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SAGE Publications
(Los Angeles, London, New Delhi,
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www.sagepublications.com
Vol 3(2): 151–158
10.1177/097340820900300210

The Earth Charter in Higher Education for Sustainability

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Abstract

A central challenge of sustainable development is to provide material sufficiency for the human population while preserving the integrity of Earth's biosphere. Current modes of economic production and consumption accomplish neither of these ethical imperatives. Institutions of higher education must show leadership in the transition to sustainable ways of life. The Earth Charter is a people's declaration of ethical principles for securing a just, peaceful, humane and sustainable future. The document can serve as a valuable resource for tertiary educators. The Earth Charter provides an inclusive definition of sustainability, emphasising the interrelated concepts of ecological integrity; social and economic justice; and democracy, non-violence and peace. It can help us resolve the tension between educating for sustainability while creating learning spaces for contestation and critical inquiry. The Earth Charter also valorises the principle of intergenerational equity, challenging us to create human livelihoods that secure the continued full flourishing of all life for generations to come.

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The world economy is today a huge casino.

Fidel Castro,

International Conference on Financing for Development, 21 March 2002

The dominant patterns of production and consumption are causing environmental devastation, the depletion of resources, and a massive extinction of species.

Communities are being undermined. The benefits of development are not shared equitably and the gap between rich and poor is widening.... These trends are perilous—but not inevitable.

The Earth Charter, Preamble, paragraph three

'THE EARTH DEFICIT'

The global financial crisis demands that we reconsider the role of economic development in securing a just, sustainable and peaceful future. In the United States, poorly regulated market systems have failed to provide people with adequate or affordable health care, to stem the growing divide between rich and poor, to protect or restore the environment, or to address meaningfully the problem of anthropogenic climate change. The challenges outside the developed world, where 2.7 billion people struggle to survive on less than two dollars per day, are even greater (United Nations Millennium Project 2006). In fact, the global market, driven by financial self-interest, the fiction of unlimited growth, and the short-term generation of wealth, has proven to be unsustainable even as a closed economic system. The irresponsible financial practices that originated in the United States and that pushed the global system to the brink of collapse emerged from an economic imperative to generate greater and greater profits within a shorter and shorter time span. And, of course, the economic system is *not* closed; it depends utterly upon the natural systems that make all life on Earth possible.

The rush among governments to prop up waning economies with money borrowed from future generations cautions us as to our grim dependence on what the Earth Charter calls devastating 'dominant patterns of production and consumption'. Proponents of financial 'bailouts' argue that such action must be taken to prevent further deterioration of human livelihoods in the short term, and that these measures can catalyse the development of new sustainable technologies and green jobs. However, it is imperative that these efforts do not forestall a deeper re-examination of an economic logic that imperils the future for the sake of the present. The enormous monetary deficits of nations remind us of what the late theologian Thomas Berry (1988: 72) terms the 'earth deficit'. He writes, 'this deficit in its extreme expression is not only the death of a living process, but *the* living process, a living process which exists so far as we know, only on planet earth'. The vast monetary and material sums required to resuscitate our faltering and flawed economic systems are not only a debt transferred to those who will come after us—they are a debt drawn on the life processes of Earth itself.

We can at least be grateful that the economic system failed before the ecological one. We now must create just economies that provide material sufficiency for all while

working in synergy with the Earth's biosphere. We take heart from the Earth Charter's call to 'adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being' (Principle 7). The Charter challenges us to critique the current global economy, which is based on the short-term generation of false wealth and to re-imagine a new one based on 'respect and care for the community of life' (Part I). The promise of the Earth Charter is that it provides an integrated ethical vision of sustainability built on a broad global consultation. It can assist us in articulating a new framework for economic and social policies and practices that is not primarily for short-term economic gain but for the full flourishing of all life.

Higher education has a critical role to play in this great transition. We believe the Earth Charter can be a critically important text for learning in several areas: resolving the multiple definitions of sustainable development, putting forth ethics for sustainability while navigating the challenges of values education and guiding ethical and sustainable actions for the university community and, perhaps someday, for the global economy.

DEFINING SUSTAINABILITY

The power of the Charter is in its potential to engender conversations, to interrupt our discourse, and to challenge our norms and routines with a comprehensive, socio-ecological vision for society and education.

—David Gruenewald (2004: 100)

While a growing number of faculty at colleges and universities are attempting to teach about sustainability, the obstacles are considerable. First, the definition of sustainability continues to be problematic. Educators and others struggle with vague and even conflicting notions of the concept. As Wals and Jickling (2002: 122) write, 'It is not uncommon to find that scientific, political and symbolic meanings of sustainability are used interchangeably by one and the same person or group. Both the knowledge base and the value base of sustainability are variable, unstable and questionable'. Indeed, sustainability remains an ill-defined concept that derives meaning from a specific context. Corcoran and Wals (2004: 91) question how one deals with the inevitable tension between the divergence of interests, values and worldviews on the one hand and the need for the shared resolution of issues that arise in working on sustainability in higher education on the other. According to them, a 'pluralism of perspectives can be a driving force for reaching solutions to sustainability issues in higher education'. The integrated nature of the ethical principles in the Earth Charter can help us recognise the commonality among many seemingly disparate conceptions of sustainability. Likewise, Gruenewald (2004: 98–99) suggests that the Earth Charter can 'stimulate multiple avenues of inquiry and dialogue' and 'inspire action on the interrelated themes of caring, justice, peace, and sustainability'. The document provides a 'comprehensive and challenging context for action and reflection'—a

shared vision for those working to realise the distinct, yet congruent, elements of sustainability in higher education.

VALUES IN EDUCATION

Alongside the intellectual challenge of arriving at a workable definition of sustainability is the pedagogical challenge of educating for sustainability while avoiding indoctrination. The Earth Charter, like any text, emerges from a particular cultural and historical moment and is open to a wide array of interpretations and reinterpretations. Ursula van Harmelen cautions against teaching ethical visions such as the Earth Charter at the expense of nurturing the important skill of critical inquiry.

To impose any ethical framework, no matter how 'good' it may be, without subjecting it to constant critical scrutiny and challenge is a denial of human freedom to make informed choices. The imposition of an ethical framework as a given is to reify not only that framework, but to mask possible interpretations of that framework that may in fact be corruptions of the original ideals. Thus, if we were to accept the Earth Charter as a code of ethics without critical and informed analysis this would seem to me to be a form of indoctrination. (van Harmelen 2003: 124)

The Earth Charter, through its extensive global consultation process, 'seeks to inspire in all people a new sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility for the well-being of the whole human family, the greater community of life, and future generations' (Earth Charter Initiative, n.d: 1). Although the Earth Charter synthesises many different worldviews, it remains the task of educators to translate its principles into the myriad contexts in which students learn. Educators must also encourage students to engage actively and critically with the text, rather than to proselytise its values.

In August and September 2001, members of the Earth Charter's Education Advisory Committee participated in an online discussion forum to consider the philosophy and methodology of the use of the Earth Charter in education. The conversation included perspectives on the role of the Earth Charter in 'values education'. In a summary of the conclusions and recommendations of that forum, Brendan Mackey, current Co-Chair of the Earth Charter International Council, reflects,

Values education is an often contested theme in education due to legitimate concern about 'which values' and 'whose values' are being promoted. These concerns can be accommodated so long as the values represent core values that are life-affirming, promote human dignity, advance environmental protection and social and economic justice, and respect cultural and ecological diversity and integrity. The Earth Charter can validly lay claim to represent such a core set of values, particularly given the participatory and multicultural process that underpinned the drafting of the document. (Mackey 2001: 9)

Educators apply the Earth Charter in a diverse range of settings and teach with it in many ways. The Earth Charter Education Advisory Committee suggests certain methodologies that are consistent with the ethical values and spirit of the process of

writing the Earth Charter. These include experiential learning, collaborative teaching, transdisciplinarity and action research (Mackey 2002).

The Earth Charter is a normative statement of shared values. However, we see the text not as a programmatic or totalising structure for teaching about sustainability, but as a document that captures a plurality of ideas about sustainability broadly conceived. It can aid educators alongside other texts in the 'development of curricula with the educational aim of teaching values and principles for sustainable living' (Mackey 2001: 9). The Earth Charter can assist in guiding our response to the critical environmental and cultural challenges of our time. For university faculty members and students alike, the Earth Charter provides: a comprehensive and validated description of the necessary and sufficient conditions for sustainable development; a statement of specific principles to guide sustainable and ethical actions; and a call to collaborate on behalf of ecological integrity, social and economic justice and a culture of peace. The Earth Charter provides higher education with a vision of another way, and a network of tertiary educators throughout the world use it to promote humane and sustainable ways of life.

ETHICAL DECISION MAKING

We believe that higher education must play a leading role in making the transition to sustainability. If the leaders of the major institutions and disciplines do not make sustainability a central academic and organisational focus, it will be impossible to create a just, equitable and sustainable future. Higher education can realise sustainability through policy-making, capacity-building, technology transfer, science and research on its campuses. Higher-education institutions must also accept their moral responsibility to assist in the creation of democratic, equitable and ecologically sound societies. We believe that the Earth Charter can help us explore the ethical dimension of the transition to such societies. Corcoran (2002: 77) writes, 'many of the problems we face are ethical problems. Therefore, the solutions must be solutions to which ethics point'. Ethics can help us creatively imagine such solutions. As stated in 'A Guide for Using the Earth Charter in Education',

The process of making sound ethical choices in concrete situations requires thinking imaginatively with both the head and the heart. Reason and scientific knowledge can help people understand the consequences of different courses of action, which are important to consider when making ethical judgments. However, scientific information by itself cannot determine what is right and wrong. Compassion and commitment, as well as reason, are involved in decisions with ethical dimensions. (Earth Charter Initiative 2009: 3)

The Earth Charter can guide us in resolving conflict between different ethical positions. For example, there is an increasingly acute conflict between the needs of current human generations and the needs of generations to come. The Earth Charter responds to this tension with the ethical principle of intergenerational equity. Supporting Principle 4a calls us to 'recognize that the freedom of action of each generation is qualified by the needs of future generations'. This principle goes to

the heart of the meaning of sustainable development as defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland as development that 'meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (1987: 8). This shared goal and value is essential to higher education for sustainability. Indeed, if sustainability is the meta-narrative¹ of our time, then intergenerational equity is, perhaps, the meta-principle for times to come. We believe that this principle, and the other principles and supporting principles of the Earth Charter can illuminate the way towards higher education for sustainability.

Box 1 What is the Earth Charter?²

'We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.'

The Earth Charter, Preamble, paragraph 1

The Preamble of the Earth Charter describes the global environmental and social predicament facing humanity. The document's sixteen main principles and accompanying supporting principles are divided into four parts which form the body of the Charter and comprise fundamental ethical guidelines for a sustainable way of life. The four principles in Part I are intentionally broad in scope and encompass the Earth Charter vision. They are: Principle 1, 'Respect Earth and life in all its diversity'; Principle 2, 'Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love'; Principle 3, 'Build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful'; and Principle 4, 'Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.' Parts II, III, and IV of the Earth Charter, entitled 'Ecological Integrity,' 'Social and Economic Justice,' and 'Democracy, Nonviolence, and Peace,' shed light on the meaning of Part I. These sections address issues such as ecosystem protection and restoration, equitable and sustainable economic activities, the eradication of poverty, environmental justice, transparency and accountability in governance, education for sustainability and prevention of conflict.

The Earth Charter Initiative involved the most open and participatory consultation process ever conducted in drafting an international document. Thousands of individuals and hundreds of organisations from all regions of the world, different cultures and diverse sectors of society participated. The Charter was shaped by scientific experts, government and civil-society leaders, students and representatives from indigenous groups and grassroots communities. It is a fundamental expression of the hopes and aspirations of the emerging global society.

The drafting of the Earth Charter was part of the unfinished business of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro (the Earth Summit). In 1994, Maurice Strong, Secretary General of the Earth Summit and Chairman of the Earth Council, and Mikhail Gorbachev, the President of Green Cross International, launched a new Earth Charter initiative in The Hague. It was undertaken with the encouragement of former Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers and Her Royal Highness Queen Beatrix of The Netherlands, and with financial support from the Dutch government. An Earth Charter Commission was formed in 1997 to oversee the project, and an Earth Charter Secretariat was established at the Earth Council in Costa Rica. The final version of the document was

(Box 1 continued)

(Box 1 continued)

released by the Earth Charter Commission in March 2000, and a phase of promotion, endorsement and implementation of the Earth Charter began.

UNESCO manages the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–14) and has adopted a resolution that recognises the Earth Charter as ethical principles for sustainable development and as a valuable educational resource. UNESCO's 32nd General Conference resolved to 'recognize the Earth Charter as an important ethical framework for sustainable development, and acknowledge its ethical principles, its objectives and its contents, as an expression that coincides with UNESCO's vision' (UNESCO 2003).

In 2005, the Earth Charter International Council adopted a new strategy for disseminating the Earth Charter to encourage local action through 'decentralized empowerment'; individuals and organisations undertake such action without direction from a central administration (Earth Charter Initiative, 2007). Earth Council member Steven C. Rockefeller (2008: 20) explains that 'the Earth Charter gives expression to the consensus on shared values that inspires and guides this peoples' movement, which has become a major force alongside business and government in shaping the future'.

Notes

- 1 We use the term 'metanarrative' cautiously, recognising the potential of narratives to conceal or displace local 'micronarratives'. Indeed, the transition to sustainability must be narrated by a plurality of voices.
- 2 This section relies on several descriptions of the process and content of the Earth Charter, especially the *Earth Charter Briefing Book (2000)* and *The Earth Charter Initiative Handbook (2008)*. The major author of these descriptions is Steven C. Rockefeller, who served as Chair of the Earth Charter drafting committee.

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