

DEMOCRATIC EQUALITY, ECONOMIC INEQUALITY, AND THE EARTH CHARTER

STEVEN C. ROCKEFELLER

Preface by Leonardo Boff



EARTH CHARTER INTERNATIONAL
SAN JOSE, COSTA RICA
2015

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PREFACE

This essay is infused with the spirit created by the Earth Charter, the spirit of care, of respect for all that exists and lives, of reverence for Earth, of re-enchantment with nature, and of collective responsibility for the destiny of the biosphere and of the human species.

Its author, Steven Rockefeller, along with other renowned individuals, was one of the primary intellectual drivers of the Earth Charter, which is among the most important international documents of the early 21st century. The Charter elaborates indispensable values and principles to guide human societies to live in a benign and sustainable manner on our Common Home, planet Earth, and to secure our future.

In this essay, Professor Rockefeller addresses two contemporary issues that are extremely important within the Earth Charter: democratic equality and economic inequality. He offers a very detailed historical account of these two realities.

First, he clarifies the meaning of the ideal of *democratic equality*, which he states, with good reason, “to be among the most radical and potent ideas in all of modern world history.” (page 8) The ideal of equality has a long ancestry, especially in religious and spiritual traditions. It is the foundation of all political and humanitarian projects today and is perceived as a common aspiration for humanity.

Subsequently, he focuses on *economic inequality*, reflecting on the many evolving efforts in the 19th and 20th centuries to understand the problem and find ways to address inequality and economic injustice. As he rightly states, “The ideal of a society of free and equal citizens was undermined. Society found itself bitterly divided between rich and poor, capital and labor, over profits and wages.” (page 18)

Professor Rockefeller shows how various efforts to minimize the harmful effects of inequality in the U.S. and Europe, including creation of the welfare state, high taxation of corporate profits, formation of foundations, and social philanthropy, have been insufficient. As economist Karl Polanyi demonstrated in his famous book, *The Great Transformation* (1944), through the modern process of production, we shifted from a *market economy* to a *market society*. This is to say that everything can be considered as a market commodity, including essential things such as water, food, soil, etc. In our market society, the increasing voracity to accumulate in an unlimited manner has exacerbated economic inequalities at the global level.

This essay also outlines some of the findings in Pierre Rosanvallon's The Society of Equals (2013) and Thomas Piketty's Capital in the Twenty-First Century (2014). Many of us would agree that where industrialist/capitalist relations exist, it appears that two kinds of injustices occur: a *social injustice*, generating increasing poverty for some and immense wealth for others, and an *ecological injustice*, devastating the goods and services provided by natural systems and threatening the foundations needed to sustain life.

As I wrote many years ago, liberation theology and ecological discourses have something in common. On the one hand, poverty fractures the social fabric of millions of poor people around the world, while on the other, disregard for Earth, our home, and the lack of respect for nature breaks down the balance of the planet, which is under threat from the predatory and unsustainable development practiced by most contemporary societies (in my book: *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*). This idea fits nicely with the author's analysis of inequality.

The essay leads the reader to conclude that due to its harmful effects, economic inequality is unethical. This inequality presents the political challenge of finding more benevolent ways of meeting human needs.

The central focus of this essay, which shines for its objectivity and reasonable analysis, is to confront the two challenges: how to ensure democratic equality and how to overcome economic inequality. Both of these themes are

addressed within the vision of the Earth Charter, which serves to *ecologize* all problems and knowledge. In the words of the Charter: “Our environmental, economic, political, social, and spiritual challenges are interconnected, and together we can forge inclusive solutions.” (Preamble)

For each important theme, Professor Rockefeller references the text of the Earth Charter, demonstrating how it inspires fresh ideals and new practices. The Charter states, for example, the importance of building “democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful.” (I,3) Another section stresses the ecological imperative to “adopt patterns of production, consumption and reproduction that safeguard Earth’s regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being.” (I,7)

Where Professor Rockefeller refers to social and economic justice, he emphasizes the Earth Charter principle: “Eradicate poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative.” (III,9) This phrase reminds us of Gandhi’s words: “hunger is an insult because it degrades, dehumanizes and destroys the body and spirit; it is the most murderous form that exists.”

Reflecting on the principle “Promote a culture of tolerance, non-violence and peace” (IV,16), Professor Rockefeller makes a brilliant commentary on the Earth Charter’s definition of peace. I consider this definition to

be most poetic and insightful: "Peace is the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which we are a part." (IV,16.f)

Underlying the struggles and successes associated with efforts to achieve democratic equality and eliminate economic inequality described in the essay, a portrait emerges of a much deeper human yearning for meaning. That meaning, as Professor Rockefeller postulates, is found in and through a relational spirituality. This is not a monopoly of the religions. Rather, it is a spirituality that resides in the depths of each human being; it guides our conscience and in it are the keys to a better world based on ethics and love. This relational spirituality is urgently needed to help us cope with the new geological era introduced by human practices – the *Anthropocene* – whose destructive energy threatens Earth's balance and the physical-chemical-ecological foundation that guarantees life on the planet.

Professor Rockefeller asserts with authority that each great civilization produces its "own unique form of spiritual and ethical consciousness." (page 71) We are now in the globalized phase of the human experiment, and our civilization is also generating its own ethical conscience and spirituality. Everywhere a new reverence for life is emerging together with a new understanding that we reside on a living Earth, which provides everything we need to live.

Steven Rockefeller's essay instills hope that we will have a future, secured by an ethic centered on Earth and the community of life, and rooted in a spirituality that makes us feel we are part of a greater whole that sustains the universe and each one of us.

Leonardo Boff

Theologian and member of the Earth Charter Commission

May 24, 2015, Petrópolis, Rio de Janeiro.

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This essay has been prepared as a contribution to Earth Charter+15, which will be celebrated in Amsterdam in June 2015. The essay is being published by Earth Charter International, but it is not an official report or statement of the Earth Charter International Council or Secretariat. The interpretations of the Earth Charter in the essay are entirely my own.

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DEMOCRATIC EQUALITY, ECONOMIC INEQUALITY, AND THE EARTH CHARTER

1 INTRODUCTION

In the process of building and sustaining a democratic society, the ideal of equality and the closely related ideal of liberty are the fundamental guiding principles. An economic environment supportive of free enterprise and innovation is vitally important, but in the final analysis a democratic nation's economic system is to be judged by its success in providing equality of opportunity and a decent standard of living for all citizens. However, as the world approaches the third decade of the 21st century, many developed and developing nations are failing to meet these criteria for a fair and just economic order. What was stated in the Earth Charter Preamble in 2000 remains an accurate description of a major challenge facing individual nations and the international community: "The benefits of development are not shared equitably and the gap between rich and poor is widening." Rising economic inequality is once again becoming an acute social, economic, and political problem, undermining confidence in democratic governments and capitalism.

In an effort to clarify the ideas, values and challenges under consideration, this essay explores the origin and meaning of the principle of equality, considers the economic implications of the ideal, and provides a brief historical overview of liberal democracy and economic inequality since the American and French revolutions. The essay then highlights the principles in the Earth Charter that have been designed to frame the intensifying debate on these critical issues and guide change. The Earth Charter, however, views the issue of economic inequality in the context of the emergence of a planetary civilization and in relation to an even more fundamental problem facing governments and market economies—the widespread, accelerating degradation of the planet’s life support systems.

The Earth Charter recognizes that the planet Earth is part of an evolving universe, that Earth’s biosphere is one interconnected ecological system of which people are a part, and that under the impact of modern technology and economic globalization all peoples are living in an increasingly interdependent world. The challenges facing humanity, therefore, require a new global consciousness and spirit of worldwide cooperation as well as transformative local action. The Earth Charter both promotes respect for cultural diversity and calls for universal ethical values that support creation of a just, ecologically sustainable, and peaceful global community. The Earth Charter’s broad vision will lead the essay to explore the interconnections between long-term solutions to economic inequality and the urgent need for a worldwide transition to sustainable

development. The essay concludes with reflections on equality and sustainability as two transformative ideals that have become interrelated and are the principal keys to a promising future.

Since the Earth Charter was launched, dramatic progress has been made in reducing mass poverty. Hundreds of millions of people have been lifted out of extreme poverty in China, India, and other developing nations. The first United Nations Millennium Development Goal, which involves halving the percentage of the world's people living in 1990 on \$1.25 a day, has been exceeded.¹ However, in recent decades, a new trend has emerged within many countries in both the North and South involving an increasing concentration of wealth in the top 1 percent and top 10 percent together with growing income inequality. This problem is especially acute in the wealthiest countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, but it is also a growing problem in emerging nations such as Brazil, China, and Indonesia. An unchecked rise in economic inequality undermines the bonds of trust that hold societies together and is a source of social unrest. There is also mounting evidence that high levels of inequality have a harmful impact on an economy, reducing consumer demand, slowing progress in education, and generally creating instability.²

The economic situation worsened with the global financial crisis that struck in 2008, ravaging economies and throwing millions of people out of work. In Europe and North America the impact has been particularly severe and

many families are experiencing declining standards of living. There is today a global unemployment crisis, especially among youth. Gender inequality continues to be a major source of income inequality. Economic inequality within nations and the substantial gulf between the wealthiest countries and the poorest are fundamental problems that the international community must confront, if there is to be any hope of building a global social and economic order in the 21st century that is just, inclusive, and sustainable.

As long as there is opportunity for all and upward mobility in a democratic society, most citizens will find no reason to object if through innovative leadership and hard work someone achieves exceptional financial success, especially when many others share in this success and the enterprise contributes to the well-being of society. However, when wealth is increasingly concentrated in the hands of an elite and opportunity and mobility are denied the larger population, reasonable people can only conclude that the policies and regulations governing the system are unfair. Under such circumstances distrust and protest spread, leading to calls for reform of both the political and economic system and for a redistribution of wealth. It is issues and concerns of this nature as well as the persistence of mass poverty in parts of the world, especially in regions being impacted by climate change, that animate the contemporary debate regarding economic inequality.

With regard to the story of the distribution of wealth and economic inequality since the American and French

revolutions, two recent studies are particularly illuminating: Pierre Rosanvallon's The Society of Equals (2013) and Thomas Piketty's Capital in the Twenty-First Century (2014).³ The two authors agree in general on the major elements of the story, which this essay will try to outline. Piketty's book has attracted wide attention because it sets forth the path breaking research that he and his colleagues, including Anthony Atkinson and Emmanuel Saez, have done in assembling a vast amount of new statistical information on economic inequality since the 18th century with a primary focus on Europe and North America. Piketty acknowledges that "Social scientific research is and always will be tentative and imperfect," and he cautions that his findings should be taken as approximations that describe the general nature of situations and trends.⁴

Toward the end of Capital in the Twenty-First Century, Piketty acknowledges that the "deterioration of humanity's natural capital in the century ahead...is clearly the world's principal long-term worry."⁵ However, neither Piketty nor Rosanvallon explore the interrelation between long-term solutions to economic inequality and the need for a transition to sustainability. For that the essay turns to the Earth Charter and many other sources.

2 THE MODERN DEMOCRATIC CONCEPT OF EQUALITY

The modern concept of social and political equality emerged in Europe and America during the 17th and 18th centuries, leading to the American and French revolutions. In this connection, it is important to emphasize that the democratic ideal of equality is first and foremost an ethical ideal involving basic attitudes and values shaping the way people relate and work together in everyday life. The moral ideals of universal equality and individual freedom lie at the heart of what philosophers and poets have called the democratic spirit and the democratic way of life. It is this spirit and way of life that inspires creation of and sustains democratic institutions.

Insofar as the principle of universal equality is an ethical ideal, the seeds of the concept were planted between two and three thousand years ago with the awakening of the moral consciousness associated with emergence of the world's great religious and spiritual traditions. The highest ethical teachings in these traditions emphasized the imperative to do what is good, right, and just in all one's endeavors and to avoid what is evil. Further, in both the East and the West the Golden Rule became a widely accepted general moral guideline regarding what is good and just, and it calls for a certain equality of consideration as an imperative in relations among people.⁶ Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is a prime example: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to

you; for this is the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 7:12) However, in the great ancient and classical civilizations, for the most part the Golden Rule was not understood to apply to people from other tribes, religions, races and nations. In general, it was not used to question hierarchical political structures, rigid class and caste structures, the oppression of women, or the institution of slavery.

In classical Athens, Plato and Aristotle initiated philosophical examination of the strengths and weaknesses of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy as forms of government, but they did not support participatory democracy and the principle of social equality. Nevertheless, during the 5th and 4th centuries BCE the Greek city state of Athens did conduct a lengthy experiment with democratic equality and citizen self-rule that was inclusive of the free male members of society. Athenian democracy did not endure, but it would become a great source of inspiration to philosophers and political leaders over two thousand years later. The Stoic philosophers in the Roman Empire promoted the idea of the natural equality of all human beings as rational and moral beings and they supported universal ethical values. However, Stoic philosophy was more concerned with helping the individual achieve wisdom, live well, and find peace of mind in a turbulent world than with promoting political transformation.

It would take centuries of socio economic, political, intellectual, moral, and religious evolution, to open the way for the emergence of the concept of universal equality

as a transformative social and political ideal. It was in the context of the European Enlightenment movement, building on the forces of change unleashed by the Italian Renaissance, Protestant Reformation, and Cartesian-Newtonian scientific revolution that this finally happened. Insofar as religion was an influence, it was as a result of a new appreciation of the prophetic tradition in the Hebrew Bible and a radical reinterpretation of the meaning of the egalitarianism found in certain Christian spiritual and moral teachings, including the notion that God values and loves all equally, the humble shepherd and the exalted king.⁷ The German Enlightenment philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), gave expression to the emerging moral and political consciousness with his reconstruction of the supreme moral principle, which he entitled the Categorical Imperative. All human persons have equal moral standing as ends-in-themselves, he argued, and should always be treated as an end and never as a means only. During the American and French revolutions, this notion that all people are ends and not mere means for exploitation by others acquired new and radical meaning.

It was the vision and spirit of equality and liberty that inspired the 18th century American and French revolutions. Regarding equality, Gordon Wood, a leading authority on the American Revolution, writes: "Equality has always been the most radical and potent idea in American history."⁸ One might add that equality is among the most radical and potent ideas in all of modern world history. The hopes and visions that were brought to life in the American and

French revolutions continue to inspire the building of new democracies in Africa, Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, and Latin America. The vision of a just society of equals and deep concern over the extremes of economic inequality in market economies are what attracted so many intellectuals and oppressed peoples to various forms of socialism in the 19th and 20th centuries.

What were the basic ideas, attitudes, and values that were associated with the ideal of equality in the 18th century leading to the democratic transformation of society? As the ideal of equality is described in what follows, it is important to keep in mind that throughout the history of modern democracy there have always been tensions and outright contradictions politically, economically and socially between the ideal and the real, the theory and the practice of equality. From the beginning the dominant groups in society—white males and property owners, for example—have tried to restrict the meaning of the ideal in one way or another. The drama of democracy is to a large extent a never ending debate and battle over what universal equality as an ideal means and how it can and should be implemented. The ideal of equality is the unfulfilled promise of democracy as a way of life and form of self-government, a vision of freedom, justice, and equity that ever stands in judgment of what has been achieved by society.

Among those fighting in support of the American and French Revolutions, the principle of equality was viewed as the key to reconstructing the human relationships that form

society. The vision of a society of equals involved rejection of hereditary monarchy and the hierarchical structure of aristocratic society. This meant repudiation of the notion supporting aristocratic society that some individuals, the nobility, form an inherently superior species of humanity and are entitled to special privileges while the mass of humanity are to be viewed as inherently inferior and should remain subordinate and subjugated.⁹ At the heart of the idea of equality is the faith that all human beings share a common nature and possess an inherent and equal dignity. All are alike in this fundamental way. This is the basic meaning of the statement in the American Declaration of Independence (1776) that "All men are created equal." Right relationship begins with mutual respect. The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (1948) identifies the elements of humanity's common nature with reason and conscience.

Further, since all are created equal sharing a common nature, all are born with a right to liberty.¹⁰ A society of equals is a society made up of free and independent individuals, in which no one should be treated as a mere means and be subjugated to the will of another. The French historian and political philosopher, Pierre Rosanvallon, writes: "the term 'equality' was originally identified with ideals of emancipation and autonomy and thus with the creation of a society of proud individuals, living as equals not set apart by humiliating differences."¹¹ In this regard, John Dewey, the intellectual leader of the Progressive Movement in America during the first half of the 20th century, explains that "the

democratic faith in equality” involves belief that every person has “the right to equal opportunity” for development of whatever abilities and gifts he or she may have and belief that every person has “the capacity to lead his or her own life free from coercion and imposition by others provided right conditions are supplied.”¹² Social equality means the freedom to enter reciprocal relations with others that reflect mutual independence. In this regard, participation in a free market economy became an important expression of the spirit of equality for many people in the early years of the American Republic.¹³ The democratic principles of equality and liberty are closely associated with the liberal concept of individualism and with a growing shift of focus from the other world to this world inspired by confidence in the new science as a tool to master nature and a related belief in the possibility of social and economic progress for all.

In addition to the right to liberty, equality also meant respect for all the fundamental rights of the individual such as are set forth in the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and Bill of Rights (1791) and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (1789). People are not equal in physical strength, talent, and a number of other ways, but the ideal of equality recognizes that they are equal in dignity and in their fundamental rights as free persons. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states this fundamental ethical principle succinctly: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” (Article 1) As noted, freedom and equality are closely interconnected. There is no equality without freedom for

all. Further, the full exercise of freedom and “the pursuit of Happiness” (American Declaration of Independence) require protection of the fundamental rights of the individual. The American Declaration of Independence states that “to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among men.” A democratic society of equals was conceived as a society of independent persons pervaded by mutual respect that honors universal human rights and equality before the law. One function of human rights law is to provide guidelines and standards designed to ensure that the essential social, economic, and political conditions exist to promote equality of opportunity. Insofar as there is tension between equality and freedom, human rights law helps to prevent the exploitation of the weak by the powerful. It offers a very good interpretation of the implications of the Golden Rule and Categorical Imperative for social relations and public policy in our interdependent, culturally diverse, modern world.

In the political realm where representative democracy was established, equality has meant being recognized as a citizen, a member of the community with equal rights and an equal share of political sovereignty.¹⁴ The concept of “one man, one vote” is a radical idea that involves a new democratic faith in the intelligence of “the common man.” Pierre Rosanvallon summarizes this democratic faith as follows: “From the learned scholar to the simplest spirit, from the richest man to the poorest of the poor—all are regarded as equally capable of thinking about the common

good and drawing the dividing line between the just and unjust.”¹⁵ John Dewey writes:

Democracy is a way of personal life controlled...by faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if proper conditions are furnished...For what is the faith of democracy in the role of consultation, of conference, of persuasion, of discussion, in formation of public opinion, which in the long run is self corrective, except faith in the capacity of the intelligence of the common man to respond with common sense to the free play of facts and ideas which are secured by effective guarantee of free inquiry, free assembly and free communication?¹⁶

The American and French revolutions awakened the aspiration for universal suffrage, inclusive political sovereignty, but realizing and securing this ideal has involved a long, hard, often bloody, and continuing struggle. It took, for example, until 1922—almost 150 years—for the United States to grant the vote to women and almost 200 years to secure in federal law the civil and political rights of African Americans.

Efforts to advance the ideal of equality are focused on ending some perceived inequality in social, economic or political arrangements that is judged to be an injustice. An unacceptable form of inequality involves an unjustified difference in the way an individual or group is treated in comparison with others. In the contemporary world, the

most common form of inequality involves some type of discrimination regarding gender, race, ethnic origin, class, religion, sexual orientation, etc. Protests over inequality often involve claims regarding violations of a person's inherent dignity as a human being and of their fundamental freedoms and civil, political, social, or economic human rights. In its efforts during the 20th century to address economic inequality and redistribute wealth equitably, the modern welfare state adopted a rights based approach. Initiatives designed to redistribute wealth are guided by an expanded vision of social rights involving the principle that everyone has a right to equal access to certain basic social goods such as education, health care, and social security.

The principle of equality is widely associated with the principles of equal opportunity and equal consideration. However, equal consideration does not necessarily mean that everyone should be treated in the same way. Equal consideration calls for equal treatment until compelling reasons are presented to treat a particular individual or group differently. Often equality of consideration does in fact lead to treating some people differently from others. For example, equal consideration regarding individuals with disabilities may mean special arrangements. Affirmative action may be called for to address the effects of past and ongoing racial discrimination. When confronted with pronounced levels of economic inequality that are judged to involve grave injustice, equal consideration may mean income redistribution through progressive tax policies and various government programs. In all these examples, ideas

of corrective and compensatory justice are at work. Some critics argue that compensatory government initiatives go too far when in addition to equality of opportunity the goal becomes equality of results.¹⁷

For most of the past 250 years, those battling various forms of inequality and discrimination have emphasized the common humanity of people and what they share as human beings—a desire for freedom and happiness and a need to be respected and valued. When promoting equality the tendency has been to minimize all that makes individuals different and distinguishes them such as gender, race, and ethnic origin. This approach makes sense when promoting universal suffrage or equal pay for equal work, for example. However, in recent decades the feminist critique of the theory of equality, a new appreciation of cultural diversity, identity politics, and the concern among many women and men in contemporary societies to be recognized and respected for what is different and distinctive about them have led to calls for some changes in how society thinks about equality. The argument is made that the principle of equality should be expanded to include recognition and appreciation of difference as basic to a person's identity and to an understanding of what equal consideration may mean in practical situations.¹⁸ Promoting a common culture that is inclusive of diversity and multi-cultural is part of the meaning of equality in the 21st century. However, an emphasis on difference becomes problematical when it leads to ethnocentrism and separatism, causing the

fragmentation of society as groups lose a unifying sense of a common identity and shared culture.¹⁹

In periods when one form of inequality is on the rise, other forms of inequality may be on the decline. In recent decades, for example, there has been significant progress in many nations in reducing inequality in health and education and in promoting gender equality and gay rights while at the same time economic inequality has been increasing.²⁰ In addition, the causes of different forms of inequality may vary in diverse cultures and from nation to nation. Building a society of equals is a never ending task. Sustaining and advancing equality requires transmitting from one generation to the next the democratic spirit and a commitment to eternal vigilance.

3 ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

Poverty and high levels of economic inequality were important factors in calls for revolutionary change in the 18th century, especially in France. However, equality was not defined in simple arithmetic terms as equality of income. The distribution of wealth was a secondary issue. Equality as liberty and independence and the quality of human relationships were the primary concern. Economic inequalities were considered acceptable provided they did not undermine individual freedom, prevent social mobility, and divide society. Inequalities created by talent and effort, which in some way benefit society, were viewed as more justified than those derived from birth and inheritance. Inheritance laws were radically revised in France and the Americans rejected the law of primogeniture. The Declaration of the Rights of Man states that “social distinctions can be based only on common utility,” but at the time the primary concern in this regard was ending the aristocratic order. Further, many 18th century democratic thinkers believed that with an end to aristocratic class privileges there would be a natural trend toward greater economic equality. Moderation and frugality were praised; luxury was denounced. Social democracy in America, the expression of the democratic spirit in everyday life which includes mutual respect, the absence of condescension, and civility, helped to minimize concerns about differences in wealth.²¹

However, the industrial revolution and rapid development of capitalism in the 19th century set in motion powerful economic forces with far reaching-consequences that the champions of liberty and equality in the 18th century could not have anticipated. Immense economic inequalities developed and divided society in Europe and America. The spread of manufacturing and the factory system coupled with free competition produced in countries like England and France a large class of propertyless workers, the industrial proletariat, who found themselves living in wretched conditions on the margins of society with no control over their lives. At the same time enormous concentrations of wealth took form among the new class of capitalists. The ideal of a society of free and equal citizens was undermined. Society found itself bitterly divided between rich and poor, capital and labor, over profits and wages. The liberal economic thinking that was dominant, which was based on the work of Adam Smith(1723-1790) and David Ricardo(1772-1823), exalted free competition as the key to economic advancement for society and argued that the economy should be regulated by competition and the market, not by the government. In addition, classical liberal economic theory tried to explain the low wages and poverty of the working class as an inevitable outcome of the free market system and the so called iron law of wages. Economic inequality was to be accepted as the price of progress.²²

By the first decade of the 20th century, economic inequality in England, France and most of the European

countries had returned to the very high levels that had existed in the 18th century before the French revolution. The richest 10 percent owned 90 percent of the national wealth and received almost 50 percent of the total national income (income from labor and capital). The top 1 percent owned more than 50 percent of the national wealth and received approximately 20 percent of national income. The middle 40 percent owned 5 percent to 10 percent of the national wealth and the poorest 50 percent less than 5 percent. No real middle class existed.²³

The industrial revolution progressed less rapidly in the New World, but in the later decades of the 19th century the United States too found itself facing rapidly rising economic inequality involving huge concentrations of wealth among an elite group of capitalists while a growing class of laborers struggled with brutal working conditions, long hours, and low wages.²⁴ Just prior to World War I economic inequality in the United States had also reached very high levels, but it was not at the extreme levels found in Europe. The top 10 percent possessed 80 percent of the nation's wealth and received over 40 percent of the nation's income. The richest 1 percent owned over 40 percent of the country's capital and took in 20 percent of national income. The middle class that had emerged in the 19th century was struggling to survive.²⁵

Karl Marx (1818-1883) and other 19th century socialists predicted that the capitalist economic system would lead to ever greater concentrations of wealth and inequality,

generating mounting class conflict. They attacked individualism, competition, and the private ownership of the means of production as the root causes of the oppression and injustice suffered by the working class. Anticipating the eventual collapse and overthrow of capitalism, they put forth visions of a classless society that involved a massive redistribution of wealth. Reflecting on the close association of equality with freedom, Rosanvallon argues that the socialist “critique of economic inequalities was always linked to the goal of a society without barriers in which individual differences did not lead to exploitation, domination, or exclusion.” Regarding the distribution of income and wealth, Marx’s widely quoted guideline states: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need.”²⁶

The 20th century witnessed a dramatic reversal of the 19th century trend towards economic inequality in the developed world. The injustice inherent in the economic system prompted a radical reassessment of the role that government should play in the economy and social life of a nation, leading to creation of the modern welfare state. The result was a major redistribution of wealth and reduction of economic inequality that continued in America and Europe up through the 1970s. For most of the 20th century the income going to the top 1 percent and top 10 percent declined, and this group’s share of national wealth and income went down significantly. In Europe, for example, between 1910 and 1970 the share of national wealth possessed by the richest 10 percent dropped from

90 percent to 60 percent, and the share of national income going to this group of earners declined from between 45 to 50 percent to 30 percent. The share of national wealth owned by the top 1 percent was reduced by more than half - from 50 percent to 20 percent - as was its share of national income - from 20 percent to 9 percent.²⁷

In the United States, the decline in economic inequality did not equal the decline in Europe, but it was nevertheless substantial. Between 1910 and 1970 the share of national wealth owned by the top 10 percent dropped from 80 percent to 65 percent and this group's share of national income fell from 42 percent to 33 percent. In the case of the top 1 percent, its share of national wealth declined from over 40 percent to 28 percent and its share of national income dropped from 20 percent to 9 percent. Further, in the decades immediately following World War II, wages for workers in the United States and much of Europe rose as productivity increased and a vibrant middle class emerged. Piketty writes: "The growth of a true 'patrimonial (or propertied) middle class' was the principal structural transformation of the distribution of wealth in the developed countries in the twentieth century."²⁸

Many factors contributed to the development of the welfare state and the reductions in economic inequality, including the rise of new progressive political movements and the reform of liberalism, the formation of a powerful labor movement, the Marxist critique of capitalism and the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, fear of class warfare and

anarchy, the devastating impact of the Great Depression, and two world wars that awakened new feelings of shared sacrifice and solidarity.²⁹ A new sense of social and economic interdependence replaced earlier ideas of the atomistic, self-sufficient individual, generating concern for those whose fortunes are shaped by economic and social forces over which they have no control. During a turbulent century, democracy proved itself extraordinarily resilient and capable of effective governance in the face of huge challenges. Freedom and human rights were defended against totalitarianism, and market capitalism underwent far-reaching reforms and was defended against Communism.

The major change in social policy that caused a reduction in economic inequality and made possible a redistribution of wealth was the widespread adoption of progressive income and estate taxes that rose to very high levels from the time of World War I up until the 1980s, especially in Britain and the United States. For example, the top marginal tax rate of the income tax in the United States was over 70 percent during World War I, climbed to 80 percent during the Great Depression and to over 90 percent during World War II, and remained at 70 percent throughout the 1960s and 1970s. From 1933 until the early 1980s top inheritance tax rates were also very high.³⁰ In defending his administration's tax policies in 1936, President Franklin Roosevelt is reported to have said: "Here is my principle: taxes shall be levied according to the ability to pay. That is the only American principle."³¹

During the 20th century, tax revenues and government social spending in Europe and North America rose dramatically. Among the wealthiest nations expenditures on social programs alone came to equal 25 to 35 percent of national income. The redistribution of wealth by the new welfare states did not for the most part involve a direct transfer of income from the rich to the poor. The mechanism for redistribution was based on the idea that everyone has social rights to certain essential social goods such as education, health care, unemployment insurance, and a retirement pension, and governments have a responsibility to provide or to ensure equal access to these things necessary to freedom, equality of opportunity, and the pursuit of happiness.³²

The concern to address inequality and economic injustice during the early decades of the 20th century was also reflected in the expanded role that private philanthropy came to play in the United States. Some of the wealthiest individuals committed substantial portions of their personal fortunes to innovative philanthropic initiatives. Of special significance was the development of strategic philanthropy and creation of the modern foundation. Strategic philanthropy, as distinct from charity, focuses on root causes and seeks long-term solutions to major social problems. It succeeded in making significant contributions in fields such as disease eradication, health care, agriculture, education, and conservation. When private wealth is combined with a high sense of social responsibility and the philanthropic spirit, it can become a means for advancing the common

good and building the not-for-profit sector and a strong civil society. A healthy democratic society needs a well-organized civil society to counter balance the influence of business and to hold governments accountable. Philanthropy with a progressive social vision and a well developed not-for-profit sector are essential to the creative vitality of a democratic society that strives to honor universal human rights and to promote social change.

The reduction of economic inequality in the 20th century in the West came to an end around 1980. The welfare state came under attack for fostering dependency and undermining development of individual responsibility. Progressive income and inheritance taxes were cut back in a number of countries where they had been at very high levels, and government spending policies became less redistributive. The income of the top 1 percent and top 10 percent began to rise again, and economic inequality has been steadily growing ever since. Middle class wages ceased to rise with productivity and stagnated. The increase of economic inequality has been far more dramatic in the United States than in Europe. In 2010 the top 10 percent in the United States possessed over 70 percent of the nation's wealth and received close to 50 percent of the national income up from 30 to 35 percent in the 1970s. The top 1 percent owned 35 percent of national capital and received 20 percent of national income up from 9 percent in the 1970s. Even though the poverty rate remains considerably lower than when President Lyndon Johnson launched the "war on poverty" in the 1960s, in

2010 the bottom 50 percent held only 2 percent of the nation's wealth and received no more than 20 percent of the national income. The Affordable Care Act has improved the situation for millions of people, but such initiatives face persistent political opposition. Income inequality in the United States in the 21st century is reaching the very high levels that existed in Europe on the eve of World War I.³³

Over the past three decades, economic globalization, the information technology revolution, the relocation of jobs to low wage countries, and the expanding use of machine intelligence (robots and automated processes) in manufacturing have been significant factors in the stagnation of middle class wages and the loss of low and mid-skilled jobs in the United States and other developed countries.³⁴ The digital revolution is transforming the manufacturing processes created by the industrial revolution and constructing a new integrated global economic system. However, the digital revolution has not to date created a significant number of jobs for the ordinary worker. As reported in *The Economist*: "Vast wealth is being created without many workers; and for all but an elite few, work no longer guarantees a rising income."³⁵ The more advanced developing nations like China are beginning to experience these same economic dynamics. The global economy is in the grip of powerful forces of accelerating revolutionary change, and political leaders and governments are scrambling to catch up.

One major cause of the dramatic increase in income inequality in the United States and some other developed nations has been an explosion in compensation provided to managers of large business firms and other private organizations. The top 10 percent of earners appropriated three quarters of the total increase in US national income between 1977 and 2007, and the largest share went to the top 1 percent. CEOs have incomes that average close to 300 times what the vast majority of workers receive. Of the increase in income generated by the recovery from the Great Recession of 2008, 95 percent has gone to the top 1 percent of earners. The U.S. Federal Reserve reports that during the period 2010-2013 the incomes of those in the top 10 percent of Americans continued to rise while the inflation adjusted earnings of the bottom 90 percent declined.³⁶

If one adopts a global perspective, there are some positive and encouraging economic trends. The United Nations reports that the number of people living in hunger and in extreme poverty has declined significantly in the 21st century. The mortality rate for children five years old and younger has dropped by almost half in recent decades.³⁷ In addition, the inequality of per capita income among nations is great, but the trend is toward decreasing inequality. The average per capita income in Western Europe, North America and Japan is ten to twenty times higher than it is in India and Sub-Saharan Africa. However, "the world seems to have entered a phase in which rich and poor countries are converging in income."³⁸ The share of the global production

of goods and services and the share of income going to the developing countries has been increasing dramatically over the past three decades. For example, the combined economic output of Brazil, China and India is now roughly equal to the combined output of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States, and the GDP of these three developing nations will soon exceed the GDP of these six developed nations. Further, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reports that: "Over the past decades, countries across the world have been converging towards higher levels of human development" and "on this basis, the world is becoming less unequal." This is all part of what UNDP has called "the rise of the South," which involves a major "rebalancing of global economic power."³⁹

In spite of these developments, the Oxford Martin Commission for Future Generations reports that regarding the concentration of wealth at the top "globalization has been associated with growing inequality." In 2012, 0.6 percent of the world's adult population owned close to 40 percent of the world's wealth. Approximately 8 percent of the adult population held over 80 percent of the world's wealth. The income from capital and labor of the top 1.75 percent was greater than the total income of the bottom 77 percent.⁴⁰ Since 1980 in all regions of the world and in the vast majority of countries income inequality has been rising.⁴¹ UNDP asserts that "Latin America...has the most unequal distribution of all regions."⁴² In individual nations in Africa, Asia, and South America such as Argentina, Brazil,

China, Columbia, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Mexico and South Africa there are growing concentrations of wealth at the very top and income inequality is at high levels.⁴³ The Oxford Martin Commission concludes: "Generating an inclusive economy that properly and productively shares the benefits and opportunities of economic growth has proved an elusive goal."⁴⁴

Without significant changes in government economic and social policy the trend toward increasing concentrations of wealth and rising income inequality within nations is likely to continue in the 21st century. The digital revolution and CEO compensation are contributing factors, but Thomas Piketty identifies a more fundamental driver of economic inequality. What caused the trend toward inequality in capitalist economies during the 19th century and what in all probability will drive it in the 21st century is a basic economic reality: the rate of return on capital (financial assets, industrial property, real estate, etc.) as a general rule exceeds the rate of growth of the economy (the rate of growth of annual per capita output and income), leading to increasing concentrations of wealth with a rising share of total national income. Accumulated wealth grows faster than the economy, and there are no natural forces in an unregulated capitalist system that counteract this trend. Market forces and technological progress by themselves are not sufficient to advance social and economic justice, and weak regulatory regimes permit inequalities to persist and grow. Historically capital is estimated to have grown at a rate of 3 to 5 percent while the economy has for the

most part grown at much lower rates. During periods of major geopolitical instability like 1914-1945, this trend may be reversed, but in a capitalist economy it will always reassert itself is the argument. This reality, asserts Piketty, “represents the principal threat to an equal distribution of wealth over the long run.”⁴⁵

Capital in the Twenty-First Century cautions, however, against using these observations about the rate of return on capital to support a theory of economic determinism regarding economic inequality. “The history of the distribution of wealth has always been deeply political,” Piketty writes, “and it cannot be reduced to purely economic mechanisms.” A democracy with a clear vision of social and economic justice can create the policies and institutions needed to “ensure that the general interest takes precedence over the private interest.”⁴⁶ The Columbia University economist, Joseph Stiglitz, agrees, arguing that high levels of inequality of wealth and income should not be accepted as an inevitable outcome of a capitalist system. “Widening and deepening inequality,” he asserts, “is not driven by immutable economic laws, but by the laws we have written.”⁴⁷

However, as Stiglitz points out, what makes the needed policy changes so difficult to achieve today is the way economic inequality leads to political inequality. Given the way the law is written and the political system works in the United States and many other countries, great wealth gives individuals and corporations the ability to buy political

influence, control democratic decision making, and obstruct change. The influence of money and powerful special interests in politics is undermining the capacity of democratic government to regulate market capitalism intelligently and responsibly. As a result, there is declining public trust in government and the democratic process as well as a “crisis of confidence” in the capitalist economic system. Reforming the democratic political system must be part of any effort with a realistic hope of reforming capitalism and reversing worldwide trends toward economic inequality.⁴⁸

There has never been a time when economic inequality in the industrialized democratic countries has been low. Building and sustaining a fair and just economic order that supports the principle of equality is clearly an extraordinarily difficult challenge economically and politically. Economic inequality in the United States was probably at its lowest levels in the 1950s. However, writing at the end of that decade, John Kenneth Galbraith in his influential study, The Affluent Society (1958), reports that “inequality is still great.”⁴⁹ Nevertheless, Galbraith asserts in the book that in the late 1950s economic inequality is of declining interest as an urgent economic and political issue. In explaining why, Galbraith writes:

...there has been a modest reduction in the proportion of disposable income going to those in the very highest income brackets and a very large increase in the proportion accruing to people in the middle and lower brackets. While taxes have

restrained concentration of income at the top, full employment and upward pressure on wages have increased wellbeing at the bottom.⁵⁰

It was a rising standard of living for the vast majority of citizens that inspired growing confidence in democratic capitalism in the West and throughout much of the world during the decades following World War II. The American experience from this era contains an important lesson regarding what is required to restore this confidence and to address the economic problems and social tensions that have historically surrounded economic inequality.

Among the developed nations over the last one hundred years, the Scandinavian countries in the 1970s and 1980s probably were those with the lowest levels of economic inequality. However, even in these countries the top 10 percent owned 50 percent of the national wealth and received 25 percent of national income. The poorest 50 percent of the population owned less than 10 percent of national wealth and received 30 percent of income.⁵¹ What is a realistic ideal and goal regarding the distribution of wealth and income among the top 1 percent, top 10 percent, middle class, and the poor? There is no ready-made formula with which to answer this question. Support for innovative economic development is critical. However, the merits of a nation's economic order are to be assessed by how effectively it serves the common good, providing equal opportunity for all, advancing human rights, and ensuring that prosperity is shared widely and by how it

cares for the disadvantaged and poor and protects Earth's ecological health and biodiversity. Each country must wrestle with how to address these challenges in the context of its distinct cultural, economic and political situation.

The Earth Charter provides some guidelines that can help to orient the debate and set goals. Further, the Earth Charter recognizes that issues of social and economic justice have become intertwined with issues of ecological degradation and climate change. It is the poor, for example, who suffer most from the pollution of air and water, the depletion of natural resources such as fertile soils, fisheries and forests, and violent weather events linked to climate change.

4 THE EARTH CHARTER AND THE PRINCIPLE OF EQUALITY

The initial proposal to draft an Earth Charter is found in Our Common Future (1987), the path breaking report on sustainable development issued by the World Commission on Environment and Development. The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), the Rio Earth Summit, took up the challenge, but governments could not reach agreement on the principles for an Earth Charter. Following UNCED, the secretary-general of the Conference, Maurice Strong, created the Earth Council to pursue the unfinished business of the Summit, including the drafting of the Earth Charter. A new Earth Charter consultation and drafting process was begun in 1995. However, it was designed as a civil society process rather than an intergovernmental negotiation, and the initiative came to involve hundreds of organizations and thousands of individuals from around the world. Under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, Green Cross International joined Maurice Strong and the Earth Council in supporting the project, and the government of the Netherlands provided initial funding. In 1996 a twenty-one member Earth Charter Commission was formed to oversee the drafting process, which was conducted by an international drafting committee working in close coordination with the Earth Charter Secretariat based in Costa Rica. In March 2000, the Commission finalized the text of the Earth Charter during a meeting at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, and

in June the Earth Charter was launched at the Peace Palace in The Hague.

The major purpose of the Earth Charter drafting process was to set forth the consensus emerging in the rapidly expanding global civil society regarding fundamental ethical principles for creating a just, sustainable, and peaceful world community. The objective was to use language and articulate values and ideals that would be widely accepted in diverse cultures, countries and sectors. The Earth Charter was constructed to be a declaration of universal values that promotes transformative action both locally and globally. It was agreed that the Charter should be kept as concise as possible and limited to articulation of fundamental principles and broad strategic goals. It was not the purpose of the Charter to present guidelines on the practical means and mechanisms for implementing the principles, which would have involved a long and complex document. The Earth Charter drafting committee drew inspiration from the visions of the world's great religious and spiritual traditions and was much influenced by contemporary science in crafting a number of principles. The Earth Charter also builds on and extends existing international law in the fields of environmental conservation and sustainable development, and it was hoped that the United Nations General Assembly would eventually endorse or recognize the Earth Charter.⁵²

The Earth Charter begins with a Preamble that is followed by sixteen main principles. Each principle is drafted as an ethical imperative and call to action. The

principles are divided into four parts. The titles of the four parts indicate the broad scope of the Earth Charter vision, which recognizes that humanity's social and economic problems and its environmental challenges are interrelated and require holistic thinking, integrated planning, and coordinated action.

- I. Respect and Care for the Community of Life
- II. Ecological Integrity
- III. Social and Economic Justice
- IV. Democracy, Nonviolence, and Peace

Each of the four parts has four main principles. The four main principles in Part I are very general and are designed to provide a concise overview of the Earth Charter's ethical vision. The following twelve principles and their supporting principles develop the vision more fully.

What is most distinctive about the Earth Charter in comparison with the United Nations declarations on sustainable development like the Rio Declaration (1992) is the clear and strong emphasis that the Earth Charter places on respect and care for Earth and the greater community of life as a fundamental ethical guideline essential to achieving ecological sustainability and a promising human future. The Earth Charter rejects an anthropocentric worldview that regards the biosphere as just a collection of natural resources for human exploitation, a mere means to human ends. Science, technology, and informed self-interest are all critical to the needed transformation of civilization, but not sufficient. The harmful nature of humanity's relationship

with Earth's ecosystems is to a significant degree an ethical and spiritual problem. A great transition to a sustainable future requires a change of mind and heart that involves awakening a deep sense of belonging to the universe together with respect for nature in and for itself as well as for its utilitarian value to people. The Earth Charter is both a people centered and Earth centered declaration.

Renewing the democratic spirit of respect for the inherent dignity and equality of all persons should be part of any strategy to revitalize democratic institutions and reduce economic inequality. This democratic spirit pervades the Earth Charter. In this regard, the Earth Charter strongly supports universal human rights, participatory democracy, social and economic justice, the equality of women and men, and elimination of all forms of discrimination. The call to protect and advance human rights is especially significant, since the concept of universal human rights is founded on the moral principle of respect for the inherent and equal dignity of all human beings. Human rights law endeavors to clarify the conditions necessary for the realization of equality and freedom. In addition, the principle of equality has always been about mutual respect and transforming the way people interrelate and work together in everyday life, and in this connection the Earth Charter principles begin with a call for an ethic of respect and care and culminate with a vision of inclusive community and peace that emphasizes right relationship.

In the spirit of equality and solidarity, the first paragraph of the Earth Charter Preamble affirms that “we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.” It briefly summarizes the Earth Charter’s inclusive ethical vision with the statement: “it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.” The Preamble highlights the importance of “universal human rights” and explicitly supports “the spirit of human solidarity.” Principles 1 and 2 articulate an ethic of respect and care for all life, calling for “understanding, compassion, and love.” Using language from the opening line of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Principle 1.b affirms “faith in the inherent dignity of all human beings.” Principle 3 is the imperative to build “democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable and peaceful.” Reflecting the 18th century revolutionary vision of the close interrelationship of equality, freedom and human rights, Principle 3.a states: “Ensure that communities at all levels guarantee human rights and fundamental freedoms and provide everyone with an opportunity to realize his or her full potential.”

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” (Article 1) The Earth Charter calls for protection and promotion of the equal dignity of all human beings in three of its sixteen main principles. Principle 9 is the imperative to eradicate poverty and will be discussed in the next section of the essay on the Earth Charter and

economic inequality. In Principle 11, the Charter recognizes “gender equality and equity as prerequisites to sustainable development” and emphasizes the critical importance of “universal access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunity.” Principle 11.a states: “Secure the human rights of women and girls and end all violence against them.” Principle 11.b further clarifies what advancing the equality of women means: “Promote the active participation of women in all aspects of economic, political, civil, social, and cultural life as full and equal partners, decision-makers, leaders, and beneficiaries.” The Earth Charter recognizes that the explosion in human numbers over the past century is a major factor contributing to the depletion of natural resources and the degradation of ecosystems. It is also the position of the Earth Charter that the most effective way to reduce unsustainable rates of population growth is to secure access for women and girls to education, healthcare, and economic opportunity.

Advancing equality requires overcoming discrimination in all its many forms involving the denial to individuals of their basic human rights. The Earth Charter calls for an end to discrimination. In constructing Principle 12, the original intent was to affirm a human right to a healthy environment, but as the principle was developed it came to embrace a more comprehensive vision. 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

explicitly asserts: “Eliminate discrimination in all its forms, such as that based on race, color, sex, sexual orientation, religion, language, and national, ethnic or social origin.” Building on the Earth Charter’s support for human rights in general, Principles 11 and 12 together with their supporting principles affirm clearly the equal dignity of all people—of women and men and of the members of all races, religions, nations and classes. These two principles reject all forms of discrimination that deny individuals their human dignity and lead to exploitation and exclusion.

The Earth Charter also supports a vision of political equality and shared citizenship with its emphasis on building “democratic societies” that involve “inclusive participation in decision-making.” (See Principles 3, 13, 13.a, and 13.b). Principle 13.c highlights “the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, peaceful assembly, association and dissent.” Principles 13 and 13.a emphasize the importance of “access to justice” and “independent judicial procedures,” which are essential for equality before the law.

In a recent publication on the Earth Charter, it is argued that it would have strengthened Principle 1.b, which refers to “the inherent dignity of all human beings,” to have included the adjective “equal” so that the Principle affirms “the inherent and equal dignity of all human beings.”⁵³ Had this addition been recommended during the drafting process, the word “equal” may well have been added to Principle 1.b, since the addition would be entirely consistent with the Earth Charter vision. However, the Universal Declaration of

Human Rights affirms in Article 1 that all people are “equal in dignity,” the Earth Charter makes clear its support for the Universal Declaration, and the language about “the inherent dignity” of all human beings, which comes from the Universal Declaration, was thought sufficient in the context of Principle 1 to cover the point.⁵⁴ In this regard, it is noteworthy that in recent reports of the UN Secretary General on the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda, “dignity for all” is cited as a supremely important governing ideal that encompasses the struggle for equality and entails “a rights-based” approach that “leaves no one behind.”⁵⁵

The Earth Charter recognizes the close link between the ideal of equality and the principle of sustainability. When the concept of sustainable development emerged in the 1980s as a powerful new vision for the future in international forums, it was closely connected with the principle of intergenerational responsibility. The World Commission on Environment and Development in its report, Our Common Future (1987), defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”⁵⁶ The Commission was especially concerned about the needs of those in future generations living in poverty. The Earth Charter affirms the moral ideal of intergenerational responsibility. Principle 4 is the imperative to “Secure Earth’s bounty and beauty for present and future generations,” and Principle 4.a states: “Recognize that the freedom of action of each

generation is qualified by the needs of future generations.” Sustainability as intergenerational equity is the ethical imperative to respect the dignity and equal rights of future generations. It is centrally concerned with securing equality of opportunity. If current environmental trends continue, future generations will inherit an overpopulated planet with depleted resources, a dangerously overheated atmosphere, and badly degraded ecosystems. Eliminating poverty and ensuring a decent standard of living for all will become an impossible task. Promoting equality over the long-term requires sustainability.

To fully appreciate the place of the principle of respect for the equal dignity of all in the Earth Charter, it is necessary to understand the Earth Charter vision of human development. Development is concerned with improving living standards and the quality of life. The concept of human development was introduced by UNDP in 1990 in recognition that economic growth and per capita income are not by themselves an adequate measure of real progress in development. The Human Development Index (HDI), which focuses on life expectancy, health, and education as well as income, was designed to provide a more holistic set of indicators of development. The goal of development from the perspective of human development involves securing fundamental freedoms, expanding choices, and enabling people to realize their full potential in and through contributing to the life of society, leading to individual and collective well-being.

The Earth Charter Preamble also recognizes that there is an ethical and spiritual dimension to human development. The Preamble states that “when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more.” The Earth Charter does not endorse the notion that well-being is generated by the cultivation of evermore desires and wants and by ever greater consumption. However, the desire for a higher standard of living is a natural aspiration and a democracy gives citizens the freedom to pursue material wealth, but the citizens of a healthy democracy understand that freedom without responsibility is unsustainable. Being more involves recognizing “that with increased freedom, knowledge and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good.” (Principle 2.b) The Earth Charter associates being more with realizing “the intellectual, artistic, ethical, and spiritual potential of humanity” and with building a better world that works for everyone. (Principle 1.b) Here lies the true path to human development and well-being.

In this regard, Principles 11 and 14 highlight the fundamental importance of “universal access to education” and “lifelong learning.” In addition, the concluding section of the Earth Charter, “The Way Forward,” calls for “a change of mind and heart.” Fundamental to being more is the kind of spiritual awakening that leads to moral insight, inner growth, and transformation. The Earth Charter identifies a number of universal moral and spiritual values that are keys to human development and well-being in the 21st century. These include reverence for the mystery of being,

gratitude, humility, respect and care, compassion and love, reverence for life, appreciation of beauty, justice, universal responsibility, solidarity, nonviolence, tolerance and peace. Principle 14.d affirms “the importance of moral and spiritual education.” Principle 7.f states: “Adopt lifestyles that emphasize the quality of life and material sufficiency in a finite world.”

Promoting peace is a fundamental goal of the Earth Charter, and its final main principle, Principle 16, is a call to “promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace.” The peace principle comes last because the Earth Charter recognizes that in order to build a culture of peace it is necessary for there to be a commitment to all the preceding fifteen principles. In addition, the very last principle, 16.f, defines peace as “the wholeness created by right relationship with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part.” Being more leads to right relationship. The Earth Charter supports a relational spirituality as the true pathway to human development, wholeness, and peace. The democratic spirit of respect for the equal dignity of all human beings is fundamental to this vision of right relationship.

5 THE EARTH CHARTER AND ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

From the start of the drafting process there was a central concern with environmental conservation and sustainable ways of living. Early on the Commission and the drafting committee realized that if the Earth Charter was to secure support from the developing world, it was essential to recognize and address the urgent need for social and economic justice. It was also clear that the world's environmental, economic, political, and social challenges are closely interconnected. Regarding economic inequality, during the 1990s the major issue on which the United Nations and international NGOs were focused was mass poverty in the developing world. Statements about economic inequality by and large referred to the gulf separating the wealthiest and the poorest nations and the fact that close to two billion people lived in poverty in the midst of a modern world with great wealth. Moreover, the eradication of poverty was widely understood to be a fundamental goal of sustainable development. This is a major theme in Our Common Future (1987) and in the declarations and reports issued by the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. As the Earth Charter was being drafted, reports were beginning to be issued on the rising economic inequality in the United States and other countries that began in the 1980s.⁵⁷

As noted earlier, the Earth Charter Preamble recognizes that: "The benefits of development are not shared equitably and the gap between the rich and the poor is widening."

The Preamble calls for “economic justice” and the third of the four parts into which the sixteen main principles are divided is entitled “Social and Economic Justice.” In short, the Earth Charter Commission and drafting committee were mindful of the need to address issues of economic inequality as an essential part of the sustainable development agenda. In this connection, the Earth Charter highlights the urgent need to eradicate poverty and calls for an economic order that promotes human development, equality of opportunity, and the equitable distribution of wealth.

Principle 9, which is the first principle in Part III on “Social and Economic Justice,” states: “Eradicate poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative.” Poverty exists where individuals, families or communities do not have the ability to secure the basic necessities of life. It involves hunger and living conditions that deny individuals the possibility of securing their basic human rights. It is both a cause and a consequence of environmental degradation. Recognizing that with international cooperation and the partnership of government, civil society, and business it is possible in the 21st century to eliminate poverty, the Earth Charter includes the following guidelines in support of Principle 9.

- a. Guarantee the right to potable water, clean air, food security, uncontaminated soil, shelter, and safe sanitation, allocating the national and international resources required.

- b. Empower every human being with the education and resources to secure a sustainable livelihood, and provide social security and safety nets for those who are unable to support themselves.
- c. Recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations.

Principle 9 and its supporting principles identify goals that address the most basic problems associated with economic inequality.

The United Nations continues to emphasize poverty eradication as the single most important goal of sustainable development. In his 2014 Synthesis Report to the United Nations General Assembly on the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda, “The Road to Dignity by 2030,” the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, states:

Eradicating poverty by 2030 is the overarching objective of the Sustainable Development Agenda...The defining challenge of our time is to close the gap between our determination to ensure a life of dignity for all on the one hand, and the reality of persisting poverty and deepening inequality on the other.⁵⁸

In order to provide the Post-2015 Agenda with measurable goals and targets, the United Nations has constructed seventeen new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to replace its Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). “End poverty in all its forms everywhere” is the first of the proposed new SDGs, which will be formally adopted at a special UN Summit on Sustainable Development in September 2015.

In the sections on “Ecological Integrity” and “Social and Economic Justice,” the Earth Charter sets forth principles for building an international economic order that is both just and sustainable, serving the common good. These principles make clear that economic growth is not an end-in-itself to be pursued without regard for its ecological and social consequences. The Charter actually avoids using the term “economic growth,” because in political debates it is often viewed as an unqualified good, and problematical patterns of production and consumption are then justified as essential to achieving it. Economic development and the means used to achieve it should serve to advance the well-being of human communities and protect Earth’s ecological systems.

The Earth sciences are developing an increasingly clear understanding of the ecological limits facing humanity. Over the past ten thousand years, the climate and other environmental conditions have been on balance conducive to human development and the flourishing of civilization. Earth’s biosphere provided the natural

resources and ecosystem services needed for creation of stable settlements, the emergence of agriculture, and the building of cities, eventually leading to an interconnected global society. Some local ecosystems were disrupted by human activity, but the biosphere as a whole proved resilient. Industrialization, the population explosion, and globalization have changed that. Humanity has entered a new geological era, the Anthropocene, a time when the nature and scale of human activity has made the human species a dominant force shaping the operations of the biosphere.⁵⁹ People and socio-economic systems are part of nature and have now acquired the capacity to alter and disrupt the global environmental conditions that have supported the community of life and human development. Further, there is overwhelming scientific evidence that the human population is consuming Earth's natural resources at unsustainable rates and severely degrading essential ecosystem services.

Two scientific initiatives are especially helpful in explaining the extent of the pressure economic growth is applying to the planet's life support systems. Ecological Footprint analysis estimates the demand a specific population is placing on ecosystems to produce the resources it is consuming and to assimilate the waste it is generating. This Ecological Footprint is then compared with the actual capacity of the relevant ecosystems. "If Ecological Footprint calculations are even roughly accurate, humanity is consuming the ecological capacity of 1.5

Earths,” asserts the Worldwatch Institute in its State of the World 2013 Report.⁶⁰

A team of Earth-system scientists is also in the process of identifying and developing quantitative measures for nine planetary boundaries that define biophysical thresholds or tipping points, which if transgressed, could precipitate large scale, irreversible changes in the environment putting at risk human security and prosperity. Recognizing the uncertainty that surrounds attempts to define these boundaries precisely, scientists have identified zones of danger and of high risk. Of these nine planetary boundaries, recent studies conclude that four of them have in all likelihood already been crossed. These four involve the rate of biodiversity loss, interference with the nitrogen and phosphorous cycles, greenhouse gas emissions, and land system change effecting forest cover.⁶¹ With regard to two of these boundaries, scientists estimate that humanity has entered high risk zones. The danger of crossing a fifth boundary regarding the depletion of stratospheric ozone has been averted by international cooperation under the Montreal Protocol, demonstrating that international agreements can be effective when the political will is there to ensure enforcement. There are many examples worldwide of significant initiatives designed to reverse the degradation of the environment, but for the most part, the dominant trends are cause for alarm.

In Part II on “Ecological Integrity,” Principles, 5, 6, 7 and 8 set forth the essential guidelines for protecting and

restoring Earth's ecological systems, upon which the greater community of life and human civilization are dependent. Included are the principle of prevention of harm, which has been called the golden rule of environmental conservation, the precautionary principle, and the polluter pays principle. (Principle 6, 6.a and 6.b) Principle 7 provides a general definition of the meaning of sustainable development: "Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being." Sustainability is about long-term thinking, the needs of future generations, and finding creative ways to pursue economic development that respect limits, prevent harm, and safeguard what is life-giving and precious. Principle 6.d on pollution warns that there should be "no build-up of radioactive, toxic, or other hazardous substances" in the environment such as dangerous levels of greenhouse gases, and Principle 7.b calls for energy efficiency and a transition to renewable energy sources.

Principle 10, which follows the principle on the eradication of poverty, is designed to emphasize that the proper function of "economic activities and institutions" is to "promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner." As noted in the preceding discussion of equality, the Earth Charter associates human development with realizing the full human potential of all citizens, with intellectual, moral and spiritual growth, with right relationship, and with building a just, sustainable and peaceful world. It is concerned with the quality of life and

well-being. Economic development is required to create the goods and services that make human development possible and that address the material needs of a flourishing human community. A sound democratic economic order will support private initiative and free enterprise, but the economic system will be organized and regulated in such a way that it contributes to, and does not conflict with, the overarching goal of human development. Respect for human rights, as well as Earth's ecological integrity, is essential.

The adjective "equitable" in Principle 10 means fair and inclusive. In a market economy, making a profit is a necessary goal for any business enterprise. However, how such economic goals are pursued should be governed by policies and regulations that ensure the system is fair and supports equality of opportunity. The Earth Charter calls for an economic system that creates the opportunities and jobs that make it possible for all people to achieve "a secure and meaningful livelihood that is ecologically responsible." (Principle 3.b) In this regard, meaningful work is essential to human development. It provides a major opportunity for ongoing learning and growth. It develops and utilizes a person's abilities and creativity, expands relationships, and builds character, including self-discipline, resourcefulness, and responsibility. It fosters the skills needed to cooperate productively with others in a common undertaking. Being in a position to contribute to the life of a community deepens a person's sense of belonging and sense of meaning and purpose. "Next to the family, it is work and the relationships

established by work that are the true foundations of society,” writes E.F. Schumacher in Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered.⁶² A society consistent with Principle 10 would not allow operations that involve the exploitation of workers and soul-destroying labor or that have a damaging impact on the welfare of local communities.

Fundamental to this vision of a just economic order is Principle 10.a: “Promote the equitable distribution of wealth within nations and among nations.” Economic justice requires an equitable distribution of wealth. Had Principle 10.a been drafted in 2015, the words “reducing economic inequality” might well have been added for emphasis. To summarize what has been discussed, the Earth Charter’s concept of promoting an equitable distribution of wealth involves reducing economic inequality by eradicating poverty, providing universal access to education and healthcare, promoting gender equality, giving special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities, supporting youth, and empowering “every human being with the education and resources to secure a sustainable livelihood,” leading to creation of a vibrant and expanding middle class. (See Principles 3.b, 9, 9.b, 11, 12.c, 14, and 14.a) It also means providing “social security and safety nets for those who are unable to support themselves.” (Principle 9.b). Governments have a responsibility to advance all these goals insofar as they have the capacity to do so. It is noteworthy that the UN SDGs do not include “the equitable distribution of wealth within and among nations,” but a number of the SDGs, such as promoting

“full and productive employment and decent work for all” and reducing “inequality within and among nations” are supportive of promoting a more equitable distribution of wealth.

The Earth Charter calls for “allocating the national and international resources required” to eradicate poverty and for empowering every individual with “the education and resources” to secure a meaningful livelihood, but it does not make an explicit reference to the redistribution of wealth. It was determined that the call for “the equitable distribution of wealth” makes the essential point without using language that could make it easier for critics, including some governments, to reject the Earth Charter, charging that it supports socialism. However, there is nothing in the Earth Charter that opposes the kind of redistribution of wealth that has taken place in many democracies with development of the welfare state over the last century. Further, a strong argument can be made that in a society with very high levels of economic inequality, the only way to achieve an equitable distribution of wealth consistent with the Earth Charter vision of social and economic justice is to adopt strategies that produce a redistribution of wealth sufficient to better educate and train the population, provide universal access to healthcare, create jobs, raise wages, improve infrastructure, prevent environmental disaster, and address the needs of the unemployed, disadvantaged and poor. In the effort to reduce economic inequality, nothing is more important than investments in education and building human capital. The objective is not a leveling process, but

maintaining economic inequality that involves 10 percent of the population holding 70 to 85 percent of a nation's wealth and taking in 50 percent of national income is morally indefensible and socially and economically unsustainable.

With regard to the gulf between the wealthiest nations and the poorest, Principle 10.b does call for a redistribution of wealth along the following lines: "Enhance the intellectual, financial, technical and social resources of developing nations and relieve them of onerous international debt." Principle 10.c calls for trade relations that support "progressive labor standards." Principle 10.d affirms that multinational corporations and international financial organizations have a responsibility to serve "the public good" and should be held "accountable for the consequences of their activities."

Reducing economic inequality requires economic reform, and economic reform requires a healthy, strong, democratic political system. The Earth Charter calls for revitalizing democratic governance locally, nationally, and internationally. In Part IV, "Democracy, Nonviolence, and Peace," the first principle, Principle 13, addresses this concern: "Strengthen democratic institutions at all levels and provide transparency and accountability in governance, inclusive participation, and access to justice." The supporting principles following Principle 13 emphasize the urgent need to eliminate corruption in government and ensure "the meaningful participation of all interested individuals in decision making." (See Principles 13.b and 13.c). The implementation of guidelines such as these

is essential if efforts to reform representative democracy and control the influence of moneyed special interests in government decision making are to succeed.

The Earth Charter vision of social and economic justice, including the call for the equitable distribution of wealth, was influenced by the achievements of the modern welfare state. However, it was not the purpose of the Earth Charter Commission to present a blueprint with detailed recommendations on tax policy and other mechanisms regarding how to realize the social and economic ideals set forth in the Earth Charter. Furthermore, different cultures and nations will adopt different approaches regarding how best to realize these ideals. The purpose of the Earth Charter is to present a broad, integrated vision of a realistic ideal that can be used to frame the debate, set goals, and inspire action, leading to social transformation, including political reform and economic restructuring.

6 A WORLD FOUNDED ON VISIONS OF EQUALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

The Earth Charter and the UN SDGs are shaped by integrated visions of a world founded on the principles of justice for all and ecological sustainability. The values of respect for human dignity, freedom, equality, and human rights have profoundly shaped the contemporary view of justice and confront civilization with the challenge of eradicating poverty and providing opportunity for all. Further, it is now apparent that the dream of a just world and the ideal of sustainability are interdependent. Everyone has a right to an environment supportive of their health and well-being, and the poor suffer most from environmental pollution and eco-system degradation. Further, in their struggle for survival those living in poverty can find themselves forced to adopt practices that contribute to deterioration of the environment. Addressing the goal of long-term environmental conservation and the needs of future generations involves advancing the goal of inclusive human development for present generations. Ending poverty and protecting the environment both require innovative economic reforms.

The concluding section of the Earth Charter, “The Way Forward,” states: “Life often involves tension between important values. This can mean difficult choices.” These reflections on economic inequality and the Earth Charter would be incomplete without taking note of the tension between the imperative to eradicate poverty in the

developing world as soon as possible and the urgent need to adopt ecologically sustainable patterns of production and consumption that respect planetary boundaries. This tension presents the international community with complex ethical, financial, and political challenges that will only become more pressing with time as the world endeavors to find a path to an ecologically sustainable future that is also just and equitable. The current international negotiations on a climate change agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change are a prime example of the ethical and practical considerations at issue.

In many parts of the world, environmental degradation contributes to the spread and persistence of poverty. However, phasing out fossil fuels and adopting a sustainable way of life involves restrictions on economic activity that make it more difficult in the short-term for developing nations to generate the growth needed to eradicate poverty. With this concern in mind, leaders from developing nations point out that the developed nations have been the major contributors in the past to the degradation of the environment and have reaped the benefits of industrialization and the burning of fossil fuels. Their Ecological Footprint per capita is roughly five times that of most other nations.⁶³ A reasonable argument is made that the developed nations, therefore, have a moral obligation to lead the way in the transition to sustainability, making major reductions in carbon emissions, in order to allow the developing nations opportunity to grow their economies, using fossil fuels as necessary.

This approach is fully developed by advocates of “contraction and convergence,” who contend that “each human has equal rights to the ecosystem services provided by the global commons, in this case the carbon absorbing capacity of the Earth system.”⁶⁴ Contraction involves the progressive reduction of carbon emissions to be led initially by the high consumption nations. As low income nations industrialize, a more equitable balance in per capita emissions—convergence—will take place. However, given the rapidly growing size of the economies in the developing world, it will not be possible to prevent global warming from reaching dangerous levels without their full cooperation. Therefore, contraction and convergence advocates reason that with convergence, the developing nations, with financial and technological support from the developed world, must join the effort to reduce emissions and make a transition to sustainability. The goal is to stabilize carbon emissions globally at safe levels as soon as possible within this century and to do it in an equitable way. In addition, in the name of climate justice, a strong case is made that the industrialized nations have a responsibility to provide the poorest nations, which have done the least to cause global warming and are the most vulnerable to its impacts, the resources to adapt to climate change. Devising global strategies for climate change mitigation and adaptation that are just and fair as well as practical face many financial and political obstacles, but striving for equity is essential to achieving an effective agreement that inspires commitment and cooperation.

The UNFCCC negotiations are only a prelude to a more complex and difficult conversation that the human family must have about sustainable development, poverty, equal rights, and economic justice in an age when the world community must face the reality of planetary boundaries. As demonstrated at Rio+20, state governments continue to put their faith in ongoing economic growth as the answer to poverty eradication and economic inequality. Leaders trust that technological innovation and policy changes will green an ever expanding economy, decoupling growth from carbon emissions and other damaging environmental impacts. SDG #10, for example, is a call to “promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth.”

That economic growth is needed to eradicate poverty cannot be seriously questioned. However, a growing number of scientists and economists are deeply skeptical about the idea that it will be possible for economic growth and material consumption to expand indefinitely.⁶⁵ All can agree that a transition to renewable energy, greater efficiency in the use of energy and materials, internalizing ecological and social costs, and other such measures are fundamental to the quest for sustainability and can dramatically alter patterns of production and consumption in positive ways. Some argue that an 80 percent reduction in material resource intensity is possible.⁶⁶ The concern is that there are still real limits to Earth’s resources and ecosystem services, and it will not be possible to invent substitutes for much that may be lost.⁶⁷ It is wishful thinking to imagine that economies in the developed world

can grow without limits, population numbers can continue to rise worldwide, and billions of people can enter the global consumer society, adopting western lifestyles, without exceeding critical ecological tipping points. Given the uncertainties and grave risks humanity faces in this regard, the wise choice is to adopt the precautionary approach affirmed in the Earth Charter: "Prevent harm as the best method of environmental protection and...Take action to avoid the possibility of serious or irreversible environmental harm even when scientific knowledge is incomplete or inconclusive." (Principles 6, 6.a) A precautionary approach should: "Ensure that decision making addresses the cumulative, long-term, indirect, long distance, and global consequences of human activities." (Principle 6.c)

In a world with ecological boundaries, finding the path to an ecologically sustainable future that is also just and equitable will require a new, deeper understanding of what constitutes the good life and well-being. It will require a new openness to ask what right relationship means in an interdependent world with widespread poverty and inequality. It will require a searching international conversation about the implications of the principles of equality and universal human rights for per capita natural resource consumption as well as per capita greenhouse gas emissions in a world where emissions and consumption must be monitored and regulated. Will the high consumption nations and high income communities in the developing world—principally the wealthiest 10 percent of the world's people—be willing to adopt the ancient wisdom of moderation as a guideline

and reduce their resource consumption so as to ensure that those living in deprivation and future generations will have an opportunity to achieve a decent standard of living? Will the human family make the adjustments necessary to care for the community of life as a whole, securing the ecological space needed to halt the rising extinction of other species? Building a sustainable and equitable world order in the 21st century involves nurturing a new awareness that, in the words of the Earth Charter Preamble, “we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.” It will entail a new readiness to build a genuine global partnership and share Earth’s finite resources and the benefits of development. The economic and political challenges are formidable, but such is the only sure path to building world community and peace as humanity endeavors to create harmony with nature.

The UN SDGs will provide for the next decade and beyond the international policy framework for reducing inequality, ending poverty, promoting human development, and protecting the environment. Agreement on the SDGs by governments reflects a significant advance in the international deliberations on these critical issues. Efforts to implement these goals will hopefully be a catalyst for the deeper international dialogue that is needed. In this connection, the relationship between the SDGs and the Earth Charter requires further clarification.

The SDGs are the product of a broad, inclusive consultation process that engaged civil society, including

Earth Charter advocates, as well as governments. They set forth an integrated understanding of the economic, social and environmental challenges that face humanity in the 21st century, which is a prerequisite for a transition to sustainable development. The first eleven of the seventeen SDGs address a broad array of social and economic challenges. Five of these first eleven goals make explicit reference to the need for sustainability. In addition, Goals 12, 13, 14 and 15 call for sustainable production and consumption and protection and restoration of Earth's ecosystems, including action to combat climate change. Goal 16 is about peace, inclusive societies, accountable institutions, and access to justice. Goal 17 calls for revitalization of the global partnership for sustainable development.

Even though the seventeen SDGs are presented as goals rather than ethical principles, the literary style used to state each SDG is identical to that used to articulate the sixteen Earth Charter principles. Each SDG begins with a verb and is crafted as an urgent call to action. In some cases the wording is quite similar. The Earth Charter vision is more comprehensive and some of the SDGs have a distinctive focus, but by and large the SDGs are in accord with the Earth Charter principles. From the perspective of the Earth Charter, international agreement on the SDGs should be viewed as a major step forward. However, there are some significant differences between the Earth Charter and the UN Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda as described by the Secretary General in his Synthesis Report,

and the urgent need for the Earth Charter is greater in 2015 than ever.

In the Synthesis Report of the Secretary General, the Post-2015 Agenda is described as being “built on the principles of human rights and the rule of law, equality, and sustainability.” It is presented as “a universal agenda,” involving “shared responsibilities for a shared future” and requiring “a sense of the global common good.”⁶⁸ However, nowhere in the report is it stated explicitly that these principles and shared responsibilities are a part of a new global *ethic* and define fundamental *moral* responsibilities. Such language is carefully avoided. This in all likelihood reflects political calculations and a concern to avoid controversies with various religious groups, but it involves a questionable strategy.

Ethical values define what a people consider to be right and wrong, good and bad in their relationships. Shared moral values create community and are the foundation upon which legal systems are constructed. Human rights law is built on what is a fundamental moral value – respect for the dignity of each and every person. Laws that are not in accord with a community’s moral outlook are very difficult to enforce. Movements for social change gain wide support when the public becomes convinced that they occupy the moral high ground. The absence of moral engagement underlies the lack of political will that is often cited as a reason why the sustainable development agenda has not been vigorously pursued by state governments.

In short, constructing a just, sustainable, and a peaceful world community requires an ethical foundation. The Earth Charter explicitly recognizes this basic need, and its principles present the inclusive vision of ethical values widely supported in global civil society. Implementation of the SDGs requires the kind of wholehearted dedication that comes only from deep moral commitment. The SDGs should be understood and presented as the expression of widely shared, fundamental ethical ideals that can unite all peoples in a great common endeavor. This is implicit in the Secretary General's Synthesis Report, but it needs to be made explicit.

What further differentiates the Earth Charter from the UN Post-2015 Agenda and the SDGs is the Charter's emphasis on respect for nature as a foundational ethical principle for building a sustainable world. In this regard, the organization of the material in the Earth Charter is different from what one finds in the SDGs. The Earth Charter puts its principles on respect for nature and ecological integrity first. The SDGs start with the social and economic agenda. The order of the principles in the Earth Charter reflects recognition that humanity is an interdependent member of the greater community of life, people are dependent on Earth's life support systems, and the human economy is a sub-system of the planetary ecosystem. The UN Secretary General's Report asserts that "the defining challenge of our time" is unwavering commitment to the ideal of respect for the dignity of all and the principle of equality. From the perspective of the Earth Charter, the challenge is twofold

and includes a commitment to “respect Earth and all life.” The Secretary General calls for “a people centered and planet sensitive agenda” and describes the SDGs as “a paradigm shift for people and planet.” He emphasizes the urgent need to “protect our ecosystems for all societies and our children.”⁶⁹ However, he stops short of calling for an ethic of respect for Earth and the greater community of life.

Aldo Leopold makes the critical point simply and clearly in his 1949 essay, “The Land Ethic”:

A land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members and also respect for the community as such.⁷⁰

It is this transformation of consciousness that the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda fails to clarify and endorse. It does not acknowledge the intrinsic value of all life forms and affirm that they are worthy of moral consideration quite apart from their instrumental value to people. It does not describe the planet’s biodiversity as a community of life. Like sexism and racism, anthropocentrism is a delusion that involves a dangerous form of hubris. Unless humanity changes its attitude toward the planet and other life forms in the fundamental ways described by Leopold, it is hard to imagine societies making the difficult and far-reaching changes necessary to achieve sustainability and end poverty.

Over the past four decades the UN has had an ambivalent relationship with the principle of respect for nature. In 1982 the UN General Assembly adopted the World Charter for Nature, which recognizes that every form of life has value quite apart from its value to people, and the World Charter for Nature affirms respect for nature in its first principle. However, over the next decade governments withdrew their active support for the World Charter for Nature. In its declarations and reports, the Rio Earth Summit does not reference either the World Charter for Nature or the principle of respect for nature. The Earth Charter, which was drafted in the years immediately following the Summit, endeavors to refocus attention on respect for nature as absolutely fundamental to the concept of a sustainable way of life. The UN Millennium Declaration, which was issued four months after the launch of the Earth Charter, does recognize respect for nature as a core value, but it provides an exclusively anthropocentric explanation for the principle. The 2002 Johannesburg Declaration issued by Rio+10 borrows language from the Earth Charter and states that “we must declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to our children,” but it does not otherwise affirm respect for nature. The Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda is silent on respect for nature and humanity’s responsibility “to,” as well as “for,” the greater community of life. In short, there is a missing piece in the strategic thinking and planning surrounding the SDGs. The Earth Charter provides the inclusive ethical vision and rationale needed to buttress and inspire action on the SDGs.

Some philosophers and environmental activists have endeavored to promote the principle of respect for nature by supporting the concept of the rights of nature. This approach can be a very effective way to explain and clarify the moral issues involved in human relationships with other species and ecosystems. Some philosophers and legal scholars propose that national and international environmental law adopt language about the rights of nature.⁷¹ In this regard, the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth (2010), which has been circulated by the government of Bolivia and the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature, presents a carefully crafted example of how this can be done. Even if one does not support the legal use of rights language with regard to non-human species, this document is a powerful educational tool in support of the ethic of respect and care for the greater community of life.

During the Earth Charter drafting process there was an extended debate as to whether the Charter should make reference to the rights of nature. The Earth Charter Commission and drafting committee finally decided not to do so because there was not wide support for it at the time. However, the Earth Charter is very clear in its support for the principle of respect for Earth and all life, which provides the ethical foundation for the concept of the rights of nature, and there is nothing in the Earth Charter that opposes the concept of the rights of nature. A number of scholars and activists support both the Earth Charter and the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth. In general, the

world's legal systems emphasize human responsibility for protecting the environment and other species rather than focusing on the rights of nature. Legal systems can, of course, do both. However, securing strong and clear recognition and support for the principle of respect for nature at the United Nations and at the national level should be the first priority. Arguments in support of the rights of nature as a philosophical concept can and should be used to advance that goal.

7 CONCLUSION

What binds a democratic society together is a firm commitment to freedom, equality, and human rights and a trust that elected governments can manage market economies so as to provide broadly shared prosperity that sustains a large, expanding middle class and supports the disadvantaged. The ideal is a genuinely inclusive and just society. The persistence of poverty and growing economic inequality in the 21st century confronts leaders locally and globally with major moral, as well as complex political and economic, challenges. A revitalization and reform of democratic institutions is needed as well as a reconstruction of economic theory and the promotion of economic reform. The resilience and promise of democracy and a market economy are once again being put to the test.

Eradicating poverty and providing equality of opportunity and social security for present and future generations cannot be achieved without also addressing the urgent need to reduce the human Ecological Footprint. Support for equality and human rights and the quest for sustainability are now evermore closely interconnected. Inaction on climate change, consumption patterns, and environmental restoration will make the eradication of poverty an impossible dream and may irreversibly alter the conditions on Earth that have supported human development. In the decades ahead, people will increasingly come to demand of their government leaders that they chart a course to a sustainable future as essential to security and prosperity.

The way in which the world's democracies respond to these challenges will have far-reaching consequences for their citizens and for how democracy is viewed and supported worldwide. Continued inaction creates great risks.⁷²

Further, the increasing ecological, economic, and social interdependence of the world's nations and peoples is making new levels of international cooperation a basic requirement. For too long, governments have allowed short-term economic and political interests to obstruct pursuit of the long-term, planetary, common good. The SDGs are a promising development, because they envision the full merger of the world's economic agenda with the sustainable development agenda that integrates concerns for equality and human rights with a commitment to environmental conservation. There is much individual nations can do locally in pursuit of the SDGs. However, making sustained progress on the SDGs will require the construction of new innovative and inclusive systems of global governance that do for the 21st century sustainable development agenda, what, for example, the Bretton Woods institutions did for economic reconstruction and development following World War II.

With industrialization, technological innovation, and economic globalization, an interconnected, multicultural, global civilization is taking form. This development coupled with advances in the Earth sciences is producing in the minds of millions of individuals in diverse cultures around the world a new global consciousness that involves appreciation

of Earth and its biosphere as one interrelated ecosystem, of which humanity is an interdependent part. Further, just as all past great civilizations have produced their own unique form of spiritual and ethical consciousness, so now the new global civilization is generating a new planetary spiritual and ethical consciousness. In the Anthropocene, with human powers of creation and destruction expanding dramatically, the awakening of a broader and deeper sense of shared ethical responsibility must be considered an especially critical component of any strategy for the future well-being of people and planet.

There is much continuity between the emerging planetary ethical consciousness and the world's great spiritual traditions formed in the past. However, the new global ethics reflect the influence of the democratic revolution, the new sciences, including ecology and cosmology, and holistic approaches to understanding the world and its problems. The result is an Earth-centered and people-centered ethic that views caring for Earth and caring for people as two interrelated aspects of one great task. Each of the world's religions faces the challenge of giving expression to this new global ethic in its own unique way consistent with its best traditions. In the course of the last century, the intellectual groundwork for such a development has been prepared by theologians and religious philosophers, and the growing support of religious leaders is a hopeful sign.⁷³

It is the emerging global consciousness and planetary ethic that finds articulation in intergovernmental and civil society declarations like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the World Charter for Nature (1982), and the Earth Charter (2000), which integrates the social vision found in the Universal Declaration with the ecological vision in the World Charter. The shared ideals and values in these declarations are part of the common faith needed to inspire, unite, and guide the world community in its journey toward a more just, sustainable and peaceful future that honors and celebrates the sacredness of life.

NOTES

¹ United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Report 2013—The Rise of the South, pp. 12-13, 26. The proportion of people living in extreme poverty fell from 43.1% in 1990 to 22.4% in 2008. During this period, the percentage of people living in extreme poverty declined in China from 60.2 % to 13.1%, in India from 49.4% to 32.7%, and in Brazil from 17.2% to 6.1%.

² Martin Wolf, “Why inequality is such a drag on economies,” in *Financial Times*, September 30, 2014, www.ft.com; Al Gore, The Future: Six Drivers of Global Change (New York: Random House, 2013), p. 34. For a study of the way inequality undermines the well-being of a society in multiple ways, see Kate E. Pickett and Richard G. Wilkinson, The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better (London: Allen Lane, 2009).

³ The Society of Equals, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013); Capital in the Twenty-First Century, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014).

⁴ Piketty, Capital, p.3. Piketty bases his historical study of income inequality largely on income tax records, which is the only approach possible, and for his study of wealth distribution he relies heavily on estate tax returns. He explains that the World Wealth and Income Database (formerly The World Top Income Database) is “the primary source of data” for his book. Capital, pp. 16-19, 581. Critics of Piketty’s account of income inequality in the United States since 1980 argue that he focuses on pre-tax income and his statistics do not take into account non-cash compensation such as employee provided health insurance and other benefits. See for example, Phil Gramm and Michael Solon, “How to Distort Income Inequality,” in Wall Street Journal, November 12, 2014, p. A15. Piketty’s analysis carefully distinguishes and explains inequality with regard to income from labor and inequality with regard to income from capital, which provides an understanding of the basic structure of income inequality. In addition, he analyzes inequality of capital ownership. His goal is to compare the structure of inequality in different societies. He also discusses the impact of taxes and government programs on the structure of inequality in different nations.

⁵ Ibid., p. 567

⁶ The “Declaration Toward a Global Ethic” adopted by The Parliament of the World’s Religions in 1993 cites the Golden Rule as the foundational principle for all social ethics. The Declaration states that the Golden Rule “should be the irrevocable, unconditional norm for all areas of life, for

families and communities, for races, nations and religions.” See Hans Küng, ed., Yes to a Global Ethic (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1996), p. 17.

⁷ Rosanvallon, Society of Equals, pp. 16-18.

⁸ See “A Different Idea of Our Declaration,” review of Danielle Allen, Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality, in *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. LXI, No. 13, August 14, 2014, p.37.

⁹ Rosanvallon, Society of Equals, pp. 10-21.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 21-26.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 258.

¹² “Creative Democracy-The Task Before Us,” in Jo Ann Boydston, ed., John Dewey: The Later Works, Vol. 14: 1939-1941(Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988) pp.226-227.

¹³ Rosanvallon, Society of Equals, pp. 26-29.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 10, 34-41.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁶ “Creative Democracy-the Task Before Us,” p. 227.

¹⁷ John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, The Fourth Revolution; The Global Race to Reinvent the State (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), pp 79, 228.

¹⁸ Rosanvallon, Society of Equals, pp. 222-228, 260-269; Susan Mendus, "Losing the Faith: Feminism and Democracy," in Democracy, the Unfinished Business, John Dunn, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 207-219.

¹⁹ For an insightful discussion of the problems associated with ethnocentrism in the United States, see Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Disuniting of America (New York: WW Norton and Company, 1992).

²⁰ Human Development Report, 2013, pp. 29-32.

²¹ Rosanvallon, Society of Equals, pp. 10, 26, 47-48, 51-68, 254, 258; Piketty, Capital, pp. 1, 31, 241, 362-63, 422.

²² John Kenneth Galbraith, The Affluent Society (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1958), pp. 24-32.

²³ Piketty, Capital, pp. 247-249, 261. The inequality of wealth has always been significantly greater than the inequality of income from labor. See pp. 244-245.

²⁴ Rosanvallon, Society of Equals, pp. 75-87.

²⁵ Piketty, Capital, 291-92, 347-48.

²⁶ Rosanvallon, Society of Equals, pp. 112-133, 258-259; Piketty, Capital, pp. 7-11.

²⁷ Piketty, Capital, pp. 260-262, 271, 316-317, 323-324, 346-349. Rosanvallon, Society of Equals, pp. 3, 165.

²⁸ Piketty, Capital, pp. 260, 291-294, 299-300, 316, 323-324, 347-349.

²⁹ Rosanvallon, Society of Equals, pp. 165-203; Piketty, Capital, pp. 153, 237, 275, 349, 355, 493-514.

³⁰ Piketty, Capital, pp. 499, 503-508.

³¹ Cited in John Haywood, "Common Sense II," in New York Times, September 21, 2014, p. 14.

³² Piketty, Capital, pp. 474-79.

³³ Ibid., pp. 248-249, 257, 261, 265, 294-296, 315-324. Edward N. Wolff, Top Heavy: A Study of the Increasing Inequality of Wealth in America (New York: Report of the Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1995), pp. v-vi; See also Robert Pear, "Number of Children Living in Poverty Drops Sharply, Census Bureau Reports," New York Times National, 17 September, 2014, p. A17. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 19 percent of Americans were living in poverty in the mid-1960s. The poverty rate fell to 11 percent in the 1970s. In 2013 it was back up to 14.5 percent.

³⁴ Al Gore, The Future, pp 4-12, 33-41.

³⁵ See “Wealth without workers, workers without wealth” and “Special Report on Technology and the World Economy” in *The Economist*, vol. 413, October 4, 2014.

³⁶ Joseph Stiglitz, “In No One We Trust” and “Inequality is Not Inevitable” in “The Great Divide” series (2014) at nytimes.com/opinionator; Paul Krugman, “Our Invisible Rich,” in *New York Times* Op-ed, September 29, 2014, p.A27; Piketty, *Capital*, pp.297, 315-321; Steven Rattner, “Inequality, Unbelievably, Gets Worse,” in *New York Times* Op-Ed, November 17, 2014, p. A25.

³⁷ The 2014 United Nations reports on food security are the result of collaborative initiatives involving UNICEF, the World Bank, the Food and Agricultural Organization, the World Food Program, the International Fund for Agricultural Development and other agencies. See Rick Gladstone and Somini Sengupta, “Despite Declines, Child Mortality and Hunger Persist in Developing Nations, UN Reports,” *New York Times* September 17, 2014, p. A8.

³⁸ Piketty, *Capital*, pp. 59, 64, 67.

³⁹ Human Development Report, 2013, pp. 1, 12-13, 23-25.

⁴⁰ “Now for the Long Term,” the Report of the Oxford Martin Commission for Future Generations (Oxford: Oxford Martin School, 2013), p. 25. Piketty writes: “Global inequality of wealth in the early 2010s appears to be comparable in magnitude to that observed in Europe in 1900-1910.” *Capital*, p. 438.

⁴¹ Michail Moatsos, *et al.*, "Income Inequality Since 1820," in Jan Luiten van Zanden, *et al.*, eds. How Was Life?: Global Well-being Since 1820 (OECD Publishing, 2014), pp. 205-210. The authors of this study focus on income inequality as measured by pre-tax household income across individuals within a country, and inequality is described by use of the Gini coefficient.

⁴² Human Development Report, 2013, pp. 29-30, 32.

⁴³ Piketty, Capital, p. 326-330; Moatsos, "Income Inequality Since 1820," p. 206.

⁴⁴ Oxford Martin Commission Report, p. 25.

⁴⁵ Piketty, Capital, pp. 1, 20, 23-27, 74-77, 84, 222, 234, 350-58, 361, 364, 424.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 1, 20, 27, 424.

⁴⁷ Stiglitz, "Inequality is Not Inevitable," in New York Times, June 29, 2014. See "The Great Divide" series of essays at nytime.com/opinionator. Stiglitz's essay is a good brief overview of economic inequality in the US and what can be done to address the problem.

⁴⁸ Ibid.; Al Gore, The Future, pp. xxiv-xxvi, 33-35, 116-124, 369-372.

⁴⁹ Galbraith, The Affluent Society, p. 84.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 85-87.

⁵¹ Piketty, Capital, pp. 248-249, 257-258, 262-263.

⁵² The Earth Charter has been endorsed by roughly 6,000 organizations including the World Conservation Congress of IUCN and UNESCO. It has not, however, been endorsed or recognized by the United Nations General Assembly even though this came close to happening at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. The United Nations has not to date formally endorsed a document that it did not draft. For additional information on the Earth Charter drafting process, see Steven C. Rockefeller, "Ecological and Social Responsibility: The Making of the Earth Charter," in Barbara Darling-Smith, ed., On Responsibility (New York: Lexington Books, Harper & Rowe, 2007) and Steven C. Rockefeller, "Crafting Principles for the Earth Charter," in Peter Blaze Corcoran and A. James Wholpart, eds., A Voice for Earth: American Writers Respond to the Earth Charter (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2008).

⁵³ Ron Engel, "Prologue: Summons to a new axial age – the promise, limits and future of the Earth Charter," in Laura Westra and Mirian Vilela, eds., The Earth Charter, Ecological Integrity and Social Movements (London: Earthscan from Routledge, 2014), pp. xv-xxx.

⁵⁴ Principle 1 is the imperative: "Respect Earth and life in all its diversity." The moral life begins with the awakening of an attitude of respect for the other. The verb "respect"

in Principle 1 is used to indicate that all life is worthy of moral consideration. The supporting Principles 1.a and 1.b were drafted in parallel and clarify why respect and moral consideration are in order with regard to non-human life forms and in relation to all people. In accord with the World Charter for Nature (1982), Principle 1.a explains that every life form “has value regardless of its worth to human beings.” The Principle affirms what some philosophers describe as the intrinsic value of all life forms. Human rights law uses the concept of human dignity to affirm the intrinsic value of each and every person, which involves the idea that each individual should be treated as an end and never as a means only. The Earth Charter as a whole makes clear that all human beings are worthy of equal moral consideration without discrimination.

⁵⁵ The titles of the last two reports of the UN Secretary General on the Post-2015 Agenda are “A Life of Dignity for All” (2013) and “The Road to Dignity by 2030” (2014). These titles identify the moral ideal of “dignity for all” with respect for the principle of equality and universal human rights. When describing the new Post-2015 Agenda, the 2014 report cites “human dignity and planetary sustainability” as the overarching themes of the 17 new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The first of “six essential elements for delivering on the SDGs” is identified as “Dignity: to end poverty and fight inequalities.” In this regard, the report states: “The defining challenge of our time is to close the gap between our determination to ensure a life of dignity for all on the one hand, and the reality of

persisting poverty and deepening inequality on the other.” The reference to “the inherent dignity of all human beings” in Earth Charter Principle 1.b should be understood to carry this same breadth of meaning. See Synthesis Report of the Secretary General on the Post-2015 Agenda, “The Road to Dignity by 2030: Ending Poverty, Transforming All Lives and Protecting the Planet,” (New York: United Nations, 2014), Section 2.2, Paragraph 36; Section 3, Paragraph 58; Section 3.3, Paragraphs 66-67; Section 6, Paragraph 161.

⁵⁶ Our Common Future, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 43.

⁵⁷ See, for example, Edward Wolff, Top Heavy: A Study of the Increasing Inequality of Wealth in America (1995).

⁵⁸ “The Road to Dignity by 2030,” Section 3.1, Paragraph 60; Section 3.3, Paragraph 67.

⁵⁹ The Worldwatch Institute, State of the World 2013: Is Sustainability Still Possible? (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2013), pp. 19-22.

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 9, 41.

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 11, 22-26; Johan Rockström, “Bounding the Planetary Future: Why We Need a Great Transition,” Great Transition Initiative Essay, (April 2015). Rockström has led the recent development of the new Planetary Boundaries framework

⁶² Small is Beautiful (New York: Harper Torch Books, 1973), p. 54.

⁶³ Rockström, "Bounding the Planetary Future."

⁶⁴ For an explanation of contraction and convergence, see Brendan Mackey and Nicole Rogers, "Climate Justice and the Distribution of Rights to Emit Carbon," in P. Keyzer, V. Popovski and C. Sampford, eds., Access to International Justice (London: Routledge, 2015).

⁶⁵ See, for example, Lester R. Brown, Plan B: Rescuing a Planet Under Stress and a Civilization in Trouble (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003); Peter G. Brown and Geoffrey Garver, Right Relationship: Building a Whole Earth Economy (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2009); and Herman Daly, "Economics For a Full World," Great Transition Initiative (June 2015).

⁶⁶ See Ernst-Ulrich von Weizsäcker, *et al.*, Factor Five: Transforming the Global Economy Through 80% Improvements in Resource Productivity (London: Earthscan Ltd., 2011).

⁶⁷ State of the World 2013, Chapters 2, 3, 4, 10, 11.

⁶⁸ "The Road to Dignity by 2030," Section 2.1, Paragraphs 48-49.

⁶⁹ Ibid., Section 1, Paragraph 24; Section 2.1, Paragraph 49; Section 3.3, Paragraph 75.

⁷⁰ A Sand County Almanac (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949) pp. 203,-204.

⁷¹ See, for example, Cormac Cullinan, Wild Law; A Manifesto for Earth Justice (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2011).

⁷² For an illuminating analysis of the environmental, economic and political challenges facing the world with special reference to the United States, see James Gustave Speth, The Bridge at the Edge of the World: Capitalism, the Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008) and America the Possible: Manifesto for a New Economy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

⁷³ For information on the many promising developments in the field of religion and ecology go to The Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology website. A significant indication of the growing support among religious leaders for a transition to a just and sustainable future in keeping with the spirit of the Earth Charter is a recent declaration issued by a conference convened by The Pontifical Academy of Sciences with the support of Pope Francis, who reportedly will soon issue a Papal encyclical on climate change. The Declaration states:

Human-induced climate change is a scientific reality, and its decisive mitigation is a moral and religious imperative for humanity;

In this core moral space, the world's religions play a very vital role. These traditions all affirm the inherent dignity of every individual linked to the common good of all humanity. They affirm the beauty, wonder, and inherent goodness of the natural world, and appreciate that it is a precious gift entrusted to our common care, making it our moral duty to respect rather than ravage the garden that is our home.

Declaration of Religious Leaders, Political Leaders, Business Leaders, Scientists and Development Practitioners, 28 April 2015, The Pontifical Academy of Sciences.

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APPENDIX A

THE EARTH CHARTER

PREAMBLE

We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.

EARTH, OUR HOME

Humanity is part of a vast evolving universe. Earth, our home, is alive with a unique community of life. The forces of nature make existence a demanding and uncertain adventure, but Earth has provided the conditions essential to life's evolution. The resilience of the community of life and the well-being of

humanity depend upon preserving a healthy biosphere with all its ecological systems, a rich variety of plants and animals, fertile soils, pure waters, and clean air. The global environment with its finite resources is a common concern of all peoples. The protection of Earth's vitality, diversity, and beauty is a sacred trust.

THE GLOBAL SITUATION

The dominant patterns of production and consumption are causing environmental devastation, the depletion of resources, and a massive extinction of species. Communities are being undermined. The benefits of development are not shared equitably and the gap between rich and poor is widening. Injustice, poverty, ignorance, and violent conflict are widespread and the cause of great suffering. An unprecedented rise in human population has overburdened ecological and social systems. The foundations of global security are threatened. These trends are perilous—but not inevitable.

THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

The choice is ours: form a global partnership to care for Earth and one another or risk the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life. Fundamental changes are needed in our values, institutions, and ways of living. We must realize that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more. We have the knowledge and technology to provide for all and to reduce our

impacts on the environment. The emergence of a global civil society is creating new opportunities to build a democratic and humane world. Our environmental, economic, political, social, and spiritual challenges are interconnected, and together we can forge inclusive solutions.

UNIVERSAL RESPONSIBILITY

To realize these aspirations, we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities. We are at once citizens of different nations and of one world in which the local and global are linked. Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world. The spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life is strengthened when we live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature.

We urgently need a shared vision of basic values to provide an ethical foundation for the emerging world community. Therefore, together in hope we affirm the following interdependent principles for a sustainable way of life as a common standard by which the conduct of all individuals, organizations, businesses, governments, and transnational institutions is to be guided and assessed.

PRINCIPLES

I. RESPECT AND CARE FOR THE COMMUNITY OF LIFE

1. Respect Earth and life in all its diversity.

- a. Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings.
- b. Affirm faith in the inherent dignity of all human beings and in the intellectual, artistic, ethical, and spiritual potential of humanity.

2. Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.

- a. Accept that with the right to own, manage, and use natural resources comes the duty to prevent environmental harm and to protect the rights of people.
- b. Affirm that with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good.

3. Build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful.

- a. Ensure that communities at all levels guarantee human rights and fundamental freedoms and provide everyone an opportunity to realize his or her full potential.
- b. Promote social and economic justice, enabling all to achieve a secure and meaningful livelihood that is ecologically responsible.

4. Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.

- a. Recognize that the freedom of action of each generation is qualified by the needs of future generations.
- b. Transmit to future generations values, traditions, and institutions that support the long-term flourishing of Earth's human and ecological communities. In order to fulfill these four broad commitments, it is necessary to:

II. ECOLOGICAL INTEGRITY

5. Protect and restore the integrity of Earth's ecological systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain life.

- a. Adopt at all levels sustainable development plans and regulations that make environmental conservation and rehabilitation integral to all development initiatives.
- b. Establish and safeguard viable nature and biosphere reserves, including wild lands and marine areas, to protect Earth's life support systems, maintain biodiversity, and preserve our natural heritage.
- c. Promote the recovery of endangered species and ecosystems.
- d. Control and eradicate non-native or genetically modified organisms harmful to native species and the environment, and prevent introduction of such harmful organisms.

- e. Manage the use of renewable resources such as water, soil, forest products, and marine life in ways that do not exceed rates of regeneration and that protect the health of ecosystems.
- f. Manage the extraction and use of non-renewable resources such as minerals and fossil fuels in ways that minimize depletion and cause no serious environmental damage.

6. Prevent harm as the best method of environmental protection and, when knowledge is limited, apply a precautionary approach.

- a. Take action to avoid the possibility of serious or irreversible environmental harm even when scientific knowledge is incomplete or inconclusive.
- b. Place the burden of proof on those who argue that a proposed activity will not cause significant harm, and make the responsible parties liable for environmental harm.
- c. Ensure that decision making addresses the cumulative, long-term, indirect, long distance, and global consequences of human activities.
- d. Prevent pollution of any part of the environment and allow no build-up of radioactive, toxic, or other hazardous substances.
- e. Avoid military activities damaging to the environment.

7. Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth's

regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being.

- a. Reduce, reuse, and recycle the materials used in production and consumption systems, and ensure that residual waste can be assimilated by ecological systems.
- b. Act with restraint and efficiency when using energy, and rely increasingly on renewable energy sources such as solar and wind.
- c. Promote the development, adoption, and equitable transfer of environmentally sound technologies.
- d. Internalize the full environmental and social costs of goods and services in the selling price, and enable consumers to identify products that meet the highest social and environmental standards.
- e. Ensure universal access to health care that fosters reproductive health and responsible reproduction.
- f. Adopt lifestyles that emphasize the quality of life and material sufficiency in a finite world.

8. Advance the study of ecological sustainability and promote the open exchange and wide application of the knowledge acquired.

- a. Support international scientific and technical cooperation on sustainability, with special attention to the needs of developing nations.
- b. Recognize and preserve the traditional knowledge and spiritual wisdom in all cultures that contribute to environmental protection and human well-being.

- c. Ensure that information of vital importance to human health and environmental protection, including genetic information, remains available in the public domain.

III. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

9. Eradicate poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative.

- a. Guarantee the right to potable water, clean air, food security, uncontaminated soil, shelter, and safe sanitation, allocating the national and international resources required.
- b. Empower every human being with the education and resources to secure a sustainable livelihood, and provide social security and safety nets for those who are unable to support themselves.
- c. Recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations.

10. Ensure that economic activities and institutions at all levels promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner.

- a. Promote the equitable distribution of wealth within nations and among nations.
- b. Enhance the intellectual, financial, technical, and social resources of developing nations, and relieve them of onerous international debt.

- c. Ensure that all trade supports sustainable resource use, environmental protection, and progressive labor standards.
- d. Require multinational corporations and international financial organizations to act transparently in the public good, and hold them accountable for the consequences of their activities.

11. Affirm gender equality and equity as prerequisites to sustainable development and ensure universal access to education, health care, and economic opportunity.

- a. Secure the human rights of women and girls and end all violence against them.
- b. Promote the active participation of women in all aspects of economic, political, civil, social, and cultural life as full and equal partners, decision makers, leaders, and beneficiaries.
- c. Strengthen families and ensure the safety and loving nurture of all family members.

12. 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.

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

- b. Affirm the right of indigenous peoples to their spirituality, knowledge, lands and resources and to their related practice of sustainable livelihoods.
- c. Honor and support the young people of our communities, enabling them to fulfill their essential role in creating sustainable societies.
- d. Protect and restore outstanding places of cultural and spiritual significance.

IV. DEMOCRACY, NONVIOLENCE, AND PEACE

13. Strengthen democratic institutions at all levels, and provide transparency and accountability in governance, inclusive participation in decision making, and access to justice.

- a. Uphold the right of everyone to receive clear and timely information on environmental matters and all development plans and activities which are likely to affect them or in which they have an interest.
- b. Support local, regional and global civil society, and promote the meaningful participation of all interested individuals and organizations in decision making.
- c. Protect the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, peaceful assembly, association, and dissent.
- d. Institute effective and efficient access to administrative and independent judicial procedures, including remedies and redress for environmental harm and the threat of such harm.

- e. Eliminate corruption in all public and private institutions.
- f. Strengthen local communities, enabling them to care for their environments, and assign environmental responsibilities to the levels of government where they can be carried out most effectively.

14. Integrate into formal education and life-long learning the knowledge, values, and skills needed for a sustainable way of life.

- a. Provide all, especially children and youth, with educational opportunities that empower them to contribute actively to sustainable development.
- b. Promote the contribution of the arts and humanities as well as the sciences in sustainability education.
- c. Enhance the role of the mass media in raising awareness of ecological and social challenges.
- d. Recognize the importance of moral and spiritual education for sustainable living.

15. Treat all living beings with respect and consideration.

- a. Prevent cruelty to animals kept in human societies and protect them from suffering.
- b. Protect wild animals from methods of hunting, trapping, and fishing that cause extreme, prolonged, or avoidable suffering.
- c. Avoid or eliminate to the full extent possible the taking or destruction of non-targeted species.

16. Promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace.

- a. Encourage and support mutual understanding, solidarity, and cooperation among all peoples and within and among nations.
- b. Implement comprehensive strategies to prevent violent conflict and use collaborative problem solving to manage and resolve environmental conflicts and other disputes.
- c. Demilitarize national security systems to the level of a non-provocative defense posture, and convert military resources to peaceful purposes, including ecological restoration.
- d. Eliminate nuclear, biological, and toxic weapons and other weapons of mass destruction.
- e. Ensure that the use of orbital and outer space supports environmental protection and peace.
- f. Recognize that peace is the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part.

THE WAY FORWARD

As never before in history, common destiny beckons us to seek a new beginning. Such renewal is the promise of these Earth Charter principles. To fulfill this promise, we must commit ourselves to adopt and promote the values and objectives of the Charter.

This requires a change of mind and heart. It requires a new sense of global interdependence and universal responsibility. We must imaginatively develop and apply the vision of a sustainable way of life locally, nationally, regionally, and globally. Our cultural diversity is a precious heritage and different cultures will find their own distinctive ways to realize the vision. 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.

Life often involves tensions between important values. This can mean difficult choices. However, we must find ways to harmonize diversity with unity, the exercise of freedom with the common good, short-term objectives with long-term goals. Every individual, family, organization, and community has a vital role to play. The arts, sciences, religions, educational institutions, media, businesses, nongovernmental organizations, and governments are all called to offer creative leadership. The partnership of government, civil society, and business is essential for effective governance.

In order to build a sustainable global community, the nations of the world must renew their commitment to the United Nations, fulfill their obligations under existing international agreements, and support the implementation of Earth Charter principles with an international legally binding instrument on environment and development.

Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life.

APPENDIX B

THE UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

(As listed in “The Road to Dignity by 2030,” the Synthesis Report of the Secretary-General on the UN Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda)

- Goal 1** End poverty in all its forms everywhere
- Goal 2** End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
- Goal 3** Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
- Goal 4** Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
- Goal 5** Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
- Goal 6** Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
- Goal 7** Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
- Goal 8** Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

- Goal 9** Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
- Goal 10** Reduce inequality within and among countries
- Goal 11** Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
- Goal 12** Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
- Goal 13** Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts*
- Goal 14** Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
- Goal 15** Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
- Goal 16** Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
- Goal 17** Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

**Acknowledging that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is the primary international, intergovernmental forum for negotiating the global response to climate change.*

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven C. Rockefeller is professor emeritus of religion at Middlebury College, Vermont, USA, where he also served as dean of the College. He received his master of divinity degree from Union Theological Seminary in New York City and his Ph.D. from Columbia University. He is the author of *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (Columbia, 1991) and the co-editor of two books of essays, *The Christ and the Bodhisattva* (SUNY, 1987) and *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment is a Religious Issue* (Beacon, 1992). His essays appear in many books and journals. Professor Rockefeller chaired the Earth Charter international drafting committee from 1997 to 2000. Since the launch of the Earth Charter in 2000, he has played a leading role in efforts to promote the Charter's ethical vision for a just, sustainable, and peaceful world. Active in the field of philanthropy, he has served for thirty-five years as a trustee of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF), an international grant making foundation with programs in democratic practice, sustainable development, and peacebuilding. He chaired the RBF board of trustees from 1998 to 2006.

This essay explores the origin and meaning of the principle of equality, considers the economic implications of the ideal, and provides a brief historical overview of liberal democracy and economic inequality since the American and French revolutions. The essay then highlights the principles in the Earth Charter that have been designed to frame the intensifying debate on these critical issues and guide change. ...The essay concludes with reflections on equality and sustainability as two transformative ideals that have become interrelated and are the principal keys to a promising future.

From the "Introduction"



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