

Alliance for a Responsible, Plural and United World

Presentation of a Proposal for a Charter on Human Responsibilities

Background

"The Earth is our one and only, irreplaceable home. Humankind, in all its diversity, belongs to the living world and is part of its evolution. Their fates are intertwined".

These words prefaced an initial proposal for a Charter submitted in 1999 to different working groups of the Alliance for a Responsible, Plural and United World.

That point in the history of the Alliance's Charter was a milestone in a process of wide-ranging, intensive dialogue between those who shared not only grave concerns about the many crises confronting humankind, but even more, a resolve to unite with others in meeting the challenges of our time.

Discussions focused on the need for a Charter, its legitimacy, nature, who would endorse it, how it would work, and its ultimate place in civil society and at international institutional level.

All through the process, the 'text' proved to be a twofold 'pre-text' : it promoted intensive intercultural and interdisciplinary dialogue and was subject to proposals for changes.

Why another Charter ?

In 1993 the Alliance was launched with the publication of a founding text : "the Platform". It was a call to join forces "to overcome our feeling of helplessness" in the face of the major crises the world has to come to grips with : the divides between South and North, poor and rich, women and men, nature and human beings. The Platform played a major role in mobilising people across all continents to share experiences and ideas in many fields of human endeavour and to frame proposals for a life of dignity for human beings and the preservation of the planet.

During this first stage, it was borne in upon the discussants that the urgency of addressing the big challenges of the 21st century required a new social pact between human beings to seal their partnership in ensuring the survival of humankind and the planet. Such a pact should take the form of a Charter to be endorsed by citizens anywhere in the world and ultimately at international institutional level.

A "third pillar"

At present international life is underpinned by two pillars : the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, centred on the dignity of individuals and their rights, and the Charter of the United Nations which focuses on peace and development. These two pillars have been a framework and enabler of undeniable progress in the organisation of international relations. But these last fifty years have seen radical changes wrought to the world itself. Humankind now confronts new challenges. It is clear that the two-pillar framework can no longer get to grips with current and future changes.

The idea for a "third pillar", an "Earth Charter", focussing mainly on relations between humankind and the biosphere, first surfaced at the 1972 Stockholm World Conference. It was taken forward at the 1992 "Earth Summit" in Rio de Janeiro, but no Earth Charter finally resulted because governments could not reach consensus on a wording which truly addressed the challenges. Since then, there has been a flurry of drafts from various sources within (international) civil society, prompted by the widely-felt belief that a third pillar is now more urgently-needed

than ever, as the many initiatives to that end show¹. The Alliance made the collective drafting of a Charter one of its objectives.

Drafting process

The process of framing a Charter was an iterative one, based on the twofold imperatives of unity and diversity : to lay a common foundation for action while respecting the diversity of cultural, linguistic, economic, political and geographic contexts. This required a reciprocating scheme open to progressive convergence.

In the period running from 1995-1998 workshops were conducted in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe by André Levesque and his team. They aimed to work out common values and principles extracted from daily realities experienced in different societies. The result was a first proposal for a Charter (1999).

From 1999 to the end of 2000, the draft Charter was extensively tested out for its specific applicability in various professional fields of human activities and diverse cultural contexts.

Meanwhile a wide range of Alliance working groups were at work on proposals to address the new challenges of the 21st century in their field of activity.

The reactions to the 1999 draft Charter and these proposals led to the decision (2001) to redraft a final proposal for a Charter which would embrace both.

The drafting committee ²submitted its first draft to a Committee of Wise Persons ³ whose comments improved the text considerably. The final proposal for a Charter is being submitted to the Assembly of the Alliance held in Lille, December 2001. The participants will consider its relevance in their various contexts. Their comments will lead to a final version.

The voyage does not end in Lille

¹ Like-minded initiatives with which we are in touch:

- the Declaration towards a Global Ethics, drawn up by the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1994;
- the Universal Ethics Project being run by the UNESCO Division of Philosophy and Ethics, in the pipeline;
- the Universal Declaration for Human Responsibility, mooted in Vienna in 1997 at an Interaction Council Congress, signed up to by 25 eminent political personalities.
- the Earth Charter written jointly by the Earth Council (Maurice Strong) and Green Cross International (Mikhail Gorbachev).

We have been and will go on working to enrich ourselves from these initiatives and cross-fertilise with them.

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After the Lille Assembly, the Charter must make headway with civil society and hopefully at some stage among international institutions. The Alliance will continue the process of testing the text in terms of its relevance in various cultural contexts, and the applicability of the principles of the Charter for socio-professional groups.

The Charter : the core of the multifaceted whole of Alliance proposals

The Charter on Human Responsibilities is not self-contained. It highlights the essence of what the proposals drawn up by the Alliance working groups have in common : a call for awareness of the urgent need to assume (new) responsibilities at both the individual and collective level.

The guiding principles are offered as a possible common ground, a content, to be 'transposed' into different socio-professional fields and into different languages in culturally appropriate forms. To use a metaphor : this common ground can be seen as the roots of a tree, like a Banyan Tree, which produce a number of branches and new trunks containing the application of the proposed guiding principles in the variety of cultural contexts and fields of human activity.

Key features

The key features of the present Charter are the following:

- *It is a Charter of Humankind's Responsibilities vis-à-vis the challenges of the 21st century.*
- *It is not a document of the here-and-now, specific to one particular field of human activity. Rather, the Charter enshrines general principles, common to those who endorse them.*
- *The Charter is meant to serve as a basis for a new social pact creating new rules for each social and each professional group in their relationship with society. It aims to become a personal, political, institutional and legal framework.*
- *The general principles have to be culturally translated into a variety of contexts and gradually applied in specific spheres of human activity as guidance to their constituents (people, communities, socio-professional groups, governments, companies, etc.).*

Is "responsibility" a universal concept ?

Yes and no. As an ethical concept, the notion of responsibility is found among all human groups. There are differences, though, with regard to the way in which responsibility is assumed. In some societies responsibility is assigned to someone by a group rather than taken by an individual at his or her own

initiative. As a consequence, accounting for the way one uses one's responsibility may differ in practice. Where responsibility in a legal sense is concerned, the cultural differences are even more marked.

The crisis now facing humanity means that these differences have to be overcome. Just as the comity of nations in the world has accepted the idea of "Human Rights", the time has come for it to take on board the notion of "Human Responsibilities". Global cooperation and governance, indeed, are predicated on the possibility of universalizing certain ideas and principles which, from wherever they may originate, are considered beneficial to all humankind.

Responsibility for the entitlement to life

The magnitude of the social and environmental crises of our time have borne in on us that what is at stake is the very gift of life. Life is not created by human beings. They participate in it : it is the mystery that intertwines all that lives, that recreates itself in nature as well as within humanity and in the relationship between them. In the midst of its diversity, humankind has the common responsibility of safeguarding the entitlement to life itself.

A Charter posited on this awareness is "universal" in the real sense of the word : it touches on all that exists, the visible and invisible alike. It upholds something that is beyond human understanding and human engineering, but for which humanity as a whole is responsible. Inherent in this basic responsibility is the need to create and leave space to other people and other forms of life. How much space and how that responsibility is shared out will vary from one context to another, but everywhere they constitute an integral part of the entitlement to life.

It is this vision that inspired the following proposal for a Charter on Human Responsibilities.

Charter on Human Responsibilities

Preamble

Never before have human beings had such far-reaching impacts on one another's social, political, economic and cultural lives. Never before has humankind possessed so much knowledge and power to change its environment

Even with the immense possibilities opened up by these ever-increasing interrelations and humankind's new potential, unprecedented crises are emerging in many areas.

Widening economic gaps within and between nations, the concentration of economic and political power in increasingly fewer hands, threats to the diversity of cultures, the over-utilization of natural resources are creating unrest and conflicts world-wide and giving rise to deep concerns about the future of the planet : we are at a new crossroads in human history.

And yet, the social institutions which should enable these new challenges to be met are working less and less well. The pervasive power of international markets is undermining the traditional role of *states*. *Scientific institutions*, pursuing their highly specialised interests, are increasingly less concerned to analyse and address the interacting global issues that confront humanity. *International economic institutions* have failed to turn the rising tide of inequality. *Business* has tended to pursue its profit goals at the expense of social

and environmental concerns. *Religious institutions* have failed in their role of addressing the new challenges faced by our societies.

In this context, we all have a duty to assume our responsibilities at both individual and collective levels.

This Charter maps out what these responsibilities are and how they can be exercised. It is a first step towards developing a democratic global governance based on human responsibilities and a legal framework within which to exercise them.

Nature of responsibilities

The growing interdependence between individuals, between societies, and between human beings and nature heightens the effects of human behaviour on both their immediate and remoter social and natural environments.

This opens up new possibilities for each of us to play a role in the new challenges that face humankind: every human being has the *capacity* to assume responsibilities; even those who feel powerless can still link up with others to forge a collective strength.

All people are equally entitled to human rights, but their responsibilities are *proportionate* to their possibilities. The more freedom, access to information, knowledge, wealth and power someone has, the more capable they are of assuming responsibilities, and the greater their accountability.

Responsibilities attach not just to *present* and *future*, but also to *past* actions. The burden of collectively-caused damage must be morally assumed by the community concerned, and put practically right as far as possible.

Since we cannot know the full consequences of our actions now and in the future, our responsibility means also acting with great *humility, prudence and precaution*.

Exercising responsibilities

Throughout human history, traditions of wisdom - religious and otherwise - have taught values to guide human behaviour towards a responsible attitude. Their basic premise - still relevant today – was that *societal* transformation will not come about without *self* transformation.

These values include respect for all life and the entitlement to a life of dignity, choosing dialogue over violence, compassion and consideration, solidarity and hospitality, truthfulness and sincerity, peace and harmony, justice and equity, choosing the common good over self-interest.

And yet, there may be times when values have to be weighed against each other when an individual or a society faces hard choices, like the need to encourage economic development while being attentive to environmental protection and respect for human rights.

In such cases, human responsibility dictates that none of these imperatives should be sacrificed to any of the others. It would be self-defeating to believe that a sustainable solution could be found to issues of economic injustice and

disregard for human rights and the environment in isolation. Everyone must be aware of this interconnectedness; and although their priorities may differ due to their specific histories and circumstances, they cannot use those priorities as an excuse for turning away from the other issues at stake.

This is the thinking that lies behind the following guiding principles.

Guiding Principles for the Exercise of Responsibilities

1. Establishing *justice* must be part of the quest for *peace*.
2. Protecting *one's own freedom and dignity* means striving for the freedom and dignity of *others*.
3. Decisions taken on *short term* needs and priorities must anticipate and allow for their *long term* impact, and if they cannot, they must opt for an attitude of *prudence and precaution*.
4. The satisfaction of *human needs* must be balanced with the preservation of the *natural environment*.
5. The pursuit of *economic prosperity* must engage with the concern for an *equitable sharing* of wealth; *market* mechanisms must be regulated to work for the *well-being* and development of *all human beings*.
6. *Material* development, *research* and *innovation* must serve *human development* and the *preservation of the planet*.
7. In the quest for *unity* to meet the challenges of the future, the regenerative and innovative potential of *cultural diversity* must be conserved.