



Towards a New Earth Agenda

December 2022 TGCI Blog Post by: Khalid Malik

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The Earth Charter was launched in 1994 by Maurice Strong and Mikhail Gorbachev, in response to the call at the UN World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) for a new charter to guide the world's transition to sustainable development. The Earth Charter was presented as a declaration of fundamental values and principles. Initially a civil society initiative, the Earth Charter, over the years, found acceptance by people at large and much support from governments and international organizations alike.

The Earth Charter's preamble "we stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future." is even more urgent today. The world's failure to adequately address the COVID-19 Pandemic has revealed deep fractures in the international cooperation system itself. This failure forewarns similar worries in meeting the COP commitments on climate change or the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Development Agenda.

Today, even more than before, humanity faces a civilizational transformation. It must work from a planetary awareness of the Anthropocene era where humanity is placing undue stresses on the planet, to the issues affecting the wellbeing and health of the people themselves. More than before, this transition has to connect with people directly. People in the end through their commitment and behaviour drive life style adjustments and 'demand' political action. We need people themselves to become the leaders and drivers of such a change. Global networks and access to internet technology must be harnessed to promote action and values that contribute to this civilizational shift.

Earth is profoundly a public good, as is social cohesion and global sustainability. As a public good it needs collective action, requiring public policies and conducive environments that bring all forces of society together within the context of a global community. To preserve and protect our 'global commons' both public and private action now need to be sharply scaled up.

Human Progress and sustainability

Progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. It is the product of enhanced capabilities of individuals coming together in a functioning society. With the right policies and institutional and societal support much can be achieved.

Sustainable progress is also about equity: among people and between generations. High

inequalities hold back progress and undermine social cohesion. Sustainability in the end is about people-their choices and capabilities to live better lives. Protecting the environment can be viewed as a good in itself. A more fruitful approach, however, is to focus on the sustainability of people and their choices. Environmental degradation and climate change threaten the long-term survival of humanity. The challenge of sustaining progress is thus about ensuring that present choices and capabilities do not compromise the choices available to future generations.

The 2030 Global Agenda and the COP Agreements on Climate Change set out ‘what’ needs to be done to protect the environment and promote economic and social sustainability. This new Earth Agenda is about the ‘how’.

At the core of the 2030 agenda of course is the search for justice. Eliminating poverty, reducing inequality, addressing discrimination, are all connected and essential for a more sustainable global society.

The imperative now is to mobilize peoples’ collective energies and partnerships to deliver on this challenge.

The New Earth Agenda

The world today is much different from that of 1994. While there are new challenges-the rise of populism, the discordant rise of new global powers- there are new opportunities as well.

The world is more connected. Social media has enabled the building of new communities, but a new tribalism of self-directed groups has also emerged, splintering rather than unifying human populations. A message today can instantly connect billions of people. And platforms can be rapidly built to mobilize collective action, for good or for bad.

These new technologies and social media innovations need to be re-purposed for a sustainable new world-a world which itself is in the midst of great change. In a few short decades, we have seen a revamping and reorientation of relations between developed and developing countries and between the north and the south.

Today’s rise in populism is arguably connected to technological change and the ways globalization and the market economy have been practiced so far. Tribalism vs Globalism is a force that needs to be harnessed for good to promote civilizational transition to a safer, sustainable world.

A new Earth Agenda that educates and inspires people is essential in helping us move to an engaged ‘planetary’ awareness that supports the large behavioral and production changes that are now needed for a sustainable world. To transform, we need to find ways to transit from tribal-national thinking to a global consciousness in terms of awareness and accountability. There is after all only one earth.

Guiding principles

The New Earth Agenda must be guided by two fundamental principles:

Putting people first

The basic idea of human development is about promoting equal life chances for all. We have to recommit ourselves to the Kantian principle that 'all lives are of equal value', as also enshrined in the UN Charter.

Both economic and social policies influence people's life chances and capabilities. Pursuing the broader goal of equity and justice also reinforces social competences and deepens social cohesion. A sustainable society is one that seeks to advance everyone's life chances-from health, education, income, to safe neighbourhoods, all that is needed for people to live the lives they value.

How far policies and responsive systems of governance succeed in advancing the prospects of most members of society will determine whether social solidarity is enhanced and fragmentation avoided.

But we need to go a further step. Equal consideration for all however may demand unequal treatment in favour of the poor and disadvantaged. We have to accept that it is not possible to advance peoples' life chances fully or even adequately without taking into consideration the social context in which individuals and communities function in. Those furthest away need the most help.

Finding a balance between people and nature

We are at an unprecedented moment in the history of humankind and the history of the planet. Today in the Anthropocene era, humans are the dominant force in shaping the future of the planet. Warning lights-for our societies and the planet are flashing red. Systems are interconnected. Planetary imbalance and social imbalances exacerbate one another. Inequalities in human development have been increasing and continue to do so. Climate change is likely to make those worse.

A 'just' transformation that expands human freedoms and capabilities while easing planetary pressures is now required. Today, almost 80 percent of the world's people believe that it is important to protect the planet. But only half say that they are prepared to take concrete actions to save it. Norms, values, incentives, regulations, all have to adjust to reward sustainable behaviour and redefine what is considered a 'good life'.

Our Commitments

To a revamping of policy, in favour of people

However it would be a mistake to only 'fix' the politics. We have to recognize that rise of populism has been much influenced by 'economics', that people have been hurt by the way economic systems have evolved-in favour of elites, and those in power. In order to fix the 'politics', we have to 'fix' the economics.

We have to be prepared to respond to critical thresholds not only in climate change but also in social sustainability and culture. Inequality, insufficient social protections, all render people vulnerable and ill equipped for reversals in their situations and the rapid transitions that are now urgently needed.

We need to create a global culture of responsibility and protection.

To new measures of human progress.

GDP measures are inadequate, as they do not adequately capture what makes us human. Human development indices do better. But despite the many possibilities of 'big data' we need more relevant measures, tailored to the needs of the day. An urgent task now is to develop simple sustainability indices, which allows us to compare countries and situations as we track our collective progress towards greater sustainability

That explicitly put 'people at the centre of development'.

After all, as the first sentence of the 1990 Human Development Report highlights, 'people are the real wealth of nations'.

To respecting the environment

How we live, how we interact with our environment, has to become part of our new awareness.

We commit ourselves to finding a better balance between peoples' consumption habits, public goods and private endeavours. Current diets, rampant consumerism, excessive production, all produce large carbon footprints. Can we do better? Whether the answer is circular economy or concepts of sufficiency, we must recognize the problem and commit ourselves to more sustainable lifestyles.

We recognize that markets need to be influenced equally so that social responsibility and protecting the environment become part of market signals, where doing 'good' pays.

To 'demanding' actions that build solidarity.

The Earth Charter took six years to produce a document once the initial call was made. Today, there is not much time left as the window for us to move to a sustainable path rapidly closes. We need to move faster and engage people all over the world directly.

The situation today requires a 'Great Transformation'. To prevent a system collapse we need better communications that go beyond connectivity to an active solidarity since "we are all in the same boat."

To being an indivisible part of a global community.

And, that we all fundamentally commit ourselves to becoming the leaders of this great transformation.

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The Age of Global Protest

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Popular protests are on the rise, and they are increasingly going global. Over the past five years, popular movements demonstrating against fiscal austerity and corruption have brought down democratic governments from Europe and Latin America to Africa and Asia. Pro-democracy protests in authoritarian countries have also proliferated, with several having succeeded in ousting long-ruling leaders, as in Sudan and Algeria. Now the economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic, combined with the rise in energy and food prices caused by the war in Ukraine, are driving another wave of cost-of-living protests.

And with the advent of new communication technologies and media platforms, what happens anywhere can be seen everywhere. The messages and actions of pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong, for instance, inspired and guided demonstrators in other continents. The Black Lives Matter protests in the United States during the summer of 2020 were particularly resonant. Building on centuries of international abolitionist and anti-colonialist protest, the demonstrations—sparked by the May 2020 killing of George Floyd by a white police officer, who knelt on his neck for nearly eight minutes—spread rapidly around the world. In addition to standing in solidarity with U.S. protesters, demonstrators in Europe, South America and Asia connected the movement to their own experiences of colonialism, racism and state violence that have been perpetrated by their governments.

New communication technologies and media platforms are not only raising awareness. They are also enabling movements in different countries to learn from and engage with each other. The leaderless pro-democracy protest movement in Thailand was connected to groups guiding similar efforts in Hong Kong. There is some concern, though, that the ease with which protest methods and tactics can be shared might obscure the amount of work required to organize effective movements that can successfully achieve political change. As a result, nascent efforts could splinter or fail because protesters are not adequately prepared to maintain them, particularly when they are challenged by government forces.

Meanwhile, governments are actively looking to contain the rise in civil resistance, deploying violence, as in Myanmar and more recently Iran, to crush peaceful protests. During the coronavirus pandemic, many countries used pandemic-related restrictions on gatherings as a pretext to curb demonstrators and arrest activists and journalists—a strategy deployed from Algeria to the Philippines. Other repressive regimes, like Russia, Belarus and Saudi Arabia, target dissidents for

violence and abduction abroad, calling global attention to the practice known as transnational repression.

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