

“The Earth Charter in 2015”
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Earth Charter+15
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It is a privilege to be here with you for this celebration of the 15th anniversary of the launch of the Earth Charter, which took place at the Peace Palace in The Hague. Much has been accomplished in recent years and the Earth Charter’s ethical principles remain profoundly relevant to efforts to find long-term solutions to the major challenges facing humanity.

At the outset, I would like to express my deep appreciation to all of you who have continued to work in so many creative ways to promote the Earth Charter and implement its principles. I want to thank especially Kartikeya Sarabhai and Oscar Motomura for their leadership of the new Earth Charter International Council and for their dedication to the mission of the Earth Charter movement. Mirian Vilela’s leadership of the Earth Charter International Secretariat under challenging circumstances has been outstanding. Mirian, you are an inspiration to us all.

Five years ago Kartikeya hosted us in Ahmedabad, India, for a memorable Earth Charter+10 celebration and conference. It is very good to be back in the Netherlands for Earth Charter+15. For over 20 years, the Netherlands’ support for the Earth Charter movement has been extraordinary. It began with Queen Beatrix and Ruud Lubbers, who at the time was prime minister. Through their efforts a partnership was formed between Maurice Strong and Mikhail Gorbachev and between the Earth Council and Green Cross International, which led eventually to the formation of the Earth Charter Commission and the drafting of the Earth Charter. I extend special thanks to Ruud Lubbers for his far-sighted vision, steadfast leadership, and great generosity over so many years. The leadership of Alide Roerink has been a critical factor in

maintaining strong Dutch support for the Earth Charter and ECI. Alide, we deeply appreciate all you have done to organize this event and bring us together today. Thank you so much.

1. “Laudato Si”

The significance of the Earth Charter has been highlighted in recent days by the new Papal encyclical, “Laudato Si,” which is to a large extent a carefully crafted Christian theological discourse on, and defense of, ethical and spiritual values that are also fundamental to the Earth Charter. At the heart of the Earth Charter is a relational spirituality and an ethic of respect and care for the community of life as a whole. The major theme of the new Papal encyclical is respect and care for all of God’s creation. Even though some Earth Charter supporters may have questions about the position of “Laudato Si” on certain specific issues, Pope Francis’ strong support for ideals and values that are central to the Earth Charter is something for which we should be thankful and something we can and should celebrate. “Laudato Si” will prove to be a powerful teaching tool in seminaries and churches around the world and in other communities. Hopefully it will inspire other religious leaders. Hopefully it will have a significant influence among government leaders as they come together at the United Nations and in Paris later this year to make critical decisions that will impact the future of life on Earth.

2. “Democratic Equality, Economic Inequality and the Earth Charter”

In a recent collection of essays on the Earth Charter edited by Laura Westra and Mirian Vilela, some questions are raised about how the Earth Charter deals with the principle of equality, the growing worldwide problem of economic inequality, and the debate over limits to growth. These are important issues and as a contribution to Earth Charter+15 I have endeavored

to clarify the position of the Earth Charter on these matters in an essay entitled “Democratic Equality, Economic Inequality, and the Earth Charter.” The first half of the essay begins by exploring the meaning of the principle of equality and its economic implications. There follows a brief historical overview of liberal democracy and economic inequality since the American and French Revolutions with a primary focus on the current situation. The second half of the essay considers the principles in the Earth Charter that have been designed to frame the debate on these issues and guide change. In addition, the Earth Charter’s integrated holistic vision leads the essay into an exploration of the interconnection between long-term solutions to poverty and economic inequality and the urgent need for a transition to sustainable ways of living. Equality and sustainability have become interrelated and interdependent ideals and the principal keys to building a better world. The essay includes an analysis of the new UN Sustainable Development Goals from the perspective of the Earth Charter.

There is not time this morning to provide you with an overview of the entire essay, but I do want to comment on the Earth Charter’s strong support for the principle of equality to be sure we are all clear about that. Then I will comment on the UN SDGs.

The principle of equality is the most radical and powerful social and political ideal of the last 250 years of human history. It lies at the heart of the vision of an inclusive, just, democratic society that inspired the American and French Revolutions. Fundamental to the ethical ideal of equality is the belief that all human beings have a common nature and possess an inherent and equal dignity. The elements of humanity’s common nature are identified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights with reason and conscience. Further, equality is closely associated with the ideal of liberty. A society of equals is a society made up of free and independent individuals in which no one should be treated as a mere means and be subjugated to the will of

another. In the words of the first principle of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” In a society of equals, right relationship among people begins with an attitude of mutual respect. Justice means honoring the dignity of the other and securing the fundamental rights and freedoms of each and every person.

The American and French Revolutions rejected the notion of an aristocratic class entitled to special privileges, and poverty and high levels of economic inequality were important factors in the call for radical change. The democratic commitment to equality and freedom has meant that a nation’s economic system is to be judged in the final analysis by its success in providing equality of opportunity and a decent standard of living for all its citizens. Achieving this goal has proved to be extraordinarily difficult. The ideal of equality remains the unfulfilled promise of democracy as a way of life and form of self-government, a vision of freedom, human rights and justice that ever stands in judgement of what has been achieved by society.

Regarding the Earth Charter, there should be no question about the Charter’s full support for the principle of equality. The democratic spirit of equality pervades the entire document. The Earth Charter’s strong support for “universal human rights” makes this very clear. Human rights law is based on the principle of respect for the equal dignity of all human beings and it elaborates what implementation of the principle of equality requires. Earth Charter principle 1.b. explicitly affirms “faith in the inherent dignity of all human beings.” Principle 3.a. states: “ensure that communities at all levels guarantee human rights and fundamental freedoms and provide everyone with an opportunity to realize his or her full potential.”

The Earth Charter calls for protection and promotion of the equal dignity of all citizens in three of its main principles. Principle 9 is the imperative to eradicate poverty. Principle 11 is the imperative to promote the equality of all women and men with an emphasis on universal access

to education, healthcare, and economic opportunity. Principle 12 calls for an end to all discrimination and exclusion that violates human rights. These three principles affirm clearly the equal dignity of all people – of women and men and of the members of all races, religions, nations, ethnic groups, and classes and of people with diverse sexual orientations. The Earth Charter also supports political equality in the form of participatory democracy.

3. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

Now I would like to turn to the UN SDGs. Earlier this year, the UN Secretary-General forwarded to the General Assembly his Synthesis Report on the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda entitled, “The Road to Dignity by 2030.” The center piece of this report are seventeen new SDGs that are designed to supersede the Millennium Development Goals. The new SDGs together with targets and timetables will be formally adopted by the UN at a special summit on sustainable development in September of this year. The SDGs will provide for the next fifteen years a well-integrated international policy framework for ending poverty, reducing inequality, promoting human development, protecting the environment, and addressing climate change. From the perspective of the Earth Charter, agreement on the SDGs by governments is a major step forward.

The SDGs are the product of a broad, inclusive consultation process that engaged civil society, including Earth Charter advocates, as well as governments. They set forth an integrated understanding of the economic, social and environmental challenges that face humanity in the 21st century, which is a prerequisite for a transition to sustainable development. The first eleven of the seventeen SDGs address a broad array of social and economic challenges. Five of these first eleven goals make explicit reference to the need for

sustainability. In addition, Goals 12, 13, 14 and 15 call for sustainable production and consumption and protection and restoration of Earth's ecosystems, including action to combat climate change. Goal 16 is about peace, inclusive societies, accountable institutions, and access to justice. Goal 17 calls for revitalization of the global partnership for sustainable development.

Even though the seventeen SDGs are presented as goals rather than ethical principles, the literary style used to state each SDG is identical to that used to articulate the sixteen Earth Charter principles. Each SDG begins with a verb and is crafted as an urgent call to action. In some cases the wording is quite similar. The Earth Charter vision is more comprehensive and some of the SDGs have a distinctive focus, but by and large the SDGs are in accord with the Earth Charter principles. However, there are some significant differences between the Earth Charter and the UN Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda as described by the Secretary General in his Synthesis Report, and the urgent need for the Earth Charter is greater in 2015 than ever.

In the Synthesis Report of the Secretary General, the Post-2015 Agenda is described as being “built on the principles of human rights..., equality, and sustainability.” It is presented as “a universal agenda,” involving “shared responsibilities for a shared future” and requiring “a sense of the global common good.” However, nowhere in the report is it stated explicitly that these principles and shared responsibilities are a part of a new global *ethic* and define fundamental *moral* responsibilities. Such language is carefully avoided. This in all likelihood reflects political calculations and a concern to avoid controversies with various religious groups, but it involves a questionable strategy.

Ethical values define what a people consider to be right and wrong, good and bad in their relationships. Shared moral values create community and are the foundation upon which legal systems are constructed. Laws that are not in accord with a community's moral outlook are very difficult to enforce. Movements for social change gain wide support when the public becomes convinced that they occupy the moral high ground. The absence of moral engagement underlies the lack of political will that is often cited as a reason why the sustainable development agenda has not been vigorously pursued by state governments. In short, constructing a just, sustainable, and a peaceful world community requires an ethical foundation. The Earth Charter explicitly recognizes this basic need, as does the Pope's new encyclical. Implementation of the SDGs requires the kind of wholehearted dedication that comes only from deep moral commitment. The SDGs should be understood and presented as the expression of widely shared, fundamental ethical ideals that can unite all peoples in a great common endeavor. This is implicit in the Secretary General's Synthesis Report. It needs to be made explicit.

What further differentiates the Earth Charter from the UN Post-2015 Agenda and the SDGs is the Charter's emphasis on respect for nature as a foundational ethical principle for building a sustainable world. In this regard, the organization of the material in the Earth Charter is different from what one finds in the SDGs. The Earth Charter puts its principles on respect for nature and ecological integrity first. The SDGs start with the social and economic agenda. The order of the principles in the Earth Charter reflects recognition that humanity is an interdependent member of the greater community of life, people are dependent on Earth's life support systems, and the human economy is a sub-system of the planetary ecosystem. The Secretary General calls for "a people centered and planet

sensitive agenda” and describes the SDGs as “a paradigm shift for people and planet.” He emphasizes the urgent need to “protect our ecosystems for all societies and our children.” However, he does not acknowledge the intrinsic value of all life forms and affirm that they are worthy of moral consideration quite apart from their instrumental value to people. He does not describe the planet’s biodiversity as a community of life. He stops short of calling for respect for Earth and the greater community of life. Unless humanity changes its attitude toward the planet and other life forms in the fundamental ways described by the Earth Charter and the Pope’s encyclical, it is hard to imagine societies making the difficult and far-reaching changes necessary to achieve sustainability and end poverty.

In short, there is a missing piece in the strategic thinking and planning surrounding the SDGs at the UN. The Earth Charter provides the inclusive ethical vision and rationale needed to buttress and inspire action on the SDGs.

It is especially significant that the new Papal encyclical gives the Earth Charter ethic of respect and care for all life strong support, including an extensive theological defense of the values and principles involved. This is the kind of leadership from religious leaders that the religion and ecology movement has long been calling for. In taking a strong stand on environmental as well as social issues, Pope Francis follows the example of individuals like Patriarch Bartholomew of the Greek Orthodox Church and the Dalai Lama.

Some philosophers and environmental activists have endeavored to promote the principle of respect for nature by supporting the concept of the rights of nature. This approach can be a very effective way to explain and clarify the moral issues involved in human relationships with other species and ecosystems. Some philosophers and legal scholars propose that national and international environmental law adopt language about

the rights of nature. In this regard, the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth (2010), which has been circulated by the government of Bolivia and the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature, presents a carefully crafted example of how this can be done. Even if one does not support the legal use of rights language with regard to non-human species, this document is a powerful educational tool in support of the ethic of respect and care for the greater community of life. In this regard, Earth Charter International should continue to explore how it can meaningfully collaborate with the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature.

There is a further critical issue regarding the UN Post-2015 Agenda and the SDGs. SDG #8 states: “Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth.” Government and business leaders trust that by means of technological innovation and policy changes it will be possible to green an ever expanding economy, decoupling growth from carbon emissions and other damaging environmental impacts. However, a growing number of economists, environmentalists, and religious leaders, now including Pope Francis, are asking: is the idea of “sustained...sustainable economic growth” a realistic goal and solution to our economic and environmental problems?

That economic growth is needed to eradicate poverty cannot be seriously questioned. Some forms of economic growth in fields like renewable energy, education and healthcare can continue to expand without harmful environmental impacts. Technological advances and green policies can move civilization toward sustainability in critical ways. However, it is wishful thinking to imagine that economies in the developed world can grow without limits, population numbers can continue to rise worldwide, and billions of people can enter the global consumer society adopting western lifestyles, without exceeding

critical, ecological tipping points now being identified by Earth system scientists. Given the uncertainties and grave risks humanity faces in this regard, the wise choice is to adopt the precautionary approach affirmed in the Earth Charter.

In a world with ecological boundaries, finding the path to an ecologically sustainable future that is also just and equitable will require a new, deeper understanding of what constitutes the good life and well-being. It will require a new openness to ask what right relationship means in an interdependent world with widespread poverty and inequality. It will require a searching international conversation about the implications of the principles of equality and universal human rights for per capita natural resource consumption as well as per capita greenhouse gas emissions in a world where emissions and consumption must be monitored and regulated.

Will the high consumption nations and high income communities in the developing world—principally the wealthiest 10 percent of the world's people--be willing to adopt the ancient wisdom of moderation as a guideline and reduce their resource consumption so as to ensure that those living in deprivation and future generations will have an opportunity to achieve a decent standard of living? Will the human family make the adjustments necessary to care for the community of life as a whole, securing the ecological space needed to halt the rising extinction of other species?

Building a sustainable and equitable world order in the 21st century involves nurturing a new spiritual and moral awareness that, in the words of the Earth Charter, “we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.” It will entail a new readiness to build a genuine global partnership that protects Earth's biosphere and

shares Earth's finite resources and the benefits of development. The economic and political challenges are formidable, but such is the only sure path to a promising future.

We are entering a new historical moment when transformative change may become possible as never before. All of us here have been blessed to be part of the Earth Charter Initiative. In the days and years ahead the world will need our hope and love. This gathering is a unique opportunity to renew our commitment to the great work that lies before us.