

THE EARTH CHARTER: GLOBAL ETHICS FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Summary

The result of a collective process of consultation around the world, *The Earth Charter* (2000) offers a moral guide for a sustainable way of life with shared values for the human family. It signals the need for comprehensive, inclusive, and global ethics. It is also about the governance (the sovereignty) of peoples. In *The Earth Charter*, not only States but also civil society, the private sector, not-for-profit non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and religious and social movements are called upon to play a role. It is a call for traditional governance (by States and Intergovernmental institutions), as well as new governance, which is about the interaction between non-governmental efforts and responsible business. Finally, *The Earth Charter* links the local with the global, the individual with the community.

The Earth Charter contains a preamble, followed by four parts with a total of 16 principles and a final statement. The preamble and the general principles of the first part are examined in this article. The proposal of *The Earth Charter* is also hereby presented comparing it to other relevant documents for the world community.

For the first time in history our planet is at risk as a result of human activities. The global ecological crisis requires us to develop a global ethics of universal responsibility that cares

for humanity and the Earth. Full realization of human rights, eradication of poverty, protection of the environment, control of the pattern of production and consumption, and good governance are focal issues of this enterprise.

We urgently need a shared vision of basic values to provide an ethical foundation for the emerging world community.

The Earth Charter, Preamble

1. Introduction

The Earth Charter (2000) is an inspiring global document offering a guide of principles for a sustainable way of life for humanity, meeting the challenges of global interdependence. The world is rapidly becoming “one” and we are all neighbors as a result of advances in science and technology. In this new scenario, we also need to join forces to shape a common future for the human family and the Earth.

This declaration of interdependence and shared responsibility that invites everyone to think inclusively is the result of a joint effort initiated in 1994 by the Earth Council (Maurice Strong) and the Green Cross International (Mikhail Gorbachev), with the support of the Dutch government and many individuals and groups around the world. In 1987 The United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development issued a call for a Charter on principles for sustainable development. The Rio Conference (UNCED) in 1992 produced *Agenda 21*, but the expected ethical framework of a Charter was not achieved. In 1997 an Earth Charter Commission was formed and an Earth Charter Benchmark Draft was presented at the Rio+5 Forum in Rio de Janeiro.

The Earth Charter is a people’s treaty, which is comprehensive and a result of intensive multicultural dialogue. Thousands of individuals and organizations, representing different cultures, faiths, expertise and grassroots communities have participated in its drafting process. This has been a remarkably open, participatory process with extensive consultations in the drafting of *The Earth Charter* as an international document. With the promotion of tolerance, cross-cultural and interreligious dialogue, and the collaboration on fundamental ethical issues it was possible to develop a framework of inclusive values for guiding human activities.

In 2002, the tenth anniversary of the Rio Earth Summit, *The Earth Charter* is expected to be submitted to the UN General Assembly. If and when *The Earth Charter* will be adopted as a “soft law” document, similar to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the implementation of its sustainable principles will be more easily facilitated, contributing to the consolidation of an ethical vision for our global civil society.

The Earth Charter contains a preamble, followed by four main themes with a total of 16 principles and a final statement. The preamble and the four first principles will be examined in this article. The proposal of *The Earth Charter* will also be hereby presented in the light of a comparison to other relevant documents for the world community. The full implementation of their proposals can only be achieved by the collaboration of global initiatives. They represent global concerns and a call for global governance, starting with the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) to the present day. The documents provide

an insight in the growing intensity of global concerns and the call for global governance. They also help us to understand why a comprehensive and inclusive document is now needed.

2. The Global Situation and the Need for a Global Ethics (Preamble of *The Earth Charter*)

The preamble of *The Earth Charter* has five paragraphs:

The first paragraph. The general introduction refers to our time as “a critical moment in Earth’s history ... when humanity must choose its future.” Our world is described as interdependent and fragile with a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms. For the “one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny” it is proposed as a common end towards achieving a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. For this moral imperative initial words of the Charter of the United Nations are paraphrased: “we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.”

The second paragraph. The Earth as “our home” is considered alive with a unique community of life, providing the conditions that are essential to life’s evolution. This paragraph draws our attention to the need for preserving a healthy biosphere with all its systems, and its finite resources as a common concern of all people. Therefore, it is considered to be a “sacred trust” for the protection of Earth’s vitality, diversity, and beauty.

The third paragraph. The “global situation” is evaluated in the light of many destructive consequences of human actions, that are undermining the community of life. The current pattern of production, consumption and reproduction are major concerns that are threatening human and global security. This paragraph introduces the need for founding intra- and intergenerational equity, with the eradication of injustice, poverty, ignorance, and violent conflict.

Since 1990, we have seen a sharp increase in the use of the word “globalization.” The globalization through, and of, technology has become possible as a result of the tremendous boost that satellites and computers have given the development of communication technology. Bits and bytes are moving us in the direction of one world with increased communication in real time and mobility. The globalization through, and of, the economy can be seen in the increase in world trade, the liberalization of capital markets, and global companies. The globalization through, and of, politics has been made possible, in particular, by the end of the Cold War, after which all countries have tended to opt for democracy plus the market principle. Globalization has consequences at the cultural level. Although we are participants in systems of values that are grounded in cultural and historical particularities, it is now possible to look at our own system of values and its proximity to other systems of values from more of a distance. And taking a broader perspective as members of humanity, our interests have a common dimension.

This new global scenario has essential implications for the human condition, and transforms everyone into a neighbor of the other, as mentioned in Report Our Global

Neighborhood (II: Caring). The result should be a community where there is a mutual caring for its members at the local, but also the global level, in order to improve the quality of life of its members. In the past, globalization has often been understood to be globalization with supremacy of economy and technology; but *The Earth Charter* is about global ethics and global governance, with a close affinity to other documents described in this article.

The fourth paragraph. In this paragraph “the challenges ahead” are discussed with respect to global interdependence, urging us to assume a moral approach for achieving a sustainable future. Globalization cannot only be described as a fact. That a descriptive dimension to the globalization must be complemented by a prescriptive approach is a common statement of global documents today. For example, *The Earth Charter* coincides in this point with the proposal of the UN Millennium Declaration (UNMD) that proclaims the need for ensuring globalization as a “positive force for all the world’s people,” with participation, solidarity, and equity.

As a positive appeal for founding a better world, *The Earth Charter* provides us with an interesting tool to use against skepticism or passivity, while at the same time promoting awareness on the global situation. Furthermore, it invites us to assume a moral decision to “form a global partnership to care for Earth and one another.” *The Earth Charter* offers an innovative vision about human development, being “primarily about being more, not having more.” Therefore, in the light of these ethics, knowledge, and technology are considered to be essential. Additionally, we are reminded that there is a human face to the global situation, requiring us to develop our ethics in our emerging global civil society, with more attention devoted toward the democratic and inclusive solutions.

The fifth paragraph. In the last paragraph, *The Earth Charter* states the need for “universal responsibility” from the local to the global level “for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world.” Human solidarity, kinship with all life and humility regarding the position of human beings in nature are innovative statements of this international document.

It seems important to state that *The Earth Charter*, based on the tradition of universal human rights, calls on shared, but differentiated responsibilities. The UDHR has proclaimed universal human rights for everybody. *The Earth Charter*, honoring these universal rights, proclaims moreover universal responsibility for the different actors to humanity and the Earth: individuals, organizations, businesses, governments, and transnational institutions, and not only as the UDHR for the States. It is a shared project to be realized by everybody according to his/her possibilities. The Preamble concludes with the introduction of the principles of *The Earth Charter* as “principles for a sustainable way of life,” providing a global ethics of shared values for the world community.

3. Respect and Care for the Community of Life (Part I of *The Earth Charter*)

Respect and care for the community of life is the general proposal of *The Earth Charter* and title of its first part. This part stresses the relationship between humankind and nature, the interdependence of all peoples, and the solidarity that bind those peoples now living on Earth and those yet unborn.

Principle 1: Respect Earth and life in all its diversity.

The first principle states that ethical concerns extend to the Earth and the community of life. We are “one human family” participating in “one Earth community.”

Global ethics can be focused on human needs with a lack of concern for nonhuman beings (anthropocentric ethics), but moral concern can also be extended to other entities (sentientist, biocentric and ecocentric ethics) (see Table 1). The results are significant as we explore the consequences of these alternative positions for human beings: Is the protection of humanity reinforced or debilitated when moral concern is extended to other entities?

GLOBAL ETHICS	human being	animals	animals and plants	non-living
philosophy	anthropocentrism	sentientism	biocentrism	ecocentrism
justification	ratio, language	capacity to suffering	living entity	entity
key-value	human dignity	sensitive life	community of life	reality as wholeness
principle of action	satisfaction of human needs	non-cause of suffering	respect of all life	moral regard to the cosmos

and/or

moral concern	anthropocentrism	sentientism	biocentrism	ecocentrism
non-living				non-living
plants			plants	
animals		animals		
human being	human being			

Table 1. The extension of the moral concern

The anthropocentric approach states that only living humans have basic moral rights because they are human. This has received some critics, in particular when human interests are promoted at the expense of the well-being of other species or a more extensive concern.

A sentientist perspective proposes moral consideration of the interests of sentient beings. Therefore the cruel or inhumane treatment of animals is condemned. Principle 15 from *The Earth Charter* illustrates this ethical view.

A biocentric perspective extends moral concern to all living entities, including animals and

plants. Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) proposed an ethic of reverence for life, affirming that “life as such is sacred.” The emphasis on respect and care for the community of life (first chapter of *The Earth Charter*) assumes this biocentric approach.

An ecocentric view extends moral consideration to the cosmos as a whole, and also non-living entities would deserve moral consideration. Close to *The Earth Charter* in this point, the interfaith UDGE II is self-characterized as a cosmo-anthropocentric ethic, saying that “humans are a part of nature, not apart from nature.” In recognizing that without nature there is no happiness and the need for harmony in nature and unity among peoples, the “new environmental ethic” proposed by FCH shares this ecocentric approach.

The Earth Charter goes beyond global human ethics and is not exclusively centered on humanity to the sentient, living and other entities of the world, but includes all sentient beings, all life forms in the world. Nature cannot be considered merely as a means for satisfying human needs. The value of nature is recognized beyond humanity, implying the moral consequence that there is also human responsibility for non-human entities. However, the extension of these global ethics is not implied to be detrimental to human beings. When people have concern for nature and the entire community of life, some preconditions for the survival of humankind itself are secured. Therefore, a moral regard for other entities can contribute positively to the future of humanity, when “human dignity” is not disregarded.

The Earth Charter, honoring human rights, offers a moral framework integrating elements of other ethical approaches, converging with proposals of respect for the nature of other global documents and also promote respect for nature, being guided by the precepts of sustainable development, with a more anthropocentric perspective. Interesting examples are principle 1 of RIO, which states that “Human beings are at the center of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature,” and the UNMD that recommends prudence in the management of all living species and natural resources.

Subprinciple 1a: Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings.

This subprinciple recognizes a value to every form of life. The respect for the community of life differs from the respect for human life, in the sense that human beings and other animals cannot survive without consuming living entities. For this question the UDGE establishes a scale of entities considering that every entity has intrinsic value to be respected because of its existence, but humans have greater intrinsic value than non-humans. The SD Part I.5 states in the beginning of the international debate on human environment (1972): “Of all things in the world, people are the most precious.”

The specific respect for human life is a common statement of the UN documents, that can be illustrated by article 3 of the UDHR: “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and the security of person.” Other documents emphasizes this right as the M2000 that dedicates one of its principles to the respect for life and dignity of each human being or the OGN that talks about “the sanctity of life” as a shared concept of people of all faiths and secular humanists.

Subprinciple 1b: Honor the inherent dignity of all human beings and affirm faith in the intellectual, artistic, ethical, and spiritual potential of humanity.

This subprinciple, is essential to understand the close relationship with the tradition of human rights of the United Nations. The preamble of the UDHR makes a “recognition of the inherent dignity and the inalienable rights of all members of the human family” and its article 1 states: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”

The postulation of human dignity of every individual is the foundation of the universal human rights by international law that have created conditions favorable for preventing and resolving conflicts since the end of the Second World War. The individual is an end in him/herself, and in order to respect human dignity, the human rights of everyone should be recognized and not be sacrificed to any interest, trying to find harmony between an individual’s needs and the needs of others must be found. In the light of human dignity we can think inclusively and share our interests with the interests of the other members of humankind with intra- and intergenerational equity.

“Human dignity” as a guide for a global ethics is shared by several proposals. The recent UNMD defines our collective responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level. The UEDGE adopts as a general presupposition that “every human possesses inalienable and inviolable dignity.”

The Earth Charter responds to a new phase in the history of humankind. It reflects global interdependence. The history of humankind has now become world history. Because of the consequences of information and communication technology and the globalization of economy, we have achieved global interdependence, as well as the threat of degradation of nature and environment. Human dignity is confronted with a new challenge. Human dignity signifies the entitlement of rights of everyone and his ability to respond to and relate to others, with respect to nature as well. *The Earth Charter* is meant to empower people and institutions to be conscious of the fact that realizing human equity implies global solidarity and respect for nature.

Principle 2: Care for the community of life with love, understanding, and compassion.

As a result of a rich multicultural dialogue and consensus three human attitudes are emphasized by *The Earth Charter* in relation to the community of life: love, understanding and compassion. As stated by the CE an ethics based on respect and care for each other and the Earth is the foundation for sustainable living. The promotion of these human attitudes would contribute to human survival and other species would not be threatened.

Subprinciple 2a enunciates the moral responsibility for realizing “the right to own, manage, and use natural resources”: we should prevent environmental harm and at the same time protect the rights of people. This subprinciple has in common with the FCH the need to connect human and natural goals, protect biological diversity and achieve equity.

Subprinciple 2b; Establish as the counterpart of our “freedom, knowledge, and power” the responsibility to promote the common good.

Principle 3: Build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful.

The third commitment of *The Earth Charter* is dedicated to democracy and human rights and fundamental freedoms. Justice, participation, sustainability and peace function as orientative goals for these societies. In accordance with the previous emphasis on human dignity, democracy appears as the best system to secure human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Principle 3a: Ensure that communities at all levels guarantee human rights and fundamental freedoms

The past century made it evident that the formulation of human rights as universal and interdependent was the best way to respect human dignity in the rich diversity of humankind, with the right to be different. As mentioned before universal human rights have been enunciated as the moral guide for the human family since the UDHR.

The UN Conference on Human Rights (1993) established with multicultural dialogue and consensus that the universal nature of these rights and freedoms are beyond question and that “human rights and fundamental freedoms are the birthright of all human beings” and that “all human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated.”

Human dignity cannot be dissociated from the base on which we are living, which is nature. In the past, this was taken for granted. So it was always very much about human rights, about the protection of the individual against the state, against power in the first place. Then human rights developed; not only as protection against power, but as an invitation to empower people to organize life in such a way that there would be more human dignity. The third phase is to act in accordance with the relationship between mankind and nature. *The Earth Charter* cares at the same time for humanity and nature. Sometimes there seems to be a tension between the realization of human rights for everyone and a care for the earth. This tension is less to the extent that *The Earth Charter* is understood and implemented in relation to human rights; to the extent that human rights for the individual are implemented empowering the individual to relate and take care of other people (intragenerational equity) and for the Earth (intergenerational equity). This tension is less to the extent that subsequently human rights for the individual are implemented empowering the individual to relate and take care of other people (distributional equity) and for the Earth (intergenerational equity).

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Biographical Sketches

Rudolphus (Ruud) Franciscus Marie Lubbers (born May 1939 in Rotterdam) attended the Canisius College in Nijmegen and studied Economics at the Netherlands School of Economics (the predecessor of the University of Rotterdam). As suggested by the title of his 1962 thesis, “The influence of differing productivity trends in various countries on the current account of the balance of payments,” his main interest was in monetary affairs. He originally planned an academic career, but was compelled by family circumstances to join the management of Lubbers’ Construction Workshops and Machinery Fabricators, Hollandia B.V. In 1964 he became Chairman of the Young Christian Employers Association, later becoming Chairman of the Catholic Association of Metalwork Employers and a member of the board of the Netherlands Christian Employers Federation. From 11 May 1973 to 19 December 1977 he was Minister for Economic Affairs in the Den Uyl-government as a member of the Catholic People’s Party (KVP).

He chose to return to Parliament on the formation of the Van Agt-government in 1977, becoming Senior Deputy Parliamentary Leader of the Christian Democratic Appeal CDA, the Alliance between the KVP and the other two main denominational parties. In the autumn of 1978 he became Parliamentary Leader of the Alliance. From 4 November 1982 to 14 July 1986 and from 14 July 1986 to 7 November 1989 he was Prime Minister of the first and second Lubbers-government CDA-VVD alliances. On the latter date he was reappointed as Prime Minister to lead the third Lubbers-government, a CDA-PvdA alliance. On 22 August 1994 Prime Minister Lubbers finished his political career; since March 2001 Prof. Lubbers has assumed the functions of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Patricia Morales studied philosophy at the University of Buenos Aires and Goethe University in Frankfurt. She obtained her Ph.D in 1996 at the University of Buenos Aires with her thesis “Derechos humanos y etica de la responsabilidad solidaria.” As assistant to Prof. Ruud Lubbers for Human Rights at Tilburg University (1998–2000), she became involved in the *Earth Charter* process, participating in the research program and the organization of conferences. They worked on a Glossary on Global Principles for the Earth Charter (www.globalize.org) among other activities. She is Academic Coordinator of the Earth Charter at Globus Institute at Tilburg University and Cedar International. She is editor of *Indigenous Peoples, Human Rights and Global Interdependence* (1994), *Towards Global Human Rights* (1996), and *Pueblos indigenas, derechos humanos e interdependencia global* (2000).