Toward a Great Ethics Transition
Opening Essay for GTI Forum [Toward a Great Ethics Transition](#)

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Why a Common Ethical Framework

Seventy-two years ago, in 1948, the newly created United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. With a catastrophic war fresh in people's memory, the recognition of the "inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family" augured a sound ethical foundation for a hopeful future. Although the subsequent decades saw the tension and tumult of the Cold War (and some hot ones), a new internationalism was also on the upswing.

Since then, a profusion of declarations and charters have sought to establish normative ethics based on universal values and principles presumed to be shared by all people, nations, and cultures. This includes, among others, the Stockholm Declaration (1972), the World Charter for Nature (1982), the Rio Declaration (1992), the Earth Charter (2000), the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), the Draft Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth (2010), and the Principles of Climate Justice (2011).

The proposition that there are universal ethical values and principles shared among all the Peoples of the world remains contested and, in some respects, rightly so. Post-modernist critics warn us that a single idea universally applied can ignore local contexts and swallow up the diverse values that reside in the richly textured tapestry that is the hallmark of human society and our biocultural relationships. However, between the bookends of absolutism (where there is only one truth) and radical relativism (where everything is subjective) lies a pluralism that leaves open the question of which of our many choices are valid and justified.[1] From this perspective,

normative ethics seeks principles to guide moral conduct when considering the right and wrong thing to do in specific contexts, and accepts that there are serious consequences from our actions (and inactions) that can be objectively assessed.

A universal ethical framework may seem like a distant hope given the growth of populist authoritarianism and a narrowing interpretation of national self-interest. However, the multiple global threats and pressures we collectively face demand global solutions and unprecedented levels of international cooperation among national governments, across all sectors and between all Peoples. Any such systemic transformation will require a roadmap guided by shared values about what we want the future to look like and an agreed set of normative ethical principles to provide the necessary moral guidance.

The Earth Charter Story

The Earth Charter, now nearing its twentieth anniversary, remains one of the most sweeping efforts to define such a global ethic. Its origins date back to the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (or "Brundtland Commission"), entitled *Our Common Future*, which recommended the creation of a new international charter with principles to guide the transition to sustainable development. Maurice Strong, one of the report's drafters and a former executive director of the UN Environment Program, followed through on this recommendation by putting the drafting of an Earth Charter on the agenda of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, for which he was Secretary-General. The international community however, passed on this opportunity, instead supporting the package of "Rio Commitments." Following the Earth Summit, Strong, together with Mikhail Gorbachev working through Green Cross International, and with support from the Dutch government, launched in 1995 a project to draft an Earth Charter as a civil society initiative. Extensive consultations on Earth Charter principles were conducted through 1995 and 1996, followed by the establishment of an Earth Charter Commission, comprised of respected sustainability leaders. In 1997, a drafting committee was formed, and the drafting process began. Importantly, the Earth Charter Commission retained control of the text of the Earth Charter and has never considered changing or adding to the text, nor has it established a procedure for doing this. Over the next four years, a growing network of national committees, civil society organizations,

experts in various fields, and concerned and interested individuals weighed in via a series of global, regional, and national consultations.

The drafting process aimed to develop a text based on an analysis of existing international law and declarations, including those by civil society, and met with stakeholders across the globe to reach agreement on a document that reflected a global consensus on shared values and principles for a more just, sustainable, and peaceful world. In March 2000, the Commission met at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris to finalize the document, and the Earth Charter was formally launched in ceremonies at The Peace Palace in The Hague.[2] Earth Charter International (ECI) was subsequently established, comprising the ECI Secretariat, its Education Center, and the ECI Council, to carry the work forward. The ECI Secretariat, based at the United Nations-mandated University for Peace in Costa Rica, aims to promote the mission, vision, strategies, and policies adopted by the ECI Council. The Charter has been translated into over forty languages and endorsed by over 7,000 organizations, including UNESCO and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

The Earth Charter is a rich text, consisting of sixteen main principles and sixty-one supporting principles organized into the four themes: Respect and Care for the Community of Life; Ecological Integrity; Social and Economic Justice; and Democracy, Nonviolence, and Peace. These principles are bookended by a preamble and a concluding statement called "The Way Forward." The Earth Charter drafting processes aimed to articulate a world ethic that complements and builds on those ethical norms situated within specific cultural and geographical contexts. Although the final product was sweeping in scope, the drafting process did still draw boundaries, for example, by limiting the text to ethical values and principles for which there was evidence of a broad and diverse base of support either in civil society or in formal intergovernmental instruments. As a result, the Earth Charter remains a document of its time. While originally conceived as an ethical framework for national governments, as a Peoples' Charter, the Earth Charter does not specify what particular responsibilities fall upon which actors and sectors of society. And, while outlining the major global challenges at the time, it does not identify the root causes of our crises.

The Earth Charter's ethic reflects an ambitious effort to bring together ecological and social concerns within one framework, mindful of humanity's special relationship with our planetary home and the greater community of life. The Earth Charter recognizes that achieving social and economic justice will require both ensuring ecological integrity as well as the rights to freedom of

opinion, expression, peaceful assembly, association, and dissent—among other things. As a global ethic, the Earth Charter has the characteristics of what Nigel Dower calls a rooted and ecologically sensitive cosmopolitanism. It is a covenant that defines an overarching way of life and answers the question of how to construct our lives together such that all life flourishes. From this perspective, the Earth Charter can be seen as a voluntary, unconditional commitment to our relationships with other persons, nature, and those things recognized as embodying the goodness, rightness, and truth of our being, and the moral obligations required to maintain and fulfill these relationships in the midst of the inevitable uncertainties and contingencies we face.

The Next Twenty Years

The Earth Charter opens with the statement that "We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future."' The urgency of this moment cannot be exaggerated: global warming, just one of many crises we face, is already causing systemic disruptions and heading past the 1.5 °C threshold necessary for a livable planet by 2040 and well beyond 3 °C by the end of this century. The integrity of our systems of governance is cracking, and current institutional arrangements are struggling to provide the necessary regulatory oversight.

Achieving sustainability will also require lifelong commitment by people of courage, acting individually and collectively in their communities and polity, to make judgments about what is right and wrong in human affairs and take the actions needed to advance that which is judged good and just. We cannot rely on the notion that good will inevitably prevail because it is divinely pre-ordained or inevitable given a rising tide of cosmic consciousness, notwithstanding the importance of each person's spiritual development.

The Earth Charter, and its sister declarations of universal ethical values and principles, can be put to work in meeting our collective challenges. All political and economic decisions and policies, however apparently pragmatic such as matters of trade and defense, entail ethical considerations. We need to normalize the idea of calling out the ethical dimensions of public and vested interest responses to the urgent problems of our time, including the climate and biodiversity crises, and subjecting them to critical moral evaluation.

Global economics and its governance could be fruitfully aligned with Earth Charter principles. We need to build systems that are supportive of the greater community of life and the interdependence of people and nature. The scope of the problem suggests the need for a new World Environment Organization mandated with a trusteeship function over global public goals and common goods, with the Earth Charter articulating the ethical basis of these trusteeship duties. Although the idea of new international institutions swims against the prevailing current, we will not have the "green economy" we need without a new economic vision and the institutional means to regulate private abuse of the global commons and goods held in common.[3]

In addition to new institutions, we also need ongoing dialogue about ethics. The Earth Charter recognized this, asserting, "We must deepen and expand the global dialogue that generated the Earth Charter, for we have much to learn from the ongoing collaborative search for truth and wisdom." Much has happened in the two decades since the launch of the Earth Charter that has enriched and added to the global dialogue on ethics and sustainability, in both formal policy forums and in civil society deliberations. Furthermore, many problems, such as climate change, have grown in scale and urgency, and others, such as the disruptions caused by technological innovations, have arisen, straining political and economic systems. The lexicon of sustainability has expanded in response to these developments. One example is the influence of First Nations worldviews, values, and principles in national and international policy and law. The term "Mother Earth" has now received formal recognition through the UN General Assembly's adoption of a resolution to designate April 22 as International Mother Earth Day, and Mother Earth is referred to in the Paris Agreement on climate change. The Earth Charter's section on ecological integrity is also in need of updating to incorporate more recent concepts that are now central to our understanding of global sustainability, such as "planetary boundaries" and the "Anthropocene."

If the promise of the Earth Charter is to be realized, a platform is needed to facilitate ongoing dialogue around the ethical dimensions of the urgent global problems we face, the application to them of accepted ethical norms, as well as the search for new universal norms and principles to guide our responses. This undertaking raises a number of practical questions, such as who would lead the effort, and what organization has the credibility and is in a position to organize and conduct the kind of inclusive international dialogue that would be required? This would have to

be much more than just an archiving exercise but a process of deliberative and engaged dialogue from which is forged ethical principles of a covenantal nature.

My call for enabling the Earth Charter to speak directly to critical contemporary events and policy issues and for continuing the global ethics dialogue that led to the Earth Charter is not alone: many persons who have played significant roles in the Earth Charter movement since its inception in the 1990s have likewise argued for its importance.[4] There are thousands of citizens as well as experts in every country of the world who are eager to participate in a renewed global ethics dialogue, and with the potential to empower the Earth Charter and its vision for the great transition we so desperately need.[5] All that is lacking is a formal procedure by which this can take place, underwritten by a strong international institutional base, and the leadership that can assure its credibility and inspire worldwide participation.

Twenty years ago. Kamla Chowdhry, one of the founding members of the Earth Charter Commission, asked, 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?[6] Answering those questions remains central to our efforts today for a more just, sustainable, and peaceful world.

Endnotes

1. Phillip Selznik, *The Moral Commonwealth: Social Theory and the Promise of Community* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1992).

2. Steven Rockefeller led the drafting process. Earth Charter Commission members included Kamla Chowdry, Mohamed Sahnoun, Henriette Rasmussen, Mercedes Sosa, Erna Witoelar, Wangari Maathai, Pierre Calame, Leanardo Boff, Rudd Lubbers, and HRH Princess Basma Bint Talal.

3. Klaus Bosselmann, Peter G. Brown, and Brendan Mackey, "Enabling a Flourishing Earth: Challenges for the Green Economy, Opportunities for Global Governance," *Review of European Community & International Environmental Law* 21 (2012): 23–39. Also see discussion in Klaus Bosselmann and J. Ronald Engel, eds., *The Earth Charter: A Framework for Global Governance* (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2010).

4. Peter Burdon, Klaus Bosselmann, and Kirsten Engel, eds., *The Crisis in Global Ethics and the Future of Global Governance: Fulfilling the Promise of the Earth Charter* (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2019).

5. J. Ronald Engel and Brendan Mackey, "The Earth Charter, Covenants and Earth Jurisprudence," in *Exploring Wild Law: The Philosophy of Earth Jurisprudence*, ed. Peter Burdon. (Cambridge, MA: Wakefield Press, 2011), 313-323.

6. Kamla Chowdhry, *Challenges of the 21st Century: Gandhi's Moral Imperative* (New Delhi: National Foundation for India, 1998).

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About the Publication

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