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The Earth Charter: The world's vision of what sustainability means

By **Darcy Hitchcock**, *International Society of Sustainability Professionals and President of AXIS Performance Advisors*
Interview with **Mirian Vilela**, *Executive Director of Earth Charter International*

The Earth Charter was released in 2000 as a guide for sustainable decision making. After almost a decade, it's time to check in to see how it's working.



Darcy: Tell me about your organization, the Earth Charter International.

Mirian: We are the coordinating body for the Earth Charter Initiative, which is a worldwide movement of individuals and organizations interested in using the Earth Charter to promote the vision of sustainability from a values perspective. We use the Earth Charter as a guide, as a compass, as an ethical framework to understand the broad vision of sustainability. It's used by a wide variety of groups —NGOs, some governments, business groups, and individuals. We function as the coordinating body for this decentralized movement. We're located at University of Peace in San Jose, Costa Rica.

Darcy: For the benefit of people who aren't already familiar with the Earth Charter, explain how it was created. What was the motivation for it and how were the principles written?

Mirian: The initial idea came out of the Brundtland Commission Report "Our Common Future, which back in '87 recommended the need for a new charter to guide us towards sustainability. For that reason, this was part of Agenda 21 in the Earth Summit, part of the official agenda, but it did not get political agreement. So after the Earth Summit, a group of leaders decided to re-launch the idea without the need to depend on government. In 1993-1995, the process was launched. Research was done on existent international principles. Then a consultation and research process was initiated in 1995 to determine what values and principles should be in this Charter. A wide spectrum of perspectives was consulted: environmental law, science, theology, indigenous people, and so forth, engaging a variety of perspectives and cultures.

There were regional and national efforts in 1997-1999 and then, finally, after six years, the Earth Charter was formally launched in the year 2000. Our focus then shifted from drafting the document to raising awareness, applying it as an educational tool and using it as a reference for policy makers.

Darcy: Tell me about how the Earth Charter is structured, the main parts of it.

Mirian: We had long conversations about the length of the document. Some wished for a simple, short document that would be easily remembered. But we also struggled to be inclusive. This led to generating a document that was longer than originally expected but still much thinner than most documents of international law.

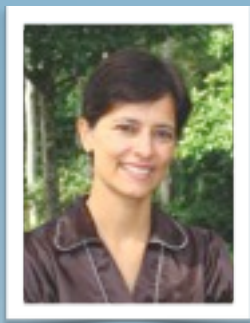
Regarding its structure, it begins with a preamble that outlines the global situation and challenges, and emphasizes the need for shared responsibility.

Then there are 16 main principles, plus supporting principles, divided into four



Jan Pronk and Mikhail Gorbachev, first EC International Workshop, The Hague, May 1995

MIRIAN VILELA



Executive Director of the Earth Charter International Secretariat and of the Center for Education for Sustainable Development at UPEACE, Mirian has been in the forefront of this Initiative since 1996. Her work has involved working with NGOs, Universities, Local Communities and Government officials. This Initiative was originally undertaken in collaboration with the National Councils for Sustainable Development initiative. She has lead and facilitated numerous international workshops and seminars on values and principles for sustainability.

She has also participated in several annual meetings of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, as well as Preparatory Conferences to the World Summit on Sustainable Development and the Johannesburg Summit itself. In that process she dealt with a number of governments' officials and non-state actors participating in such events. Ms. Vilela teaches courses to graduate students of the University for Peace on "Sustainable Development" and "Environment and Sustainability Governance".

Prior to her work with the Earth Charter, Mirian worked for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) for two years in preparation of the 1992 UN Earth Summit and a year in UNCTAD – United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. She moved from Geneva to Costa Rica in 1993 to join in the establishment of the Earth Council, an NGO established to follow up the Earth Summit agreements and promote the establishments of National Councils for Sustainable Development.

Mirian holds a Master Degree in Public Administration from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, where she was an Edward Mason Fellow and a B.Sc. with focus on International Trade.

Nationality: Brazilian

parts:

1. Respect and Care for the community of life
2. Ecological integrity
3. Social and economic justice
4. Democracy, non-violence, and peace

These are all interconnected principles. We need democracy to ensure social justice and also to achieve ecological integrity.

Then, finally, there is a conclusion, which is called "The Way Forward," and references the ethical dilemmas and need for understanding global interdependence and responsibility.

The Earth Charter has a strong focus on community, collective thinking, a collective future and shared responsibility.

Darcy: When it was created, were there important insights or surprises for you?

Mirian: The whole process was quite a learning process for all involved. We developed an understanding of different perspectives and also discovered some issues were very important to certain groups.

One principle that got a lot of discussion was the one related to compassion. In the first draft, compassion was linked to protection of animals. We had a two-year discussion with representatives from indigenous peoples, Buddhists, Hindus and animal rights. It was quite eye-opening to understand the different meanings and how people would relate to the word "compassion!"

As a result of this, in 1999, compassion was moved from the principle on animal rights and instead became part of caring for community of life.

What struck us is the commonality. We can be people from different regions, all different cultures and areas of expertise, but the Earth Charter process reaffirmed our commonalities. It was quite interesting to see all we share as humans, without worrying about our cultures and nations. I think it reaffirmed a very strong human identity.

Darcy: That's very reassuring. The first principles had to do with the environment. Is there an implied hierarchy, needing to take care of the environment first or did you see them as equal spheres?

Mirian: There was a lot of discussion about what would come first. We didn't want one thing to be more important than others because, as I said, everything is interdependent and the Earth Charter has a systemic nature. However, the Earth Charter is not anthropocentric but rather eco-centric. That's why it talks about the community of life. There is a strong vision of how humans and economy are embedded in our natural world, not the other way around. The environment is not a subset of the economy or our well-being, quite on the contrary.

Darcy: I'm curious about the emphasis on democracy, especially given the United State's adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan. Can you talk a bit about what democracy meant in this context?

Mirian: It's just the notion of democracy and development as freedom, the ability to participate and to dissent. It's not supposed to be used as a political flag from one country or another, a national flag,

or to imply that there is one way to be democratic. But democracy ensures people's empowerment, good management of our resources and ensures equitable distribution. We need people and



Launch of the first EC Benchmark Draft, Rio de Janeiro, 1997, with Steven Rockefeller, Mercedes Sosa, Maurice Strong and Gorbachev

different actors in society to have the freedom to play the role they need to play in good governance: setting priorities, making decisions and calling on our public and private institutions to be accountable.

Darcy: You want the Earth Charter to guide our decisions: so how is it being used now?

Mirian: Since the year 2000, we have made a strong effort to bridge the language gap. We felt it was important to bring it to people in their own language. So we have built Web sites and provided information in numerous languages: Chinese, Arabic, Portuguese, Russian, etc.

We also have a strong focus on education: not just formal schools and universities, but also to have it used as educational tool in non-formal and informal settings, for example in enterprises. In Brazil, the main corporate social responsibility (CSR) group, an association of the private sector, the Ethos Institute, is using the Earth Charter to promote a broad and more comprehensive concept of sustainability. As you know, sustainability is in vogue, but much of the effort is focused on environmental issues: recycling, energy efficiency, etc., which is a good start, but the Earth Charter reinforces the broad focus of sustainability.

Darcy: Can you be more specific about exactly how it is being applied?

Mirian: It's used in workshops where people are invited to understand the different principles in theory and practice. For example, in 2004 Costa Rica developed books built on the national curriculum, cross-referencing the Earth Charter Principles. These books are used by teachers and students in primary schools. It's not just a book about Earth Charter. It aligns the national curriculum to the Earth Charter and includes suggestions for activities. Another example is the Hilton Hotel in Arlington, USA, that has used the Earth Charter to sensitize its staff with a comprehensive vision of sustainability.

One of our concerns is how to address the gap between international policies and national policies and what happens on the ground. For example, UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014), which we

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Miriam Vilela, Earth Charter

support, is an important international policy, and some countries are committed to it, but teachers, the media or groups in the private sector hardly know about it! So we try to address this gap by providing tools to those who need to implement it.

Darcy: Can you give me an example of a business that is using the Earth Charter?

Mirian: We have developed a partnership with Global Reporting Initiative. They published a document which compares and shows the added value of the UN Global Compact, the GRI and the Earth Charter. I have yet to see who's using that particular instrument, though.

Some private firms are using the Earth Charter in their CSR projects. Another company in Brazil that makes motors for refrigerators, Embraco, is using the Earth Charter on their corporate social responsibility projects.

I haven't seen anyone fully incorporate it into their operations yet. But business groups in Spain, Mexico, and Brazil have looked at their strategic plans and used the Earth Charter to inform their business plans. In Spain and Brazil, two service companies which provide strategic design and consulting are using the Earth Charter in training for top executives.

Darcy: Compare the Earth Charter to UN Global Compact. How are they similar or different?

Mirian: First the process of preparing them was quite different. The Global Compact was a United Nations initiative led by Kofi Annan, whereas the Earth Charter had a much longer and broader process of consultation. The Compact is targeted toward the private sector and Earth Charter toward a much broader group. The Earth Charter is much broader and more comprehensive. The Compact may be easier to understand, adopt, and implement because it's simpler.

Darcy: So what would you like to see happen next? What's the future?

Mirian: I would like to see a snowball or domino effect where a number of people in institutions— universities, schools, businesses, governments— fully use the Charter as a useful compass for their decision-making processes and for their efforts in educating people about sustainability. This needs to happen not only in the English-speaking world, but also China, Brazil, and other countries. We need to reach out to those groups, small and big business, teachers, and policy makers, so they can embrace such ethical frameworks. Our vision is to have as many groups embracing it and using it, in a faster way, so our values and decisions are reoriented toward sustainability. It's an instrument for clarifying, stimulating, and motivating people, an instrument to give hope, to invite people to reflect about our values and our decisions and the associated consequences.

Resources:

Main website for Earth Charter:

<http://www.earthcharter.org>

See some EC Videos at:

<http://www.youtube.com/ECInternational>

A short history of the Earth Charter initiative:

<http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/download/>

[about the Initiative history_2t.pdf](http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/download/)

