

A Short History of the Earth Charter Initiative

The Earth Charter is a people's declaration on global interdependence and universal responsibility that sets forth fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable, and peaceful world. It endeavors to identify the critical challenges and choices facing humanity in the twenty first century. Its principles are designed to serve "as a common standard by which the conduct of all individuals, organizations, businesses, governments, and transnational institutions is to be guided and assessed." (Earth Charter Preamble) The Earth Charter is the product of a decade long, world-wide, cross-cultural, dialogue on common goals and shared values conducted during the 1990s. This process, which involved the most open and participatory consultation process ever associated with the drafting of an international document, is the primary source of the legitimacy of the Earth Charter as an ethical guide.

I. Origins of the Earth Charter

Among the many recommendations in Our Common Future (1987), the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), is a call for creation of a "Universal Declaration on Environmental Protection and Sustainable Development" in the form of a "new charter" with principles to guide nations in the transition to sustainable development. Building on this recommendation, Maurice F. Strong, the secretary general of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit (UN Conference on Environment and Development), proposed in 1990 that the Summit draft and adopt an Earth Charter. Intergovernmental consultations were held on the Earth Charter during the preparatory process for the Rio Earth Summit, but an intergovernmental agreement on principles for an Earth Charter could not be reached. The Rio Declaration, which was issued by the Summit, contains a valuable set of principles, but it falls short of the inclusive ethical vision that many people hoped to find in the Earth Charter.

Therefore, in 1994, Maurice Strong as chairman of the Earth Council joined with Mikhail Gorbachev in his capacity as president of Green Cross International to launch a new Earth Charter initiative. It was Jim McNeill, secretary general of the WCED, and Queen Beatrix and Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers of The Netherlands who brought Strong and Gorbachev together. The Dutch government provided the initial financial support. The plan was to conduct the project as a civil society initiative and to draft a charter that articulates the consensus taking form in the emerging global civil society on values and principles for a sustainable future.

Ambassador Mohamed Sahnoun of Algeria served as the first executive director of the Earth Charter project during 1995 as a new international consultation process and research in the fields of environmental ethics, sustainable development, and international law got underway. An Earth Charter secretariat was established at the Earth Council in Costa Rica under the management of the executive director of the Earth Council, Maximo Kalaw of the Philippines. In 1996, Mirian Vilela of Brazil became coordinator of Earth Charter activities at the Earth Council. Toward the end of 1996, an Earth Charter Commission was formed to oversee the drafting process. It was co-chaired by Strong and Gorbachev and included a diverse group of twenty-three eminent persons from all the major regions of the world. The Commission invited Steven C.

Rockefeller, a professor of religion and ethics from the United States, to chair and form an international drafting committee. The drafting process, which began in January 1997, required three years.

Hundreds of organizations and thousands of individuals participated in the creation of the Earth Charter. Forty-five Earth Charter national committees were formed. Earth Charter dialogues were conducted throughout the world and on-line on the Internet, and major regional conferences were held in Asia, Africa, Central and South America, North America, and Europe. The ideas and values in the Earth Charter reflect the influence of a great variety of intellectual sources and social movements. These include the wisdom of the world's religions and great philosophical traditions and the new scientific worldview being shaped by, among other disciplines, cosmology and ecology. The Earth Charter should be seen as a product of the global ethics movement that inspired the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and gained wide support in the 1990s. The drafting committee worked closely with the World Conservation Union (IUCN) Commission on Environmental Law and carefully reviewed all relevant international law declarations and treaties and over 200 civil society declarations and people's treaties. The Earth Charter builds on and extends international environmental and sustainable development law. It reflects the concerns and aspirations expressed at the seven UN Summit meetings held during the 1990s on the environment, human rights, population, children, women, social development, and the city. It recognizes the importance of the spread of participatory and deliberative democracy for human development and environmental protection.

The final text of the Earth Charter, which was approved at a meeting of the Earth Charter Commission at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris in March 2000, contains a preamble, 16 main principles, sixty-one supporting principles, and a conclusion entitled "The Way Forward." The Preamble affirms that "we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny," and the Earth Charter encourages all people to recognize their shared responsibility, each according to his or her situation and capacity, for the well-being of the whole human family, the greater community of life, and future generations. Recognizing the interrelationship of humanity's environmental, economic, social, and cultural problems, the Earth Charter presents an inclusive, integrated ethical framework. The titles of the four sections into which the principles are divided indicate the breadth of the vision: I Respect and Care for the Community of life; II Ecological Integrity; III Social and Economic Justice; and IV Democracy, Non-Violence, and Peace. The Earth Charter identifies a number of widely shared spiritual attitudes and values that can strengthen commitment to its ethical principles, and the document culminates with a vision of peace and the joyful celebration of life.

II. The Earth Charter Initiative, 2000 – 2005

A second phase in the Earth Charter Initiative was begun with the formal launch of the Earth Charter at the Peace Palace in The Hague in June 2000. Following this event the Earth Charter Commission turned over responsibility for oversight of the Earth Charter Initiative and fund raising to a newly created Steering Committee, which included among others several members of the Earth Charter Commission. The Commission retained authority over the text of the Earth Charter and its members continued to provide advice and support for the initiative on an individual basis. In 2000, Mirian Vilela was appointed to serve as director of the Earth Charter Secretariat at the University for Peace. Over the next five years the Earth Charter was translated into forty

languages and endorsed by over two thousand five hundred organizations representing the interests of hundreds of millions of people. Among the organizations that have endorsed the Earth Charter are UNESCO, the World Conservation Union (IUCN), the International Council of Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI), and the US Conference of Mayors. The Earth Charter provides an excellent overview of the essential elements of sustainable development and world peace, and before long it was being widely used as a teaching resource in schools, colleges, universities, and non-formal education programs.

A major effort was made to secure formal recognition of the Earth Charter at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002. During the Summit a number of world leaders and heads of state and many NGOs attending the Summit issued public statements in support of the Earth Charter. The final version of the Johannesburg Declaration does not include an explicit reference to the Earth Charter. However, it does affirm the central theme of the Earth Charter when, borrowing language from the Charter, it states that “we declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to our children.” Efforts to seek formal recognition of the Earth Charter by the United Nations General Assembly are on-going.

By 2005, the Earth Charter had become widely recognized as a global consensus statement on the meaning of sustainability, the challenge and vision of sustainable development, and the principles by which sustainable development is to be achieved. It was being used as a basis for peace negotiations, as a reference document in the development of global standards and codes of ethics, as a resource for governance and legislative processes, as a community development tool, and as a framework for educational programmes on sustainable development. The Charter was also an important influence on the Plan of Implementation for the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development and ECI became a partner with UNESCO in promoting the Decade.

In 2005 the Steering Committee undertook a major strategic review of the progress and strength and weaknesses of the Earth Charter Initiative. This involved both an internal and external assessment. The external review was conducted by Alan AtKisson, an international consultant in the field of sustainable development. The evaluation process concluded that much had been accomplished between 2000 and 2005 and that the Initiative had great promise and should be continued, but its future success depended upon a major reorganization of its management structure and long-range strategic planning. The strategic review process culminated with a major Earth Charter conference in The Netherlands that was hosted by the Dutch National Committee on International Cooperation and Sustainable Development (NCDO) and that brought together over 400 Earth Charter leaders and activists. At this conference, the Steering Committee’s decision to appoint Alan AtKisson as a new executive director of the Earth Charter Secretariat was announced.

During The Netherlands conference, KIT Publishers in Amsterdam released a book edited by Peter Blaze Corcoran, Mirian Vilela and Alide Roerink entitled *The Earth Charter In Action: Toward A Sustainable World*. This publication contains sixty essays by Earth Charter leaders and supporters from around the world and provides a valuable overview of the significance of the Earth Charter and of Earth Charter activities.

III. The Earth Charter Initiative, 2006 to the Present

In 2006 the Earth Charter Secretariat was reorganized as Earth Charter International (ECI). A new Earth Charter International Council with twenty three members was formed to replace the Steering Committee and to oversee ECI's core programs and small staff. Steven Rockefeller, Razeena Wagiet of South Africa and Erna Witoelar of Indonesia were elected as the co-chairs of the newly formed ECI Council. An Earth Charter Center for Communications and Strategic Planning was opened in Stockholm, Sweden. The former Earth Charter Secretariat at the University for Peace was transformed into the Earth Charter Center for Education for Sustainable Development. The ECI Council adopted a new mission and vision statement, and began to develop the new strategies and policies for the third phase.

National governments began to make even stronger, more formal commitments to the Earth Charter. The Brazilian Ministry of Environment entered into a formal agreement with the ECI secretariat and the Center for the Defense of Human Rights of Petrópolis, founded by Leonardo Boff and Marcia Miranda, to promote the Earth Charter to every sector of Brazilian society. During a presidential celebration of Earth Day 2007, the ministries of education and environment in the Mexican government made public commitments to use the Earth Charter as an educational instrument in the Mexican school system. Other state and city governments initiated or strengthened formal public commitments to adopt, use and implement the Earth Charter, including the State of Queensland, Australia, the Republic of Tatarstan in the Russian Federation, and cities like Calgary (Canada), Munich (Germany), New Dehli (India), Oslo (Norway), and Sao Paulo (Brazil).

During 2006 and 2007, endorsement of the Earth Charter reached 4,600 organizations and the Earth Charter website began to experience a dramatic increase in visitors, growing to nearly 100,000 per month. New Programmes were launched in Religion and Business. The Earth Charter Youth Initiative continues to expand with groups now operating in twenty-three countries and the number of Earth Charter affiliates grew to ninety-seven in fifty-eight countries. The Charter began to take on new relevance in matters of policy as the global dimension of problems such as climate change highlighted our interdependencies and the need for collective action. ECI was invited to participate in an international conference on Intercultural and Interreligious Cooperation for Peace organized by the president of the UN General Assembly.

As a result of an intensive three-day workshop on long-range strategic planning lead by Oscar Motomura at Amana Key in Sao Paulo, Brazil, in 2007, the ECI Council launched a new strategy of "Decentralized Empowerment for Scaling Up," designed to dramatically increase active participation in the Initiative without the need for an expanded central administration. New "Action Guidelines" were released to provide a framework and coordinating mechanism for this decentralized activity to promote the Earth Charter and implement its vision.

After two years managing the transition to the third phase of the Earth Charter Initiative, Alan AtKisson stepped down as executive director of ECI at the end of 2007 in order to devote more time to his consulting business and other related projects. He continues his association with ECI as an advisor. Mirian Vilela was appointed the new executive director of ECI, and the headquarters of the ECI Secretariat was again based at the University for Peace in Costa Rica, together with the Earth Charter Center for

Education for Sustainable Development. In 2007 Erna Witoelar stepped down as co-chair and Brendan Mackey was elected a new co-chair.

Looking to the future, the Earth Charter continues to grow in international stature as a source of inspiration for action, an educational framework, and an international soft-law document, as well as a reference document for the development of policy, legislation, and international standards and agreements. Endorsement of the Earth Charter has become a process that stresses engagement with the document in practice, including use of the Charter as an assessment framework. Decentralized empowerment paves the way for a rapid expansion in Earth Charter-related activity worldwide. In keeping with this approach, the ECI Council at its May 2008 meeting adopted a long range strategic plan that involves the creation of six task forces that will initiate new activities in support of the Earth Charter in the areas of Business, Education, The Media, Religion, the United Nations and Youth.