

## Chapter 27

### Learning and living with the Earth Charter

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We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations. (Earth Charter Preamble)

#### Introduction

We take the concept of social learning as particularly apt for the processes at work in the community of commitment and practice of the Earth Charter Youth Initiative (ECYI). The ECYI is a small, dynamic group of young Earth Charter advocates from around the world.

The Earth Charter itself is a declaration of fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable, and peaceful world (Appendix 27.1). We see it as an inclusive ethical vision seeking to inspire in all peoples a new sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility for the human family and the larger living world. The Earth Charter is a statement of ethics developed through a larger social learning process of worldwide participation by many tens of thousands of stakeholders in meetings and online discourse over thirteen years. We describe the Earth Charter as a people's treaty and a living document. The Earth Charter Steering Committee decided at its meeting in Amsterdam, in November 2005, to ask the Earth Charter community to suggest changes and improvements in the text itself for future consideration.

Founded in 2000, the Earth Charter Youth Initiative includes several hundred young leaders in some forty countries. The mission of the ECYI is to encourage young people to bring alive the values of justice, sustainability, and peace as they are articulated in the Earth Charter, and to effect positive changes by using the Earth Charter as an ethical guideline.

We believe that the work and structure of the Earth Charter Youth Initiative can be effectively examined through the lens of social learning. Vandenabeele and Wildemeersch (1998) write that social learning is a collaborative reframing process

involving multiple interest groups or stakeholders, and is located in the multitude of actions, experiences, interactions, and social situations of everyday life. In bringing together youth across geographic, cultural, and religious boundaries, the ECYI engages young people in just such a collaborative learning process. By encouraging local stakeholders to decide on their own ways of translating the global values and vision of the Earth Charter to the specific contexts of their local communities, they are encouraged to take ownership of the document.

The ECYI strives for a kind of ripple effect – such as after someone throws a stone into a lake, each ripple creating another one until the whole lake vibrates. The more stones that are thrown into the water, the more the ripples can transform into waves – waves of healing water to wash the wounds of our fragmented societies and our tortured planet (Slaby 2005). Grassroots youth activities around the world create a substantive process. In this way, the Earth Charter Youth Initiative demonstrates social learning that is “collaborative and collective, i.e. ‘learning communities’ or groups of stakeholders...working together to probe, discuss, and test various insights and solutions to...environmental problems, and forming networks to promote continuous interaction and communication” (Krasny and Lee 2002).

## **History and provenance of the Earth Charter**

The saga of the writing of the Earth Charter began in 1987 in the lead-up to the 1992 Rio United Nations Conference on Environment and Development and covered thirteen years in all. In the preparatory process, many governments disagreed with the idea of an ethical commitment, so efforts within the United Nations structure were ended. It was also felt that there could be an imposition of an environmental agenda on the global south by northern nations.

Therefore, in 1994, a civil society initiative was launched to advance the development of a people’s charter of ethical principles for sustainability. Under the leadership of Maurice F. Strong and Mikhail Gorbachev, the Earth Council was established. The Earth Charter Commission with worldwide membership was formed in 1997. An International Secretariat was established, and a formal drafting process took place from 1997 to 2000.

From a social learning perspective, the process that was used to draft the Earth Charter is quite noteworthy. We believe it to be the most open and participatory collaboration ever used in preparing a global document. Hearings were held throughout the world. Both the Drafting Committee and the Earth Charter Commission, which approved the final wording, were large and widely representative of a diversity of regions of the world, races and ethnicities, faith

traditions, and backgrounds. Tens of thousands of additional stakeholders participated in regional, national, and internet-based Earth Charter drafting conferences.

These efforts proved extremely valuable in highlighting areas of consensus, as well as areas of conflict, in relation to the structuring and phrasing of early drafts of the Earth Charter (Earth Charter Commission 2000, Vilela and Corcoran 2005).<sup>54</sup> One such example is from the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, which became deeply involved in the debate concerning the wording of the Earth Charter text; in particular with regard to Principle 7 of Benchmark Draft II, “Treat all living beings with compassion”. This was because of the interpretation of the word ‘compassion’. Compassion for animals is a very important notion in many religious traditions, but it was unacceptable among the indigenous hunting cultures as related to animals. The Inuit and Hindu stakeholders represented “totally different cognitive agents with multiple perspectives” (Röling 2002). After significant deliberation, the notion of ‘respect and consideration’ in relation to animals was accepted by all. In terms of social learning theory, we believe this example represents what Niels Röling (2002) has called ‘distributed cognition’, or ‘different but complimentary contributions’ to the Earth Charter drafting process.

The last thirty years of international dialogue on environment and development have produced an array of international declarations and paths of action that, together, articulate the international community’s understanding of sustainable development. The unique contribution of the Earth Charter is that it provided an integration of the values and principles contained in these documents – and was then refined by a decade-long civil society consultation process where a multiplicity of vantage points and perspectives were included.

This provided credibility and a framework for making clear the ethical vision for sustainable development. The Earth Charter also has the capacity to deal with several of the other problems of social learning in education for sustainable development. It can bring meaning to the multiplicity of viewpoints, diversity of ecologies, and complexity of cultures in which learning for sustainable development must take place.

We know such a vision takes form in a specific cultural setting and at a particular scale. In reality, then, challenges in learning for sustainable development emerge in local interpretation and local implementation approaches. We think it is useful

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<sup>54</sup> This story is as told by Mirian Vilela, Executive Director of the Earth Charter International Secretariat, and Peter Blaze Corcoran in *Building Consensus on Shared Values* in Corcoran (2005).

to have the context of an overarching ethical framework to make sense of the diversities and multiplicities of practice.

## **Social learning within the Earth Charter Youth Initiative**

In this chapter, we reflect upon the learning that takes places within the Earth Charter Youth Initiative at two levels: in the small local youth groups that comprise the Earth Charter youth network, and in the international virtual community of electronic communication. At both levels, the initiated processes of social learning are transformative to individuals and communities alike. Social learning has been described as “collective and collaborative learning that links biophysical to the social, cultural and political spheres, the local to the global arena, and action to reflection” (Finger and Verlaan 1995). In this sense, we believe that by engaging with the Earth Charter, young people not only learn about the different aspects of sustainable development, but experience themselves as active promoters of change and contributors to global discourse on sustainability.

Earth Charter community level youth activity includes strictly local efforts inspired by the Earth Charter’s call to act collectively and locally towards the common goal of fostering sustainable development. In particular, Subprinciple 12.c of the Earth Charter says, “Honor and support the young people of our communities, enabling them to fulfill their essential role in creating sustainable societies”. Initiatives of local Earth Charter Youth Groups, as they are known, such as those in The Philippines to campaign locally against the introduction of genetically modified organisms, are analyzed below.

Initiatives on a larger national scale, such as the Earth Charter Youth Group in Sierra Leone, are then described. This group uses the tenets of a specific principle of the Earth Charter, Principle 16, to reconcile ex-combatants of the horrible decade-long civil war with their local communities. Although the geographies, technologies, and socio-political contexts of Earth Charter activists vary from nation to nation, common aspects of social learning are found in the projects of the ECYI network. In these cases, stakeholders – Earth Charter youth – demonstrate interactive problem-solving, conflict resolution, shared learning, convergence of goals, and concerted action as they promote the ethical values and principles of the Earth Charter: respect and care for the community of life; ecological integrity; social and economic justice; and democracy, non-violence, and peace.

### **Locally in The Philippines**

The Eco Trekkers Society, Inc. (ETSI) of Negros Occidental, The Philippines, was created as a college organization at the Technical University of The Philippines

– Visayas and solely as an adventure club.<sup>55</sup> At the time of inception, members' interests focused on mountaineering and outdoors activities. However, in response to timber poaching and illegal forest activities encountered while hiking on the island of Negros Occidental, as well as genetically engineered 'Bt-Corn' introduced throughout The Philippines, the group widened its focus to include environmental awareness and education.

The shift in focus from recreation and social outings to environmental and educational activism demonstrates a key tenet of social learning: stakeholders learning and responding through observation and interaction with their social and environmental context. In 2002, ETSI formally registered as a non-governmental youth organization with the goal to "advance the role of (Filipino) youth and actively involve them in the protection and promotion of sustainable development" (Yap 2005). In 2003, the group registered as an official Earth Charter Youth Group. The group has endorsed the Earth Charter as its guiding principles and ethical framework.

By basing their local activities on the ethical principles of the Earth Charter, Eco Trekkers expresses its solidarity with youth organizations who are working on similar issues in other parts of the world. However, the process of locally adapting the Earth Charter is not a linear one. The Earth Charter is not used as an 'ultimate truth' that has to be strictly applied to any given situation or local context. Rather, we see it as a stimulus to reflect upon the aims and values that guide our collective behavior. This questioning of guiding motivations makes room for manifold processes of social learning.

Maarleveld and Dangbegnon have written that social learning includes "learning by individuals through interaction with their social context ...learning pertaining to social issues ...and learning that results in recognizable social entities" (1999). Against a backdrop of youth unemployment and environmental degradation, Eco Trekkers' main focus is organizing youth from a grassroots level, where poverty and lack of education often hinders young people from actively participating in finding solutions to issues that affect them. In particular, the Eco Trekkers Earth Charter Youth Group embraces the environmental and ecological aspects of the Earth Charter.

One main facet of Eco Trekkers outreach and education programs is to campaign locally against genetically modified organisms (GMOs). It is based on Earth Charter Subprinciple 5.d, "Control and eradicate non-native or genetically

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<sup>55</sup> This story is as told by youth activist Khyn P. Yap in *Using the Earth Charter in Local Campaigns Against Genetically Modified Organisms* in Corcoran (2005).

modified organisms harmful to native species and the environment, and prevent introduction of such harmful organisms.” While other activist groups lobby for the government’s rejection of GMOs, the young people of ETSI work at a local level to educate consumers in their community about the threat that GMOs pose to health and environment. They do this by organizing small group discussions in schools, hosting monthly public forums, distributing flyers that list GMO foods sold in local markets, and displaying public exhibits that warn about the risks of introducing engineered crops. This dialogue engages Earth Charter Youth within and among local communities. Against this background, discussions on the Earth Charter principle on GMOs broadened the participants’ perspectives and revealed the inextricable interconnection of The Philippines’ environmental and economic challenges.

By using the Earth Charter Youth Group identity, ETSI demonstrates its connectedness to other youth around the world who promote the vision of the Earth Charter in their local communities. In addition, Eco Trekkers sees participation in the Earth Charter Youth Initiative as a way to strengthen its efforts of disseminating the Earth Charter within its community, within its networks of outdoor recreation and adventuring, and within its networks of the wider youth sustainability movement. Khyn Yap, President of Eco Trekkers Society, Inc., has written

“Our involvement in the Earth Charter Youth Initiative makes us realize that we are not alone in striving to make our world a better place, but that there are individuals like us who persistently pursue peace and sustainable development. We became aware that small local actions, like...campaigns against harmful genetically modified organisms, make a big impact nationally and internationally. And if we all acted together, who says that we cannot build a sustainable and peaceful world?” (Yap 2005)

The worldwide global dialogue taking place among the larger group of the Earth Charter Youth Initiative, to which Yap alludes, is analyzed below.

## **Nationally in Sierra Leone**

In some parts of the world, several Earth Charter Youth Groups are formed within a single nation, as in the case of Sierra Leone. Youth activists across the country have united as the Earth Charter Youth Group-Sierra Leone (ECYG-SL).<sup>56</sup> Where

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<sup>56</sup> This story is as told by youth activist Sylvanus Murray in *Using the Earth Charter with Ex-Combatants in Sierra Leone* in Corcoran (2005).

Eco Trekkers works toward sustainability through the Earth Charter's call for environmental activism, the Sierra Leone group responds to issues of social and economic justice, as well as democracy, non-violence, and peace. Sierra Leone currently faces the challenge of social reconstruction after enduring a civil war that concluded in 2002. The bulk of the warring factions were comprised largely of young people. They took instructions from their older commanders to loot, burn, rape, and kill. Thus, the issue of reconciling ex-combatants with their local communities is imperative in the current post-war situation.

Working as a committee of representatives from umbrella youth organizations and community-based organizations, Earth Charter Youth Group-Sierra Leone uses the Earth Charter to "support mutual understanding, solidarity, and cooperation" (Earth Charter Subprinciple 16.a) between ex-combatants and their communities. This work is done through community meetings and sensitization sessions for young men who are being disarmed, demobilized, and reintegrated into society. These sessions gave former soldiers the chance to repent for the deeds of cruelty that they were forced to commit during the times of civil war, and they were welcomed by the victimized community. In other instances, the dialogues hinge on the economic problems that were among the root causes of the conflict, and lead to collective efforts to generate new forms of income for the members of the community.

ECYG-SL empowers ex-combatants to participate in projects that develop and safeguard communities, with a special emphasis on peacemaking, tolerance, ecological, and cultural components. This work relates to social learning in that it allows for "interaction in which all who feel the need are free and have equal chances to express their views, and that they do so in an understandable, legitimate, and truthful manner" (Maarleveld and Dangbegnon 1999). This interaction is particularly important in sensitization and tolerance-building. It provides a framework for creating a safe environment in which different views are shared in a truthful, understanding, and non-violent manner. The skills of peaceful conflict resolution and conflict transformation are prerequisites for social learning, as only on their basis can opposing views and opinions be regarded as beneficial and enriching to one's own perspective.

Members of the Sierra Leone youth group use the Earth Charter as a comprehensive strategy to prevent violent conflict and to manage and resolve environmental conflict disputes. One example of action comes from the Firestone Community, where Earth Charter youth activists established a home-garbage collection program that created employment opportunities for young people, helped to create sanitary conditions, and reduced the number of violent conflicts over pollution in the local river and water supply.

Sylvanus Murray, coordinator of the Earth Charter Youth Group in Sierra Leone, sees the links of environmental protection, economic development, and peace espoused in the Earth Charter. He writes “In search of a new vision that promotes economic stability, respect for all forms of life, good governance, human rights, and democracy, the youths in our country have found the Earth Charter as a guiding document. ... [T]hese issues must be addressed in an integrated approach, as it is outlined in the Earth Charter” (Murray 2005).

## **Social learning and the Earth Charter Youth Initiative in cyberspace**

Social learning theory recognizes the existence of collective learning goals and the need for creating the right conditions for stimulating the learning of individuals. It can be viewed as an intentionally-created, purposeful learning process that hinges on the presence of the ‘other’ or others (Wals and Heymann 2004). Since 2002, the Internet has been the primary means of communication through which ideas and experiences are shared among the widely-scattered Earth Charter Youth Initiative. We see it as giving a human ‘face’ to the abstraction of interconnectedness. E-mail communication links activists from different cultural and economic circumstances. In this process of linking action, diversity, and global thinking, much learning takes place. It is a challenging but hopeful process which creates shared participation and engagement. This zeal and commitment contributes an informed perspective to the larger Earth Charter Initiative.

As an example of this electronic communication, the Earth Charter Youth Initiative has discussed the difficulties of locally adapting the Earth Charter principles. A Chinese member of the network shared experiences of how difficult it is to clear the ground for the Earth Charter’s approach to propagating ethical principles in the cultural context of her country. As a reaction, Canadian ECYI members with Chinese background shared their insights of how they involved their peers in meaningful dialogues and activities on the Earth Charter. This Chinese-Canadian interaction resulted in a partnership between the two organizations.

The Earth Charter Youth Initiative benefits from its loose and creative structure, linking youth around the world who share the ethical vision of the Earth Charter and strive to make it a reality for their local and national communities. These youth have developed a remarkable range of ideas for bringing the Earth Charter into action and spreading its message among 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 pupils and students on the Balearic Islands who drafted their own local Earth Charters and lobbied their school-boards for endorsements.

By facilitating the sharing of local and international youth experiences and successful projects using the Earth Charter, the ECYI serves as a global 'high five' for young activists around the world to acknowledge and support each other beyond geographical, cultural and religious boundaries. The groups and individuals who are linked through the internet get a sense that they are not alone in their efforts. This connection empowers them to stay active and helps to recharge their enthusiasm.

Through the Earth Charter Youth Initiative, young people from the Western world are brought into direct exchange with young activists from Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and Asia. Activists share the vision of creating a more sustainable world, but translate the principles of the Earth Charter into different culture-specific programs and projects. In entering into the cross-cultural online communication, participants learn from diverse approaches to Earth Charter principles. A sense of solidarity is strengthened through transnational collaboration and global North-South partnerships.

Recently, such youth perspective has been crucial to the global activists' meeting celebrating five years of the Earth Charter, which was attended by many from the ECYI. They also contributed significantly to a new book published for the occasion, *The Earth Charter in Action: Toward a Sustainable World* (Corcoran 2005). Here, they represent about one out of five contributors.

## **Conclusion**

We hope the authentic participation of youth in the Earth Charter movement can be a model; there is a great need globally to integrate the knowledge and perspectives of youth into society. This is the aim of learning and living with the Earth Charter – personal empowerment in order to participate actively in sustainable development.

In addition to the significant learning at the individual level, important social learning is enabled by the structure of the Earth Charter Youth Initiative. This social learning takes place in locally-organized projects and in nationally-organized efforts. Learning from these initiatives enriches the global virtual community of electronic exchange. This organic process represents the kind of social learning that informs and strengthens the work at all levels.

Since its launch, the Earth Charter Youth Initiative has confirmed youth's interest in establishing a sound, ethical foundation for the emerging global society. This takes place with no significant financial assistance, but rather by nurturing the enthusiasm of dedicated young people ready to spend their free time striving

to make the world a better place. Young people, who are directly and adversely affected by economic globalisation, have realised how essential it is to find holistic solutions to these challenges. They have demonstrated that the Earth Charter plants seeds of hope in people's hearts. Youth who are learning and living with the Earth Charter can use the tool of social learning to reflect critically upon their work.

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## **Appendix 27.1**

### ***The Earth Charter Preamble and main principles***

<http://www.earthcharter.org>

The full Earth Charter consists of a Preamble, sixteen main principles with sixty-one subprinciples, and “A way forward”. This appendix includes the Preamble and the main principles only.

#### ***Preamble***

We stand at a critical moment in Earth’s history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.

Earth, our home

Humanity is part of a vast evolving universe. Earth, our home, is alive with a unique community of life. The forces of nature make existence a demanding and uncertain adventure, but Earth has provided the conditions essential to life’s evolution. The resilience of the community of life and the well-being of humanity depend upon preserving a healthy biosphere with all its ecological systems, a rich variety of plants and animals, fertile soils, pure waters, and clean air. The global environment with its finite resources is a common concern of all peoples. The protection of Earth’s vitality, diversity, and beauty is a sacred trust.

The global situation

The dominant patterns of production and consumption are causing environmental devastation, the depletion of resources, and a massive extinction of species. Communities are being undermined. The benefits of development are not shared equitably and the gap between rich and poor is widening. Injustice, poverty, ignorance, and violent conflict are widespread and the cause of great suffering. An unprecedented rise in human population has overburdened ecological and

social systems. The foundations of global security are threatened. These trends are perilous – but not inevitable.

The challenges ahead

The choice is ours: form a global partnership to care for Earth and one another or risk the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life. Fundamental changes are needed in our values, institutions, and ways of living. We must realize that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more. We have the knowledge and technology to provide for all and to reduce our impacts on the environment. The emergence of a global civil society is creating new opportunities to build a democratic and humane world. Our environmental, economic, political, social, and spiritual challenges are interconnected, and together we can forge inclusive solutions.

Universal responsibility

To realize these aspirations, we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities. We are at once citizens of different nations and of one world in which the local and global are linked. Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world. The spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life is strengthened when we live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature.

We urgently need a shared vision of basic values to provide an ethical foundation for the emerging world community. Therefore, together in hope we affirm the following interdependent principles for a sustainable way of life as a common standard by which the conduct of all individuals, organizations, businesses, governments, and transnational institutions is to be guided and assessed.

### **Principles**

I. Respect and care for the community of life

1. Respect Earth and life in all its diversity.
2. Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.
3. Build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful.
4. Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.

In order to fulfill these four broad commitments, it is necessary to:

II. Ecological integrity

5. Protect and restore the integrity of Earth's ecological systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain life.
6. Prevent harm as the best method of environmental protection and, when knowledge is limited, apply a precautionary approach.
7. Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being.
8. Advance the study of ecological sustainability and promote the open exchange and wide application of the knowledge acquired.

III. Social and economic justice

9. Eradicate poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative.
10. Ensure that economic activities and institutions at all levels promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner.
11. Affirm gender equality and equity as prerequisites to sustainable development and ensure universal access to education, health care, and economic opportunity.
12. Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.

IV. Democracy, nonviolence, and peace

13. Strengthen democratic institutions at all levels, and provide transparency and accountability in governance, inclusive participation in decision making, and access to justice.
14. Integrate into formal education and life-long learning the knowledge, values, and skills needed for a sustainable way of life.
15. Treat all living beings with respect and consideration.
16. Promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace.

