

Youth Power for the Common Future

with the main topic

Acting on the Earth Charter

This year the global pandemic has both demonstrated the essential unity of all humanity on this planet, and also highlighted the extreme inequality that still persists. Yet we must not forget the existential threats we face from the climate crisis, the collapse of global biodiversity, and other global catastrophic risks. Youth are striking and marching in the streets around the world as we protest the threats to our future and the failure of adults to act. The materialistic society and its consumer economy have been pillaging the planet and leading to the potential collapse of civilization. Many have lost hope, and it is hard to find a positive way forward. However, a crisis can also be an opportunity, not to return to business as usual, but to accelerate the transformation to a just and sustainable economy and society. The way forward has already been mapped out by the UN Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals, but they are still outweighed by powerful governments and corporate interests ignoring the future if not denying that there is a problem.

The preceding ECPD Conference will address these global trends with potentially irreversible and intergenerational consequences and consider the responsibility to take urgent multilateral action, and its results will be useful background for the Youth Forum. The challenge for us as tomorrow's leaders is to orient our lives with the ethical principles necessary to build the just, peaceful and sustainable society that we want to live in. The Earth Charter offers that ethical framework, and can provide us with sound guidance on how to live and behave through the turbulent times ahead as we construct the better world of tomorrow.

Origins of the Earth Charter

The Earth Charter, agreed 20 years ago after a long and wide consultative process among many representatives of civil society from around the world, provides an essential consensus document on the basic principles and values that should underlie humanity's relationship to nature. It was originally intended to be one of the outcomes of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), the Rio Earth Summit of 1992. However governments resisted many essential elements, and finally only agreed on the Rio Declaration with 27 principles, which was still an important advance in international soft law. The conference Secretary-General, Maurice Strong, therefore decided to turn to civil society to prepare the Earth Charter that he failed to get from governments.

In 1994, Maurice Strong and Mikhail Gorbachev launched an initiative to develop an Earth Charter prepared by civil society. The initial drafting and consultation process drew on hundreds of international documents. An independent Earth Charter Commission was formed in 1997 to oversee the development of the text, to analyze the outcomes of a world-wide consultation process and to come to agreement on a global consensus document. The President of the EPCD Council, Federico Mayor, was a member of the Commission.

After a first Benchmark Draft of the Earth Charter was released at the Rio+5 Forum in 1997, and a second in April 1999, international consultations continued particularly through Earth Charter National Committees and international dialogues. After numerous drafts and after considering the input of people from all regions of the world, the Earth Charter Commission came to consensus on the Earth Charter in March 2000, at a meeting held at

UNESCO headquarters in Paris. The Earth Charter was later formally launched in ceremonies at The Peace Palace in The Hague. Over the following five years, a formal endorsement campaign attracted over 2,000 organizational endorsements, representing millions of people, including numerous national and international associations, and ultimately global institutions such as UNESCO and IUCN – The International Union for Conservation of Nature. Many thousands of individuals also endorsed the Earth Charter.

The Earth Charter

The Earth Charter is an ethical framework for building a just, sustainable, and peaceful global society in the 21st century. It 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. It is a vision of hope and a call to action.

The Earth Charter has four pillars: respect and care for the community of life; ecology integrity; social and economic justice; and democracy, non-violence and peace. Under these principles are sixteen rights and responsibilities with sixty-one specific applications.

It includes four broad commitments to:

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

The full text is available at <https://earthcharter.org/discover/the-earth-charter/>.

Many of its principles are now reflected in international environmental conventions and other international law.

Implementing the Earth Charter

The Earth Charter Initiative (<https://earthcharter.org/>) is a global movement of organizations and individuals that embrace the Earth Charter and use it to guide the transition towards a more just, sustainable, and peaceful world.

The 40th General Conference of UNESCO, held on 12-27 November 2019, adopted a resolution that reaffirms the importance of the Earth Charter as an ethical framework for sustainable development. In the statement, UNESCO encourages Members States to use the Earth Charter in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) processes, in particular in the implementation of the new [ESD for 2030 framework](#) and in connection with the 2017 [UNESCO Declaration of Ethical Principles in relation to Climate Change](#). Taking into account the current world situation and environmental crises including climate change and biodiversity loss, delegates felt it was now time to act, and the Earth Charter provides the principles and values needed for that.

Acting on the Earth Charter

Faced with the complex problems besetting the world today, it is easy to see what is wrong with society and the economy, and the failure of leaders to respond to the crises now upon us. It is much harder to propose solutions, since many do not yet exist, or only in embryonic forms. It may even be difficult to see in what direction to move forward. Do we

need more global governance, or small-scale local solutions, or both? Are answers to be found in capitalist or socialist frameworks, or something totally different? How do we meet the needs of the poor while protecting essential natural processes and biodiversity? There are probably many different answers to such questions, all appropriate in specific contexts.

The famous systems thinker Donella Meadows, author of "*The Limits to Growth*" wrote about *Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System* (1999) necessary to bring about change. At the top, as most effective are the mindset or paradigm out of which the system arises, and beyond that, the power to transcend paradigms, realizing that no paradigm is "true", but that everything depends on purpose, the values one believes in.

What, then is our ultimate human purpose? Is it to become rich and famous, or perhaps to refine our character through service to others and to contribute to an ever-advancing civilization? This is the realm of ethics, morality and values, if not religion. Once we get our bearings at the level of values, this can guide our behaviour choices through the complexities of life and the challenges ahead. The Earth Charter provides a framework of values for addressing the challenges of human sustainability in harmony with the natural world, distilled from the wisdom and experience of many peoples, cultures and faith traditions. In a world with few guideposts, it can be an important place to start.

The Youth Forum provides a place to consider these questions, to listen to others, and to help us to make up our own minds (and hearts). It is our generation that is inheriting the world. Preceding generations have made a mess of it. Can we do better? Drawing on the Earth Charter as an inspirational text, what questions would we like to explore? How might we apply some of these principles in practical actions? It is for us to create our own agenda for this Youth Forum. We can think about it in advance and come prepared with some proposals, or draw on inspiration at the moment. There will be opportunities to post our suggestions, listen to others, and organize ourselves into groups for creative discussions, refining proposals that we can bring back to the whole group.

Complexity and new ways of thinking

Drawing on the principles of the Earth Charter can also help to find some direction in dealing with the complexity of our current problems. The economic paradigms, narrow specialisations and linear ways of thinking that got us into this mess will not help us to find a way out. There are so many variables all shifting and changing at once. Complexity-based thinking is distinguished by listening to many voices at the same time with an openness to the emergence of something new. Diversity in views can suggest new factors contributing to a creative consensus. Ethical principles can suggest ways forward that meet the needs of all. Emergent creativity can be fostered by being aware of the number of elements and the number of combinations by which they can be put together. Sometimes there are choices or bifurcation points when key changes or decisions could have major cascading effects that need to be considered. When something new emerges, it opens up many adjacent possibilities. For example, personal computers led to the internet, which itself, was a whole new emergent phenomenon. "New ways of thinking" imply both new ways of framing or conceptualizing what is happening along with new ways of thinking together.

In order to motivate people to change, it is important to come up with ways to capture their imaginations and impact their emotions. For example, new metaphors can be generated through the interaction of different disciplines. The metaphor of a musical band could be

used to illustrate how people doing very different things in an integrated way could produce an overall result that would be positive and far more than the sum of the parts.

A consultative or dialogue process can be distinguished from discussion, which is an analytical shaking apart the diverse aspects of whatever is discussed, and debate, in which each side attempts to win. Rather dialogue involves conscious sharing of ideas and emotions including those inspired by previous speakers, an openness to the truth of others, a willingness to play with possibilities, and a spirit of building on the ideas of others while not clinging to one's own initial perspective.

A dialogue combines the presentation of an issue—including problems, prognosis, and what is at stake—with questions that address what is key to moving on the challenge, including principles like those in the Earth Charter. The ideal group size is eight to twelve participants. A facilitator guides a dialogue meant to generate creative ways of addressing the issue. Participant groups can be consciously organized to have a variety of voices, as diversity increase creativity. This is an effective way to deal with complexity. We could try to apply this approach in our own dialogues during this forum.

Some sample questions based on the Earth Charter

How might we design a local project or community consultation to make environmental conservation and rehabilitation integral to all local development initiatives?

How can we ensure that our own decisions address the cumulative, long-term, indirect, long distance, and global consequences of our activities?

How can we adopt a lifestyle that emphasizes our quality of life and material sufficiency in a finite world?

What can we do to recognize and preserve the traditional knowledge and spiritual wisdom in both our own and other cultures that contribute to environmental protection and human well-being?

What practical efforts can we make to recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations?

What further efforts can we make in our own lives to eliminate discrimination in all its forms, such as that based on race, colour, sex, sexual orientation, religion, language, and national, ethnic or social origin?

How can we best pursue our own moral and spiritual education for sustainable living?

How can we help our generation to recognize that peace is the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part?

Meadows, Donella. 1999. *Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System*. Hartland, Vermont: The Sustainability Institute. http://www.donellameadows.org/wp-content/userfiles/Leverage_Points.pdf