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Focus on Deep Drivers

Contribution to GTI Forum [Toward a Great Ethics Transition](#)

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Allow me to start from the concluding remarks by Brendan Mackey in his inspiring [essay](#) quoting the words of a founding member of the Earth Charter, Kamla Chowdhry:

*How can we ensure that ethical and spiritual values get a fair hearing with the economist, technologist, and the industrialist? How do we weld economics with ethics, and have a technology with a human face?*¹

The focus of these questions allows me to share some ideas about the Charter's present and future by engaging with two broad areas of intervention: "ethical *and* spiritual values" and "economics and technology." Perhaps not by chance, these two areas echo the powerful spectrum of *proximate and ultimate* drivers in a Great Transition, where population, technology, economy, and governance are proximate drivers and values, needs, knowledge/understanding, power structure, and culture are the ultimate ones.² This spectrum is also found in Donella Meadows's twelve *leverage points*, where the highest and most powerful leverage (linked to the ultimate drivers) refers to (10) changing goals, (11) changing paradigms, mindsets, and worldviews, and (12) transcending paradigms.³ Moreover, another way of discussing this spectrum is to explore the inner and outer dimensions of transition and transformation, where it is argued that, compared to mainstream approaches to change and transition, much more focus is needed on the former elements of change.⁴

The Earth Charter has deep roots in ultimate drivers, highest leverage points, and inner transformation. Yet, by and large, Western governments and the multilateral organizations they (just about) still largely control have focused on proximate drivers, on low leverage, on outer

transitions. The other side of the spectrum has been left to the margins—many would argue, for ideological positioning as much as for feelings of discomfort. Yet, they have so much to do with the ethical and spiritual values discussed here, precisely because they inform the goals, the paradigms, and the mindsets shaping the questions, problems, and solutions. If this bias (or can we now call it failure?) persists, we may be more likely to head towards the kind of techno-scientific utopias that, in most imaginaries, transform into dystopias.⁵

It's time to balance it out.

We cannot move towards the more promising, just, and sustainable vision of the Great Transition if we do not engage with both ends of the spectrum of change. Nowhere is this more pressing, and inadequately addressed, than in the tightening alliance between economy and technology, where the latter seems to have almost taken definitive control of the former (or was this always the case?). Technology's framing of solutions is catching up with the framing of the problem, largely unencumbered by ethical (or spiritual) concerns. Sheila Jasanoff's inquiry into the rise to power of biology and its disciplinary evolution offers a sobering illustration.⁶ The appeal for "pragmatic" solutions is precisely aimed at excluding "ethical considerations"—one of the aspects discussed by Mackey in his search for a renewed role for the Earth Charter.

It is the discomfort that needs to be addressed, so that we can feel safe and capable of navigating the space between Mackey's bookends "of absolutism... and radical relativism" and finding solace in the ocean of "pluralism," with the help of the rising voices of post-development, which Bayo Akomolafe has poetically reframed as "the urgency of nurturing the manifold worlds that breathe seditiously."⁷ This, in my view, can be done only if we can create the space to question the epistemological and ontological roots of the powerful alliance (and grip on frames) between economics and technology—in other words, if we find the courage to explore the potential change offered by ultimate drivers, deep leverage points, and inner changes.

In this sense, I am less convinced of the need to pursue a new multilateral organization (though by no means against it), as I would see it as another proximate, or external change-type of solution. But I would like to offer one possible avenue to combine the Earth Charter's wisdom and the Great Transition vision: what if we brought into conversation the Earth Charter's ethical compass

and intrinsic ultimate goal of systems that are “supportive of the greater community of life” fully acknowledging the “interdependence of people and nature” (quoting Mackey), with the UN 2030 Agenda and its set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—so that together they might help move earthlings towards a Great Transition?

Many have argued that the SDGs need an ultimate goal. As they stand, the seventeen intermediate goals risk performing worse than the earlier division of three pillars (economy, society and environment), limiting implementation through proximate drivers, shallow leverage, and outer change. Can the Charter be the guiding framework for the SDGs, so that the transformative potential envisaged by Ban Ki-moon might actually stand a chance?

The SDGs may fall short of GTI’s vision, but they may just offer a potential bridge to higher aspirations, if...guided by ethical and spiritual values.

Endnotes

1. Kamla Chowdhry, *Challenges of the 21st Century: Gandhi's Moral Imperative* (New Delhi: National Foundation for India, 1998).
2. Paul Raskin, Tariq Banuri, Gilberto Gallopín, Pablo Gutman, Al Hammond, Robert Kates, and Rob Swart, *Great Transition: The Promise and Lure of the Times Ahead* (Boston: Tellus Institute, 2002), <https://greattransition.org/gt-essay>.
3. Donella Meadows, *Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System* (Hartland, VT: Sustainability Institute, 1999), <http://www.donellameadows.org/archives/leverage-points-places-to-intervene-in-a-system/>.
4. Here the literature is growing rapidly (like in all fields it seems). See, for example, Oliver Parodi and Kaidi Tamm, *Personal Sustainability: Exploring the Far Side of Sustainable Development* (London: Routledge, 2018). And in policy terms, see Pop Francis II, *Laudato Si'*, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si_en.pdf.
5. Olivia Bina, Andy Inch, and Lavínia Pereira, "Beyond Techno-Utopia and Its Discontents: On the Role of Utopianism and Speculative Fiction in Shaping Alternatives to the Smart City Imaginary," *Futures* 115 (January 2020), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0016328719303374>.
6. Sheila Jasanoff, *Can Science Make Sense of Life?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2019).
7. Ashish Kothari, Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, Federico Demaria, and Alberto Acosta, eds., *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2019).

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