Focus on Deep Drivers
Contribution to GTI Forum Toward a Great Ethics Transition

Olivia Bina

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?

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. 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. 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.

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


About the Author

Olivia Bina is a Researcher at the Institute of Social Sciences at the University of Lisbon, Adjunct at the Department of Geography and Resource Management at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and a Fellow of the World Academy of Art and Science. She explores the (un)sustainability of socioeconomic models through the lenses of ecological economics, environmental governance, sustainable futures, and transition theories. She holds a PhD in geography from the University of Cambridge.

About the Publication

Published by the Great Transition Initiative.

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.


About the Great Transition Initiative

The Great Transition Initiative is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As an initiative for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.