

## **The Earth Charter: A Blue Print for Survival**

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Global survival is an issue of concern to us all. In the North and the South, in the East and the West. To the rich or the poor, the powerful and the marginalised. The world community's deep concern for the earth's depleting resources, vanishing species and declining quality of life was first seriously raised at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment at Stockholm in 1972. Twenty years and dozens of international conferences later, these issues were brought together with those of growing poverty and human degradation at the Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. In addition to more than a hundred heads of state, this conference brought thousands of diplomats, business leaders, non-governmental representatives and other stakeholders directly into the process of setting the international sustainable development agenda. The wide media coverage of the event confirmed and legitimised these issues in the minds of thinking citizens everywhere.

The immediate outcomes of the Rio conference included not only the Conventions on Climate Change and Biodiversity, Agenda 21 and the Rio Declaration of Principles, but also institutional frameworks such as the new UN Commission on Sustainable Development and a strengthened Global Environment Facility. Perhaps the most long lasting impact of the conference was, however, the realisation by the various "major groups" – women's organisations, trade unions, interfaith associations, professional bodies, etc. that each of them has a responsibility for bringing about the conditions needed to make development sustainable. As a result, many sectoral bodies have come into being all over the world, not least the Local Agenda 21 movement covered in last month's issue of this newsletter.

Civil society has been responsible for many of these initiatives; one of the most important being the Earth Council which was set up with its headquarters in Costa Rica by a group of leading NGOs which included Development Alternatives. Over the past five years, the Earth Council has been engaged in several pioneering ventures such as the design and setting up of an "Ombudsman" to mediate environmental and resource conflicts, the promotion of National Councils for Sustainable Development to act as multi-stakeholder roundtables at the country level, information services and the formulation of an "Earth Charter".

The Earth Charter is envisaged as a universal statement of the ethical principles that must underlie sustainable development. "Its purpose is to codify the relationship that humanity has with nature on the one hand and with future generations on the other," says Development Alternatives' President Ashok Khosla who took active part in the Rio process and the setting up of the Earth Council. Much of the inspiration for the charter comes from Maurice Strong, secretary-general of the Rio summit and Mikhail

Gorbachev, former president of the Soviet Union and now head of the international NGO, Green Cross.

The Earth Charter aims to create public awareness and widespread commitment by people everywhere to rejuvenate the earth. The first draft was presented in March 1997 at the Rio + 5 Conference organised by the Earth Council, also at Rio. Subsequently, consultations on the Earth Charter were initiated worldwide to get both feedback to improve the document and to generate constituencies for its adoption. The Earth Council requested Development Alternatives and People First to organise consultations in India, to get an Indian perspective on the charter. The first consultation took place at Bangalore on December 13, and the second at New Delhi on December 19. Both were open to participation by NGOs, government representatives, environmentalists, academics, scientists, other professionals and concerned citizens. Participants were invited to give their suggestions on the current, "benchmark" draft of the charter and on the "Indian Perspective" which had been prepared over the preceding months through an extensive series of smaller, more specialised consultations.

Participants broke into groups, which were requested to deliberate on four issues pertinent to the charter: human development, resource management, governance and ideology for global sustainability. More than 140 people participated in the Bangalore session, and about one hundred in the consultation at Delhi. The day-long meetings in both places followed similar formats. Each session began with an inaugural address by Ashok Khosla, who briefly traced the background of the Earth Charter. He pointed out that although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted fifty years ago by the United Nations, was certainly a pioneering and commendable effort, it entirely ignored humanity's responsibilities towards nature and the earth's life-support systems.

Its emphasis on peace and security issues was quite understandable, given the historical circumstances – coming as it did right after the trauma of the Second World War – and in view of the fact that the issues of planetary survival had not yet emerged on the UN's radar screen. However, after three decades of intensive debate on environmental and equity issues, we need now to go much further than the human rights declaration could.

Coming to the focus of the day's consultation, Dr. Khosla described the Earth Charter, the current version of which is the result of many successive drafts, as a step beyond the Universal Declaration. He recounted how People First's Managing Trustee S. K. Sharma and he had sat through several meetings with experts in different fields to formulate the Indian perspective. He stated that the inputs from the Indian consultations would be sent to the Earth Council and expressed the hope that they would help to enrich the final version of the document. Concluding his address, he said that this Earth Charter process comes at an appropriate time since it provides us with an opportunity to discuss some of the fundamental issues that underlie the "terrible mess" the country finds itself in: growing poverty, illiteracy, alienation and environmental devastation.

At the Bangalore meeting, Dr. Amitava Mukherjee, Director of Action Aid and a co-host of the consultation then raised the need for civil society – the NGO sector – to take

responsibility for bringing about a reorientation of the development process. He pointed out that we now need to generate a far higher level of commitment at the individual and community level to solving the problems of social injustice and environmental destruction. At the consultation in Delhi, Mrs. Kamla Chaudhury, a member of the global Earth Charter committee elaborated on the fundamental changes needed in today's social paradigms. "The Earth Charter is about renegotiating our relationship with nature," she said, lamenting that there was more talk than action on the imperatives of the charter. "We need to take a U-turn" in the area of development, she said, pointing to the need for fundamentally different alternatives. She ascribed the current mess to the dichotomy between the western ideal of achievement, based on "having", and the Indian heritage of "being", realised through renunciation and disinterested action. These are values that Mahatma Gandhi promoted throughout his life. She advised India's return to her roots, in place of the mindless copying of the West that had characterised the nation's post-independence politics and culture. Her hypothesis was that the "starting point of the Earth Charter must be the self," and this in turn would lead to a reconnection with the earth. And this process had to be rooted in the spiritual wellsprings of a nation.

Mr. S.K. Sharma, who rounded up the pre-lunch session before group discussions began, focused on the political agenda for realising the ideal of sustainable development. Quoting Thomas Jefferson — "I know of no safe repository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves" — he recommended Gandhian democracy as the best instrument to actualise the Earth Charter. The Village Republic, as envisaged by Gandhi, is a system of governance with a soul, with the people free to participate in the decisions that affect them. The sense of ownership, they thus acquire, encourages them to husband and conserve the nation's resources. This can, he stated, be possible only if power moves upwards from the panchayat or village government and citizens have the right to referendum. Moreover, the very essence of Gandhian economics is sustainable development, based on restrained consumption and local industries. "We need simple, swadeshi housewife economics," said Mr. Sharma, learning to manage within our means rather than being burdened with huge foreign debts. Indian democracy, in its present form, is sick through huge overheads, created by an enormous bureaucracy. The costs of unnecessary government structures need to be drastically reduced. He ended by making an impassioned plea for a Satyagraha for a new Bharat, to 'exorcise the colonial ghost' and to eliminate the inappropriate systems of governance left behind by the British.

The discussions that followed yielded eight to ten group presentations in each consultation. On the fundamental issues underlying the imperatives of sustainability, there was considerable degree of commonality among these, though much variation on the specific issues chosen. At both meetings, there was solid consensus on the urgent need to bring about a more equitable society in which women and the huge rural population must be empowered through local self-government and better access to livelihood opportunities. Some insisted that the fundamental issue relates to the introduction of sustainable, holistic lifestyles that conserve resources; others put greater emphasis on the need for people-oriented government systems and more people-friendly economic policies.

A large number of participants put their bet on value-based and vocational education and a return to the traditional Indian ethos of the unity of all life, enshrined in the phrase, 'Vasudeva Kutumbakam'. One of the groups enlarged the last point by suggesting global citizenship. Another differed from the Gandhian perspective by stating that there were other options. A note of dissent from some of the younger age group in the consultation urged participants to go beyond 'abstract goals' and acknowledge the potential for 'a revolution' in the Earth Charter and the satyagraha, to be launched by People First in mid-January.

What clearly emerged from the deliberations, conducted in a spirit of intellectual bonhomie, was that there is a growing number of people who care not only for the future of India but of the earth, as the home of all humanity. And a broad recognition that these concerns transcend national boundaries.

After the presentations, and the subsequent – highly animated interchange among the groups, the conveners summed up the day's proceedings. It was widely agreed that to bring about the policy changes needed and to facilitate the transition to a sustainable society, strong pressure would have to be brought by the public on government at various levels. He expressed the view that a movement of the type called for by many participants at the consultation could succeed in doing this. But it would require much coherence of purpose across a broad spectrum of the public and a strong commitment to go beyond discussion to concrete action. It was necessary to bring about structural changes, something that would be strongly resisted by those whose interests are vested in the status quo. He pointed out that group efforts had a better chance of succeeding and new instruments of public action would be needed. The citizens' voice could be heard only through referendum. Along with this, changes in laws were needed to ensure transparency in governance. He acknowledged the deep concerns that had emerged from the discussions.

Mr. Sharma concluded the session by reiterating the relevance of Gandhian ideology in the exercise of building a sustainable society and truly democratic polity. While the people were the ultimate conscience-keepers of democracy, he argued, a sovereign rights commission could be instituted to function as their formal voice in governance. He mooted the possibility of filing a petition before the Human Rights Commission to examine changes in the Indian Constitution. He stressed the need, at the same time, to nurture the pluralistic Indian world-view.

While assuring the participants that their views would be conveyed to the Earth Charter drafting committee, he also expressed the view that the discussions had considerable value beyond the specific purpose of that document. He hoped that the on-going process, of which the consultation is a part, would accelerate the creation of a more sustainable India. Many participants agreed that this process needs to be continued and made commitments to help carry it further.

The Earth Charter process in India was organised by Development Alternatives and co-hosted by Action Aid. The events in Bangalore and Delhi were made possible through a

generous grant from the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for which the participants expressed their sincere gratitude.

### **People's Earth Charter**

The Earth Charter is envisioned as a universal statement of fundamental values and principles, that will inspire and guide people and nations towards sustainable development. The goal is to develop a "People's Earth Charter", broadly accepted by civil society institutions and associations worldwide, that will encourage the United Nations, hopefully by the year 2000, to adopt a universally accepted Earth Charter'.

The process to formulate the Earth Charter began after the Rio Conference in 1992. The Earth Council, with Maurice Strong as its chairman, was set up to initiate, sustain and monitor the process. Consultations on the charter are being held world wide, both in various regions and countries, and among the different sectors. A working draft is being prepared for the consideration of the Earth Charter Commission at its meeting, scheduled for January 1999. Recommendations made at the consultations by participants will be incorporated into the draft before it is submitted to the commission.