

Abelardo Brenes, Costa Rica. A thematic essay on responsibility to the whole Earth community and to promote the common good

Universal and Differentiated Responsibility



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Responsibilities for Peace and Sustainable Development. This document was presented to the General Assembly that same year by the Government of Costa Rica. He joined the drafting committee of The Earth Charter in 1998. Currently he is a Senior Advisor to the Earth Charter Initiative. He has directed several projects in Central America in support of peace-building processes in the region. He is now working with educators in diverse contexts in exploring the educational potential of the Earth Charter.

The principle of universal responsibility, stated in paragraph five of the Preamble of the Earth Charter, is of fundamental importance in meeting the critical challenges of the twenty-first century. It provides a necessary complement to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights' recognition of each person as a global citizen, worthy of equal respect and dignity on the part of the universal community of nations. From an ethical perspective, "universal responsibility" can be interpreted as having two key implications: each and every person is equally responsible to the whole Earth community, and the scope of our ethical responsibility impinges on our relationship to the Universe as a whole.

In Subprinciple 2.b, the Charter states as an imperative the principle of "differentiated responsibility": "Affirm that with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good." How can responsibility be common yet differentiated? On face value, it seems contradictory. The intended meaning of responsibility seems to be different – capacity to respond – given that the subprinciple states that the basis of differentiation *is* freedom, knowledge, and power.

These two meanings are complementary and of equal importance within the rationale of the Earth Charter for it to have practical utility in a world confronting the current "global situation" (Preamble, paragraph three) and the "Challenges Ahead" (Preamble, paragraph four). They pose, however, distinct implications, particularly from political and educational points of view. In particular, the political dimension of differentiated responsibility poses the seemingly intractable problem of the transmutation of "power."

The case for differentiated responsibility could rest on a principle of trans-generational justice. It can be argued that those individuals and groups who have accumulated more power throughout history by exploiting Earth's resources and the fruits of human labor have a proportionate debt to present and future generations within the context of our common good. This line of argumentation would flow from paragraph three of the Preamble: "The benefits of development are not shared equitably and the gap between the rich and poor is widening." It does not seem that this argument by itself will suffice, however, unless we are willing to accept further wars and strife. If it is true that "legitimated avarice" is the driving force of global capitalism (Wood, 2004), then any serious attempt to obligate the powerful will increase the existing trend towards what Hammond (1998) has described as a "fortress world."

An alternative approach is enlightened self-interest, as insinuated in the Charter's Preamble: "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" (paragraph four). Security-based motivations have proven to be effective in changing diverse domains of human behavior. The fundamental problem with this approach, even if coupled with the "debt" principle, is that change tends to be the minimum required to overcome perceived risks and is often too late. "As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise" (Preamble, paragraph one). This insight reflects our knowledge that problems of economic and social injustice, ecological (dis)integrity, absence of democracy, and violence are causally interrelated; and, their cumulative effect can lead to catastrophic changes. Security-

oriented approaches will likely provide, at best, an illusion of safety for those who believe they are protected within their fortresses.

The development of human virtues and altruistic motivations is a third way for voluntarily taking on differentiated responsibility. This rationale is also found in the Earth Charter's Preamble: "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" (paragraph four). Principle 2 provides an imperative describing the kinds of virtues and skills that we must nurture to fulfill such a vision of human development: "Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love". The challenge seems to be how to bring about such a profound cultural shift in the predominant models of human development oriented towards utilitarian and possessive individualism.

These three approaches are not mutually exclusive. My personal experience in educational work with the Earth Charter has led me to conclude that strategic combinations of these approaches, tailored to diverse educational target groups, are needed to effect change in conscientization and behavior within a universal/differentiated responsibility framework. The key problem is how to critically counter the globally hegemonic conception of power, as domination, to a new hegemony of power, as "understanding, compassion, and love" (Principle 2).

A starting point has been reflection on the relationship between freedom and responsibility. The dominant notion of freedom driving global capitalism is external freedom to accumulate wealth and power. As posited by Giddens (1991), in the external freedom dimension, "freedom from" oppression and exploitation provides the legitimate impetus for majorities of peoples towards emancipatory agendas for social justice. On the other hand, "freedom for" connotes the existential freedom enjoyed by emancipated peoples to define a life politics agenda that will give life a sense of mission. These two agendas can either be in conflict or can be harmonized. The key to what will be the final result is found in the inner dimension of freedom, as indicated in paragraph four of the Charter's Preamble: "We must realize that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more." The unanswered question, which to some degree is personal, is the meaning of "being more." We may agree, though, that the imperative of universal responsibility entails a notion of freedom from fears, compulsions, and other forms of alienation that are at the root of avarice and which impede the full flourishing of our human potential.

I have been engaged in diverse educational explorations based on the above reflections:

A substantive program carried out in Costa Rica throughout four years (1997-2001) based on universal and differentiated responsibility is described in Brenes (2004). It focused on a large, densely-populated, urban settlement with a reputation of being very violent. Educational interventions targeted community leaders, schools, and journalists, following an immersion approach (Evans, Evans & Kennedy, 2000). Changes included a reduction of violence in the community and a recognition in press reports and editorial analysis that the roots of the problems in the community were the common responsibility of the Costa Rican society and successive governments.

The M.A. in Peace Education at the University for Peace, which began in 2004, has provided an opportunity to explore diverse didactic approaches to the universal/differentiated responsibility issues. I am convinced that the rationale of the Preamble of the Earth Charter provides a promising guide for critical reflection and dialogue, and the result can be a commitment to its main body of principles. The opportunity to engage in dialogical processes of analysis of contemporary challenges in heterogeneous groups of students representing rich and poor regions, who also undertook immersion experiences of action-learning in poor urban settlements in San José, has offered insights into diverse reactions to such challenges. Whereas students from countries with similar problems could easily identify and transfer learning to their contexts, reactions from many of the students from wealthier nations illustrated the complexities and sensitivities involved in educating the non-poor to accept differentiated responsibility. Typical initial reactions of some students, who on surface level had manifested peace and justice-related values, have been: "I feel guilty, disempowered and there is nothing that I can personally do"; or "The challenges are so massive and the people in the wealthy countries are never going to change." In the longer run, our experience seems to indicate that a continuous process of immersion and action to foster "understanding, love, and compassion" for the oppressed, and those living in marginal environmental conditions, can gradually lead to significant changes.

The above experiences have confirmed that it is relevant which dimensions of the Charter's principles are given priority in both educational and policy contexts. When the priority is social and economic justice, particularly in heterogeneous groups such as the one characterized above, the result has been inter-group polarization and identity-related conflicts. When our approach towards universal responsibility is placed on an awareness of our place within the context of the history of our universe, and our potential life mission in the ongoing cosmogenesis, an awareness of our deeper unity ensues. Were we not all stardust created through the explosion of a super nova anteceding the Sun? This work has been aided by a permanent one mile long exhibit¹ of the evolution of Earth from a five-thousand million year perspective. The exhibit culminates with the first four principles from the Earth Charter and invites each viewer to ask, "where do we go from here?" This is then complemented with

reflection on one's life project within the perspective that a key dimension of universal responsibility is defining a life mission within an awareness of how past evolutionary history is implicated in one's existence, and how one's life can determine the lives of future generations.

Work is presently being undertaken exploring the use of the Earth Charter to link formal education and community-based education using the Earth Charter Community Action Tool (EarthCat, 2005). Interestingly, participants in this process have identified "personal peace" as a fundamental starting dimension. Seen from a systemic point of view, this makes sense. If individuals in key leadership positions are motivated by values such as those central to the Charter, and live according to them with integrity, the implications for a community or organization to move accordingly are very high.

Experiences with the latter two approaches provide support for a pedagogical rationale for fostering universal and differentiated responsibility by framing inquiry within the Earth Charter's concept of peace: "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" (Subprinciple 16.f). Reflecting deeply on this concept of peace and on the meaning of wholeness seems to tap into powerful aspirations within the human psyche to develop a cosmological sense of selfhood (see Naess, 1989; Harris, 1991) which provides the needed depth of commitment to the values and principles of the Earth Charter required for differentiated responsibility to flourish.

This inquiry can be linked to reflection on one's life project guided by the phrase "We must realize that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more" (Preamble, paragraph four). If one reflects on the relationship between "being more" and "being peace," a phrase introduced by Hanh (1987), within the framework of the Charter's concept of peace, this can stir the passion to plunge into the psychological substratum of universal and differentiated responsibility – that is to "Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love" (Principle 2). It is believed in the Buddhist tradition of the five wisdoms that a person with a developed consciousness can simultaneously see the equality and the uniqueness of all things. Seen from this perspective, universal and differentiated responsibility are inseparable. ●

Notes

1 *The walk thru time...From stardust to us*, originally produced by the Hewlett-Packard Company and later gifted to the Foundation for Global Community, in Palo Alto, California. They, in turn, authorized UPEACE to translate the exhibit into Spanish.

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