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It Takes a Movement

Forum contribution: [Toward a Great Ethics Transition](#)

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If we are to grasp the “ethical foundations” for the Great Transition, further elaboration of the ethical vision to which we are called to bear witness must take place within a much broader dialogue on how to build an international movement with the power to usher in an era of just, sustainable and non-violent global governance.

The historical grounds for doing this are clear with respect to the Earth Charter. The Charter was linked from its inception with the prospects of international law and science as the chief means to implement its global vision and ethic. The model was the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The adoption of the Declaration by the United Nations in 1948 was followed by two groundbreaking international treaties and the formation of a strong civil society network committed to the advancement of human rights. The Earth Charter Council hoped that in similar fashion the adoption of the Earth Charter by the UN General Assembly would mark a major advance in the articulation of the spiritual and ethical mission of the United Nations by framing the long standing universal values of justice and peace within a strong Earth centered perspective and thus pave the way for the subsequent adoption of the IUCN-proposed “Draft International Covenant on Environment and Development.”

Only toward the end of the second drafting effort, in the late 1990s, did it become clear that there was little chance for the adoption of the Earth Charter by the General Assembly. At the same time, it became clear that the United States and Britain were going to continue their post-Reagan/Thatcher retreat from support for international law in areas other than finance and trade. Hope for significant implementation of the Charter lay in a broad international coalition

of scientists, civil society activists, ecologically committed religious faiths, a select number of progressive governments, and responsible business interests.

After its launch in 2000, the leadership of the Earth Charter Council was faced with the question of whether to form a membership organization or whether the direction of the Earth Charter Initiative (ECI) should remain in the hands of a self-perpetuating private board, the Earth Charter Council. A few of us argued strongly for a membership organization, but the second alternative was chosen.

Over the last twenty years, the Earth Charter Initiative at the University of Peace in Costa Rica has coordinated a far flung informal network of domestic and international civil society organizations, sponsored a website, sought endorsements of the Charter, provided educational resources in association with UNESCO, held conferences, and encouraged affiliated groups to use the text in ways they believe most effective in their communities—all this, and more, with very limited resources, and all to the good. However, to the best of my knowledge, there have been no official positions taken in the name of the Charter on what policies are required to address critical global issues such as climate change, the sixth extinction, vast economic inequality, or the increase in the threat of nuclear war; no criticisms made of any government or corporate actions, such as the American invasion of Iraq or withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord; no support for any controversial political leader or cause; no call for help for any of the massive humanitarian crises across the planet; no comprehensive critique of the geopolitical forces and neoliberal ideologies that rule the world.

In its failure to take concrete ethical and political positions, the Earth Charter Council mirrors the World Social Forum, suggesting a weakness across liberal international civil society that may help explain its failure to bring about substantial social change. There seems to be an assumption that the Charter expresses a submerged consciousness or hidden consensus among the peoples of the world on universal spiritual and ethical principles and that once articulated, and the opportunity for endorsement offered, practical changes in society will follow. I do not believe this is true. I believe the Earth Charter, like the Great Transition Initiative, represents a minority position seeking to be a world consensus. Declarations such as the Earth Charter can help bring people together and inspire the better angels of our nature. But much more is needed. The vision of the Earth Charter is

inherently a political vision affecting all spheres of human governance, and political power must be mobilized on behalf of specific policies and goals to fulfill its promise.

In my view, a serious effort to build a movement capable of providing a strong ethical foundation for the Great Transition would consist of the following elements:

(1) a text that sets forth an inspiring vision of humanity's membership in the community of life and the ethical responsibilities it has for the just, sustainable, and non-violent flourishing of the planet with strong empirical and rational claims to truth;

(2) a challenge to each locality and nation across the world to engage in a process of drafting a "charter" that will spell out an ethical vision for its particular community and its special obligations to the world community and the shared international ethical vision;

(3) a procedure for drafting revisions that elaborate, amend, or supplement these texts in light of new experience and understanding—in other words, the composition of "living documents";

(4) a way for persons and groups in all social locations throughout the world to participate in the articulation of global and local ethics;

(5) voices that bear witness to those places across the world that are bleeding and are on the edge of the global ethical struggle;

(6) a set of prescribed policies that need to be pursued to address the great moral issues before the global community, both within and beyond the spheres of domestic and international law;

(7) a diagnosis of the geopolitical and economic causes of our present plight and the agencies responsible for it;

(8) a strategy for mobilizing political will for confronting these agencies and replacing them with alternative forms of democratic governance;

(9) a program of civic education in the justifications for the ethical vision and the responses necessary to implement it;

(10) a covenanted, democratic organizational structure for the movement with the leadership and resources necessary to advance its influence in all parts of the world.¹

None of these things can be pursued in isolation. We do not know what ethical principles mean apart from our understanding of their consequences for policy and action. We do not know what ideas and vested interests we must oppose unless we have a diagnosis of the causes of our present social and environmental crises. We do not know how to organize ourselves into an effective international social movement unless we know what each community and nation will pledge to contribute. We cannot mobilize the political will to bring about the Great Transition unless we commit ourselves to one another as members of a mutually accountable citizen-led social movement that bears witness to the suffering of people and the planet and stands in solidarity with those who are risking their lives to heal it.

I am taking my cue here from the examples of the great religious and secular movements that have demonstrated their capacity to change the course of human history. As important as their universal ethical teachings is their capacity to nurture moral character in their members and inspire a sense of shared faith across the generations based on a prophetic diagnosis of the nature and sources of evil in the world and the specific ways humans can find personal and collective salvation.

I believe that the Great Transition Initiative would do a great service if we were to identify the movements that are the most significant bearers of the ethical foundations for the Great Transition—the movement for the Rights of Mother Earth, Pierre Calame’s Alliance for a United and Responsible World, the Earth Charter Initiative, among others—and engage in an international dialogue that submits them to the kind of critical evaluation as global change agents as I have briefly suggested here.

Endnotes

1. These are elaborated further in Peter Burdon, Klaus Bosselmann, and Kirsten Engel, *The Crisis in Global Ethics and the Future of Global Governance: Fulfilling the Promise of the Earth Charter* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2019).

About the Author



Ron Engel was a founder of the Ethics Working Group of the World Conservation Union and a core member of the international drafting committee for the Earth Charter. He has been a high school biology teacher, park ranger, community organizer, Unitarian Universalist minister, international environmental activist, university professor, and author. As Professor of Social Ethics at Meadville/Lombard Theological School (1970–2000) and lecturer at the Divinity School and College of the University of Chicago, he helped to pioneer the academic fields of environmental ethics and theology. He is the author of such books as *Sacred Sands: The Struggle for Community in the Indiana Dunes*, *Ethics of Environment and Development: Global Challenge, International Response*, and *The Crisis of Global Ethics and the Future of Global Governance: Fulfilling the Promise of the Earth Charter*.

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