

High-Level Dialogue of the General Assembly
On Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace
Informal Interactive Hearing with Civil Society

“Best Practices & Strategies for Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation Going Forward”

4 – 5 October 2007

Respondent: Steven C. Rockefeller, Earth Charter International

Among the many issues addressed by the panel speakers, they have emphasized our common humanity and the need to promote shared values. They have provided us with inspiring examples of social and ecological responsibility. They have called attention to the religion of the heart, the deep spirituality that is the well spring of our great religious traditions and the source of compassion, love, healing and reconciliation. Building upon what has been said in this regard, I would like to highlight the importance of ethics and of clarifying and acting upon our shared values. In short, my message is: promote global ethics in the midst of our rich cultural and religious diversity as a core strategy.

Our ethical values define what we consider to be right and wrong, good and bad in human conduct and in our relations with each other and the larger community of life. Our ethics reflect what kind of person we chose to be and what quality of community life we chose to sustain. Shared values are what make community and cooperation possible. In an increasingly interdependent world where our major challenges can only be addressed in and through international cooperation, shared values and global ethics are essential.

One of the most significant achievements of the United Nations over the past sixty years has been the gradual construction in and through dialogue of a new global ethic beginning with the UN Charter and Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Many UN resolutions affirm the existence of universal values. The challenge is to continue the process of constructing a global ethic in response to the world’s needs and to instill in all people and each new generation an understanding, and appreciation of and commitment to this ethical framework.

In this regard, I would like to call attention to the Earth Charter, which is an important civil society contribution to the development of a new global ethic. It is a declaration of fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable and peaceful world that builds on and extends the shared values affirmed in international law.

The Earth Charter consultation and drafting process is an instructive model of a very successful worldwide, intercultural and interreligious dialogue on shared values. The Earth Charter’s ethical framework for sustainable living and building a global culture of peace is also a valuable teaching tool and guide to action that is being used throughout the world by schools, universities, governments, and NGOs, including UNESCO and IUCN. It can be a valuable resource in advancing the dialogue on shared values and in building support for global ethics and cooperation for peace.

1. The Earth Charter as a Model for Intercultural Dialogue

The Earth Charter's decade long, worldwide consultation and drafting process is a model of a highly productive cross cultural and interreligious dialogue. It was started as a United Nations process and completed by a civil society initiative. It involved the most inclusive and participatory process ever associated with the drafting of an international declaration. Thousands of people and hundreds of organizations, including a large number of religious leaders, participated in the global dialogue.

The methodology used in this dialogue is instructive. Emphasis was put on the increasing interdependence of all peoples and attention focused on the fundamental challenges faced by all peoples. The goal was to identify widely shared ethical values and principles on which humanity must act in order to address these challenges. We found that people from different cultures and religious traditions often have very different philosophical and religious reasons for embracing ethical values many of which they hold in common. In the Earth Charter consultation process we respected and learned from these differences, but we did not try to bridge them. Instead we focused primarily on reaching agreement regarding the basic ethical principles that should guide conduct in the 21st Century. With this focus and close attention to the use of appropriate language, we were able to give expression to the consensus on critical ethical values that is taking form in the emerging global civil society.

Nurturing respect for cultural and religious diversity and developing an understanding of different worldviews is very important. However, intercultural and interreligious dialogue can be especially effective when attention is focused on where different worldviews overlap regarding ethical values and practical action with reference to common problems. The Earth Charter is evidence that with this approach much can be accomplished in laying an ethical foundation for building community locally, regionally and globally.

In the concluding section of the Earth Charter entitled "The Way Forward," the statement is made that "We must deepen and expand the global dialogue that generated the Earth Charter, for we have much to learn from the ongoing collaborative search for truth and wisdom." The Earth Charter itself can be used as a framework for ongoing interreligious and intercultural dialogue. It focuses attention on the critical issues and ethical choices that will shape the future of life on Earth. Many organizations today are giving special attention to the dialogue between Islam and the West, and the Earth Charter is already being used effectively in the Middle East. A number of leaders from Muslim nations, including Ambassador Mohammed Sahnoun of Algeria, Princess Basma bin Talal of Jordan, and Ambassador Erna Witoelar of Indonesia played major roles in the creation of the Earth Charter and continue to promote its use and implementation.

2. The Earth Charter as a Teaching Tool and Guide to Action

The Earth Charter is a valuable teaching tool for promoting and understanding shared ethical values and global ethics, and it provides an excellent overview of what is required to build a global culture of peace in the 21st Century. The Earth Charter is already being used widely in schools, colleges, universities and seminaries, and Earth

Charter International (ECI) operates an Earth Charter Center for Education at the UN-mandated University for Peace in Costa Rica. ECI has also just launched a new initiative designed to engage religious communities with the Earth Charter.

The Earth Charter is a valuable teaching resource for a number of reasons.

- It emphasizes that all human beings are one human family interrelated with the larger community of life and all share a common destiny.
- It clarifies the critical challenges and choices facing the human community.
- It presents an inclusive, integrated ethical vision that builds on international law and the findings of UN summits, draws upon the wisdom of the world's religions, and expresses the consensus on shared values taking form in civil society.
- Beginning with its preamble and its first principle, the Earth Charter puts strong emphasis on respect for both cultural and biological diversity.
- The Earth Charter, which was initially proposed by the UN World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987, puts special emphasis on the need for environmental protection and sustainable development. The Earth Charter principles present a comprehensive definition of the meaning of sustainable development, and they make clear the interdependence of ecological sustainability, social and economic justice, and non-violence and peace.
- The Earth Charter culminates in its final principles with a vision of “a culture of tolerance, non-violence and peace.” The whole Charter can be read as a declaration on the core elements essential to creating a culture of peace.

UNESCO's conference of member states has endorsed the Earth Charter as a valuable ethical framework for sustainable development and teaching tool, and Earth Charter International is a partner with UNESCO in promoting the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. UNEP is also currently using the Earth Charter in some of its training programs.

The Earth Charter has been translated into over 40 languages and thousands of organizations, including IUCN, governments and religious communities, have endorsed the Declaration. It provides an inclusive and integrated ethical framework that is an effective guide to cooperative action in support of sustainable development and the building of a culture of peace.

In conclusion, I would like to share several reflections on interreligious dialogue and peace and on the Earth Charter and the United Nations. Given the current world situation, interreligious dialogue should be conducted at three different levels. First, each religious tradition needs to hold its own internal dialogues in an effort to ensure that its sacred symbols and texts are not used by extremists to promote intolerance, hatred and violence. Second, there is a need for dialogue among all the religions with the goal of creating a community of the world's religions that is a model of tolerance, mutual respect and peaceful coexistence. There will always be disagreements between various religions, but problematical disagreements should be addressed through ongoing dialogue in a way

that deepens mutual understanding and promotes new insight. Third, the world's religions should be engaged in the larger worldwide dialogue on shared values and global ethics that has gone on at the United Nations for decades and that has been advanced by civil society through initiatives like the Earth Charter. The involvement of the world's religions will deepen this global dialogue. It will also help the world's religions better understand the great challenges that face the human community and will give religious leaders a better sense of how to fulfill their responsibilities as global citizens.

As the United Nations becomes more deeply involved in intercultural and interreligious dialogue, consideration should be given to consolidating some programs and to coordinating initiatives with overlapping goals and objectives. There is recognition of this need in UN General Assembly Resolution 61/221, which requests the Secretary General to ensure "overall coordination and coherence in its interreligious, intercultural and intercivilizational dialogue and cooperation efforts, inter alia, through the designation of a focal unit in the Secretariat to handle these matters." This would be a major step in the right direction. There could be benefits in even greater coordination and collaboration. The Earth Charter's inclusive, integrated ethical framework can be used to suggest other ways of coordinating UN initiatives in support of intercivilizational cooperation, building a culture of peace, and sustainable development. For example, UNESCO could further integrate its work on the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development with its programs in intercultural cooperation and a culture of peace, and the Alliance of Civilizations could help promote the ethics of sustainable living.

Finally, formal recognition in a document adopted by the UN General Assembly of the Earth Charter as an important contribution from civil society to the construction of a global ethical framework for sustainable development and world peace would strengthen the Earth Charter's soft law status and its capacity to help the UN achieve its goals for interreligious and intercultural cooperation for peace.

Note: For more information on the Earth Charter see the Earth Charter website:
www.earthcharter.org