

THE EARTH CHARTER: AN ETHICAL FRAMEWORK FOR A FEASIBLE UTOPIA

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Abstract

This research objective is to highlight an innovative, holistic, inclusive, integrated approach to a sustainable future promoted by the Earth Charter and describe the structure of its ethical framework. The main conclusion of the research is that the ethical framework of the Earth Charter is based on a limited number of core concepts: planetary human identity, feasible utopianism, co-responsibility and committed compassion. Planetary human identity is based on the capacity to incorporate nature into the process of identity building and integrate three complementary feelings: singularity, belonging to groups and belonging to the planetary community of life. The Earth Charter stresses the necessity to give a new life to utopianism by working out a critical-radical-alternative, but a feasible idea of future and our responsibility towards it. Moreover, the Earth Charter rethinks responsibility as co-responsibility and assigns it four different qualities: universal, synchronic, diachronic and differentiated and appeals to an innovative politically connoted notion of compassion.

Key words: *Earth Charter, co-responsibility, planetary human identity, committed compassion, feasible utopia, development, education for sustainability*

Introduction

Over the past four decades, the United Nations has gradually shaped and organized a complex global strategy aimed at integrating the principles, values and practices related to sustainable development into all sectors of education. This strategy aims to promote those changes in behaviour necessary to preserve the future integrity of the natural environment and to give to present and future generations the opportunity to enjoy social justice, equity, peace and economic sustainability.

Today, the fundamental aim of the United Nations (2010) is to implement the United Nations Decade for Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). According to the Resolution 57/254 of 2002, the period from 2005 to 2014 has been declared the United Nations Decade for Education for Sustainable Development. United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is serving as the lead agency of this Decade, and nations are being encouraged to establish their own Decade-oriented initiatives.

The DESD has clear, firm and well-grounded values. This ethical foundation can be found in two different key documents: Resolution 55/2, also known as the “Millennium Declaration” (2000) and the *Earth Charter* (2000). According to this ethical reference

framework, UNESCO has developed its own concept of “sustainable future”, the goal towards which the future of humanity and the planet will be guided.

The *Millennium Declaration* is a real platform agreement among nations, non-governmental and supranational institutions. In the *Millennium Declaration* (2000), the international community declares its intention to take the leadership and the coordination of a brand new global partnership for mankind’s development and for a sustainable future for the planet.

In the *Millennium Declaration*, the UN states a shared idea of the future that will inspire its agenda in the 21st century; the UN announces the project of “a world united by common values, striving to achieve peace and decorous living for all men, women and children” (Kofi Annan, monitoring sessions on the outcomes of the Millennium Summit, 2004). The *Millennium Declaration* is orientated towards a more peaceful, more prosperous and more just world, a new alternative world order built by the nations acting together as a real global community with common goals. The declared inspiring reference values of this project are freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature and shared responsibility.

The sustainable development concept of the *Millennium Declaration* is definitely based on a vision of the world and a future that is alternative to the current system of values and the dominant present conception of human development. Sustainable development is conceived as the will to improve the quality of life for everyone, now and in future, by reconciling economic growth, social development and environmental protection. It is absolutely clear that this goal can be achieved only through a global world agreement by which all nations, communities and even individuals of the planet start cooperating on a new basis and striving for a common goal.

However, the most comprehensive and rigorous exposition of the framework of values of the DESD and the entire UN strategy for the new century can be found in the *Earth Charter*. The *Earth Charter* is an international declaration of fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable and peaceful world in the 21st century (UNESCO, 2003).

The *Earth Charter* ethical framework

The *Earth Charter* is a completely innovative document from at least four different points of view. Firstly, completed in 2000, it is the product of a decade-long worldwide cross-cultural dialogue on common goals and shared values integrating the environmental, social and economic dimensions of our global concerns. Secondly, it is a document designed to regulate relations between states, individuals and nature, a sort of code for the universal regulation of planetary relations. The *Earth Charter* pinpoints nature and all the living beings. Thirdly, the *Earth Charter* tries to offer the Earth community concrete answers to address major global issues of today’s world in a sustainable way. Finally, the *Earth Charter* attempts to synthesize the diversity of perspectives of sustainable development into a common vision by bringing about a brand new dialogue between different cultures, traditions, interests and concerns.

The first four main principles listed in the *Earth Charter* provide an overview of its ethical vision:

1. respect for the 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 the Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.

The *Earth Charter* aims to provide an integrated ethical vision of sustainable development, building on a broadly participatory global consultation, assisting the human global community in articulating a new framework for economic and social policies oriented not primarily towards short-term economic gain, but towards the full flourishing of life (Rockefeller, 2003). It seeks to inspire in all peoples a new sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility for the well-being of the human community and the larger living world by calling human beings to create a global partnership. It states that the world environmental challenges, human rights, equitable human development, democracy and peace are interdependent and indivisible. The objective of the *Earth Charter* is to give an inspiring expression to the most fundamental principles of an integrated ethical vision for our common future. These principles will have enduring significance for people of all races, cultures and religions, clarifying humanity's shared values and developing a new global ethic for a sustainable way of life (Maurice Strong, Chairman of the Earth Council and Co-chair of the Earth Charter Commission).

According to the *Earth Charter*, the relations between states, individuals and nature should:

- reconcile integrity, unity and diversity as a condition to preserve humanity;
- recognize others (other humans and nature and, with it, all living beings who constitute it) as the foundation of every relationship and the very possibility of peace;
- accept the fact that the preservation of the common good is essential for the exercise of freedom;
- recognize that innovation and change are not ends in themselves.

The *Earth Charter* acknowledges these principles as the fundamental basis for the development of a new *ethics for the future*, the key condition, according to UNESCO, for building a sustainable future.

UNESCO promotes the *Earth Charter* as the possible universal planetary relations regulating code for future. The document is, therefore, intended as the required instrument for developing and affirming the basic reference principles for a just, sustainable and peaceful future society, for promoting respect and responsibility, justice, social equity and economic democracy, the fight against poverty, non-violence and peace.

Moreover, the 32nd General Conference of UNESCO (2003) adopted a resolution recognizing the *Earth Charter* as an important ethical framework for sustainable development⁷ and a valuable educational tool (particularly in the context of the DESD).

The *Earth Charter* claims two major educational functions (Mackey, 2002). First, it defines the basic structures of a new educational paradigm by which to build societies

oriented towards global integrated human development and a sustainable future. The *Earth Charter* acts as an educational tool to:

- raise awareness among people about the need to take personal responsibility for present global challenges;
- encourage a change in lifestyle oriented towards sustainability and “being” instead of “owning”;
- promote global citizenship based on dialogue and cooperation between human beings and peoples.

The *Earth Charter* envisions and builds a shared common idea of what “ethics for sustainability” could be, by promoting a comprehensive and democratic world dialogue between individuals, peoples, organisations and nations.

The basic orientation of the *Earth Charter* is holistic: it conceives our planet as a whole, as an integrated system, an interconnected and interdependent “community of life”. Therefore, it proposes that the answers to the complex interrelated problems mankind is dealing with today and will have to face in future must inevitably be systemic. As claimed by Boff (2001), the reference concept of the *Earth Charter* new paradigm is that of “multiple-inter-feedback of everything with everything”. It is an innovative theoretical foundation that calls for a new educational orientation, an educational orientation very similar to the paradigm of complexity developed by Morin (2001).

The four basic principles of the path towards a sustainable future are the second fundamental reference of the *Earth Charter*: respect and care for the biological community and for ecological integrity; social justice and economic democracy; non-violence and peace. By stating a position very similar to the one proposed by Edgar Morin (2001), the *Earth Charter* warns us that our survival depends on our capacity “to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on [...] our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future”, and that this is the consequence of the fact that humanity is one part of a vast evolving universe, systemically interconnected. To achieve this goal, “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” (ECI, 2000, p. 1).

The first axis: The “planetary human identity”

According to the *Earth Charter* vision, the distinguishing feature of the contemporary human condition is “unity in diversity”. The identity of human beings in a globalized world is, on the one hand, plural, unique and individual as a result of multiple heterogeneous affiliations. On the other hand, it is characterized by the feeling of belonging to a global world community, by the consciousness that all human beings share a common destiny. The possibility of building a new human identity, individual and common at the same time, relies on this very deep sense of belonging to a planetary community. According to the

Earth Charter, by missing it, we lack the basic requirement for sustainable development: the capacity to act on a global scale for the protection of and care for the planet as a biotic community. The ensuing new basic task for education is to work out new patterns for promoting and spreading in our societies “fundamental changes [...] in our values, institutions, and ways of living” (ECI, 2000, p. 1).

The *Earth Charter* is inspired by a critical humanism oriented to the transformation of reality, a possible, feasible, utopia bent on building a brand new socially and environmentally sustainable planetary community. The final paragraph expresses these utopian aspirations in a very effective way by saying: “Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life” (ECI, 2000, p. 4).

The second axis: Feasible utopianism

A new feasible utopia for the 21st century is therefore at the core of the *Earth Charter*. A utopia based on a very radical idea of human development as “human development is primarily about being more, not having more” (ECI, 2000, p. 1). The person, his/her liberty, stands as the main goal of development, while the concepts of “welfare” and “quality of life” should be strictly tied up with the potentials that people are actually able to implement (Sen, 2000). The *Earth Charter* calls for a return to utopia, for a real Copernican revolution; it reminds us that all living beings are necessarily mutually dependent; there is no possibility of future development without complying with this principle.

This critical reality change oriented humanism. This new form of feasible realistic utopianism, highlights the fourth ethical principle of the *Earth Charter*: the principle of responsibility. “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 [...] with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good” (ECI, 2000, pp. 1–2). All human beings have a “responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations” (ECI, 2000, p. 1).

Third axis: Universal, synchronic, diachronic and differentiated co-responsibility

Modern ethic defines “responsibility” as the capacity, peculiar to human beings, “to answer for their actions to themselves and to others, i.e. to account for them and take the consequences resulting there from” (Escámez Sánchez, García López, & Pérez Pérez, 2003, p. 189). As a consequence, the *Earth Charter* acknowledges that the ethical nature of the person, the fact that every human being has the duty to take positions on “the

transformation of social settings [...], on action” (ibid., p. 209), is based on the capacity to feel responsible.

According to the *Earth Charter*, the possibility of developing communities that can be sustainable, responsible, able to face the present challenges and capable of future depends on a radical reconsideration of the reference ethical values for individuals and communities, at local, national and global levels. The basis of this paradigm shift has strong affinities with the revised theory of ethics worked out by Jonas (1993) who believes that, faced with the current technological civilization “Prometheus unchained”, a real threat to the survival of the planet and of the human race, it is necessary to frame a new global ethics for the technological civilization, to develop a brand new ethic of responsibility completely different from traditional morals. The new ethics will enable people to give up the traditional intention and individual conscience point of view, considering the moral subject as isolated when judging their own conformity to the moral principles. The new ethics will enable acceptance of totally new points of view:

- to estimate the long-term effects of human actions;
- to estimate the consequences of human action on the extra-human world and the future generations;
- to recognize the need for a new relational, dialogical and continuously revisable basis for moral judgment.

The Jonas’s (1993) ethics of responsibility suggests a new moral imperative, more suitable for the present technological age: “Act so that the consequences of your actions are compatible with the continuity of authentic human life on Earth” (Jonas, 1993, p. 48.).

Faced with a possible ecological disaster, Jonas refuses pessimism and counters the arguments of the propagandists of “unlimited hope” with a moderate trust in reason and human freedom: “Despite all, my hope rests ultimately on human reason, that reason which has already proved so extraordinary in getting our power and which must now take the lead in limiting it. To doubt it would be irresponsible” (Jonas, 1993, p. 48).

The new *Earth Charter* ethical perspective has, therefore, important consequences, not only on morals, but also on politics and education. Responsibility is thought over as co-responsibility and as a moral obligation of everybody to everyone. Therefore, co-responsibility is universal: the human being as a moral subject who, by bringing on actions, takes on moral responsibility towards all living beings of the planet and also towards the Earth itself as a living being. The human being must, therefore, respond morally before the whole planetary community. All the elements of nature (living, non-living and the Earth itself as a whole) are included in the moral community.

This new form of universal co-responsibility is a “glocal” responsibility; it combines the needs of the local with the needs of the cosmic community of life. Co-responsibility includes all action consequences, even the unpredictable: “an ethics of responsibility must take into account the consequences of actions, both intentional and non intentional, to the ecosystem, for the third world and for future generations” (Cortina, 2002, p. 146). Moreover, this new conception of moral responsibility implies the “precautionary principle” already outlined in the Stockholm Conference (1972) and extensively reaffirmed by the Rio Declaration (Principle 15).

The concept of responsibility encourages an original integration between two different aspects. A synchronic, intra-generation one: people bear the responsibility to build democratic, just, peaceful, sustainable societies, based on respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, where everyone has got a real opportunity to develop his own potential societies for all generations and peoples who live in the same historical moment. On the other hand, a diachronic, inter-generation aspect: all the generations that will inhabit the planet in the future have an equal right to access the common goods that we use today (ecosystems and cultural-historical heritage). We are responsible to guarantee them this right, and for this the *Earth Charter* asks us to “...secure Earth’s bounty and beauty for present and future generations, [...] recognize that the freedom of action of each generation is qualified by the needs of future generations, [...] transmit to future generations values, traditions, and institutions that support the long-term flourishing of Earth’s human and ecological communities” (ECI, 2000, p. 2).

The *Earth Charter* also develops another innovative approach to the concept of responsibility. It works out the concept of differentiated responsibility, which binds the intensity of moral obligation to the actual possibilities and means of actions that the moral subject has. From this brand new point of view, all human beings must answer for actions and choices according to their actual means.

Fourth axis: Critical and politically committed compassion

Finally, the *Earth Charter* appeals to the value of “compassion” – care for the community of life with understanding, compassion and love. In the Western philosophical tradition, the concept of compassion generally shows a certain degree of complexity and ambiguity; it is a moral and philosophical concept to which there is a great deal of suspect and mistrust. However, the formulation of it is extremely innovative, featuring an absolutely liberating charge. In fact, the definition as provided by the *Earth Charter* implies sensitivity and deep engagement with the suffering of others, requires active involvement, solidarity and responsibility. It does not hide the asymmetries of the relations between the persons and the asymmetrical nature of power relations. It promotes respect and recognition of the dignity of those who suffer, collaborating and sharing; its connotation is political and moral, and it, therefore, implies also political commitment and complaint of injustice.

The *Earth Charter* raises the need for an ethical commitment and, from there, recognizes that we really have a chance to counter the risk of human extinction as a consequence of over-consumerism and over-exploitation of the resources that characterize our current development pattern. An ethical commitment based on three key values: the sense of planetary human identity, the universal differentiated co-responsibility, synchronic and diachronic and the critical responsible compassion.

Conclusion

Faced with the many present global crises, the *Earth Charter* claims it is possible to reverse the present situation, to ensure for our societies the possibility of a sustainable future and the continuity of life on the Earth.

But, even more important, the *Earth Charter* suggests a feasible utopia, a new development pattern, focused on the strengthening of the individual freedom, capacities and aptitudes (Sen, 1998, 2000). A brand new, clearer, critical and radical idea of the future and of our responsibility towards it as compared to the remarks on this issue elaborated in former documents.

At the time when major changes in how we think and live are urgently needed, the *Earth Charter* challenges us to question and rethink our values and to choose a different, more sustainable way. At a time when international partnership is increasingly necessary, the *Earth Charter* encourages us to search for common ground where we can compare our diversities and jointly work out and embrace a new global ethic that could be shared by a growing number of people throughout the world. At the time when education for sustainable development has become essential, the *Earth Charter* provides a very valuable educational instrument.

According to the *Earth Charter*, building sustainable communities able to meet the challenges of the contemporary world and the present environmental, social, economic and cultural crisis is possible by integrating two pathways. It would be possible, on the one hand, by drawing the outline and promoting a new ethics for individuals and communities at local, national and global levels. A paradigm shift is based on the call to global responsibility, being responsible to oneself, to the others and to the planet, focused on a new balance between freedom and a sense of limits and on the capacity of envisioning and building the future. On the other hand, the ability of people to appreciate the beauty of nature, love it and assume the responsibility to promote it in their attitudes and behaviours is of utter importance.

A special responsibility should be accorded to education, to its capacity to build a new awareness and create proper conditions for more responsible and sustainable attitudes and behaviours. The highly innovative nature of the *Earth Charter* helps to explain why so much research has been carried out on it recently (Attfield, 2007; Bosselmann, 2004; Dower, 2004; Lucier, 2004; Lynn, 2004; Murga, 2005; Vilela, 2007).

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