



A Guide for Using the Earth Charter in Education

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Earth Charter is the product of a worldwide, decade long, cross cultural dialogue on common goals and shared values. It was drafted by a civil society initiative and launched in 2000. The mission of the Earth Charter Initiative is to promote the transition to sustainable ways of living and a global society founded on a shared ethical framework that includes respect and care for the community of life, ecological integrity, universal human rights, respect for diversity, economic justice, democracy, and a culture of peace.

This Guide is intended for all educators who are concerned to develop educational systems and programs that prepare young people and adults to live sustainably and become responsible local and global citizens in the 21st century. It provides basic information on how to use the Earth Charter in educational settings. It will be especially helpful to educators who are working in the fields of environmental education, education for sustainable development, human rights education, human ecology education, peace education, humane education, social education and allied areas. The Earth Charter can also be used to assess and reconstruct the entire curriculum and management practices of an educational institution in an effort to ensure that the institution is doing everything it can to prepare students to meet the great challenges of our time.

The second section of this guide briefly outlines the history of education for sustainable ways of living and the significance of the Earth Charter as a teaching and learning resource. The third section discusses the significance of ethics and explains the important place of ethical values in the Earth Charter. The fourth section identifies major themes that the Earth Charter can help address in diverse educational settings. The fifth section lists a number of the educational goals that teachers can consider when using the Earth Charter. The sixth section presents guidelines for developing Earth Charter educational materials and programmes.

Earth Charter Principle 14 emphasizes the need to “integrate into formal education and life-long learning the knowledge, values, and skills needed for a sustainable way of life.” From the outset, education has been at the center of the Earth Charter’s purpose and a major focus of the Earth Charter Initiative’s programmes.

A significant body of knowledge has been developed around the use of the Earth Charter in teaching and learning. Educators from all regions of the world have contributed to this body of knowledge, based on their practical experiences of applying the Earth Charter in a diversity of educational settings.

II. EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE WAYS OF LIVING AND THE EARTH CHARTER

The Earth Charter is being used in education for all ages and within formal and non-formal contexts. It has proved to be an especially valuable teaching instrument in the evolving field of environmental education, and its principles are in accord with UNESCO's early definitions of environmental education found in the Belgrade Charter (1975) and the Tbilisi Declaration (1977). It has been utilized in human rights and peace education and has been taken up in new educational endeavors aimed at sustainability designated variously as education for sustainable development, education for sustainability, and, even, environmental education for sustainable development. In these various arenas, the Earth Charter is contributing to the ongoing critical conceptualization of education processes that aim to develop understanding of and promote justice, sustainability and peace.

The United Nations has declared 2005-2014 the *Decade of Education for Sustainable Development* (DESD), and the United Nations' understanding of ESD is inclusive of these broader issues of justice, sustainability, and peace. According to UNESCO's plan of implementation for the DESD, the overall goal of the DESD is "to integrate the values inherent in sustainable development into all aspects of learning to encourage changes in behavior that allow for a more sustainable and just society for all." A key question for DESD is: *what are the values inherent in sustainable development and the ethical principles that can guide sustainable ways of living?*

The Earth Charter reflects the consensus taking form in the emerging global civil society on universal values for sustainable development and can validly claim to represent a core set of shared ethical principles with a broad and multicultural base of global supporters. In the holistic sense promoted by the Earth Charter, sustainable development or sustainable ways of living require changes in both the hearts and minds of individuals, along with the reorientation of public policies and practices. Education is a key to advancing the transition to more sustainable ways of living as it can help rekindle more caring relationships among humans and between humans and the natural world. It can facilitate the creative exploration of more environmentally and socially responsible forms of development. For this to happen, it is crucial to foster education that helps people understand the fundamental changes needed if sustainable development is to be realized.

The opening sentence of the Earth Charter preamble states: "We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history a time when humanity must choose its future." First and foremost, this involves a choice of guiding ethical values. In this regard, the Earth Charter calls for a new sense of universal responsibility that reflects the spirit of solidarity with the whole human family, including future generations, and a commitment to protect the well-being of the community of life as a whole, of which humanity is one interdependent part. Education has a critical role to play in awakening this sense of universal responsibility.

Values education is a contested field due to concerns over "which" values and "whose" values are being promoted. Such concerns are less of an issue when the values being examined represent core values that respect human dignity, are life affirming, and are consistent with those of many cultures around the world. However, critical thinking is needed concerning what values should guide our decisions and actions.

The Earth Charter provides an integrated and coherent framework for developing educational programmes and curricula aimed at teaching and learning for a more just, sustainable and peaceful world. The integrated approach promoted by the Earth Charter emphasizes the relationships between the different challenges faced by humanity, ranging from the eradication of poverty, to the protection of Earth's ecological systems, and to the elimination of all forms of discrimination. The Earth Charter can be used as a resource to undertake teaching and learning in many fields and can help in exploring the links and inter-relationships between the various dimensions of sustainability.

The Earth Charter can help to improve the quality of education by serving as a vehicle for integrating ethics into the curriculum. "Quality Education" is based on the four pillars of the *Education for All* movement: *learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and with others, and learning to be* (Delors et al., 1996). Of particular relevance here is Earth Charter Principle 2, which calls for an ethics and a pedagogy of care: "Care for the community of life with understanding, love, and compassion." The Earth Charter Preamble stresses that "we must realize that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more," and the Earth Charter affirms in Principle 1b faith in the intellectual, artistic, ethical, and spiritual potential of humanity. Using the Earth Charter as a tool for critical reflection and for

responsible action, education processes can help develop an orientation toward life based on the concept of caring and can help students become the persons they have the potential to be.

Many other principles have specific educational implications. For example, Principle 8 calls on the need to “advance the study of ecological sustainability and promote the open exchange and wide application of the knowledge acquired.” Principle 11 affirms the need to recognize “gender equality and equity as prerequisites to sustainable development and ensure universal access to education, health care, and economic opportunity.” This principle relates to the efforts of the *Millennium Development Goals* and *Education for All* movements to promote basic education for all, gender equity in education, and the improvement of quality of education.

III. ETHICS AND THE EARTH CHARTER

The Earth Charter sets forth ethical principles and general guidelines for sustainable ways of living and for building global community. It challenges people to think about ethical values and to expand their ethical consciousness.

Ethics as a philosophical discipline is concerned with inquiry regarding what is right and wrong, or good and bad, in human conduct. A society’s ethical values are the guide to what is considered right and wrong in the relations among people and between people and the larger living world. Shared ethical values are the foundation of community and the rule of law. A person’s ethical values reflect what kind of a person he or she chooses to be and what quality of community life she or he chooses to support and sustain.

People inherit ethical values from their family and culture. As the individual matures intellectually and learns to think independently, he or she must learn the art of ethical decision-making. 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.

It is important to recognize that the Earth Charter contains general ethical principles as distinct from rules. Rules tell one exactly what to do in a specific situation. General principles tell us what to think about when we are deciding what to do. It is also useful to keep in mind that we live in a complex world and there will be at times conflict between different ethical principles. For example, there is frequently a tension between individual freedom and securing justice for all. Likewise, there can be tension between the needs of present generations and the needs of future generations and between the short-term interests of people and the long-term health of ecosystems.

The Earth Charter is designed as a vision of global ethics, which can be used to promote ongoing reflection and dialogue across different cultural perspectives. Global ethics are urgently needed in the twenty-first century. All peoples live in an increasingly interdependent world. No group or nation can solve the major problems they face by acting alone. International and cross-cultural collaboration is essential. Effective collaboration requires common goals and shared values, and that means global ethics.

IV. EARTH CHARTER THEMES

The following are some of the major themes included in the Earth Charter that can be emphasized in educational programs:

1. *Critical global challenges and choices.* The Earth Charter Preamble outlines the critical environmental, social and economic challenges that confront humanity in the twenty-first century and highlights the choices we must make in order to build a more just, sustainable and peaceful world.
2. *The interdependence of social, economic and environmental concerns.* The Earth Charter principles are organised into four main interdependent sections: “Respect and Care for the Community of Life”; “Ecological Integrity”; “Social and Economic Justice”; and “Democracy, Nonviolence, and Peace.” These define the major spheres of responsibility that must be considered together when assessing critical problems and seeking solutions. For example, poverty is both a cause and consequence of environmental degradation and to solve either problem one must address both as well as many other issues.
3. *A definition of sustainable development and guide to sustainable living.* Developed through a wide global consultation process and drawing on a comprehensive review of environment and development documents, the Earth Charter represents a socially validated definition of “sustainability” in what is a contested field of inquiry.
4. *Universal rights and universal responsibilities.* The Earth Charter clarifies the relation between universal human rights and universal human responsibilities. In the words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” All human beings also have social and ecological responsibilities. These common responsibilities should be differentiated according to each person’s capacities and circumstances. In addition, it is important to recognize that social and ecological responsibilities create limits on the exercise of rights and freedoms.
5. *The greater community of life.* The Earth Charter emphasizes that all people are members of one human family and that the human family is an interdependent part of the greater community of life on Earth. Membership in the community of life embeds us in the universe story and calls us to support future generations. With community membership goes the responsibility to respect all members of the community and to live in a way that supports the common good. What are our responsibilities to people from other nations, cultures and religions? To future generations? To nonhuman species, individual animals and ecosystems? The Earth Charter can be used to engage teachers and students in a dialogue on these important questions.
6. *Global ethics.* The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Charter of the United Nations, created 60 years ago in the aftermath of World War II, created the foundation for global ethics. The World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987 called for a new charter to guide the transition to a sustainable future. This recommendation led to the early efforts to create an Earth Charter with a new vision of human-Earth relationships. The Earth Charter drafting process involved a dialogue with thousands of people from around the world, and is an example of how shared values and ethical principles can be found amidst our cultural diversity.
7. *Ecological integrity.* The second section of Earth Charter principles sets forth guidelines for protecting and restoring the ecological integrity of the planet. Ecological integrity refers to the health of Earth’s life support systems, including the capacity of ecosystems to provide clean air,

fresh water, and food and to recycle waste (ecosystems services) and the health of the planet's biodiversity. The Earth Charter's principles provide a framework for dealing with environmental problems such as protecting endangered species, reducing pollution and dealing with climate change.

8. *Social, economic, and environmental justice.* The third section of Earth Charter principles focuses on social and economic justice, including the eradication of poverty, equitable socio-economic development, gender equality, and universal access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunity. In addition, the Earth Charter expands the concept of social justice to include environmental justice and the human right to a safe and healthy environment.
9. *Democracy, nonviolence, and peace.* The Earth Charter highlights the importance of democratic institutions and the active engagement of citizens in promoting environmental protection and sustainable development. The Earth Charter defines peace as involving right relationship with oneself, other persons, other cultures, and the larger living world. It emphasizes that the challenge is to create a culture of peace that promotes these right relationships. In addition, the peace principle in the Earth Charter is the concluding principle because implementation of all of the preceding principles is a prerequisite for achieving peace. The Earth Charter constitutes a map of the interrelated issues involved in promoting nonviolence and peace.
10. *Partnerships, collaboration and global governance.* The conclusion of the Earth Charter ("The Way Forward") emphasizes that "every individual, family, organisation, community and government has a vital role to play" in building a secure and sustainable future. This concluding section also highlights that the partnership of governments, civil society, and business is essential for effective governance, and that, in addition to informal arrangements, building a sustainable global community requires advancing formal means of governance, including processes and legal instruments negotiated through the United Nations.

V. EDUCATIONAL GOALS AND THE EARTH CHARTER

The Earth Charter can be used to support a variety of educational goals including the following:

1. *Raising awareness and understanding of critical global problems* – The Earth Charter can be used to develop the capacity for critical thinking and to raise teachers and students awareness and understanding of the environmental, social, and economic problems facing the world, the interdependent nature of these problems, and the need to live with a sense of global responsibility, especially at a time when we face crises of unprecedented magnitude.
2. *Promoting dialogue on the values and principles for a sustainable way of life* – Common goals and shared values are the foundation of a strong and healthy community. The Earth Charter is a valuable resource for promoting dialogue on the common goals and shared values needed to build just, sustainable, and peaceful communities both locally and globally. Dialogue requires respect for cultural diversity and the opinions of others, careful listening, and the open-minded search for common ground.
3. *Promoting individuals' ethical development* – By using the Earth Charter to raise awareness, develop understanding of critical global problems, and promote dialogue on common goals and shared values, the Earth Charter can become an instrument for expanding a person's ethical awareness and commitments. It can also assist individuals in learning how to make sound ethical choices that involve thinking imaginatively with both the head and the heart.

4. *Inspiring a spirit of collaboration, cooperation, and action* – The Earth Charter concludes with a call for action through, among other things, new partnerships between civil society, business, and government at all levels. The challenges of sustainability are so large and complex that they can only be meaningfully addressed through cooperation. The educational challenge here is to provide students with the skills and opportunities for cooperative actions that express their ideas for more sustainable ways of living
5. *Encouraging a bio-sensitive outlook* – Many of the Earth Charter’s principles can be used to help teachers and students become more aware of and better understand the importance of biodiversity, natural processes, and the ecosystem services they provide to all living beings, the needs of other species and individual animals, and the environmental conditions necessary for a healthy life.
6. *Applying values and principles* – The main body of the Earth Charter is action-oriented and functions as a guide to more sustainable ways of living. The Earth Charter can serve as a framework for people and organizations to critically compare their reality with their ideals. This kind of analysis in turn provides the basis for identifying strategies for bringing about constructive change.
7. *Facilitating an understanding of the relationship between the Earth Charter, public policy, and international law* – While the Earth Charter is a “people’s charter” it can also be understood as an international “soft law” document. Soft law is important as it provides the values and principles to support and direct the development of “hard law” such as new international treaties. The Earth Charter can be used to explore the status of public policy and law regarding problems of environment and development.
8. *Assisting educational institutions and systems in reorienting their teaching and operations towards sustainable ways of living.* The Earth Charter has inspired many educational resources for teaching and learning for a sustainable future, and for assessing the sustainability practices of educational institutions. These Earth Charter based resources can be used to deepen our understanding of, and practice of, justice, sustainability and peace in educational settings.

In summary, education for sustainability, as informed by the Earth Charter, should help learners:

- To understand the challenges and critical choices that humanity faces and appreciate the interconnections between these challenges and choices;
- To comprehend the meaning of a sustainable way of life and of sustainable development and to create personal goals and values conducive to a sustainable way of living; and,
- To critically evaluate a given situation and identify action goals for bringing about positive change.

VI. GUIDELINES FOR DEVELOPING EARTH CHARTER EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMES, ACTIVITIES, AND MATERIALS

There are many ways that the Earth Charter can be used in education, depending on the context, and on the educator’s and student’s interests. Formal and non-formal educational settings offer different opportunities for using the Earth Charter, and the appropriateness of an approach will vary

in different cultural settings. There is not a single “best way” to use the Earth Charter in education. However, based on the experiences of educators from diverse settings, the following general guidelines are offered:

1. *Be consistent with the Earth Charter’s values and principles.* The process by which Earth Charter educational materials and programmes are developed and used should be consistent with the spirit of the document, respecting diversity, emphasizing participation, and learning from locally-based knowledge and activities. Such processes involve learning through dialogue and the exchange of different perspectives as a practice that will enrich critical thinking.
2. *Use the Earth Charter within existing educational programmes and textbooks.* In formal education, it can be very difficult to make room for new content. Opportunities should be explored to use the Earth Charter within existing educational programmes. Educational systems, curricula and materials can be examined in order to identify opportunities for making use of the Earth Charter, for re-organising existing material, and for informing curriculum development in light of the Earth Charter.
3. *Avoid preaching or proselytizing.* Values education requires that teachers and learners remain aware of the need to avoid proselytising, respect the right of individual learners to independently hold or reject values, and understand that within the search for common ground, respect for cultural diversity is a central value.
4. *Use the integrated, interdisciplinary vision of the Earth Charter.* Education programmes and activities using the Earth Charter should try and consider all parts and main themes of the Charter, thereby promoting an integrated, holistic approach. Often, one of the parts or themes of the Charter may serve as the entry into reflecting or analyzing a topic. However, the activity or programme should seek as much as possible to work with the integrated vision of the Charter. This will require reflecting on the effects and implications of one part on another, such as the linkages between humanity’s social, environmental, political, ethical and economic challenges. Educational materials and programmes based on the Earth Charter should reflect its multidisciplinary character, integrating the sciences, the humanities and the creative arts. The Earth Charter provides a bridge between science and the humanities that can help to enhance the role of transdisciplinary studies in our educational systems.
5. *Provide opportunities for “learning by doing.”* Earth Charter-based educational programmes should use experiential learning activities that involve action-oriented learning or “learning by doing”, such as community outreach activities; a field trip to experience a specific context or situation addressed in class; learning activities that model real life situations, such as role-playing; and, “hands on” education experiences with research-oriented activities. Secondary and university students might consider forming a youth group and carrying out sustainability and peace-building projects. Experiential learning is essential to bridging the gap between espoused values and real-life actions. It also provides opportunities to experience what it means to implement an ethical principle within one’s community and personal life. Experiential learning is particularly important for ethics education, for it is when we are engaged in action that our values are applied and tested.
6. *Use flexible and contextualized educational processes.* Earth Charter educational programmes should wherever possible offer experiences and reflections that are closely related to, and rooted in, the contextual reality of the learners. Such processes should directly involve the learners and address their priorities as much as possible according to their context.

7. *Promote social and professional networks* to connect learners and educators through webs of interaction and relationship that develop shared knowledge as well as professional support. These networks can be established on a virtual or electronic basis, as well as through face-to-face contact.

VII. CONCLUSION

This document offers guidelines for individuals and groups interested in using the Earth Charter in educational practice. Hopefully, it will stimulate further use of the Earth Charter in schools, universities and in many workshops and educational settings.

A number of Earth Charter tools and resources have been developed by different groups and are available from the Earth Charter website: www.earthcharter.org. Materials include a compilation of experiences on how the Earth Charter has been used in different educational settings, which present the different ways groups are using the Earth Charter as an ethical framework for reorienting curricula to meet the challenges of sustainability. These can serve as an educational resource for understanding of the critical choices facing humanity and the urgent need to foster commitment to a sustainable way of life.

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