



# EARTH CHARTER: CHARTING A COURSE FOR THE FUTURE

The Earth Charter, a set of 16 overarching ethical principles and 61 supporting principles, was launched in June 2000 in The Hague. Its sponsor was an international commission led by two influential, international figures: Mikhail Gorbachev, president of Green Cross International, and Maurice Strong, Secretary-General of the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development.

## A Manifesto for Earth

Environmental governance operates through a range of social structures, from government laws and agencies, to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), to customary rights, responsibilities, and behaviors. But there is also a less tangible side to environmental governance. The decades since the 1972 Stockholm Conference have witnessed the emergence of global norms of good environmental governance. These norms are not formally defined, but they are characterized around the world by a decreased tolerance for corruption and increased expectations of transparency and public participation in decision-making (see also Chapter 1). Such norms are rooted in the idea that broad ethical, moral, and behavioral shifts are required by governments, corporations, and communities, if good governance is to become a universal reality.

The Earth Charter represents an attempt to codify such norms of good governance in a statement of universal applicability. It is a unique document, both in its ambitions and in its mode of development. The Earth Charter grew out of ideas and opinions expressed by thousands of individuals; it was not mandated by an intergovernmental process or body, nor does it yet have any official status. It represents something new in global governance: a genuinely public expression of

the beliefs and values that should, ideally, govern decision-making for the benefit of humans and the rest of the living world. The document is characterized by strengths and weaknesses:

- The extensive participation and consultation processes undertaken around the world give the Earth Charter legitimacy.
- The genuine effort of the Earth Charter Commission to build consensus among all parties confers credibility on the final document.
- The Earth Charter's high aspirations may not be fully realizable, but their wording was not compromised by *realpolitik*.
- The Earth Charter has no legal status and no powers of enforcement, and will therefore be regarded by some parties as irrelevant.
- The document's lack of specificity makes it hard to translate aspirations into practical actions.

Ten years in the making, and the result of collaboration by civil society organizations across the globe, the Earth Charter builds on a succession of UN documents including the 1987 Brundtland Commission report, the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, and the UN Millennium Declaration. In just over 2,400 carefully-crafted words, it lays out an ethical foundation for building a just and sustainable world—one based on respect for nature and people, universal human rights, social and economic justice, democratic and participatory societies, and non-violent conflict resolution.

As a set of principles to live by, rather than a prescription for action, the Earth Charter stands apart from the many other UN-driven declarations and treaties that address environment and development. And it does so in ways that have direct impact on issues of governance.

First, it presents a holistic worldview driven by such ethical concerns as respect for nature, rather than the economics-

and science-driven “environment-by-numbers” approach that most businesses and governments take toward sustainable development. This holistic approach views the strengthening of democratic institutions, the transparency and accountability of governing institutions, and inclusive, participatory decision-making as inseparable from environmental protection and social and economic justice.

Second, the Earth Charter is largely a bottom-up rather than a top-down initiative, shaped and adopted primarily by civil society and local government institutions rather than central governments. Third, because it is not a policy-making document which may be ratified by some governments and flouted or rejected by others, the Earth Charter’s framers hope it will reach directly to citizens the world over. The aim is to generate changes in attitude and behavior across a wide constituency including individuals, communities, local governments, schools and universities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and businesses.

## The Earth Charter: Main 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.

### 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, healthcare, 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, NON-VIOLENCE 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, non-violence, and peace.

Source: Earth Charter Secretariat 2000

In an international arena crowded with environmentally driven initiatives, it is perhaps easier to define the Earth Charter by what it is not than by what it is. It is not a practical to-do list for achieving ecological protection or sustainable development on national or local levels. Nor is it (at least as yet) a formal intergovernmental agreement. On both counts, it differs from Agenda 21, the main outcome of the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, which lays out a broad sustainable development plan of action for governments.

Earth Charter advocates describe inspirational documents like the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights as the closest parallels to what they hope to achieve.

These so-called “soft law” documents are not legally binding. But when adopted by state governments they become morally binding, providing standards by which nations measure their civilizations. Human rights, for example, were placed firmly on the international agenda in 1948 when the UN General Assembly declared them to be “universal” and a “common standard of achievement” (United Nations 1948). While stated in very broad terms, the declaration has successfully codified human rights standards and is used to hold nations accountable in the court of public opinion. The Earth Charter Commission hopes that it, similarly, will become a

common standard for ethical, just, and environmentally sound behavior “by which the conduct of all individuals, organizations, businesses, governments and transnational institutions is to be guided and assessed” (Earth Charter Secretariat 2000).

Such sweeping goals, coupled with the charter’s broad language and high-minded principles, are easy to criticize as too general to be useful and too open-ended to be monitored for effectiveness. But to do so misses the value of such behavior-changing initiatives. No one today, for example, seriously disputes the authority or effectiveness of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, although it took many years for its principles to be translated into legally binding conventions adopted by nations.

By early 2003, the Earth Charter had been translated into 27 languages. More than 2,000 NGOs and 1,000 local governments have endorsed its principles (Rockefeller 2003), while 54 countries have formed Earth Charter national committees (Smith 2002:30). Its name recognition is limited and it remains well below the radar of most national governments. Yet among local governments and within the emerging global civil society—linked by common aims of ecological protection, social justice, and peaceful internationalism, and connected by the Internet—it is beginning to find a strong foothold.

## Earth Charter Snapshots

**T**here is no such thing as a standard Earth Charter program. Around the world, communities, individuals, businesses, educational establishments, and local governments are using different means to translate symbolic support for the charter into practical action and behavioral change.

### In Parliaments and Town Halls...

Three years after its launch, actual adoption of the Earth Charter by local governments remains limited, with the most enthusiasm demonstrated in the United States, Eastern Europe, Spain, and parts of Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. In April 2001, the parliament of Tatarstan, a semi-autonomous Russian Federation republic, became the first provincial government to embrace the Earth Charter as a guide for state policy and practice. With a mixed and potentially volatile population of Muslims and Orthodox Christians, the republic has made non-violent resolution of conflict a cornerstone of its constitution and its leaders view the Earth Charter as a means to this end. The Tatarstan government has analyzed its key laws and policies against Charter principles and is introducing the document into school curricula (Earth-Ethics 2002:36).

In April 2002, Puerto Rico’s senate followed suit, voting to support the principles established in the Earth Charter, to adopt them as a guidance system in its “formulation of public laws and politics,” and to exhort the territory’s government,

educational system, and business, science, and media organizations to do likewise (Alvarez 2002). The document has also been endorsed by 99 cities and towns in the nation of Jordan (Earth Charter Initiative 2002:8).

In the United States, where Local Agenda 21 has generally been slow to take off, the Charter has made significant inroads into local government consciousness. It has been endorsed, among others, by the 1,000-member U.S. Conference of Mayors and the 400-member Florida League of Cities (Earth Charter Initiative 2003).

At a global level, the International Council of Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) endorsed the Charter and is encouraging its 380 municipal members to apply its principles (Earth Charter Initiative 2003). Some local authorities are already doing this in practical ways. The city government of San José, Costa Rica, for example, has implemented an Earth Charter training program for over 1,800 employees, including the police, sanitation, and health departments. Workers are encouraged to incorporate its principles into their daily activities (Earth Charter Secretariat 2003).

### In Classrooms...

The Earth Charter’s ethical framework has struck a strong chord with educational institutions. The Charter is central to the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s efforts to develop teacher training programs on sustainable development for schools and universities. Its principles have

## Creating the Earth Charter: A Lesson in Global Democracy

In itself, the Earth Charter embodies two of the good governance themes emphasized throughout this report as prerequisites to successful sustainable development: the right of citizens to participate in decision-making and the transparency of organizations and processes. The process by which it came about could be described as textbook participatory democracy in action.

The concept of an Earth Charter, laying out “independent principles for a sustainable way of life,” first surfaced in recommendations made by the 1987 Brundtland Commission. Five years later the world’s heads of state gathered for the UN Conference on Environment and Development (commonly known as the Earth Summit) in Rio de Janeiro. But the charter idea failed to take root there, prompting its Secretary-General Maurice Strong and former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev to launch an Earth Charter Initiative in 1994, with the support of the Dutch government.

Under Maurice Strong’s leadership, in his role as chairman of the Earth Council, consultations began on developing the Charter as a “people’s treaty” rather than an intergovernmental document. The aim was to tap into the ideas and energies of a global civil society movement blossoming in the wake of

also been endorsed by the International Baccalaureate Association and by dozens of university departments and hundreds of schools worldwide.

In universities, the Charter is being used both as a framework for philosophical discussion and as a starting point for developing practical policies. At Michigan State University, for example, a course entitled “Earth Charter: Pathway to a Sustainable Future” grounds environmental study in real world problems. Students are given practical projects which reflect Charter principles, including designing and building a composting system, transforming cafeteria food waste into nitrogen-rich compost, and developing a campus recycling strategy (Earth Charter USA 2003b).

### In Communities...

The United States has seen some of the strongest and most spontaneous reactions to the Earth Charter’s call for a new, ethical world order. A diverse group of strangers including a Philadelphia printer, a single mother in Portland, a Buddhist in San Francisco, and a former mayoral candidate in Indianapolis pooled resources over the Internet to launch community networking summits under the umbrella “The Earth Charter: A Declaration of Interdependence” (Roberts 2001). Around 700 U.S. organizations representing 40 million members have endorsed the Charter, including the Sierra Club and Humane Society of the United States.

In other nations, the Earth Charter is being used as a community development tool. Elizabeth Ramirez, an environmental

educator in Costa Rica, has used its principles in working with impoverished village women in the remote, mountainous regions of Laguna Hule and Río Cuarto.

Communist collapse in Eastern Europe and the emergence of new communications technologies (EarthEthics 2002:16–19). At the invitation of the Earth Charter Commission, established in 1997, several thousand individuals and organizations around the world took part in a rolling process of consultation, drafting, further consultation, and re-drafting. Efforts were made to reach wide audiences via the media and Internet-based conferencing. Participants included local governments, environmental and social justice NGOs, religious, educational, and indigenous people’s organizations, scientists, ethicists, and legal experts. One on-line drafting session involved representatives of 300 universities and 78 countries (Earth Charter USA 2003a).

To give the Charter a firm foundation in existing international agreements, its core team of drafters, led by Steven Rockefeller, professor of religion and ethics at Middlebury College, Vermont, drew on a wide variety of sources. These included 50 existing international law instruments, the findings of the seven UN summits held during the 1990s, and the contents of about 200 nongovernmental declarations and people’s treaties on environment and development (Earth Charter USA 2003a).

The Charter’s wording was shaped by contemporary science, international law, religious teachings and philosophical

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After studying individual Charter principles, villagers have planned and carried out activities that protect local landscapes, enhance women’s status, and reinforce traditional cultural and social values. A children’s movement, the *Defensores Verdes* or Green Defenders, has also been formed. Its members act as guardians of the natural environment within their homes, schools, and communities, creating vegetable gardens and wildlife refuges, replanting a forest area, and opposing the development of a lake, among other activities (Vilela 2003).

### In the Business World...

In general, engaging with the business community has not been a priority for the Earth Charter Initiative; nor have trade associations, other than the World Federation of Engineering Organizations, flocked to endorse its prescription for change. One exception is the Australian investment banking industry, members of which met with 40 civil society groups in October 2001 to discuss using the Charter as a framework of principles for the ethical investment industry (Manning 2001). While no industry-wide agreement was reached, Earth Charter Australia is now working with individual corporations on establishing broad sustainability criteria to evaluate companies’ performances. The Calvert Group, a leader in the field of socially responsible investment, has unilaterally endorsed the Earth Charter as an ethical guide.





## Measuring Progress: Earth Charter Indicators

**T**o succeed on its own terms, the Earth Charter must act as a tool to promote good environmental governance, ecological protection, social progress, and ethical business practice on a global scale. Yet many communities struggle with how to give its principles the practical application this entails. To help bridge this gap, the World Resources Institute (WRI) is developing a set of indicators that can act both as a road map to sustainability for local government and as a practical checklist for community activists to track local progress against Earth Charter principles.

Each indicator will describe a specific step, tied to an Earth Charter principle, for local governments to take along the path to sustainable living. For example, compliance with Earth Charter Principle 11(a) (to “secure the human rights of women and girls and end all violence against them”) would be measured by the presence or absence of legislation granting women equal rights (WRI 2002:18).

In 2004, the Earth Charter indicators will be piloted in a few communities. WRI will help them adapt the indicators so that they will be meaningful in their particular local context. The accessibility of data at the local level will be a key to applying the indicators successfully. “The more locally you apply indicators, the more likely you are to force change as a result,” argues Christian Layke, indicators project coordinator at WRI. “You are operating close enough to the decision-making level to really make a difference.”

traditions, the global ethics movement, and best practices for building sustainable communities. But as it progressed, the text was continuously adapted and extended to encompass the consensus view of a broad range of organizations and individuals that commented on several globally circulated drafts.

“Whenever I got recommendations from this group, so long as they were not scientifically unsound or completely out of step with international law, we considered them in the drafting committee,” says Steven Rockefeller. “Principle 10, for example, caused a lot of discussion because developing country advocates were passionate about referring to economic justice. It went through 25 or 30 drafts until we got a formula that was both consistent with international law and acceptable to all parties in the advisory group” (Rockefeller 2003).

Initially Mikhail Gorbachev and other Earth Charter commissioners wanted to develop a short statement with a few punchy principles. However, developing country activists such as Wangari Maathai, the Kenyan founder of the Green Belt Movement, argued strongly for a more detailed ethical framework that could be used to hold their governments to account for their actions.

“There was a continuous tension between having a short document that would have an emotional and poetic impact and a document that would give people on the front line the concrete help they needed,” recalls Rockefeller (Rockefeller 2003).

The drafting committee of international environmental law experts, scientists, ethicists, and grassroots representatives met three times in New York between 1997 and 2000 to refine a text acceptable to the Earth Charter commissioners. A final version was approved in Paris in March 2000.

## Vision Versus Reality

It is hard to quarrel with the Earth Charter's sentiments, but how influential can such an aspirational document realistically hope to be? In a world riven by nationalism and religious hatred, it promotes peace, tolerance, and the interdependence of nations. In a world where natural resources are indiscriminately exploited and nonhuman species are in retreat, it urges respect for nature and ecological protection. In a world where the income gap between rich and poor nations and individuals grows ever wider, it calls for economic justice and the eradication of poverty. The task of achieving such moral and cultural shifts in the global mindset is truly Herculean.

## Acting Globally

The Earth Charter's positioning outside the mainstream intergovernmental process on sustainable development is proving both a strength and a weakness. On one hand, those working to implant the document in the public consciousness can point to its grounding in civil society as a source of legitimacy arguably greater than that wielded by a small elite of international policy-makers.

They can also point to strong support for the Charter among developing countries, many of whom frequently clash with industrialized nations over the content and tone of formal international agreements on environment and development. Approximately 41 developing nations have so far begun Earth Charter-related activities, compared with about 20 developed or transition countries. Host president Thabo Mbeki of South Africa was among several developing country representatives urging support for the Earth Charter's ethical principles at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg.

At the same time, the Charter risks irrelevance, or a permanent place on the sidelines, if it becomes entrenched too far outside the formal international process. With so many environment-based treaties and statements of intent now published by the UN, by national governments, and by international and national alliances of NGOs, the Earth Charter needs to stake its claim at every level—including the intergovernmental. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for example, became such a powerful, behavior-changing tool precisely because it was adopted by the United Nations on behalf of all the world's countries. Pressure could then be applied by the many on the few nations who continued to defy its standards.

One of the initiative's four avowed goals was to mirror the progress of the human rights declaration by winning endorsement by the UN General Assembly at the 2002 Johannesburg summit. However, the charter's visionary worldview fell victim to business as usual. In his opening address, President Mbeki of South Africa cited the Earth Charter as part of "the solid base from which the Johannesburg World Summit must proceed," and the draft Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development, to be signed by heads of state, referred

to "the relevance of the challenges posed in the Earth Charter." However, the reference was later deleted, in a closed-door session, on the last day of the summit (Earth Charter Secretariat 2002:2).

This setback underlines the difficulty the Charter's exponents face in winning acceptance for an ethical framework to guide global action on environment and development. While applying a set of agreed values to policy-making might seem a logical step in our increasingly interdependent and resource-depleted world, persuading governments to limit their freedom of action by formally adopting them will not be easy. According to Earth Charter commissioners who attended the summit, there was little interest in discussing ethical principles at all, while some governments actively opposed references to the need for global ethics (Earth Charter Secretariat 2002:3).

The Earth Charter's penultimate paragraph calls for the implementation of its principles through a legally binding international instrument. Such a vehicle already exists in the form of the Draft Covenant on Environment and Development drafted by the Commission on Environmental Law of the World Conservation Union (IUCN), which synthesizes all existing international law in the field. Yet the Covenant has languished before the United Nations since 1995, with no nation so far willing to step forward and propose its adoption.

The Earth Charter commissioners believe incremental advances, rather than wholesale endorsement or recognition, may well prove the route to acceptability for both the Charter and the Covenant. One such advance was WSSD's formal acceptance of an educational partnership between the Earth Charter Initiative and the United Nations. This will involve UNESCO, the governments of Costa Rica, Honduras, Mexico, and Niger, and 13 international NGOs in using Earth Charter principles to help train community leaders to implement sustainable development (Earth Charter Secretariat 2002:4).

A second incremental step was the use of wording almost identical to that in the Charter's preamble in the Johannesburg summit's political declaration, namely: "We declare...our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life and to our children" (United Nations 2002a). This reference to "the community of life" is the first of its kind in a UN document of law. As such, according to Steven Rockefeller, it marks "a critical moral step" by governments toward accepting environmental responsibility "not just toward human beings but to the larger living world" (Rockefeller 2003).

## Acting Locally

By building strong grassroots support in many countries, the Earth Charter is creating the potential to revolutionize attitudes to local governance and stewardship of natural resources. At the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, its principles were endorsed by mayors and other



local government representatives from around the world. To channel this potential, however, local communities, businesses, and governing authorities need to translate their symbolic support into concrete plans and policies.

In some places, this is happening by itself. The cities of Burlington, Vermont, Toronto, Canada, San José, Costa Rica, Jundalooop, Western Australia, and Urbino, Italy are either measuring city programs against Earth Charter principles or using the principles to guide municipal practice. In Canada's biggest and most ethnically diverse city, the Toronto Regional Conservation Authority has measured its policies on minorities against the Charter's Principle 12 and taken action accordingly. In response to Principle 12(a), which calls for the elimination of "discrimination in all its forms," for example, the city has committed itself to measure and address instances of "environmental racism," such as higher pollution levels in ethnic neighborhoods. It has also pledged to provide opportunities for all minorities to have equal access to recreation, education, and green spaces in the city (King 2002:1).

Many local government organizations that have endorsed the charter, however, have done little concrete with it. "Groups such as the U.S. Conference of Mayors are coming to us and saying, 'We love the Earth Charter, how do we use it?'" says Richard Clugston, executive director of the Center for Respect of Life and Environment in Washington, DC, and a member of the Earth Charter's international steering committee (Clugston 2003). In response, the committee is now developing toolkits on using the Charter in teaching or as part of local government sustainability programs.

Such practical guidance is essential to expanding the Charter's reach, according to grassroots activists like Gwendolyn Hallsmith, a pastor who successfully led efforts to persuade more than 20 town meetings in Vermont to endorse it. "Getting a local city council to make a symbolic gesture of support for the Earth Charter is one thing, but really putting the principles to work in a municipality is another thing altogether. It requires a substantial commitment to participatory planning and action on the part of the municipality and often takes some dedicated resources to see it through" (Hallsmith 2002).

A second challenge for the Earth Charter secretariat and steering committee is delineating what role the document should play alongside other community-based sustainable development initiatives. Since the 1992 Earth Summit, for example, around 2,000 (mostly European) local governments have developed specific plans of action under the umbrella of Local Agenda 21, including recycling, water conservation, and energy efficiency programs (Hallsmith 2002).

Mirian Vilela, executive director of the Earth Charter International Secretariat, based in Costa Rica, concedes that some local authorities see no need to endorse the Charter—either because they are actively implementing Agenda 21 or

because sustainable development is not seen as a priority. She contends, however, that the Charter can legitimately complement Local Agenda 21 programs in two ways: First by providing a missing ethical framework within which decisions and policies can be made; and second by expanding sustainable development programs beyond their usual limited focus on combating environmental problems to include social and economic justice and democratic decision-making. "I describe Local Agenda 21 as providing the body of community sustainable development while the Earth Charter is the soul. You need the one to complete the other" (Vilela 2003).

This argument was endorsed somewhat less poetically by the world's governments in the 2002 Johannesburg Summit's Plan of Implementation, which emphasizes "the need to consider ethics in the implementation of Agenda 21" (United Nations 2002b). To what extent the Earth Charter will fulfill this role for local sustainability initiatives around the world, however, remains an open question.

### **Charting a Course for Earth's Future?**

Throughout history, the power of words has shaped human actions and outlooks. By planting and spreading ideals of acceptable behavior that gradually become *idée fixes* in diverse cultures across the globe, inspirational texts can prove more powerful and permanent than conquering armies. Yet to achieve this, the Earth Charter needs to succeed on many levels. It must inspire with its words, acting as a driver for behavioral change and a roadmap for practical action.

How likely is this to happen? The simple answer is that it's too early to say. In a world deeply divided by geopolitics, religion, and warfare, the Earth Charter may become a guide for those who seek a partnership of nations dedicated to maintaining global peace, social and economic justice, and ecological security. Or it may simply prove too idealistic as a guide for practical behavior, and give way to a new set of values and beliefs that more accurately reflect the global zeitgeist.

"My view is that the Earth Charter provides a very useful vision of the way the world—governments, business, communities, and individuals—need to think about global issues and fold them into everyday life," reflects Daniel Esty, a governance expert at Yale University. "But it's a very big challenge to get people to re-engineer their thinking, and that process has only just begun. There is also still a good bit of work to be done to consolidate at the international level a new set of environmental norms for people to endorse and live by" (Esty 2003).

UN General Assembly endorsement would help the Earth Charter's bid to become this internationally accepted ethical framework. But the measure of real change, says Esty, will be "the extent to which the norms the Earth Charter puts forward penetrate into real life" by persuading people and governments to change their behavior (Esty 2003).