

THE RELEVANCE OF THE EARTH CHARTER AS THE NGO IN PROMOTING DIALOGUE ACROSS VALUES AND CULTURES

Lee Kok Kheng
Lot 960 KM14, Taman Kota Cheras Utama
Kuala Lumpur

Abstract

The Earth Charter itself is an outstanding example of a decade-long, worldwide and cross cultural dialogue on common goals and shared values that can enable mankind to develop a just, sustainable and peaceful society in the 21st century. It encourages us to search for similarity in the midst of our diversity and to embrace the correct global ethics in order to bring about respect and care for the community of life; ecological integrity; social and economic justice; democracy, nonviolence and peace. However, to transform all these brilliant Earth Charter ideologies into action and sustainable development, it demands on each and every individual an undertaking to self-reform in order to be committed to the aspirations of the Earth Charter. Since the launch of the Earth Charter Initiative in 2000, many NGOs have made unrelenting efforts to disseminate the values and vision of the Earth Charter to many people around the world. To date the Earth Charter has been formally endorsed by 2,446 organizations and local governments. 780 organizations in the United States represent over 40 million people. It is through numerous dialogue sessions, seminars and conferences conducted by the NGOs that inner changes in individual's thinking and way of life take place. However, to ensure sustainable and greater success of the Earth Charter, more youth participation in the global Earth Charter Initiative is essential.

What is the Earth Charter?

The Earth Charter is a declaration of fundamental ethical principles for building a just, sustainable and peaceful global society in the 21st century. It seeks to inspire all people a new sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility for the well-being of the whole human race, the community of life and future generations.

The document's vision recognizes that environmental protection, human rights, equitable human development, and peace are interdependent and indivisible. In 1987, the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development issued a call for the creation of a new charter that would set forth fundamental principles for sustainable development. The drafting of an Earth Charter was part of the unfinished business of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. In 1994 Maurice Strong, the Secretary-General of the Earth Summit and Chairman of the Earth Council, and Mikhail Gorbachev, Chairman of Green Cross International (GCI), launched a new Earth Charter initiative with support from the Dutch government. An Earth Charter Commission was formed in 1997 to oversee the project and an Earth Charter Secretariat was established at the Earth Council in Costa Rica.

The Earth Charter was drafted through consultations over a 10 years period with thousands of individuals from 77 countries. It was launched at The Hague Palace in 2000 by the Earth Charter Commission. It is a soft law document like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and is morally, but not legally, binding on the state governments that agree to endorse and adopt it, and it often forms the basis for the development of hard laws. It is also hailed as the "*people's document*" with no patents.

The Earth Charter consists of four general principles supported by sixteen subsidiary provisions. The four general principles are: -

- I. Respect and care for the community of life
- II. Ecological integrity
- III. Social and economic justice
- IV. Democracy, nonviolence, and peace

These principles are also based upon contemporary science, international law, and the insights of philosophy and religion. Today, the Earth Charter is endorsed by more than 8000 organizations that represent hundreds of millions of people. In 2004, Professor Wangari Maathai, the Earth Charter Commissioner from Kenya and member of GCI's Honorary Board, became the first African woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of her contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace.

Why is the Earth Charter important?

In the present century, the world has undergone many crises: national, religious and ethnic issues; the widening gap between the rich and poor; exploitation of natural resources without regard to the future needs; over billion of global population are living without access to clean water and sanitation facilities; armament race and the wide spread of terrorism and violence in many countries. Hence, there is a palpable need, as to no other time in history, to forge a global ethic for building a just, sustainable, and peaceful world in the 21st century. And this is clearly stated in the Preamble of the Earth Charter that, "We urgently need a shared vision of basic values to provide an ethical foundation for the emerging world community."

Mr Mikhail Gorbachev, former president of the Soviet Union and the co-chairman of the Earth Charter Commission remarked at the launching ceremony of the Earth Charter at Hague in June 2000 that the Earth Charter was more important than any of the fifty significant documents and treaties he signed as president of the Soviet Union. He also equated the Charter to an expression of the hopes and dreams of millions.

The significance of dialogue in the global propagation of the Earth Charter

Dialogues were used not only to draft the Charter but, more pertinently, to disseminate and win the endorsement from the

grassroots, NGOs and heads of states to stimulate their actions to place ethics and human values above all the physical benefits; and to achieve sustainable development at home and globally.

SGI President Daisaku Ikeda, the president of the lay Buddhist association, Soka Gakkai International (SGI), promoting peace, culture and education, said in his message for the Hague launch of the Earth Charter in 2000, “The process by which the Earth Charter has been developed is one of dialogue. Truths arrived at through discussion and dialogues are warm, living truths. Nothing sparks a more profound and lasting transformation in the human heart than such interactions

It has been highlighted that small dialogue groups and one-to-one discussions are the key to awaken the masses, NGOs and state leaders to the importance and impact of the Earth Charter on one’s own life. However, when dialogues were held over dinners, many a time the dialogues developed into other issues. Hence, starting very simply, but regularly, is the key to have an effective dialogue.

Dialogue is not limited to the exchange of pleasantries, but includes the sharing of sharply differing perspectives. Courage and endurance are essential if we are to continue the painstaking task of loosening the knots of attachment to a particular point of view or habit of living. In fact, this humanistic diplomacy approach opens the way to mutual learning, acceptance and respect. The subsequent dynamic interactions can bring forth unforeseen possibilities. The role of NGOs and individual in the promotion of the Earth Charter via dialogue is further elaborated below.

(a) The Earth Dialogues

To provide an open and neutral forum for all parties to debate on global issues and the Earth Charter, Earth Dialogues were launched in 2002 by Mikhail Gorbachev and Maurice Strong, and run by Green Cross International. The dialogues consist of a series of public forums aimed to mobilize global public interest and action to promote three objectives essential to the future of humanity: -

- Averting the ecological disasters which threaten our planet

- Fighting the scourge of poverty
- Acting to ensure truly sustainable development

The Earth Dialogues furnish a platform for translating the principles in the Earth Charter into practice on the ground. The deliberation develops a strong sense of accountability in citizens, governments, businesses and organizations, and encourages collective ethics-based actions and partnerships.

The Earth Dialogues have been held in France, United States, Pakistan, Spain, Australia and Brazil, each one attracting speakers of the highest caliber, including world leaders, Nobel Prize winners, top scientists, civil society representatives and decision makers from across the world.

(b) The Power of an Individual

Not many really understand the tremendous power inherent in their lives, and even fewer actually tap into that power. The following prominent environmental activists illustrate the potential capability of an individual in bringing about reform not only in oneself, but the entire society and the world, and to establish a life in line with the values advocated in the Earth Charter.

(i) 2004 Nobel Peace Laureate Dr Wangari Maathai

Dr Wangari Maathai of Kenya is the founder of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya. In 1977 she inspired women across Kenya to plant trees to combat soil erosion resulting from deforestation as well as to provide firewood for cooking. Today, the movement has transcended national boundaries and some 100,000 people have planted more than 30 million trees. Dr Maathai has also contributed substantially to the advancement of Kenyan's women education and empowerment, democratization and sustainable development. She once indicated, "If one feels something needs changing, and then one should first change oneself. ----- I may only be planting a tree here, but just imagine what's happening if there are billions of people out there doing something. Just imagine the power of what we can do."

(ii) Dr Hazel Henderson, USA

Dr Hazel Henderson is a world-renown environmental economist, consultant on sustainable development, columnist and TV producer of the series: *Ethical Market*. In the 1960s, she founded “*Citizens for Clean Air*” movement as a housewife because she was worried about air pollution in New York City. She engaged the mothers in discussions and wrote letters to city officials to demand for the daily air quality data to be aired in TV and radio. She eventually succeeded in getting the US President Lyndon B Johnson to sign the *Clean Air Act* in 1967.

The above two examples serve to demonstrate that we can empower individuals with good values and sense of commitment and responsibility. When individuals join hand together to act as world citizens we can protect the environment, the poor and the world peace. Grassroots movements can alter the current of history.

(c) Soka Gakkai International (SGI)

Two Buddhist principles, namely “*oneness of life and environment*” and “*dependent origination*”, teach the values and the correct way of living to attain happiness in life. The first principle is to inculcate respect to Earth and life in all its diversity and the second is to recognize the interdependency and interconnectedness of all life.

In a dialogue with Dr Hazel Henderson, SGI President Ikeda remarks, “Guarding others’ lives, the ecology and the earth is the same as protecting one’s own life. By the same token, wounding them is the same thing as wounding oneself.”

Since 1997, President Ikeda has supported the Earth Charter Initiative in his annual peace proposal to the United Nations. Around 20 SGI organizations in different countries have been supporting the Earth Charter movement since 1997 through exhibitions, lectures and discussion groups.

Ikeda Center for peace, learning and dialogue at Boston, USA, has published the fruits of its seminars and symposiums held on the Earth Charter into documents like *Buddhist Perspectives on the Earth Charter and Women’s Views on the Earth Charter*. These

materials have become the teaching materials all over the United States in institutions like Harvard and Columbia.

One SGI member in Beijing made the Earth Charter the ethical foundation for a school. Another is creating an Earth Charter-based learning centre for sustainable development in rural France and another has worked with SGI-Italy to conduct youth forums and talk shows to use the Charter to reflect on their real-life concerns.

As the concept of sustainability is not always thoroughly apprehended, SGI has produced two Earth Charter resources, namely a film entitled “*A Quiet Revolution*” and a road-show exhibition “*Seeds of Change: The Earth Charter and Human Potential*”.

On August 28, 2007, the “*Seeds of Change*” exhibition and a forum were jointly organized by the *Centre For Civilizational Dialogue, Museum of Asian Arts*, University of Malaya and SGM. On January 16, 2000, SGM launched a waste recycling campaign with members and held an Earth Charter forum. Till today, many SGM members are still actively practicing waste recycling every month in their own communities. Lately, SGM members also learn to produce culture *Effective Microorganisms* from fruit wastes that can help to clean up waterways in the surrounding environment. (7) On September 2, 2007, an exhibition and a forum were held at Wisma Kebudayaan SGM, with the theme:” From a Culture of Violence to A Culture of Peace: Transforming the Human Spirit” The exhibition was subsequently put a road show around the country for 6 months and it attracted more than 160,000 visitors, of whom 90,000 signed for the vows to denounce violence and promote the value of peace.

Faith-based groups, such as SGI and SGM, have wide grassroots networks and a wide reach into the local communities. This is exactly the areas for religious organizations to make significant contribution to the propagation of the ideology of the Earth Charter.

(d) The Earth Charter Youth Initiative

Since sustainable development involves the ability of future generations to meet their needs for survival, they must be educated

through the Earth Charter partnership to assist to create the sustainable communities. As a result, the Earth Charter Youth Initiative was launched in 2000. The aims of the Youth Initiative are to encourage young people around the world to bring alive the values of sustainability, justice, and peace as they are outlined in the Earth Charter and to effect positive changes by using the Earth Charter as an ethical guideline. Thus far, the youth have developed a remarkable range of ideas for bring the Earth Charter into action and spreading its message to their peers; from the Armenian summer camps, focusing on environmental issues and distributing children's versions of the Earth Charter in three different languages, to the Costa Rican Earth Charter Concerts; to the Earth Scout movement, which guides youth through activities demonstrating each of the sixteen Earth Charter provisions.

Similarly, various countries have established Earth Charter Youth Groups to educate themselves about the Earth Charter and engage in projects that foster environmental protection, sustainable development, social justice, and a culture of peace.

In five junior secondary schools in Ethiopia, Earth Charter Youth Groups have been created to focus on poverty eradication, tree-planting campaigns, and waste collection.

Several youth organizations endorsed the Charter and use it as an ethical guide in their struggle against HIV, poverty, and environmental degradation.

The Earth Charter Youth Initiative serves to allow youth around the world, both as the leaders of tomorrow and as citizens of today, to develop a sustainable future for them. The Youth Initiative empowers them to create synergy based on the Earth Charter's principles, locally and globally.

In the past few years, we witnessed natural disasters, wars, violence, global economic slowdown and epidemics causing enormous sufferings to millions of people around the world. On tracking for the source of these problems, a number of financial experts and scholars are of the opinion that the root cause stems from the disregard for the dignity of life human values, and ethics. The ethics and values propagated by the Earth Charter are exactly what are lacking in many individual and the solution to all the above problems is contained in the Earth Charter. For the

continuous existence of mankind on this planet, it is imperative that more NGOs should be roped in to scatter the seeds of the Earth Charter awareness widely by conducting dialogues with people who have yet to come into contact with this wonderful compass of life. We must ensure that the seeds land in places where inspired individuals can continue to implant and establish the values of the Earth Charter in people's daily lives. Through holding dialogues, NGOs have the potential to re-direct the attention of the governments to focus on the incorporation of the Earth Charter in education curriculum and in the development programme of youth.

References

- Anderson, J. (2005). *Building Support for the Earth Charter Movement*, In: *The Earth Charter In Action*, Ed: C.P.Blaze, Royal Tropical Institute, Netherlands, pg 174-175.
- Dodge, R. (2007). *The Earth Charter: A Declaration of Interdependence*, In:
http://www.opednews.com/articles/opedne_robert_d_071012_the_earth_charter_3a_a.htm
- Green Cross International. (2008). In: <http://www.gci.ch>
- Hassan, P. (2005). *Earth Charter: An Ethical Lodestar and Moral Force*, In: *The Earth Charter In Action*, Ed: C.P.Blaze, 2005, Royal Tropical Institute, Netherlands, pg 29-31.
- Henderson, H. & Ikeda, D. (2004). *Planetary Citizenship: your values, beliefs and actions can shape a sustainable world*, Middleway Press, pg. 115-131.
- Ikeda, D. (2007). *The Promise of Dialogue: Moving beyond the use of military force*, In: *Cosmic*, March 2007, Cosmic Publication of SGM, KL, pg 6-7.
- Lee, K.K. (2008). *Inner Reform And World Citizenship --- The Key To Bridge the Gap Between Science And Values In The*

Discourse Of Environmental Crises, a paper presented in the Seminar “Inner Reform and World Citizenship” at CCD, Uni. Malaya, June 2008.

Slaby, M. (2005). *Making Ripples of Change: The Hopes of the Earth Charter Youth Initiative*, In: *The Earth Charter In Action*, Ed: C.P.Blaze, Royal Tropical Institute, Netherlands, pg 113-114.