

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.

Welcome everyone to today's conversation. We are honored to have Alicia Bárcena as our very special guest speaker of today's conversation.

And Alicia, thank you so much for joining us today. Thank you so much, Mirian. I'm so happy to be here today. It's for me a great privilege to participate in this wonderful podcast. And with you, you and I share so many years of working together in this wonderful initiative, the Earth Charter, and all what it means. So count on me. I'm ready to participate and to make sure that we can contribute in any way possible. I remember how many years we worked together almost 30 years ago. So I'm very pleased to be here today.

Thank you so much. Let me briefly introduce Alicia, who is Alicia to our audience, as this will give you a good context of our conversation. Alicia Bárcena is a biologist and the current Secretary of Environment and Natural Resources of Mexico, which is the Minister of Environment of Mexico. Before that, she was the Secretary of Foreign Affairs, and prior to that, she served as the Executive Director or Executive Secretary of ECLAC, which is the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.

In that capacity, Alicia took a leadership role in the development of the Eskazu Agreement, which we have been following since then, which is the regional agreement on the access to information, public participation, and justice in all environmental matters in Latin America and the Caribbean, which was certainly not an easy task to put this together. Now for me, which is a curious fact, and for all of us that are is our main audience of our podcast, is that Alicia worked at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, UNCED, also known as the 92 Real Earth Summit, where she was in charge of putting together the Ocean Chapter of Agenda 21, in addition to many other various tasks to put together that huge effort of the Earth Summit.

Very special, she is the Founding Director of the Earth Council. In that role, Alicia organized the first Earth Charter workshop, which was held in May 1994, 30 years ago, in the Peace Palace in The Hague, which was a historical launch in moments for our initiative. So just imagine how happy I am to talk to you, Alicia, today for our Earth Charter podcast.

Well, thank you so much, my dear Mirian. In fact, it is true that we come a long way with the Earth Charter. It was difficult at the beginning because it is really a declaration of values and ethical principles to build a just world, a sustainable and peaceful world. And actually, it came first, as mentioned, by Gro Harlem Brundtland in 1987. And then it was formally presented to the Earth Summit in 1992. But you may remember that Maurice Strong and Mikhail Gorbachev were both of them who were very committed to have an Earth Charter coming out of the Rio Summit in 1992.

It was not possible, but Rio 92 produced the Rio Principles, which was the basis at the end of the day of the Earth Charter itself. But then what happened is that Maurice Strong and Mikhail Gorbachev, with you, with your health and my health indeed, was really launched, as you say, in the Peace Palace in The Hague. And it's really, I would say, has four pillars that I guess we should recall very, very urgently and that's respect and care for life, in a way, to have a care society, not only caring about people, which is very important, but also to care about the planet and also to have peace with nature, in a way, which is now taking form through UNEP.

But in fact, we were also very much committed to protect ecological integrity, social justice, democracy, social and economic justice, democracy, no violence, and of course peace. And you may remember that it was, I guess, it was really very successful because in the Peace Palace, which I think was the best place to launch it at the end of the day, because it was then when society took it under its, obviously, it took a long way in a way because it was in 1994 when it was promoted by Maurice and by Mikhail Gorbachev and then there was a very broad consultation process that included thousands of people that participated and then the Earth Charter was officially launched in 2000 in the Peace Palace.

And I think it was wonderful to have this document that at the end of the day has been adopted voluntarily by individuals, by civil society, by education, communities and religious groups. I also remember very well that our friend from, you remember Stephen Rockefeller plays such a big role because he's also coming from a very ecumenical view, a religious group that he was bringing together and he was key also to help us there. Now, Alicia, you are clearly a true leader in international cooperation in environmental diplomacy and sustainable development. So let me ask you one important question nowadays with regards to the UN. Some people are questioning the value of the UN and the value of international cooperation.

And now it happens that we are commemorating also the 80th anniversary or the 80th year since the World War II and the founding, the very founding of the United Nations. So imagine this is a very important year and yet it seems that we are entering a poly crisis with growing distrust in multilateralism and even efforts that undermine the importance of the UN in its role to foster peace, sustainability and cooperation. So I would like to hear your thoughts on this historical moment, 80 years, but also in terms of what you think is the importance and the role of the United Nations for the current times.

I think you're touching a very crucial point and that is, you know, we are in a certain way commemorating these 80 years of the UN, but at the same time, this is a reminder of what happened in World War II and the emergence of the emergency of having an institution like the UN came after the suffering of many people. And I think that at the end of the day, what's happening today is that we are, I mean, the UN was born from the ashes of the war and it had a fundamental vision of peace and justice and cooperation. And of course, it had a very important agreement between the, the, at that time, the, the, the, the most powerful countries that were around the world and the allies.

But at the end, and I would say that today, the situation is even more crucial and more critical for the UN because we are confronting, as you very well say, a poly crisis, which is

the convergence of climate emergency, geopolitical tensions as never before, technological disruption and social fragmentation. And I think that we are at the, at the point, and I would say that we are confronting a sort of an international indifference to the suffering of certain people. And that's where I think we have to make a true effort to come again in solidarity and fraternity. And I really believe that, I mean, not being a religious person, you remember that we also brought all the religious leaders at some point to discuss the air charter.

And Pope Francis, who just passed away, he, he, you know, he issued this *Laudato Si*, this wonderful encyclical that was, I think, very powerful in terms of, of changing the mindset, even of the, of the religious groups. And, but unfortunately, I guess that we are in this, in this moment of, I would say, is we are in front of confronting a world which the past, in a way, the, the previous models of development and so forth are still there. They don't die yet. And we are confronting the new world, hopefully, that doesn't emerge yet. This is like a Gramscianian moment. Gramsci said that the old is not dying, and the new is not yet there. So we are in an interregnum somehow.

So I think that we need to, to work even more, more, I would say more consistently, more together, because we come in the, in the decade of the 90s, I guess, it was a real change of era in the sense that we had all these conventions as the one emerged from Rio 92, where we have Agenda 21, and all the conventions, the Convention on Climate Change and biodiversity, the certification. And from there on, I guess, we had this decade of norms of normative decades of social development, population, women, etc.

So now I think we, we have to, we have to then work because the erosion of confidence in multilateralism is rooted in unmet expectation, rising inequalities, and the powerlessness of global institutions, because, for example, in this confrontation between Ukraine and Russia, I think that the UN couldn't couldn't play the appropriate role as it should. And then we fell into this, I would say, apathy from the apathy from the, I mean, from the Security Council, which is at the end of the day, the most powerful body of the UN, because of course, the Security Council is the one who protects or has the right to protect in a way through through is, you know, through its goal. But in this occasion, the five permanent members were the ones in confrontation.

So it was very difficult to reach any agreement within the framework of the UN. And at the same time, we, I think we have to, we have to recognize that the UN is facing an enormous challenge of fulfilling the essence of its mandate. And that is to save humanity from the scorch of war, to promote and protect human rights, international law, collectively address climate change and foster sustainable development, all of these mandates of the UN that were given by its members, because at the end of the day, the UN is the members of the UN. But now I think we are in a moment of great weakness of the participation of the members of the UN.

And I guess that's where we need to, I think we need to enter into a very profound reflection to change the UN, to strengthen the UN, to, I would say, to prepare the UN for this new era. And maybe the structures of the UN are not anymore responding to the problems of the world of today, including artificial intelligence, including climate change. I think we have many institutions dealing with the same problems. And I think we have

to do a little bit of, of maybe restructuring of some of the key topics of the UN into a very concrete agenda. So we don't have that dispersion in institutions and in people.

And I think that this is the moment to, to recall, I would say, and to come again together and to, I would say, recuperate or restore the capacity and the ability of the UN to convene, to coordinate, to catalyze solutions for global challenges. We must reform it. And I think Antonio Gutierrez has made a big effort on that. You remember even since Coffian and there was big efforts to, to reform the UN and then of course with Ban Ki-moon, now with Antonio Gutierrez. But I think this time around we have to be very serious about it because in the last terms of the UN, there has been a lot of creation of institutions, like for example, the resident coordinators.

And I think there has been a, a certain, I would say, creation and the explosion of more posts and more costs. And I think we need really to, to look into this carefully and see how can we reform it, empower it. And the UN has to become again an agent of change and transformation for the countries and for the member states, especially for the weakest part of the UN. And that is the, the African countries, the small island development states, countries in transition or emerging economies. So there's a long way to go. And I think we, I have been working very hard and thinking very hard what needs to be done to, to again, you know, reconstruct because the UN has to exist. We, this is the best institution we have. And we cannot replace it so easily or disappear it.

We have to work within it and, and, and try to build a new format of the UN. Yeah. I think you made good points. We need, we cannot undermine it or make it disappear, but strengthen it, but towards a strong effort of reforming it and making it more efficient. Before leaving the topic of the UN, I would like to say that we need to have, we have to to rethink the whole thing and have clarity of one thing, because the eruption of Donald Trump has brought to bear many questions about whether the UN is going to subsist or not, whether climate change, whether multilateralism is going to be working or not. And I, I, I want to make a very clear reflection here, because I think there's no person or government as powerful as they can be that can change the course of a transition that the world is already committed to.

Many, many countries of the world are committed towards clean energy, towards sustainability, which is the topic we are going to address. But what we need to understand is that, yes, everybody is a little bit, I would say, shocked by, by Donald Trump and his, and his reflections about many things. But I don't think they can change the, the, the course of, of what many people have decided to change. And most importantly, at the local level, at the city's level, at the people's level, but indeed, many countries are also on this. And I would say that I would, I wanted to evoke one, one of the, of the words of one of our major Mexican diplomats, Jaime Torres Bode, who said in the UN General Assembly in 1947, he said, 1947, and the words are today as actual as any, any others.

He said, we met at the solemn hour for humankind. The solemnity of these hours is not a product of our presence in this hall, the General Assembly, but of the concerns and anguish that all peoples are suffering. And I think this is indeed a moment in history that we are going through again. And so we need to achieve peace, solidarity, justice, and international cooperation. So, and of course, the global south is, I think is, is all about unfulfilled

promises as symmetries in power and the perception that multilateralism has been ineffective to solve the, the problems they need. Now, let's talk about democracy. Let's talk about inequality and environmental breakdown that's currently taking place.

You have consistently over the years emphasized the deep interconnections between democracy, social injustice or justice and the environment's sustainability of what we need to do. So how do you see these elements influencing each other's today, especially in the context of Latin America? What do you think we should do to strengthen them in a integrated approach? So coming to, coming to Latin America and the Caribbean, as you will say, and the importance of democracy, I would say that democracy is the other side of the coin of inequality, of equality or inequality. If you don't have equality, if you have a world full of inequalities, then democracy is at stake.

Because democracy is about the participation of people, of course, not only in decision making, but also in the distribution of the, of the gains of development, of the revenues of the economic growth. So democracy and equality are really, as I said, are faces or, how do you say, carers of the same coin, you know, so we need to, two faces of the same coin. Exactly, two faces of the same coin. When people are seeing in democratic countries like in Latin America that we have a growing social injustice, then they start questioning. The problem is not the social injustice, the problem is with democracy, and therefore people start considering to welcome authoritarian government. What, what are your thoughts on this?

Absolutely, I am with you all together because I think that in a certain way the progressive governments have not been able to solve many of the problems of the people or to propose an alternative model of development. So we are still attached to a model of neoliberalism, extractivism, and an exploitation of people and natural resources that still is the, the, I would say the key factors of the, of the development model of today in many countries.

So regardless, if you have changes of governments or not, we are not changing the heart of the model of development. And, and therefore we are weakening in a certain way the possibility to have, I would say sustainability added to the complex development challenges that we are confronting. I think Agenda 2015 was an effort to try to, to, I mean Agenda 21 of course, which you and I were so much involved. And then Agenda 2015, which is the Agenda for Sustainable Development, which is with their 17 development goals, of course, was another effort to try to move quickly towards a, a world of more equality, social justice, environmental policies. But it seems to me that we are losing those causes in a way. The democratic spaces are shrinking. You know, we have a problem here in Mexico.

I was reading a report yesterday about the environmental defenders, the, the, the people that are defending nature, they have been killed in my country. You know, we have more than 120 people that have been killed since 90, since 2020. And this is happening all over the region, the people, and this is where it's a casu agreement that you very well mentioned it, which I was really very much part of it myself, because this agreement is about access to information, to environmental justice and to participation. And it derived from principle 10 from, from Rio Summit. And also it's in the, in the Earth Charter. The right of people

to, exactly. It's, you know, it's article 13, which is the, the, you know, the right of the people to participate, to have the information.

But I would say that we are still in a world where extractivism is, is really the, the, and after the Ukraine, Russia war, where the energy crisis came very clear, I think it was a moment where fossil fuels were again brought to the bear to bear in the, in the, in the, in the world. So I think we are having a profound moment of crisis, poly crisis, as you very well named them. And I think that we need to look for these vibrant democracy again. And the Earth Charter can be a very powerful tool because people need to go back to values, need to go back to the origin, to the most fundamental principles that include, I would say, social justice that include equality, that include solidarity, fraternity.

These are cases in which human rights has to become again a very important tool for the, I mean, we have to live together in this world and, and we have to transform the paradigm that has been disastrous in many factors for a region, I have to say. Yeah, we need to live how to coexist together between North, South, East, West, independently of where we come from. And thank you for mentioning this, because we agreement. We need, we think that it's time for it to be reinforced in all countries in the region. Now, this year is COP 30 is a very important COP.

Let's talk about that. And we'd like to hear from you your thoughts on this now, that you are the Mexican government in such an important position as the Minister of Environment. You have been also following all this process for the past over 30 years. And we know it's an urgent matter. There is a call for action for deep transformation. We'd like to hear your thoughts on what do you think should be considered the core principles leading to COP 30?

Well, basically, I think we have, we have an agenda that we have to comply with. First of all, the Paris Agreement, I think we'll, we have to take stock of where we are. And I think there has been a stock taking meetings of where we stand in terms of reducing really the, the, I would say, the, the emissions from, from the world. I think the root was to have these NDCs, which is this national, the terming commitments. My problem with that is that I don't think that the summation or the addition of this national NDCs is going to solve the problem. And they are not ambitious. They are not sufficiently ambitious. We are still with the, with the summation or the addition of all these NDCs. We will hardly be below two centigrade, frankly speaking, even below three centigrade.

So I think ambition has to be more, I mean, we have to be more ambitious every country in, in the NDC that we are building, of course. And then of course, the other part of it is that financing is a real problem. There has been a commitment from Baku. There is a, let me say there is this, this objective that goes from Baku to Belém, which is going to be how to increase really the funding from 300, I think, billion, no, 300 million to 1.3 trillion. I mean, they, this is really like moving really up the funding for, for combating climate change. And I think that we are, we are in a problem because it's time to move beyond rhetoric and beyond and to really take the action that, that is needed.

The problem is that the fossil fuels are again in the market are very much the solution for many of the, of the, even in Europe that they have already entered into a big transition,

energy transition. They are also going back to fossil fuels. I think that again, the leadership of Brazil and particularly President Lula is going to be very important. President Lula is calling several preparatory sessions that I think can be of great importance. One of them is going to be the, the BRICS meeting that he's calling for.

Mexico is not part of BRICS, but I think this meeting of the BRICS is really going to be extremely important to, to bring together very large economies like, like Russia, like India, like China, which are also big, big countries that need to contribute to reducing gas emissions and also to, to putting forward more, more money, I would say, in cooperation for, for, for this energy transition that is urgently needed. In Mexico, we are in, I would say that we are in much better shape than in the past because we have a president, Claudia Sheinbaum, who is a person that is very committed, well, the first female to lead our country in 200 years of history. Celebrating that. I tell you, we are simply celebrating that big time because it's so important to have a woman leading the nation, number one.

But secondly, she has a, I would say, a particular commitment with environment and with climate change. She's an expert on climate change. So she will, is going to play a very crucial role, I think from now till COP 30. She met already with Lula in, in Selah, in Honduras. And I think that there are many things that we can do together. But one of the things we're going to do is we are, we are preparing already our NDC, which is going to include a more ambitious agenda in terms of energy transition, particularly on renewables. Of course, we want to move more quickly to renewables.

And even within fossil fuels, we want to move from, let's say, diesel or combusto, to natural gas, which is okay within fossil fuels, but to, to try to move towards a trajectory that is more clean. On the other hand, we are doing something else, and that is solutions based in nature. And I think this is a powerful tool as well. And that is how to refer, I mean, build more forests, to bring back mangroves, to restore the land in a way, and to compensate the emissions through solutions based in nature. And I think that has been permeating quite real, real in many parts of Mexico. So I think that we are going to be ready to produce NDC that is going to be a mix of reducing emissions with conversation, with the conservation of biodiversity and solutions based on nature.

We are going to organize a preparatory session in Mexico in August with all the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. We are doing it together with Brazil, with Andrea Correa Del Lago. You may remember Andrea Correa Del Lago, who is a very fantastic diplomat from Brazil, who was very much involved in Rio and Rio plus 20, and he has been in this agenda forever. So I'm so glad that Andrea Correa Del Lago and myself were going to join forces to have this meeting in August. And of course, we will invite you because a chapter on the earth, a charter about the challenges of climate change are extremely important.

That will be indeed wonderful. I just want to make a comment on the priorities for COP30. I think with the kind of government we have in terms of Brazil and Mexico, with both heads of states and both ministers of environment, with such a commitment and long-term understanding of the challenges to make it happen, to make all the agreements around COP happen. So in terms of

I think the Mexican people, but also the people around the world would be looking at Brazil as the president of COP, but also Mexico with the leadership, the kind of caliber of leadership we currently have to really raise the bar for all of this. Now, the Brazilian government in March issued an open letter actually signed by

Ambassador and President of COP Correa Del Lago, where the government is calling, talking about climate change, and calling for a climate action, more action, but also calling for a global ethical stock take. Global ethical stock take and Brazilian government is taking this leadership and asking for more ambitions, more investment, finance, and etc. Now, on this idea of global ethical stock take, the proposal that they are doing is that it seeks to embed ethics and broader society voices into the climate decisions, which is quite unique also for COP. How do you build this process undertaking? What are the opportunities you see in framing climate action through an ethical lens? And how do you think Mexico might engage or support this initiative?

I think it's very crucial to have everybody involved, actually, because not only everybody involved, but everybody understands or look at a climate change through ethical lens, because at the end of the day, climate change is not just a scientific or an economic problem. It's a moral and ethical crisis. I think it's a civilizatory crisis at the end of the day. The civilization is at stake, our civilization, and also the way we relate to one another, future generations, and to nature. So I think that climate change has to be a part of decision making, and not only in decision making as such, but also to include dignity, climate justice.

I think this is one of the most important things, because at the end of the day, climate change is going to affect the poorest, the most vulnerable, and indigenous peoples, women, youth. I just finished a meeting with a group. This is a group of that President Sheinbaum has pulled together. It's called Sembrando Vida, which is helping vulnerable communities to produce more food, to protect nature. But also we were discussing how these communities are going to be affected by climate change, and what are the preventive actions that we need to take if there's going to be scarcity of water, for example, or increase of temperature, which is already happening. Mexico used to have 18 glaciers, and we only have five left.

So there's a big agenda that we really need to make sure that people understand that we are on this together. That it's not only a problem of one or the other. And that's where, as I said before, Eskazou Agreement is embodying these values. This championing climate change is rooted in human rights. And of course, it has one component that I think is so important. It is the protection of the activists, the environmental activists that have been very persecuted in many fronts. Most of them even have been killed. So we really have to look into this just transition towards climate change.

We organize in Mexico around 11 dialogues and forums on climate change with different constituencies, with NGOs, with scientific, with indigenous peoples, because we want them to tell us how they are living through the already effects of climate change, and what are the things that we should do collectively to confront this, I would say, this challenge that we are all really confronting. And in that regard, I guess that I believe that we have in this global ethical stocktake, the role of women for me is particularly important.



And that's why I am proposing a feminist environmental policy, because I believe that women have a very particular way of looking at these problems, and also a lot of experience and knowledge on how to inspire the rest of society and the children that they are educating. Wonderful. Okay, well, thank you so much for sharing this concrete example of how Mexican government is already looking at just transition. Climate action should go hand in hand with a just transition, and I'm happy to hear that. Now we are coming to the last question. This year marks the 25th anniversary since the launch of the Earth Charter. So more than 30 years ago, actually, 25 years since the launch, but the initiative started actually with you over 30 years ago.

And you were certainly instrumental in shaping the idea of a Earth Charter initiative that should be based on a multistakeholder dialogue and bring together different actors. We brought together experts from environmental law, scientists, and etc. Now looking back, how do you see the importance of such a global ethical framework as the Earth Charter? How do you see the evolution of the Earth Charter in terms of its relevance for today, and what do you think should be the role it could be playing? Well, I really believe that the Earth Charter remains one of the most visionary and enduring ethical framework we have for sustainable development. I think it was born out of an unprecedented global consultation process that is still, I think, there.

I mean, that's still very valid, that brought together voices, as you very well say, from experts, the lawyers, from indigenous communities were very important, scientists, youth, faith, leaders, civil society. And I believe that what united us was at that time a shared conviction that sustainability is not only a technical challenge, it's a moral imperative.

And I think this is more true than ever before. So looking back 25 years ago, the charter was ahead of its time. I guess it's really a very visionary document, a proposal that should become, I would say, the social compact of the United Nations, to tell you the truth, and to all the people of the world, the Earth Charter should be, and not only the social compact, but the sustainable development compact. And I think we need to do that because we, I mean, we have spread out many conferences, the conference of the future, the conference of, I don't know what, but we need to bring together again, this charter that looks ahead of its time, that emphasizes ecological integrity, social and economic justice, democracy, nonviolence and peace.

And long before these principles became widely recognized as essential pillars of sustainability. So we need to recall and we need to bring them back. And I think that the Earth Charter's power is very powerful because it's universal and speaks for the whole, it speaks to the common humanity honoring the diversity. You remember, we were very careful that the Earth Charter should represent everybody. Nobody should feel undermined or leaped out.

So I think it encourages us to see the connections between people and planet, between generations, knowledge systems, values, actions. And at this very critical juncture of the world, the Earth Charter can play a crucial role in rebuilding trust, in fostering collaboration across borders and sectors, and guiding both public policy and private behavior. It can help us infuse international cooperation with ethical foundations. So I, I believe we must bring the Earth Charter back into the heart of global dialogues into our classrooms, into

our parliament city halls, international negotiations. It is not only a framework for sustainability, it's a compass for the future we want and deserve. So this is what I think, my dear Mirian. I think we should work on that. And I want you to count on me really.

I think it's extremely important to be on this together, many years after, with the same values and maybe more powerful values and more, I would say, more challenging problems. And let's see if we can make the Earth Charter a document that is, I would say, accepted by everyone and signed by everyone as a, in this anniversary in July to have, like I would say, the confirmation that the Earth Charter is a very important framework for the world. Okay, well, thank you. Thank you so much, Alicia, Dr. Alicia Bárcena, who is now the Minister of Environment of Mexico. I deeply appreciate who you are and the journey that you have had over the past 30 or 35 years that I've been following you. Thank you so much. Thank you so very much.

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