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Ο Καταστατικός Χάρτης της Γης μέσα από την  
Οπτική της Βιώσιμης Δικαιοσύνης

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## The Earth Charter through the Lenses of Sustainability Justice

### Ο Καταστατικός Χάρτης της Γης μέσα από την Οπτική της Βιώσιμης Δικαιοσύνης

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#### Abstract

The Earth Charter, the product of a worldwide, decade long, cross-cultural dialogue on common goals and shared values, is a vision and declaration of fundamental ethical principles for building a just, sustainable and peaceful global society in the 21st century. For almost two decades, the Earth Charter initiative has evolved to set forth fundamental principles for a sustainable way of life in an inclusive way. This paper attempts to connect the Earth Charter with the notion of sustainability justice. It has been found that all the four dimensions of sustainability justice, namely: social justice, environmental justice, economic justice and cultural justice are reflected upon the whole Earth Charter document and are related with its underlying vision.

**Keywords:** *Earth Charter, sustainability justice, ESD, transformative learning*

#### Περίληψη

Ο Καταστατικός Χάρτης της Γης, προϊόν ενός παγκόσμιου δεκαετούς διαπολιτισμικού διαλόγου πάνω σε κοινούς στόχους και αξίες, είναι ένα όραμα και μια διακήρυξη ηθικών αρχών για την οικοδόμηση μιας δίκαιης, βιώσιμης και ειρηνικής παγκόσμιας κοινωνίας για τον 21<sup>ο</sup> αιώνα. Η πρωτοβουλία του Καταστατικού Χάρτη της Γης, για δύο σχεδόν δεκαετίες έθεσε τις βασικές αρχές για ένα βιώσιμο τρόπο ζωής με έναν ολιστικό τρόπο. Η παρούσα εργασία επιχειρεί να συνδέσει τον Καταστατικό Χάρτη της Γης με την έννοια της βιώσιμης δικαιοσύνης. Βρέθηκε ότι και οι τέσσερις διαστάσεις της βιώσιμης δικαιοσύνης, δηλαδή: η κοινωνική δικαιοσύνη, η περιβαλλοντική δικαιοσύνη, η οικονομική δικαιοσύνη και η πολιτισμική δικαιοσύνη αντανακλώνται σε όλο το κείμενο του Καταστατικού Χάρτη της γης και συνδέονται με το βασικό όραμά του.

#### 1. What is the Earth Charter?

The Earth Charter (<http://www.earthcharter.org>) is a product of a decade-long, worldwide, cross-cultural dialogue on common goals and shared values. Although the Earth Charter began as a United Nations initiative, it was, finally realized by a global civil society initiative that involved key figures and hundreds of people and organizations as a people's charter on 29th June, 2000.

The Earth Charter came out as a response to a number of shared crises and challenges that humanity is facing in the last decades, where the global becomes local and the local becomes global. Among them, the most notable ones are those of widespread poverty, violation of human rights, the climate change caused by unsustainable practices, the threat posed by economic globalisation, as well as various social and economic injustices. Recognizing the interrelationship of environmental, economic, social, and cultural problems with human existence, the Earth Charter presents an inclusive, integrated ethical framework. It is one of the most important global initiatives seeking to inspire a new sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility in all people for the well-being of the whole human family, the greater community of life, and future generations. This differentiates the Earth Charter among other comparable global initiatives. The Earth Charter has inspired declarations of global ethics such as the draft citizen treaties prepared for the Rio +20 Summit in 2012 (Engel, 2014). It provides a very broad perspective on learning to live together sustainably and thus is helpful for educators who wish to develop a comprehensive approach to education for sustainability (Harding et al., 2010).

The Earth Charter starts with the Preamble and encourages us to search for common ground in the midst of our diversity and to embrace a global ethic based on the following Principles: I Respect and Care for the Community of life; II Ecological Integrity; III Social and Economic Justice; and IV Democracy, NonViolence, and Peace. Finally, the document culminates with the Way Forward. The way the content is structured as well as the titles of the four parts indicate the breadth of the Earth Charter vision which recognizes the interrelationship between humanity's socio-economic problems with its environmental challenges and the need for a holistic thinking, integrated planning and coordinated action (Rockefeller, 2015).

The Earth Charter Preamble lays out the critical environmental, social and economic challenges that confront humanity, and highlights the choices we must make in order to build a more just, sustainable and peaceful world. It looks holistically into the four pillars of sustainable development: environment, economy, society and culture. In this sense, it places particular emphasis on issues such as social justice, non-violence and peace, which are often, overlooked in educational frameworks for sustainable development (Kostoulas-Makrakis, 2012). The Earth Charter is a value-based document that presumes virtuous action by individuals, schools, corporations and nations (Preston, 2010). The virtues that support this formation include compassion, cooperativeness, intergenerational justice and stewardship (*ibid.*). It can be used as a tool and framework to help teachers and students to clarify their perspectives and challenge some of their views about learning to live together sustainably (ECI, 2005). As it challenges people to think and more importantly learn to clarify their ethical values and to expand their critical consciousness, it could be easily serve as a tool for the transition to more sustainable ways of living.

The need to essentially change our unsustainable value systems in order to make the essential transition to sustainable lifestyles is addressed by the Earth Charter, not only in theory, but also through an extended resource of concrete examples, lesson plans and learning objects (e.g., Matarazzo-Neuberger & Filho, 2010; Mathar, 2010; Sheehan & Laitinen, 2010; Vilela et al., 2005). Adopting the Earth Charter does not, by any means require the homogenization or standardization of cultures or beliefs; it encourages people to identify and clarify their own beliefs and then recognize the common interests and

concerns they share with others (d'Evie & Glass, 2000). There is, however, the danger of using the Earth Charter in a doctrinaire manner, which could undermine its promise (Ruiz, 2010). According to Engel (2014), the Earth Charter does not provide a complete and final ethical blueprint for the planet in any dogmatic sense. Instead, it should be viewed as an interpretative text and not as a final consensus document. Engel continues saying that "we must use the text as a platform for reinvigorating the discussion of global ethics that created it and be much more explicit about the societal transformations that will be required to implement its underlying vision" (Engel, 2014:xvi).

As Vilela (2014:xxxiii) states "... the transformation we all seek and that will make a just, sustainable, and peaceful world will require that we reconnect our inner selves with the larger community of life through both a change of mind and a change of heart". Merging the Head, the Heart and the Hand responds to the need for adopting a holistic approach to teaching and learning to live together sustainably (Kostoulas-Makrakis, 2014). The head is about cognitive function and being logical, while the heart is about affective function, ethics, values, emotions and feelings and the hands are about human agency that is the disposition and ability to act as agents of change.



**Figure 1.** The 3 Hs of the Earth Charter (Kostoulas-Makrakis, 2014, p. 92)

## 2. Defining sustainability justice

The concept of "sustainability justice" as it has been conceptualized and defined by (Makrakis, 2006; 2017) reflects the four pillars of sustainable development: environment, economy, society and culture. In particular, it is perceived as a process, which: 1) seeks fair (re)distribution of resources, opportunities, and responsibilities; 2) challenges the

roots of oppression, exploitation and injustice; 3) empowers all people to raise their voice, needs and rights; and 4) constructs knowledge, empathy, compassion, social solidarity and action competences. Extending the connection of sustainability justice to the four sustainable development pillars, it is composed of social justice, environmental justice, economic justice and cultural justice (Makrakis, 2017). Social justice has evolved as a response to the injustices faced by marginalized and isolated groups and, in general, how advantages and disadvantages are distributed to individuals in society (Miller, 1999; Fouad et al. 2006; Constantine et al. 2007; Riddell, 2009). The applicability of the concept of social justice involves a trivalent relation between market, institutions and needs, which strengthens the relation between social justice and economic justice (Balaceanu, Apostol & Penu, 2012). Achieving economic justice depends upon distributive justice that includes the fair distribution of resources, wealth and democratic participation in economic and social decision-making (Calleija, 2016).

### **3. Identifying sustainability justice in the Earth Charter principle**

As pointed earlier, the Earth Charter is inspired by a vision based on human rights, justice, peace and social responsibility. Looking at the Preamble of the Earth Charter, one can get the first encounter with sustainability justice issues. It is stated that the Earth is our Home and we must join together our forces to protect the Earth's vitality, diversity and beauty. In this way, we can build a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature (environmental justice), universal human rights (social justice), fair distribution of human resources (economic justice), and a culture of peace (cultural justice). 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". It thus, proclaims the demand for intergenerational justice, emphasized more through statements such as "Recognize that the freedom of action of each generation is qualified by the needs of future generations" (Principle 4a) and "Transmit to future generations' values, traditions, and institutions that support the long-term flourishing of Earth's human and ecological communities" (Principle 4b).

As a whole, the Earth Charter document includes principles relating to all types of sustainability justice. However, the notion of justice is made more explicit in Section III, which is directly linked to "Social and Economic Justice" as well as in Section IV entitled "Democracy, Non violence and Peace" where sustainability justice becomes very visible. Under Section III, Principle 9, refers to the need to "Eradicate poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative". In saying that, it puts the issue of poverty in its right direction that is, stressing its connection to ethics as it can be seen in Principle 10a "Promote the equitable distribution of wealth within nations and among nations". As pointed earlier, sustainability justice gives due importance to the struggles of marginalized, poor and indigenous people who are usually facing economic, environmental and social racism. This is clearly supported by the statement "Recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations" (Principle 9c). As well as, "Affirm the right of indigenous peoples to their spirituality, knowledge, lands and resources and to their related practice of sustainable livelihoods" (Principle, 12b). As it has been argued in another article (Kostoulas-Makrakis, 2012), the Earth Charter draws attention to the additional responsibility, understood as a capacity to respond effectively, that derives

from possessing greater power, wealth, knowledge and freedom. In other words, those in more privileged situations must assume greater responsibility for promoting sustainability, including assisting those in less privileged circumstances. This implies that education processes, drawing upon the Earth Charter through critical reflection, can help discern ways in which human potential can be realized. This is a 'caring' lifestyle orientation that education processes can help to clarify using the Earth Charter as a tool for critical reflection and for responsible action.

The Earth Charter gives particular emphasis to equity instead of equality, which "suggests fairness and the obligation to remedy injustice and this is clearly its intended meaning in the Earth Charter" (Engel, 2014: xxiii). Indeed, the concept of 'equity' prevalent in sustainability justice cuts across many Earth Charter Principles:

- "Affirm gender equality and equity as prerequisites to sustainable development and ensure universal access to education, health care, and economic opportunity" (Principle 11).
- "Secure the human rights of women and girls and end all violence against them" (Principle 11a).
- "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" (Principle 11b).

The 10<sup>th</sup> Principle with its supporting principles stress the importance to "ensure that economic activities and institutions at all levels promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner", including the developing world: "the equitable distribution of wealth within nations and among nations" and the enhancement of "the intellectual, financial, technical and social resources of developing nations". The Earth Charter states clearly that, "The benefits of development are not shared equitably and the gap between rich and poor is widening". This implies that issues of economic justice still remain urgent and cannot be separated from our ethics and values systems. It has to be stressed that questions of economic justice are fundamentally questions about the ethics of income distribution, unfair trade, economic exploitation, unequal distribution of wealth and poverty.

Another statement "Eliminate discrimination in all its forms, such as that based on race, color, sex, sexual orientation, religion, language, and national, ethnic or social origin" (Principle 12a) is relevant to the demand that all people must have the opportunity to participate in decisions that can affect them. Moreover, the Principles under section IV and in particular, the Principle 13 which emphasizes the need to "Strengthen democratic institutions at all levels, and provide transparency and accountability in governance, inclusive participation in decision making, and access to justice" is explicitly related with the notion of justice. The voices of those that their lives are affected by the long-term impact of decisions need to emerge and be heard (Vilela, 2014).

In the Section concerned with "Respect and Care for the Community of Life", it is clearly stated that we should "Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings" (Principle, 1a). Added to that, we should "Build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful" (Principle 3) and "Promote social and economic justice, enabling all to achieve a secure and meaningful livelihood that is ecologically responsible" (Principle 3b). All these statements include notions of social, environmental and economic justice. Interpreting

further these Principles, it becomes obvious that the Earth Charter provides a road map for promoting peace and learning to live together sustainably based on harmonious relationships with ourselves, with human communities, and with the biosphere. This can serve to foster positive change based on our need to contribute meaningfully to sustainable ways of knowing, living and work. Its principles are action-oriented that lay down the way to promote social, environmental, economic and cultural justice (cf. Kostoulas-Makrakis, 2012). As Vilela (2014) argues, the Earth Charter calls for action, especially in times that the world has been focused on national and individual interests that threaten the ecological integrity. The Earth Charter document states that the dominant patterns of production and consumption are the major causes of environmental devastation, the depletion of resources and a massive extinction of species. In the 7<sup>th</sup> Principle it is mentioned that there is a need to “Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth’s regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being”. Indeed, “the Earth’s Ecological integrity is affected not by some forces that come from another planet, but by our unsustainable and careless lifestyles and patters of production” (Vilela, 2014:xxxii)

The whole Section II named “Ecological Integrity” with its 4 principles and its 20 supporting principles is literally devoted to environmental justice. In particular, the 5<sup>th</sup> principle states: “Protect and restore the integrity of Earth’s ecological systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain life. This principle distinguishes the Earth Charter from most other ethical declarations (Engel, 2014). Its supporting principles put a special emphasis on issues such as maintenance of biodiversity, recovery of engendered species and ecosystems, control of genetically modified organisms and management of renewable and non-renewable resources in a more sustainable way.

Principle 8 calls for the need to “advance the study of ecological sustainability and promote the open exchange and wide application of the knowledge acquired”. This implies that education processes, drawing upon the Earth Charter as a pedagogical tool, can help to unblock human potential (cf. Kostoulas-Makrakis, 2012; 2014). The Earth Charter, as Vilela (2014) argues, provides a strong rather than a weak sustainability approach that requires a radical shift in the way we see the world, as well as a shift from fragmenting knowledge to holistic knowledge. This also suggests a shift to the ways we learn and work and the need to infuse the Earth Charter’s ethical framework in educational processes and practices. Education processes can help to clarify our values using the Earth Charter as a tool for critical reflection, for responsible active citizenship and sustainable happiness (cf. Kostoulas-Makrakis, 2016).

Cultural justice can be found in Section III (Social and Economic Justice) since it shares a lot with social justice (Beltrán, Hacker and Begun, 2016). For example, Principle 12d reads “Protect and restore outstanding places of cultural and spiritual significance”. In this Principle the issue of cultural justice is made clear. Since, cultural justice is closely to cultural rights, Principle 12a elaborates the right to non-discrimination in all its forms such as race, color, gender, religion and language among others. Moreover, issues of cultural justice are found in Section IV (Democracy, Non Violence and Peace) and in particular, the final Principle urges us to “Promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace” (Principle 16). Its supporting Principle (15f) which reads “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 are a part" indicates the interdependence of all forms of life which transcends the whole Earth Charter document. The Earth Charter provides an integrated definition of peace based on harmonious relationships with oneself, with human communities, and with the biosphere. This holistic definition can serve to foster positive change based on our need to contribute meaningfully to the common good (Kostoulas-Makrakis, 2016) that reflects the demand for social justice.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the final paragraph in the "Way Forward" of the Earth Charter invites us: "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".

This inspirational call contains all types of sustainability justice (environmental, economic, social and cultural) denoting their interdependence. What is, strongly, recommended in the Earth Charter is that we have a responsibility towards the other, may be not only human beings, but also, future generations, the whole community of life as well as the Earth itself. It is led by a vision based on human rights, justice, peace and social responsibility.

The Earth Charter challenges each one of us to think and reflect on our values, ethics, beliefs and actions in order to advance social, economic, environmental and cultural justice for our own generations and for the future ones. Having the Earth Charter as a road map, we can all work for bringing justice in the world. The notion of holism and interconnectedness that transcends the Earth Charter document is also visible in all dimensions of justice as it was discussed above. The Earth Charter, either explicitly or implicitly, draws attention to our responsibility, for safeguarding the ecological integrity of our planet and the elimination of social, economic, cultural and environmental injustices.

It has become obvious that in order to live in a more sustainable way "a change of mind and heart" is required driven by "hand" that, calls for action. Revealing sustainability justice through the Earth Charter, it will help us realizing the full human potential that is necessary in transforming our unsustainable ways of living in order to build a just, sustainable and peaceful world. It becomes evident that the vision in building an environmentally, socially, economically and culturally just world is possible through integrating sustainability justice in teaching, learning and curricula. In this context, the Earth Charter can be used as a valuable pedagogical tool.

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