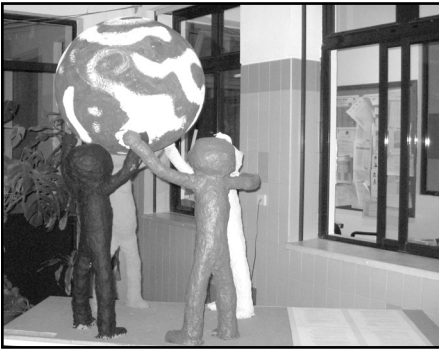


**The Earth Charter:
Environmental Education and
Sustainability Tool****Fátima Matos Almeida²¹****Introduction**

When ASPEA (the Portuguese Association of Environmental Education) adopted the Earth Charter, it became obvious that all, or almost all, of its work and activities were directly linked to the principles and values promoted by the document. ASPEA therefore decided to incorporate the dissemination and adoption of the Earth Charter into its interventions, and to adapt its previously developed activities to promote this integrating document.

ASPEA is a nonprofit NGO founded in 1990, whose main purpose is to develop environmental education in both formal and non-formal education settings. Our work is mainly focused on the training of teachers, educators, and other agents. The key objectives are to promote the exchange of knowledge and information, create spaces for discussion, and provide and implement national and international best practice models of education for environment and sustainability.



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ASPEA members were first introduced to the Earth Charter at the Caretakers of the Environment International Organization Conference in Costa Rica in 1999, at the same time as this document was being drafted. In 2003, an invitation was made to Guillem Ramis, the Earth Charter's 'Focal Point' from Palma de Mallorca, Spain, to make a presentation about his education project, Vivim Plegats, at the XII Pedagogical Conference of ASPEA. His experience and commitment to developing innovative projects and methodologies for education, as well as his creative uses of the Earth Charter, served as a source of inspiration for the adoption of the Earth Charter within our association.

Hence, ASPEA began to systematically gather information and resources through the official Earth Charter website, in order to raise awareness about the notion of sustainability through the document. Teacher training initiatives were launched in the areas of environment, sustainability, citizenship and art. The Child and Youth Forum, an annual event held since 2002 in Aveiro to celebrate Earth Day (April 22), became known as the Child and Youth Earth Charter Forum.

Through a process of reflection, we came to view the Earth Charter as a unique and innovative approach to environmental education. The structured set of principles and values serve to shift the traditional focus of environmental education or environmental problems – waste, energy, climate change, etc. – towards a more holistic framework. This is based on an understanding of the need to explore the relationships between human beings, as well as between human beings and the environment. This approach also enables an analysis of the consequences of our everyday actions on the natural environment to which we belong, and of which we are an integral part.

With the purpose of enhancing the role of education to build sustainable societies, **ASPEA has used the Earth Charter in four main action areas:**

- 1 Formation of environmental educators and monitors.
2. Development of pedagogical resources.
3. Project implementation:

- Earth Charter Project - Live Science (Projeto Carta da Terra - Ciência Viva) and
- Earth Charter Project: A Tool for Sustainability Project (Projeto CTIS - *Carta da Terra Instrumento de Sustentabilidade*).

4. Communication and dissemination of the Earth Charter during all forums in which ASPEA members participate.

1. Formation of environmental educators and monitors

The Earth Charter has been used as a teacher-training tool. The workshops invite participants to read and discuss the Earth Charter document and to watch related videos produced by the Earth Charter Secretariat and by Leonardo Boff.²² Participants are then asked to form small groups and to create a poster, skit, or any other visual display to be presented to the rest of the group.

Between 2006 and 2007, the following training courses were offered: two for tutorial formation; four training sessions for young monitors of environmental education for sustainability; and six brief sessions that were requested by schools and municipal chambers.

2. Development of pedagogical resources

In 2006, the Ministry of Education and the General Direction of Innovation and Curricular Development, edited the Sustainability Guide - Earth Charter, which was translated and adapted from the Earth Charter Teacher's Guidebook. The Guide, resulting from a partnership with ASPEA, was first presented and distributed to nearly 150 participants at ASPEA's XIV Pedagogical Conference of Environmental Education, which took place in Lisbon. Subsequently, we have used this material during joint presentations at similar events. The Guide will also be made available through the website of the Ministry of Education.

At one school, the teachers also translated and adapted an Earth Charter Guide for Children. The pupils produced two videos and two computer games that were inspired by this document.

²² Leonardo Boff is a Brazilian theologian, one of the founders of liberation theology and author of more than sixty books. He is also an Earth Charter Commissioner.

3. Implementation of projects based on the Earth Charter

The “Earth Charter - Live Science” Project

This project used the Earth Charter document as an interdisciplinary tool to offer classes for pre-school and primary school students (from four to ten years of age). These sessions focused on cooperative learning, learning science through hands-on activities, real-life learning situations and basic exercises of experimental science. The project was also intended to encourage teachers to bring more enthusiasm into their pedagogical methods, and to link science-related subjects with the principles and values of the Earth Charter.

The project embodied some Earth Charter principles as guiding forces for children’s education globally, with the view to giving their learning a sense of meaning and promoting actions of respect, concern and responsibility towards the environment.

This project was carried out in 2006–2007 in four schools near Lisbon. It was financially supported by the Live Science Programme of the National Agency for Scientific Culture, and was designed to sensitize pre-school and primary school teachers about one of the greatest environmental problems that humanity faces in the new millennium – climate change.

A significant overlap was found between the teaching of experimental sciences and the principles of Earth Charter:

Principle 1 - Respect Earth and life in all its diversity; (community of life; citizenship duties)

Principle 5 - Protect and restore the integrity of Earth’s ecological systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain life; (waste, consumption and conservation; biodiversity)

Principle 6 - Prevent harm as the best method of environmental protection and, when knowledge is limited, apply a precautionary approach; (pollution, energy and climate change)

During the course of this project, six hands-on sessions were held in every class of the partner schools. Additionally, two field trips were carried out with nearly 200 children and their respective teachers participating. The field trip to the Lisbon Forest Park was organized for the youngest pupils, featuring nature exploration games and activities. Meanwhile, older students participated in a visit to the National Engineering, Technology and Innovation Institute, where they learned about clean and environmentally-friendly sources of energy, especially sun and wind.



Field trip to Parque Florestal de Monsanto with primary school.

Earth Charter Project: A Tool for Sustainability (CTIS Project)

This project is based on a methodological proposal for applying the principles and values inherent to the Earth Charter within the context of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014). This proposal is broad in both scale and scope-international (Countries with Portuguese as Official Language - CPLP), regional (Europe), national (Portugal) and local (Regional Education Co-ordinations).

The purpose of the project is to turn schools into educational poles for sustainable development, and to turn citizens into knowledgeable agents for change. This mission should be carried out within the framework of the Earth Charter’s values and principles, and through their dissemination and implementation by all educational actors in the community.

- **At the local level**, the project has been developed at the Regional Education Coordination of the Algarve region. Several primary and secondary schools have been involved: the Group of Schools of Salir (Loulé) and the Group of Schools of Algoz (Silves), among others. The project is expected to expand to other Regional Education Coordination areas, as suggested by the interest shown by schools, authorities and other stakeholders involved in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).
- **At the national level**, a committee was created to involve representatives of the Ministry of Education (General Coordination of Innovation and Curricular Development) and the Ministry of Environment (Institute of the Environment), as well as the National Committee of UNESCO as an observer entity.
- **At the regional level**, in January 2006, a collaboration agreement was signed with the Salamanca, Spain-based Local Initiatives of Castilla and Leon Foundation (Fundación Iniciativas Locales, Castilla y León), for the school year 2006–2007. The latter, in coordination with ASPEA, also developed a parallel project in Portugal.
- **At the international level**, a partnership was established with the Community of Countries of Portuguese Language (CPLP) to share the experiences and materials developed during the course of the project. Primarily involved in the collaboration have been those countries where the need for Education for Sustainable Development is considered to be the most pressing.

The general objectives of the project are to:

- Transform the school into a pole of information production and dissemination regarding Education for Sustainable Development. The school should also be an agent for intervention and social mobilization, one which is operated by students and their families. In one case,

families supported the students in producing a video about waste, both past and present. This video featured a re-enactment of a picnic held thirty years ago and a picnic in the present-day context. Students were then asked to compare the difference in the quantity and quality of waste produced in the two examples, and to reflect on Principle 7 of the Earth Charter as it relates to the video.

- Contribute to the dissemination and implementation of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) and the strategy of Education for Sustainable Development of United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE). News has been published about the actions carried out at the schools, through an online blog and through various local communication agencies. The project has also been included in the efforts of the Decade at the national level, through the Portuguese Committee of UNESCO.
- Identify a set of indicators to measure the project's level of success, as well as the participation levels and contributions of different entities for the Decade.
- Encourage the pedagogical use of the Earth Charter and other related resources.
- Compile and create documents and materials supporting pedagogical methods and the dissemination of best practice examples within the framework of the Earth Charter.

Generally, the project includes a teacher training workshop, a local evaluation and follow-up of the project, a Child and Youth Forum, and a seminar for teachers. We believe that the development of professional competencies for teachers and educators within the field of Education for Sustainable Development is fundamental for realizing the objectives of the Decade regarding the implementation of educational policies, as well as for putting into practice the Earth Charter's principles and values.

Within this context, the Project involves three main stages for training professors and other technical partners: a periodic follow up of acquired skills; a periodic follow-up in the field; and ongoing knowledge exchange and skills transfer between colleagues and project partners. This structure is intended to, among other aims, facilitate thinking about the theoretical basis of ESD and about the methodologies required to explore the Earth Charter and its educational use, as well as to evaluate processes and results.

Each teacher, within his/her discipline, is encouraged to work in a transversal and interdisciplinary manner; to select one or more principles of the Earth Charter in collaboration with students; and to structure a project whose final outcome will be presented to the entire scholastic community during the Child and Youth Forum, which is held at the end of every school year.

The Project, during its pilot phase in 2005–2006, paved the way for an initial evaluation of its methodology. All the involved stakeholders, partners and teachers/educators, considered it to be a project of *high pedagogical value for thinking and disseminating of Education for Sustainable Development practices*. There was a general consensus to continue to support and develop the project.

In 2006–2007, the Institute of the Environment and the waste management company ALGAR, announced their funding of the project. One participating school involved a total of 125 students from five Grade 7-8 classes in the Project. Teachers from Visual and Technological Education were in charge of coordinating this initiative. The final product of this work has been a collection of 30 posters with illustrations and taglines alluding to Earth Charter principles and values, as studied and selected by the students.

A group of schools from the city of Salir involved 13 teachers and 291 students, from different disciplines and different levels of primary education, in the Project. The schools produced and distributed a collection of eight post cards that were illustrated by students on the basis of Earth Charter principles. The 16 principles of the document were transcribed on 2,000 post cards, thanks

to funding from the Municipal Chamber of Loulé. The local community publicly commended the outcome of this project during commemorative events related to Sprig Day, held in May.

In addition, an Earth Charter Child and Youth Forum was held in Algarve in 2007. The 300 participants included students, teachers, parents, heads of education and different entities within the project, technicians and members of local organizations.

This forum, by giving a leading role and voice to children and youth, served to publicly highlight the results of those projects that had been elaborated by four schools involved.

This Project has enabled curricular content and interdisciplinary subject areas to be incorporated into the diverse initiatives undertaken by the partner schools in Education for Sustainable Development and environmental education. These were then contextualized within the framework of national and international objectives and strategies by providing interveners with a theoretical basis and a policy guiding pedagogical practice within the field. Further details about the project can be accessed by visiting the blog: <http://is-ct.blogspot.com>.

In general terms, the methodology for applying the Earth Charter Project: A Tool for Sustainability, is structured as follows:

Teacher training workshop

Teachers involved in the project must attend a Training Workshop for promoting competences in the field of Education for Sustainable Development in general, and for exploring the pedagogical value of the Earth Charter in particular.

Pedagogical exploration of the Earth Charter in the classroom

Pedagogical exploration is based on the development of professional competences within Education for Sustainable Development, as well as on the pedagogical use of the Earth Charter by other teachers, regardless of

educational level or discipline. **Examples of competences include to:**

- Identify which Earth Charter principles are suitable and relevant to their teaching practice.
- Integrate them into their classes (e.g. course content).
- Write a report detailing all activities that were carried out, identifying: which is (are) the principle(s) and value(s) of the Earth Charter that were selected for pedagogical exploration; which course content served as a base for this exploration; and, what is the pedagogical methodology employed.

Meetings with education authorities and other partners

In addition to the school meetings required for developing the project, the coordinator(s), once appointed, should participate in the Local Committee of the project.

Contact with the community

It is crucial to develop a non-formal education programme for local community members within the framework of life-long learning. In Algarve, for example, the In Loco Association is designed to develop such initiatives in partnership with local schools/groups. Within the context of developing an Earth Charter for a community (Commitment Charter), it might be useful to draft a questionnaire for members of the local population. First, this questionnaire will serve to raise awareness about the project, the Earth Charter and the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. Additionally, it will obtain valuable input from the local population for the creation of their community's Commitment Charter.

In addition to sensitizing participants about adopting more sustainable ways of living, each class/ school/ group/community should create a Commitment Charter – summarizing the vision/reading of the students (and other members of the educational community) about the principles and values inherent to the Earth Charter. These Commitment Charters should become the base for the project's final product.

Lessons Learned

After two years of experimenting with the pedagogical use of the Earth Charter, we can confirm that the Earth Charter is a very useful tool for developing the professional competences of educators and teachers regarding Education for Sustainable Development. This is indispensable for educating our children and youth for a better world. The vast diversity and amount of documents available on the Internet offer good support resources for teachers' work. However, it is also crucial to offer training sessions and promote knowledge-sharing, as well as to carry out follow-up visits and project evaluations in the schools, in order to achieve project objectives and build sustainable partnerships.

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