understanding about eating and how does that relate with our health and well-being of nature in the world. So does this start, this effort starts with sparking our general public interest on mindful eating in farming?

Yes, that's an important, that's an important, that's two important entry points, you know, the food, nutrition, mindful eating. One practice we use is this mindful eating practice and, you know, eating in silence very mindfully and just contemplating also before lunch, you know, that all the conditions that are needed to get this food here and, you know, how much food connect us to places, people, nature, the whole universe somehow. So that's an important, I think, door to this agenda.

The other one on farming, I think, is very also interesting, also the relationship between well-being and sustainable farming, which goes also both ways, you know, people, you know, if they look, for example, at their health also, which is a key dimension of well-being, you know, then maybe there's more attention to that, there is probably more possibility that they adopt more sustainable farming practices. And at the same time, what we see, and I think that's very interesting, is that there is some evidence that farmers who adopt regenerative practices increase their well-being. So they are being changed by their own farming practices as they connect more deeply with the land in particular. They are, you know, their life as a farmer become more meaningful and nourishing for them.

So, yeah, these are two very key entry points to the food system.

What do you think is the main start or the main door to trigger that change? So the question is, if we need to change our food system, where to start? Is it through education? Is it through mindful eating policies? Where do you think should be the focus of the priority to trigger the necessary changes around food system? Well, I'm not sure there is only one, you know, we have decided to take a whole system approach, which is also interesting. We see that there's a lot of disconnection also throughout the food systems, you know, between consumers and producers.

So to me, it's a lot about reconnecting these different parts together, right? But definitely, you know, what you said, I think, you know, from a consumer, we all, you know, we all food consumers first. So, and we know that there is a planetary diet that is better for us and better for the earth, right? So I think that can be a win-win in many cases. And so an important leverage point, right, which has to do with everyone. So definitely, I think this is a very important one. On the other aspect of the food chain, farmers, I think, you know,

as I work in these issues, I have noticed, you know, it's interesting how we are treating well, we're treating badly, you know, the earth and the ones that are, you know, working with the earth, you know, the farmers were at the start of this food chain.

And to me, farmers' well-being also is a very important leverage point with also some win-win possible. And I think that will be very strategic because of climate change, you know. We know that maybe farmers, maybe the occupation is the highest suicide rate in the world. It's a big problem. And it may get worse with climate change. And, you know, they are, to me, the context of climate change with farmers are frontline workers. So we really need to take care of them if we want to, you know, still have some food on a plate. So I would think this is another very important leverage point. So what are your ideas of how we could integrate various actors, farmers, academics, civil society groups on a sort of joint efforts in common language in terms of reorienting our food systems to something more regenerative?

How can we integrate or join efforts? So that's what we are building, you know, with this Conscious Food Systems Alliance. We have a community of learning and practice. We are having events looking at consciousness practices for food systems and formations. We have series on mindfulness, nature connection, level one in September on nonviolent communication, etc. And on the other side, we are looking at specific entry points, as I say, you know, farmers, well-being and resilience.

And we have this discussion. There's often a lot of different stakeholders. We are also practicing together. We have developed an introductory curriculum that we are eager to roll out, Conscious Food Systems Leadership Program. And we also want to bring more talking circles, which I think this is all about community. And mindful talking circles are a great way to build through deep listening, through our great way to build that common understanding. We also look forward to podcast series on, you know, what is the vision of different members on Conscious Food? What does that mean for them? The role of Consciousness in transforming food systems in order to weave together a unified but diverse narrative on this.

Yeah, sounds good. So do you relate your ideas of education for being to these efforts of Conscious Food? How do you relate this? These are not separate efforts, I think. Yeah, well, definitely. And, you know, this work for me started with Conscious Food Systems Alliance, so it started three years ago when I had just finished the first draft of my book. So, and it looked for me as a personal, unique way to pilot that agenda of the politics of being in one sector in a very, you know, very concrete way about, you know, how do you build such initiative? How do you bring together people? How do you share a frame, a common narrative, etc., etc. So it definitely, I think, fit in this, you know, vision of the politics of being of a new development paradigm.

It's interesting because, you know, and I think to me, there are two aspects that are linked. So we hear more and more about the importance of mindsets of inner capacities or transformative qualities and skills for sustainability. But with the politics of being, I think I go, so it's part of the politics of being, but I think the politics of being goes one step further because it says it's not only a mean for an end, that would be sustainability. It's also the true human development.

And I think we need, you know, we need to work with people where they are, but also offering a deeper perspective, which I think is needed to, if we see only that as a mean for an end, we don't really, we're not really changing so much our mindsets, so much our, so that's, I think, one step beyond to transform the whole agenda of development, I think. And that, you know, is part to me of the real change of consciousness. It's also having a new view of, you know, what we are here for and what progress means collectively.

Yeah, so this change of consciousness with the effort of conscious food alliance and the inner development goals that you're so closely working with, which I think is so much aligned with the ideas that articulated in their shadow, but also in the effort of around the shutter movement on turning consciousness into action. So how, how do you, would you envision their shadow contributing or being used in these efforts of conscious food alliance, for instance, or the inner development goals? So I think the Earth Charter offers, I mean, is a very important declaration, a lot of work went into it. And it offered really a unique vision, looking really more long term, you know, as we were starting this new millennium, right?

And I think that can be a reference point for the work we are, we'll be doing on, you know, what are the kind of new cultures and new values and new worldviews we want to see developing and we want to see people working on food systems transformation operating from. So yeah, I look forward to, you know, collaborating with you and to seeing how we can understand for discussions we are having now on this point. Ray Thomas, we are coming to the end of our conversation today, but I still want to ask you a last question. Because you also talk about great transition. And we also, I think there are many efforts and movements trying to contribute, making special efforts from different angles, trying to contribute is much necessary, much needed, great transition to more flourishing a regenerative future.

I suppose the work you are doing are elements to help speed up this process.

But I'm going to ask you again, if you can expand a bit more and with your last reflection here for our conversation today, in what do you think are the most important acupuncture points that could help us speed up this process towards the much needed great transition.

Thank you, Marianne. So there are two ways to look at it. One I think is to, and that's very important, that's a core of my work, is to identify what are the seeds of this new world. And I have one of my chapter, one of my part of my book is called Spiritual Values as the foundation of the politics of being. And I think there I identify what are the main groups, ideas, and around, so one is systemic complex thinking. The other one is, I call it life, people like the regeneration movement, we need to operate based on life principles.

The other one, happiness, well-being, love, empathy, compassion, peace, culture of peace, culture of partnership, mindfulness. And I have a last one called mystery, just to be looking into the absolute dimension. And so I think these are the kind of imaginal cells, let's say, of the new, the future, the brighter future that wants to be born. And how we can activate that, obviously, education is key now and relates a lot to your work. At the end, its politics of being is not growing consciousness. So it's education, but not only in the education sector, in all sectors. Everything that we do in society should be an opportunity to practice

deeper human values. And coming together as communities and maybe in different sectors, how I think is very important.

Well, thank you so much, Thomas, for joining us today for this interesting conversation and look forward to learning more from you and also your collaboration.

Thank you. And thank you so much for the work you do. Thank you so much, it was really great to discuss with you and I look forward for more collaboration with you, which is at the core of my work.

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