



Think Piece Learning for a World Changed by Intergenerational Equity

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Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.

- a. Recognize that the freedom of action of each generation is qualified by the needs of future generations.
- b. Transmit to future generations values, traditions, and institutions that support the long-term flourishing of Earth's human and ecological communities.

Earth Charter Principle 4

Intergenerational equity, the ethic of responsibility among generations, is stated in the Earth Charter as the imperative to 'recognize that the freedom of action of each generation is qualified by the needs of future generations' (Earth Charter Commission, 2000:Subprinciple 4.a). Clearly, ethics call out for responsibility to those yet to come of age. Indeed, this is at the heart of sustainable development – to 'meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs'.¹ We believe that 'learning in a changing world' must pay particular attention to the ethical principle of intergenerational equity and to the dramatic demographics of an increasingly youthful population.

Second, it presents a powerful opportunity for society if young people can participate in positive aspects of life, such as culture, environment, governance, politics and commerce, to promote sustainable development. In order to do so, young people need the support of older generations in terms of appropriate policies, education, information, financial resources, and hope.

Young people have an enormous stake in the present and future state of the planet. For instance, through their lifestyles, they influence commerce and the media industry and shape the process of production, marketing, and consumption patterns of goods and services (UNEP/UNESCO, 2001). Since young people are also tomorrow's workers, entrepreneurs, parents, and political leaders, the policy makers know that they will greatly influence the future of their nations and global governance (World Bank, 2006).

Agenda 21 – the sustainable development blueprint for the 21st century – recognised in Chapter 36 that education, public awareness and training are critical for sustainable development, and that the participation and involvement of young people, alongside eight other major groups,² are essential in its implementation (United Nations, 1992). However, sustainable development – in its dimensions of environment, society and economy – remains elusive as the state of the planet continues to deteriorate with attendant consequences to human wellbeing worldwide (MEA, 2005). The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD), 2005–2014, provides an important opportunity to explore the role

of enhancing the involvement and participation of young people in sustainable development processes and environmental protection activities, and to consider how education can be used as a tool for confronting the enormous global and local challenges (UNESCO, 2004).

But how might such an important opportunity unfold? And how might we broadly advance intergenerational equity in environmental education?

We believe the wider context of the UNDESD – the problem of human development that leaves one billion people in extreme poverty, the daunting environmental destruction we face, and the challenge of the demographics of youth – must be taken seriously. The devastating effects of unsustainable development upon the poor, so many of whom are youth and children, must be alleviated. Especially necessary is the creation of youth development opportunities that are sustainable.

Our work in environmental education takes place in the context of a globalised economic order that creates increasing amounts of wealth and concentrates it in the richest nations and richest individuals. And here we want to draw concern to the extreme poverty and attendant suffering that characterises our globalised world – in particular the global South. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer – and to an extreme extent. As you read this, one billion people struggle for life, and 20 000, mostly in Africa and Asia, will die today of extreme poverty.

Our work in environmental education also takes place in the context of the rapid deterioration of natural systems that support life on Earth, and that are also critical for human wellbeing. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment initiated in 2001 by Kofi Annan, former Secretary General of the United Nations, indicates that nearly two-thirds of the services provided by nature to human kind are in decline worldwide (MEA, 2005).

The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has now noted in its rather conservative report that global warming can be linked to anthropogenic causes and that climate change consequences are likely to increase in the absence of human interventions to limit greenhouse gas emissions globally (United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2007). The anticipated devastation is coming decades sooner than expected, and this is a conservative report. There are those who say we have entered the period of profound human-caused climate change, loss of biodiversity, and breakdown of natural systems.

Much of the natural world and significant parts of the social world are in agony; young people face a diminished future. We believe it is essential to create openings for serious participation by young people in conferences on environmental education. Young people have the greatest stake in learning for a changing world and the most to lose in the future. We believe such engagement in the questions and process of how environmental education must adapt is an antidote to the alienation and ennui that so many youth now feel.

Taking seriously the wider context of environmental education – ‘the changing world’ – compels us to make significant changes in teaching and educational policy – ‘the learning.’ Learning in a changing world must be learning for a world changing to alleviate poverty, eradicate diseases, promote gender equity, protect natural systems, create sustainable employment, and enhance youth participation in all matters related to their diminishing prospects for sustainability.

We already have pioneering examples in the area of curriculum reforms in higher education. For example, Earth University in Costa Rica has designed a curriculum to match the challenges of agribusiness, and is therefore able to dedicate itself to producing a new generation of young people trained specifically to focus on improving the human condition through entrepreneurial activities.³ We believe that the challenge of education is to outline operational specificity to the broad-based concept of sustainable development in a changing world.

We emphasise this wider context because we believe that, at this critical juncture in human history, we must put environmental education into the service of the poor, into the service of the natural systems upon which we depend, and into the service of the rightful aspirations of youth to sustainable livelihoods and enduring hope. It is therefore encouraging that the debate on how to bring educational research, training and outreach activities to the service of the regions and communities in which educational institutions are located is emerging in Africa (Juma, 2005). Even more encouraging are new and innovative learning models such as the Youth Encounter on Sustainability (YES), which encourages the sensitisation of students for sustainability questions, in relation to their own perspectives, disciplinary knowledge, and experiences while learning about specific areas of sustainability in an environment that allows for practical experiences (Baud & Diaz-Triana, 2004).

We would like to offer the Earth Charter as an inspiration for teachers and students, as a framework for education for sustainable development, and as a hope for moving toward increasing prospects for sustainability. The Earth Charter is a declaration of fundamental ethical principles for building a just, sustainable and peaceful global society.⁴ It seeks to inspire in all peoples a sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility for the wellbeing of the whole human family and the larger living world.

The contributions to the substantive content of the Earth Charter were derived from a prodigious array of sources. These ranged from the global ethics movement to the sacred texts of the world's major religions, from international law documents to new thinking in the sciences of physics, cosmology and evolutionary biology. Extensive research was conducted in these fields as a preparation for the drafting of the Earth Charter. The Earth Charter Initiative has worked especially closely, and continues to work, with a number of indigenous peoples' groups. As a result, the worldviews of the first peoples infuse the document with traditional wisdom. Perhaps the other, most significant source is international law. This includes intergovernmental law, charters and treaties – over 70 in all. This also includes non-governmental declarations and peoples' treaties – over 200 in all. And it includes 50 international law instruments.

The Earth Charter Initiative involved the most open and participatory consultation process ever conducted in connection with the drafting of an international document. Thousands of individuals and hundreds of organisations from all regions of the world, different cultures, and diverse sectors of society participated over 13 years.

Education, with its powerful concentration of intellectual resources and privileged position in society, has a leadership role, indeed, a moral responsibility to seek ethical and practical answers to the economic, environmental and social problems caused by globalisation. Education, then, can take the lead in pointing the way toward an integrated vision of the challenges and the solutions. We believe that the Earth Charter, recognising as it does the

indivisibility of environmental protection, human rights, equitable human development, and peace, is a wholesome conception of sustainability that can assist education in its response to globalisation.

This brings us to education for sustainable development. The concept of sustainability is emerging as a critical principle not just in education but in business, economy, human development, and policy making. Indeed, we think it is the meta-narrative of the 21st century. To us, the essence of sustainability is intergenerational responsibility. Education for sustainable development is that which speaks to the fundamental and profound change that we must make from the present course of environmental, social and economic development in order to ensure a healthy and peaceful world for future generations – in order to ensure a hopeful and enduring future for younger generations.

But what might that mean in educational practice?

UNESCO argues that our understanding of sustainable development, and approaches to education for sustainable development, should be inextricably linked with the ongoing Education for All initiative, the United Nations Literacy Decade 2003–2012, and the Millennium Development Goals... In addition, UNESCO asserts that education for sustainable development should not be equated with environmental education, but rather encompasses it and go beyond it, integrating the social and economic dimensions with environmental concerns. (Clugston & Calder, 2005:4)

UNESCO has an enormous challenge in making sense of such a complex agenda, even though the initiatives they are trying to bring together are related and complementary. Many in environmental education are struggling to define education for sustainable development. One such definition was composed by 35 participants from 17 countries at the Halifax Consultation in Halifax, Canada, 2005. We were but two of many at this gathering for the tenth in a series of global consultations held in connection with the Global Higher Education for Sustainability Partnership (GHESP) Resource Project.

Participants agreed that:

Education for sustainable development is inherently interdisciplinary and carries context, process, and contextual implications. Content-wise, it encompasses ecological literacy; process-wise, it takes on multiple pedagogical techniques; and contextually, it is place-based. Education for sustainable development gets at the notion that the built environment, social environment, institutional environment, and natural environment serve as pedagogical tools in a learning community. Education for sustainable development connects mind, body, and spirit and is potentially transformative. It encompasses different ways of knowing, i.e., relational, reflective, and rational. (Halifax Consultation, 2005)

Our challenge, as environmental educators, is to arrive at a shared vision of the meaning of education for sustainable development and a practical agenda for achieving it (Clugston & Calder, 2005). The Earth Charter process, as well as the results of the various UN Summits in the

nineties: on education for all in 1990; on environment and development in 1992; on population and development in 1994; on social development in 1995; on women in 1995; and on human settlement in 1996, as well as the Millennium Development Goals in 2001 can help us do so, because they embody and articulate ethical values. In particular, we believe, environmental education must engender learning guided by an ethic that recognises the limits on present generations on behalf of generations to come. Guided by the Earth Charter, environmental education must also fulfill its 30+ years-long quest to, as the Earth Charter says so well, 'transmit to future generations values, traditions, and institutions that support the long-term flourishing of Earth's human and ecological communities' (Earth Charter, Subprinciple 4.b).

This and many other principles of the Earth Charter represent serious intellectual and cultural efforts to chart a course toward intergenerational responsibility and global sustainability. How we manage the problems of poverty, environmental destruction and youth will determine the quality of life on Earth. Environmental education, in particular, has a moral obligation to examine critically the changing world and to seek to move it in a direction that is humane, just, and sustainable. It is only through this that we can fulfill the four pillars of learning: learning to know; learning to do; learning to live together; and learning to be (UNESCO, 1996). The Earth Charter provides an ethical framework for this urgent task. We believe it can serve as an inspirational guide to learning for a world changed by intergenerational equity.

Notes on the Contributors

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In a forthcoming book, Osano and Corcoran are exploring the nexus of young people, education, and sustainable development. They seek to articulate an emerging theory of environmental education informed by Earth Charter ethics that emphasises the participation of young people in developing the principles, perspectives, and praxis of such environmental education. They are both active in the Earth Charter movement.

Endnotes

- 1 Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987:8).
- 2 These are: (1) women; (2) indigenous people; (3) nongovernmental organisations; (4) local authorities; (5) workers and trade unions; (6) scientific and technological communities; (7) farmers; and (8) business and industry.
- 3 See Earth University Foundation, http://www.earth-usa.org/earth_university/curriculum.html.

- 4 Much of this language is from traditional Earth Charter sources developed over the years of describing the provenance, process, and intellectual architecture of the Earth Charter. It may be attributed to various authors including Steven C. Rockefeller, Chair of the Earth Charter Drafting Committee.

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