

Making the World One



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The Earth is one but the world is not. We all depend on one biosphere for sustaining our lives. Yet each community, each country, strives for survival and prosperity with little regard for its impact on others. Some consume the Earth's resources at a rate that would leave little for future generations. Others, many more in number, consume far too little and live with the prospect of hunger, squalor, disease, and early death.
Our Common Future, 1987, p. 27

It has been a generation since the World Commission on Environment and Development famously introduced the concept of an integration of environment and development that is sustainable, "to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."¹ This concept, both brilliant and problematic, has framed a great debate of the turn of the millennium. How, and if, we will find a path to sustainability has become the most important narrative of our time.

What kind of world we will leave for the young, and what values will we transfer to them have become epic questions. The tragic truth pointed out by the Brundtland Commission is well-known but often ignored.

We borrow environmental capital from future generations with no intention or prospect of repaying....We act as we do because we can get away with it: future generations do not vote they have no political or financial power; they cannot challenge our decisions. But the results of the present profligacy are rapidly closing the options for future generations. (p. 8)

Indeed, sustainability is a diminishing prospect. The gloomy and alarming forecasts for the future of life on Earth as we have known it create a great sense of urgency for action. Yet, almost everywhere we see the failure of governmental and intergovernmental institutions to take effective action. In the case of my own powerful USA government, we see a comprehensive policy of *not* taking action on the most serious problems, such as anthropogenic climate change. Indeed, this policy goes so far as to alter the conclusions of the science that show how serious the problems are. Most dangerously, this policy includes the rejection of all international agreements that might lead to effective action toward a sustainable world.

In the face of such urgency and such governmental ineffectiveness and, even, intransigence, what are we to do? Surely, as the indigenous peoples have taught us, we have an ethical responsibility not to foreclose future access to the beauty and bounty of Earth. We must reach across generations to acknowledge the

profound inequity and irreversible loss of opportunity this represents. Neither ought we to condemn them, or ourselves, to a diminished future. Indeed, I believe we have an intergenerational responsibility to provide for sustainable livelihoods. We must secure, by our actions, a hopeful future for the fifty percent of the world population that is under the age of twenty-five.

It is becoming well-established that we can meet the basic needs of all and surely we could find satisfying and sustainable employment for the rising generations in doing so. The Millennium Development Goals' process is showing us the way to alleviate the suffering of the billion of our brothers and sisters who live in extreme poverty. But, are we *willing* to do so? By what thinking and what policy might we move toward a sustainable world?

As early as 1987, the Brundtland Commission wisely saw the need for "... a new charter to guide state behavior in the transition to sustainable development" (p. 332). This charter, of course, became the Earth Charter and it became a guide to much more than the behavior of states. As you will see in this book, for some it became a guide for an ethical life. For others, it became a values framework for business or public policy. For still others, it became a covenant for caring for Earth – and for others.

This book shows how people have built consensus on shared values for a better world and are taking action on this hopeful vision. For hope is not a given; it remains to be constructed. The Earth Charter is an "ark of hope"; it is a vessel for our hopes for a better world. It helps us to know what a just, peaceful, and sustainable world might look like.

The Earth Charter principles result from a successful process of building consensus on values that are widely shared. These core values, so clearly articulated in the Earth Charter principles, give us much to go on as we work toward bringing a sustainable world into being. They are substantive and specific. Earth Charter principles articulate common ethical values that are compatible with many indigenous beliefs, worldviews, religions, and secular philosophies. They help us interpret our beliefs in light of the perilous trends of our current unsustainable development path. They express these values as a global, civic ethic of specific rights and responsibilities. In my experience, by articulating common concerns and common values, the Earth Charter provides a righteous vision. By being part of a participatory, inspiring process, it gives us hope that the vision is viable. By specifically articulating a vision of sustainable development, it provides a path forward to achieve it. The Earth Charter is a guide to such a path and an inspiration to action.

It is easy to talk about the crises of social injustice and poverty, of violent conflict, and of environmental disasters that create such suffering for all forms of life. The world is in agony and, as we improvidently exceed its carrying capacity, so is Earth. This book captures the stories of those who are doing something about these crises. It demonstrates the rich diversity of uses of

the Earth Charter and points toward many future possibilities for its greater use.

Thematic and descriptive essays from around the world tell of action informed by the Earth Charter and demonstrate its utility in diverse cultural contexts. They show its promise in working across the divide between the northern and southern hemispheres, across the faith traditions, the nations, and the generations.

Each Part of the Earth Charter, including the Preamble and The Way Forward, is given in full text, presented in a separate color, and is introduced by an extended essay on the overarching themes of that Part. Then, each of the sixteen main Principles is spoken to in either a thematic essay on its content or in a descriptive essay on a project related to the substance of that Principle.

The writers include the well-known whose action within an ethical framework has been enhanced by their work on the Earth Charter. The writers also include those little-known outside their circles whose heroic fortitude in putting the Earth Charter in action is often without recognition but which has been of critical importance. There are sixty-two essays by seventy-four contributors. They are from thirty-two nations and represent a wide diversity of geographies, cultures, and traditions. Several of the essays are by young people taking part in the great adventure of putting their high hopes and aspirations for a better world into action as inspired by the Earth Charter. Through these writers, taken together, we see that this is a people's movement – even as the Earth Charter is a people's treaty.

It is my desire that this book celebrates the ways in which the Earth Charter has been used. I also trust that it shows the efficacy of the Earth Charter in international law, religion, diplomacy, education, business, public policy, and many other fields – and that it points the way toward increasing usefulness.

Finally, it is my hope that you, the reader, will add your creative imagination to this endeavor of putting the Earth Charter into action – that *you* will live the Earth Charter, and thereby, join in the process of defining it as a living document. ●

Note

1 World Commission on Environment and Development. (1987). *Our Common Future* (p. 8). Oxford: Oxford UP. The Commission was chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland and is informally known as the Brundtland Commission.