

**EARTH CHARTER LAUNCH AT THE HAGUE
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The SGI-affiliated Boston Research Center for the 21st Century has organized programs in support of the Earth Charter campaign since 1997, holding consultations with scholars and activists and publishing a series of books available as an “Earth Charter Studies” kit. BRC Executive Director Virginia Straus was invited to an Earth Charter Launch event at The Hague in June, where she presented the Charter-related activities of the Center and the SGI and read a message by BRC founder Daisaku Ikeda.

“We have lost our innocence. We know what we are doing to our home, this Earth. We don’t need information. We need the will, or motivation to change our ways. Intellectual understanding is not enough. We need moral conviction and fearlessness.” Maurice Strong, co-chair of the Earth Charter Commission and chair of the Earth Council, highlighted a theme that was stressed several times during the launch of the Earth Charter at the Peace Palace in The Hague, the Netherlands, on June 29.

Professor Wangari Maathai of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya spoke of the need to reflect deeply on every phrase of the Earth Charter. “What is a truly just society?” she asked. How many people in the north really feel that they need the south and cultural diversity and biodiversity? Do we really feel a shared responsibility for world hunger and debt? She urged us to take time to reflect deeply on these issues so that we can be moved to action.

Three hundred fifty activists from all continents gathered for a one-day event to support the launch of the education and implementation phase of the Earth Charter process, now that the document itself is complete. An illustrated copy of the Charter was symbolically presented by a youth representative to Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands, guest of honor at the formal launch.

Ruud Lubbers, former prime minister of the Netherlands, chaired the launch that was hosted by the Dutch National Committee for International Cooperation and Sustainable Development.

In a heartfelt address, former Soviet president and Earth Charter Commission co-chair Mikhail Gorbachev said that as Soviet president, he signed many important documents and conventions, but to him the Earth Charter is more significant than any of these.

He stressed that the Charter represents the hopes and dreams of millions of people, and noted that actually changing our behavior to be in tune with the Charter is the hardest perestroika change all of us must make—as individuals, as families and in our work, whether in business, politics, or even the military.

Professor Steven Rockefeller, who coordinated the painstaking effort of gathering comments and input on the text from thousands of organizations and individuals all over the world over a five-year period, commented: “Interconnectedness and responsibility are the two main themes of the Earth Charter. The spiritual challenge facing us in the twenty-first century is to integrate the head and the heart, science and faith, and intelligence and compassion.”

Virginia Straus, director of the Boston Research Center for the 21st Century, described the extensive consultations on the Earth Charter held at the Center that have brought together diverse groups including Buddhist representatives from different traditions. She

said that at least one phrase from a consultation held at BRC had made its way through to the final text: “We must realize that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more.”

She also outlined the work being done by members of the SGI to spread awareness of the Charter, especially in the United States and Asia. This has highlighted the importance of linking Earth Charter awareness raising to practical projects and focused discussions on local social issues.

Ms. Straus read a message from BRC founder Daisaku Ikeda, in which he commented: “We can use the Charter as a tool for transformation—transforming first ourselves, then our families, communities, countries.... But we cannot do this if it remains on paper, filed neatly away. We must unwrap it, open it, paint its visions.”

All participants at the launch agreed that we are now entering unknown territory: how to put the Charter into action, what this will actually mean.

As an illustration of this, Jim Poirot of the World Federation of Engineers Organizations outlined the steps being taken to promote the Earth Charter among the federation’s 8 million members: 1) Ongoing involvement and input into the development of a living Earth Charter document; 2) Spreading information and raising awareness among members, through newsletters, etc.; 3) Expanding acceptance and agreement among members to support the Earth Charter; 4) Developing guidelines for use in the daily practice of engineering.

Mr. Poirot stressed that he is keen to get to the fourth stage so that the Earth Charter and its values can have a real impact on engineering practices. He hopes that in time engineers will know that they can be expelled from the federation for breach of such “sustainable development guidelines” as much as for breaches of safety regulations.

One whole region that is seriously considering adopting the Earth Charter and its values as a framework for sustainable development is Central Asia. Now in the process of the difficult transition from socialist, centrally planned economies to unrestrained free markets, some countries want to choose a third way by creating a territory of tolerance and sustainable development based on the Earth Charter. (This might involve Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Khazakstan and Kyrgystan.)

Dr. Parvez Hassan of the World Conservation Union (IUCN) described the links between the Earth Charter and the IUCN Draft Covenant on Environment and Development. He stressed the need for the Earth Charter to be supported by an internationally legally binding instrument on the environment and development. “It is only when the lofty principles of the Earth Charter become binding legal obligations and are implementable by people all over the world will the Earth Charter have achieved its full potential.”

A presentation was given by the local Indigenous People’s movement of the Netherlands, who presented a symbolic stone to the Peace Palace as a reminder of their harmonious value system and their support for the Earth Charter. The Charter seems to find immediate recognition among indigenous peoples, women and youth—perhaps because they are normally marginalized and feel that their voices are not heard. As a spokesman of the Earth Charter committee from the Dominican Republic said: “Ordinary people often understand and relate to the message of the Earth Charter much more than politicians do.”

As we strive to find new ways to put the Earth Charter into practice, the grassroots process of dialogue and awareness raising must continue. Resources are needed such as

trainers and curriculum materials, and the Earth Council is now acting as a clearinghouse to make such resources available on their Web site (www.earthcharter.org).

We are just at the start of a journey. And just as with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is over the next 50 years that this process will really take root and stimulate change. In the words of Dr. Parvez Hassan: “I have faith that, like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Earth Charter will unleash energies and expectations that will change human societies in their relationship not only to each other but also to our planet Earth.”