

Statements on Controversial Issues (Taken from Section XI. of the Earth Charter Initiative Handbook)

From time to time people raise questions about the position of the Earth Charter regarding various sensitive or controversial social issues. The following statements on several such topics have been prepared by Steven Rockefeller in consultation with various ECI Council members and Advisors. These statements are not official statements adopted by ECI Council. However, the Council supports the use of these statements by Council members, the Secretariat, Affiliates, and others when they are looking for guidance regarding how to respond to questions about the Earth Charter.

The Earth Charter and Religion

The Earth Charter is the product of a decade-long, worldwide, cross-cultural dialogue on common goals and shared values. Consultations on the Earth Charter began during the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, but the actual drafting of the Earth Charter was conducted and completed as a civil society initiative. It is the purpose of the Earth Charter to articulate the consensus on shared values taking form in the emerging global civil society. Many religious leaders from diverse traditions participated in the consultation and drafting process.

The Earth Charter sets forth general ethical principles and strategic guidelines for building a just, sustainable, and peaceful world. The text of the Earth Charter affirms many values that are fundamental to the great religious traditions of humanity, including compassion, love, justice, care for the poor, environmental conservation, and peace.

The Earth Charter promotes the building of a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace. It strongly supports respect for cultural and religious diversity. The Earth Charter Initiative encourages all cultures and religions to embrace, in their own distinctive ways, the Earth Charter's ethic of respect and care for all peoples and the greater community of life. It is not the purpose of the Earth Charter Initiative to create a new world religion and the Earth Charter has not been presented as a "mystical revelation" as some have asserted. It is not the intention of the Earth Charter Initiative to replace the high ethical demands of the world's religions with some new ethical minimalism.

Different traditions and organizations affirm, celebrate, and promote the Earth Charter in many diverse ways. The Earth Charter Commission and International Council welcome a diversity of responses from religious organizations and groups. They do not identify the Earth Charter itself with any one response in particular.

In addition to its ethical principles, the Earth Charter recognizes the importance of the spiritual dimension of life and makes reference to several widely shared spiritual values, including the following: The Preamble emphasizes "that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more." It affirms the values of "reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature."

The Earth Charter, which seeks support across all boundaries of faith and culture, does not make reference to God or the Creator, because some religious traditions and many humanists do not use God language. However, some people in the Christian, Jewish, Islamic, and Hindu traditions and various other religious traditions choose to interpret the reference to "reverence for the mystery of being" as a summons to reverence for God. Other individuals and groups will not give this reference a theological interpretation.

The Earth Charter teaches respect for nature and Earth, our planetary home. The Earth Charter does not promote the deification or worship of Earth. The Earth Charter capitalizes Earth because this is the name of the planet. All the planets in our solar system have names. Astronomers, scientists in general, and many others use the names of the planets when referring to them. In addition, the use of the name Earth evokes the image of the planet in space as captured by the photographs of the astronauts. This image of Earth as a relatively small, beautiful, and fragile planet floating in space encourages the attitudes of respect and care.

The Earth Charter recognizes that all nations, peoples, and religions live in an increasingly interdependent world and that many urgent problems can only be managed and resolved in through global cooperation. Collaboration and partnership require common goals and values such as are found in the Earth Charter. There is a great need for the leadership and support of the world's religions in the effort to promote shared values and to build a just, sustainable, and peaceful world community.

Even though the Earth Charter advocates worldwide cooperation and global community, it is not the purpose of the Earth Charter to promote creation of a world government. The Earth Charter does state that "the partnership of government, civil society, and business is essential for effective governance."

The Earth Charter, Non-Discrimination and Sexual Orientation

Principle 12 states: "Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities."

Principle 12.a states: "Eliminate discrimination in all its forms, such as that based on race, color, sex, sexual orientation, religion, language, and national, ethnic or social origin."

The Earth Charter in Principle 12.a calls for an end to all forms of discrimination, including discrimination based on sexual orientation, in accordance with international human rights law. It is only in this context that the Earth Charter addresses the issue of homosexuality.

Discrimination involves distinctions, exclusions, and restrictions that deny people their human rights and fundamental freedoms as set forth in international law. Some people suffer discrimination because of their sexual orientation. Article 26 in the international Covenant on Political and Civil Rights is widely recognized among international lawyers to provide a general prohibition against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Principles 12 and 12.a are an extension and clarification of the concerns and values set forth in a number of preceding principles in the Earth Charter. For example, Principles 1 and 2 call for respect and care for the community of life as a whole. Principle 2 emphasizes the values of understanding, compassion, and love.

Principle 3 calls for building just and peaceful societies, and Principle 3.a is the imperative to "ensure that communities at all levels, guarantee human rights and fundamental freedoms and provide everyone an opportunity to realize his or her full potential." In this spirit, Principle 9.c calls on all communities to "protect the vulnerable." Principles 12 and 12.a should be read with these other principles in mind.

Fundamental human rights and freedoms under certain circumstances have to be weighed and balanced against each other. In this regard, international jurisprudence (case law) leaves open the possibility that if religious institutions and other organizations are able to demonstrate that it is "legitimate to do so," they may restrict the opportunities open to gays and lesbians in their institutions. The ethics of such restrictions are a matter of on-going debate.

The Earth Charter recognizes that "Life often involves tensions between important values. This can mean difficult choices." The tension between individual freedom and social justice or the practice of non-violence and the prevention of harm or environmental protection and economic development are examples. The Earth Charter does not endeavor to address the many complex problems that may arise when individuals, institutions, and governments endeavor to implement its general principles. From the perspective of the Earth Charter there must be very compelling ethical reasons for permitting any form of discrimination in any institution.

The Earth Charter and Responsible Reproduction

The Earth Charter calls for sustainable patterns of human reproduction and for universal access to healthcare that fosters reproductive health and responsible reproduction. However, the Earth Charter does not address the issue of abortion. It does not take a position for or against abortion.

1. The Scope of the Earth Charter

The Earth Charter is the product of a decade-long, world-wide, cross-cultural dialogue on common goals and shared values. Its purpose is to articulate the consensus on shared values that is taking form in the emerging global civil society.

The Earth Charter sets forth general ethical principles and strategic guidelines for building a just, sustainable and peaceful world. The Earth Charter Commission intended to say in the text of the Earth Charter just what is stated and nothing more.

The Earth Charter Commission and International Council recognize that there will be an ongoing debate over how to implement the Earth Charter's various ethical principles and that different cultures and communities will adopt diverse approaches to achieving the goal of sustainable development. The Earth Charter focuses attention on the critical ethical issues and frames the debate. The Earth Charter does not try to prescribe answers to the many complex questions about what means and mechanisms should be chosen in the effort to realize its goals and values.

However, the Commission and International Council do recognize that the ends actually achieved by an initiative are constituted and shaped by the means adopted and that worthy ends do not justify unprincipled means. All means should be consistent with Earth Charter values.

It is helpful to keep in mind that the Earth Charter is made up of principles, not rules. Rules give instruction on exactly what to do in specific situations. Principles advise us on what to think about when we are trying to decide what to do.

2. Sustainable Patterns of Reproduction

The first principle of the Earth Charter is the imperative to "respect . . . life in all its diversity", and Principle 1a states that "every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings."

Principle 7 calls for patterns of human reproduction that are sustainable and "safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being." It should be noted that the Earth Charter does not use the term "population control," and when referring to patterns of reproduction, it explicitly states that these patterns should be pursued in ways that safeguard human rights. In short, the Earth Charter principles are opposed to coercive methods of regulating population growth.

In accord with the international consensus worked out at the UN summits on population in Cairo (1995) and on women in Beijing (1997), the Earth Charter recognizes that the most effective way to achieve sustainable patterns of human reproduction is to promote gender equality and to empower women in and through "universal access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunity." These values are affirmed in Principle 11 as a matter of social and economic justice as well as sound sustainable development policy.

3. Reproductive Health

The Cairo and Beijing UN summits also specifically emphasize the critical importance of reproductive healthcare for the achievement of sustainable development. The Earth Charter in Principle 7e, therefore, states, "Ensure universal access to healthcare that fosters reproductive health and responsible reproduction."

The Beijing Platform for Action (1997) defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." (Annex II, IV.C.89) According to the Beijing Platform reproductive health involves well-being "in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions and processes." Achieving reproductive health means "that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so." (Annex II, IV.C.94)

4. Responsible Reproduction

As indicated above, Principle 7 makes clear that "responsible reproduction" involves patterns of reproduction "that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community wellbeing." It is the position of the Earth Charter that the goal of responsible reproduction should be achieved through gender equality, the empowerment of women, and universal access to healthcare, and in ways that respect humanity's fundamental human rights and freedoms.

Within the framework of the Earth Charter's general principles, different cultures and communities may adopt diverse approaches to the provision of health care that fosters reproductive health and responsible reproductions. The Earth Charter does not enter the discussion and debate on this matter.