

MEETINGS WITH REMARKABLE EDUCATORS

PODCAST TRANSCRIPTION OF

Mirian Vilela

with host

Ba Luvmour

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Ba Luvmour: Welcome to ***Meetings With Remarkable Educators***. This podcast is brought to you in part by you, our friends and supporters at ***patreon.com/remarkableeducators***. Each podcast is a dialogue between me, Ba Luvmour, and an educator who sees the greatness in their students and touches the whole of their being. These educators defy generalizations. So here's a little bit about what they've done and how I know them.

Ba Luvmour: Today's guest is Mirian Vilela, who is part of the UNESCO Chair for Education for Sustainable Development, and with the Earth Charter at the UN chartered University for Peace in Costa Rica. Mirian's perspective on what is sustainability and what the Earth Charter really means is in my opinion transcendent to how people often think about sustainability, her words ring of a profound connectedness of life, self, education, environment, just wholeness. It's my great, great delight and my honor to bring Mirian to each of you today.

Welcome Mirian and thank you so much for joining *Meetings with Remarkable Educators*. Our podcast is graced to have you, so thank you so much.

Mirian Vilela: Thank you very much for the opportunity also to share and learn on this occasion.

Ba Luvmour: So I know that a center of your work is the UN Earth Charter, and I'm pretty sure our listeners don't know a lot about that. Can you give us a little background on that, and also tell us your involvement with it?

Mirian Vilela: Yes. So the Earth Charter is a movement, it's a global movement, but it's also an ethical framework of documents. It emerged out of the '87 Brundtland Commission report called, known as Our Common Future, and in that report the Brundtland Commission recommended the need of a new charter to guide states towards a more sustainable development in societies. And with that, there sort of became part of the agenda of the preparatory process to the Earth Summit, the UN conference on environmental development that took place in 1992. It was part of the initial negotiations, but there was no political agreement at that moment and occasion, and therefore the Earth Charter became after their summit, Citizen Society Initiative. So during most of the decade of the '90s there was a whole consultation process, dialogue multi-stakeholder, multi-cultural, multi-sexual dialogue around, what are the values

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and principles that should guide humanity towards this new era of new civilization towards a more just and sustainable role?

The Earth Charter is actually the outcome of that dialogue and consultation that took place around the world in the decade of the '90s. It was launched in the year 2000. And since then, since it was launched it became a global movement that involves individuals and organizations from different parts of the world, but also different education settings and different sectors that are using the Earth Charter in creative ways as an ethical reference, as an anchor, as an ethical framework, as a guide for decision making, or as an educational instrument. That's what the Earth Charter is, so a movement, and an education instrument, an ethical document.

Ba Luvmour: So there's actually a specific document. A charter implies that there are specific guidelines in the document, and so if we say we're part of this Earth Charter movement that means we've read, ingested, and said that document means that much to us.

Mirian Vilela: Correct. The document basically articulates a set of values and principles that we believe a large group of humanity share independently of geographically position, or culture, or religion, kind of values and principles, commonalities among human beings in terms of what do we think should happen, our aspirations for a better world. And yeah, it's a document. It's a document that articulates four parts, 16 principles. 16 principles organized in four parts. It starts with a preamble, and it ends with a conclusion called *The Way Forward*.

Ba Luvmour: So you said that many different types of organizations are part of the Earth Charter, are part of accepting the Earth Charter as moving their own missions forward. What kinds of organizations and countries are involved in this?

Mirian Vilela: The Earth Charter is active in around 89, 90 countries around the world.

Ba Luvmour: Wow, that's great.

Mirian Vilela: Yes. There are in all regions of the world, so in Latin America, in Africa, in Asia, in Europe, in North America there are registered activities with the Earth Charter. We have Earth Charter affiliates about a hundred affiliates around the world working in about 89 to 90 countries, and these are sometimes universities, schools, or local governments. Civil society organizations that basically looked at the Earth Charter, and adopted it, and decided to embrace it, and use it

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as their reference, anchor. We see the Earth Charter as an ethical compass, as a compass for decision making, as a compass for understanding where we are in this historical moment in human history, but also what's the direction we should take in our decision, our daily decisions, but also public and institutional decisions to insure ensure a more just and sustainable society.

Ba Luvmour: So is there communication among these different organizations around the world?

Mirian Vilela: Yes. It could be better.

Ba Luvmour: Always, right? That's true for everybody, isn't it?

Mirian Vilela: From time to time it's a lot of people, there's language divide. To give you an example, there's a very active Earth Charter group in Belarus. They're extremely active. They have been involved for over 15 years with Earth Charter. But they speak Russian in Belarus. Their English is very limited. It doesn't mean that they're not doing a great job. So we do communicate with them, but in a limited way, no? Sometimes it requires translation. There are organizations working with Earth Charter in China, Brazil, the United States, so it's also an issue of language, language divide, and language groups. We, as an Earth Charter International Secretariat, we function as a hub of this global movement.

Ba Luvmour: You're the Secretariat, you function as a hub? You personally or your group there?

Mirian Vilela: No, our group. We are based in Costa Rica, and we have an Earth Charter International Secretariat and also an education center, and as such we basically try to facilitate a process, a process of networking among active people. We try to collect stories of good practice. For instance, we have been trying to collect stories of how a group is using the Earth Charter in the UK, or how different groups is using the Earth Charter in Brazil, be it a school, a university, or even an enterprise. And therefore as an international hub of these global movements, we try to capitalize efforts, it is an issue of language and translations, and we try to collect these stories in a written format, but also in video format precisely to make it easier for people to get to know one another and what's going on.

Ba Luvmour: And I imagine from the different cultures that we get many different ideas of how to implement the charter, and so is there a

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cross-fertilization in which the ideas of each different place influence or inspire one another?

Mirian Vilela: I believe so. For instance, we have about three or four publications that collect cases of good practices, lessons learned of how a group in Mexico decided to use the Earth Charter in artwork and in art and education. So through, I think we have about over a hundred stories that we have collected. Stories that are written, in a written format, from all regions of the world and in all settings. We provide these stories precisely as a way to show different angles, different possibilities, and it's kind of cross-fertilization.

Ba Luvmour: Yes. And you specifically, what exactly are you doing? What is your role and your function?

Mirian Vilela: As the Earth Charter International Secretariat, I'm the executive director here. I help to facilitate the process and the engagements with this network of partner organizations. We basically spend a lot of time nurturing relationship, enhancing, and reaching out to new people, and collecting these stories. That's as Earth Charter International Secretariat.

But we also have an education center that is located at the University for Peace in Costa Rica. For many years we have ... Well, we have also set up a UNESCO chair on education for sustainable development with the Earth Charter. The purpose of the center and the UNESCO chair is to offer training and research. It's really to do training and research on values-based education, on the education for sustainable development that has a special angle on values and cultivating values of care and respect, and responsibility, which is at the core of the Earth Charter. We developed a number of courses and online programs in English, in Spanish, in Portuguese, and we offer the courses and research also in terms of what's going on around the world with this Earth Charter movement.

Ba Luvmour: And the courses are generally taken by whom? Who are the clients who actually go online or connect with you to take the specific courses?

Mirian Vilela: Educators. Educators in all settings. It could be educators from K-12, so primary and secondary education. Educators even in universities, so higher education. For instance, we currently have a group from a university in Kenya taking an online course with us. A number of university professors, K-12 educators, and also many people who are working in education in the non-formal education setting. So any professional who is willing to expand their view, or

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enhance knowledge on sustainability, or on pedagogical approaches regarding values and sustainability into education.

Ba Luvmour: And so I know our listeners and I'm certainly interested in how did you personally get drawn into this? How did you come to make this such a life work which is so touching and really heart opening for the rest of us?

Mirian Vilela: I think just by coincidence. It was never planned. My life is all about improvisation. My life is all about, be open to what's ... a lot of things that come our way. But of course, I did fall in love with working with people, people from all regions of the world, different cultures, different languages, different contexts, so it's hard not to fall in love with that at least from my perspective, no?

I was engaged, I was involved in the organization of The Earth Summit back in '92. I worked at the UN, and that's how I began to be involved in the theme of sustainability. So I was part of the organization of that huge historical conference that took place in June '92 in Brazil that really was a historical moment in terms of policy making, awareness-raising, commitment of politicians, but also different sectors of society. It was really the first time the UN historically, it was the first time the UN was opening the doors for non-state actors in a special way, in a different way, non-state actors meaning groups of interests that are not governments, no? It could be farmers, or business, or local governments, et cetera, youth groups, or women's groups. So I was involved in that '92 process that really put sustainability in the top of the agenda.

It was also an interesting time in terms of the fall of the Cold War, and new democratization in many places in the early '90s. I never stopped being involved in the role of sustainability. It's just that between more or less for the first 10 years, so '92 to 2002, I was more engaged or interested in influencing policy making and understanding sustainability.

Since the early 2000s, or since more or less 2000 gradually more to 2005, I became more and more engaged, involved, and interested not just in developing UN policies or government policies on sustainability, but really reorienting education and transforming education to be a space that would really cultivate values of care, responsibility, and respect, values of sustainability. How could we really bring values at the center of any education setting be it for children, or adults, for engineers, for lawyers? Because I think ... So anyway, I started being more and more interested in that, and I continue to be.

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- Mirian Vilela: The reason for that is mainly because I think we can have a lot of knowledge, and knowledge without character without values can actually be very dangerous and not very positive for the common good.
- We can see that with the growing grievances [sic], and really many even big decision makers that have a lot of education, we could even say quality education. So many people who are making a lot of bad decisions in the world is not because they're lacking education. And that's scary.
- Ba Luvmour: It is. So you mean something by sustainability that I wish I could find more and more of because certainly most of the environmental educators that I've come across in my career they mean simply and only a reorganization of how we deal with the natural resources. But you're actually to my ear, and I admit that I may be putting this into your words, but that there's a quality of self, of spirituality, a deeper sense of who we are that is really at the core of sustainability. Is that a fair paraphrase of what you're saying?
- Mirian Vilela: Yes, totally, totally. I think one of our biggest challenges is really to move away from these fragmented approaches to problems and challenges, and really reaching ... It's a change of mindset, no? We are all educated the way our organizations are set and organized. It's all in a reductionist way, in a fragmented way. Let's look at one thing, other one, a problem without seeing the connection with the other. So at the core of sustainability lies really the need to shift away these fragmented mindsets to a more systemic and holistic approach and mindset to life. That's how life is, so about interconnections, so about relationships.
- Ba Luvmour: I'm sitting here and I'm actually feeling pretty emotional listening because these are the words I've just yearned to hear. I ran a big learning center in a part of Northern California that's famous for its environmentalism, for bringing legal briefs all the way up to the Supreme Court in America to try to change logging practices. There was never the transfer of understanding to quality of self. It's always been a pain and a suffering in my heart that we don't understand, we don't stop and understand the natural unfolding of humans, we don't participate in ourselves as natural phenomena, and try to connect what you're connecting, which is the quality of self, and how we live in the world, and how we educate one another, and what that really means, that the heart of this whole process, and I'm just thrilled to hear your voice, so thank you so much for that insight, and to hear it, and the world.

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Mirian Vilela: No, I really, I feel good about the issue. I think there are more and more people in institutions that have embraced this sort of new education paradigm, doing education from different angle and approach, and really looking at the real purpose of education as being an instrument of social transformation not just an instrument to have someone have various skills to have more things in their lives, no? We have been myopic to believe that we go to better education, or we acquire education, or higher education with this lens of self-interest. And so I really want to demystify this and put the lens of responsibility with the common good.

Ba Luvmour: It's teaching story time. Briefly, teaching stories invite us to see the world with a new perspective often featuring a wise fool or trickster animal. They can be humorous with many shades of meaning shining through the story. I have told teaching stories for the past 40 years with great effect not only for the listener, but for me as I have learned so much about myself through recounting these stories.

Today's teaching story is entitled, “**Nobody Really Knows.**”

Suddenly realizing he did not know who he was, the wise fool rushed into the street looking for someone who might recognize him. The crowds were thick, but he was in a strange town and he found no familiar face.

Suddenly he found himself in a carpenter's shop.
"What can I do for you?" asked the craftsman stepping forward.

The wise fool said nothing.

Carpenter: "Perhaps you would like something made from wood?"

Wise fool: "First things first," said the wise fool. "Now, did you see me come into your shop?"

Carpenter: "Well yes, yes, I did."

Wise fool: "Good. Now have you ever seen me in your life before?"

Carpenter: "Never, never in my life."

Wise fool: "Then how do you know it is me?"

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Let's have some fun interpreting this teaching story. Become a Patreon supporter at [patreon.com/remarkable educators](https://patreon.com/remarkableeducators). And you'll have access to our detailed comments on how this story applies to education and parenting. Of course, that's just our perspective. The fun comes with community dialogue as the many shades of the teaching story come alive. See you there.

Ba Luvmour: In 1999, the UN, there was the *50th anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights*, and they realized, I guess, that they didn't include children in their comment. So they organized really around the world these conferences. There were four in the United States geographically. Josette and I were invited to the West Coast Conference. There was only about 20 people, which was nice. And the idea was, it was run by the head of *Amnesty International*, and the idea was, what should be in this document?

And so we broke up into small groups to talk about it, and what Josette and I said individually in each of our group was there needs to be this breakdown of separation, there needs to be a fundamental human right and it should still be for children to never believe that they're not separate. In other words, we're always interconnected. And that that can be brought forward in different ways at different ages, and so on, and anyone can do that, but you have to hold that at the core.

Unfortunately, at that time the issues were more like health care and food, and that sort of thing, which I agree. I mean obviously they're tremendously important. But that to me is the essence if we understand we're interconnected then from there ... And to me that's a natural capacity. It's we almost have to be educated to believe we're separate or what you call self-interest.

Mirian Vilela: Right, right. It's kind of a need to reeducate our minds, our hearts, and the way in which we relate to the largely remote. At the heart of the Earth Charter education because the Earth Charter really articulates this importance to expand our consciousness with regards to how we relate to the world, to the largely remote world. So at the core of the Earth Charter there is an ethic of care and respect not only among human beings but care and respect with the community of life. So just that calling, that invitation for us to lift up our eyes and see, "Oh, I belong. I'm part of a community of life, and what's that community of life, and to elevate, to amplify our sense of care and responsibility not only with my own self or my own closest community, but to expand that sense of community to

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the largely remote." I mean at the core of it is really an understanding of interconnectedness.

Ba Luvmour: Do you feel that core is fairly well understood by all the different organizations that you're affiliated with?

Mirian Vilela: Well, I certainly think that for those organizations and individuals involved with Earth Charter, that's what our worldview is. But certainly we have to acknowledge that that's not the mainstream thinking, and worldview either, and that's not what is really seen in the reality in the majority of places in the world. But I think that's what many different groups working not only with the Earth Charter movement, but also with movements that are very similar are working towards.

Ba Luvmour: Wow. So how would, let's say, people listening to us get connected to all this incredibly wonderful work that you're doing? What would they do? Would they go online and take a course? What if they wanted to form an organization? There's, my experience both in my teaching and my work with universities and different schools as well as listening to you is that there's more and more people who are getting the message, we might say. I'm always interested, there's a lot of people right on the edge. I work with people who are trying to move to non-traditional education to allow a greater sense of self to be part of a child's experiences.

So your work, and all that you're representing, and you're doing could be a wonderfully expansive part of it. I mean even for homeschooling communities, there's democratic schools, there's a huge network of international holistic schools.

I'll be speaking at a conference in Portland here in June where there will be non-traditional schools from around the world. How do we bring it forward? How do they map in here? We have to map in in my opinion, so tell us.

Mirian Vilela: Well, everybody that comes across the Earth Charter are obviously invited to use it, to make good use of it. Everybody's invited to go to our website, **earthcharter.org**, read the Earth Charter, get familiar with the world view that it's really articulating. I think more than really know the words and all the principles by heart is to get the essence, get really the spirits of the Earth Charter, and this general idea of what is this worldview that the Earth Charter is articulating.

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And then people are invited to adopt it, and incorporate it in their various areas of action, in areas of interest be it a school, or local community, or university, a research project. We do invite people to look at the examples that already exist. For instance, we have a number of schools around the world, here in Costa Rica, or in the UK that are using the Earth Charter in interesting ways, or universities, et cetera. We invite people to look around and see what others are doing.

We did develop a number of resource materials that are available on our website in our virtual library like how to bring the Earth Charter to education. There's a guide for using the Earth Charter in education settings. There's a teacher's guide book of how to use the Earth Charter. We have been in the process of updating many of these resources. We have a number of videos too.

So people are certainly more than welcome to use the resources that are available on our website, or to join one of our programs. We also have a program to engage young people, so there's a youth Earth Charter course online in English and in Spanish. The purpose of that course is basically to enhance ethical leadership in young generation using the Earth Charter as an instrument to sensitize and expand people's awareness and commitment to become ethical leaders. So we have a number of options on our website be it online course for young people and online courses for educators or our resources that are freely available on the website.

Ba Luvmour: And do you ever have a convocation of Earth Charter people to get together?

Mirian Vilela: Yeah, from time to time we do. We do that also online through webinars or from time to time face to face. In early 2019, this year we just had a conference that brought together with over a hundred people from different parts of the world that are researching or using the Earth Charter in different education settings. We offered three days as a space to share and learn from one another. There's kind of an Earth Charter educators network. We do offer that also.

Ba Luvmour: Well, I could go on for quite a while here. I think in terms of podcast time we're pretty close to our end. I would love to give you an opportunity, what message would you like to leave with our listeners? What would you like them to really know and walk away with?

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Mirian Vilela: I think I would like to invite people to think about the importance of social transformation. I think we all agree on social transformation. But I think my invitation is to look at ethics and values-based education as an instrument of social transformation, as an instrument to cultivate an ethic of care in the society that we all desire, no? A society that lives in a just and peaceful way. So I invite everybody to, I would say, to think in creative ways in contributing to this process of social transformation through the lenses of enhancing our character, our values, values that are related to the common good. And of course, invite people to look at the Earth Charter, and get familiar with it, and use it depending on their context as an instrument to clarify what are the values and principles of sustainability, but also as an instrument of education, of value clarifications in education.

Ba Luvmour: Thank you so much. Thank you. This is just ... I hope everyone listening, listens, share it; do whatever you have to do to get these wonderful words out into the world. Thank you so much Mirian.

Mirian Vilela: Yeah, thank you. Thank you so much for the opportunity. It was a pleasure to be here and learn also from you. Thank you.

Ba Luvmour: As a postscript, Mirian is one of the few people who actually asked deeply about my work and Josette's work and wanted to know us in a meaningful way before we even began the podcast. Fortunately, Demetri recorded it. And so here as a postscript is the conversation that Mirian and I had before the podcast began.

POSTSCRIPT:

Mirian Vilela: What were you doing before?

Ba Luvmour: What was I doing?

Mirian Vilela: Where are you based?

Ba Luvmour: Where am I based? In Portland, Oregon.

Mirian Vilela: That's East side, West side?

Ba Luvmour: West side, Northwest. Yes, it's very beautiful country just gorgeous, mountains, forests, really pretty.

Mirian Vilela: And you were working in education in the field of education?

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Ba Luvmour: Yes, I've spent my whole career in the field of education. In fact, it's only since we closed ... Josette, my wife and I have always worked together for 40 plus years, and it's only since we closed our last holistic school that we decided to go ahead and do a podcast (series) because we wanted to hear, we wanted to make sure everybody has a lot to say. I think one of the commitments we have to make that hasn't been made well, and I understand why, is allowing a lot more of our voice to be heard in a lot more venues and opportunities. It's just not done. There are so many great people really paying attention to what needs to be done.

But my primary work with Josette has been in holistic human development, and that's kind of how we got into all this because we looked at childhood, and then we looked at adults as well from a different lens. We looked at them through the lens of well-being, not pathology, and we asked ourselves the question, what are the natural capacities as they unfold? All life goes through life stages. So, what are the natural capacities, and how can we see them come into our humanity not just culturally or conditioned in that sort of way? It was startling relooking at how we develop and what we really mark as important at different times of life. And so we brought that forward in a very quiet way, and it was not well-received.

Mirian Vilela: No?

Ba Luvmour: Oh, no. It went against what most people believe is we should only look at behavior, we should separate out cognition, emotion, and behavior, all those kinds of events. That's wrong. We develop as whole people all at once. We don't develop in these separate events that are just convenient for a reductionist scientific approach. How can we step back and look at it through the child's eyes and *feel* through the child's heart and allow that to come forward? We then explored that very profoundly all the way through age 23.

Then Josette wanted...I don't know if you experienced Mirian, but Josette experienced a lot of disrespect as a woman in the field. She didn't have all the degrees other people had and that sort of thing. So she said, and it was personal for this as well for her, she said, "I'm going to go back and get a PhD." And in it what she studied, and this is what I think is fantastic is, what happens to adults when they engage children from the perspective of holistic development? That is instead of the conditioning and the adult expectations, but we really understand that children organize the world different ways, and we provide those learning relationships, opportunities, what we came to call nourishments at those different moments,

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what happened? And we thought, "Well, there'd be some increased emotional complexity perhaps or whatever."

But the committee said that her research indicated that adults who really participated with their children in this way including educators actually grew in wisdom. This was a really kind of very intense high-end academic place, *Fielding Graduate University*. And so that was another boost. I mean, yeah, wow, let's stop and look at it. We're not really talking about what you can do for your children, but we're talking about a bidirectional development in which we're growing together, which is the name of her book, so that she made her thesis into a book, so that in that we can participate in a completely different way in which there's an opportunity for relationship and mutual growth. That really kind of filled out our work, and then we became popular. We were in Mexico, and England, and all kinds of places, and giving talks and seminars for many, many, many years.

Then we developed a learning center, which included outdoor education, and family based programs. That was very successful for 17 years. And then I didn't want to be an administrator 'cause I love to work with people, so we let that go. There were other reasons too. We started a couple schools and those did okay. And then we said, "Nah, that's good enough." Let's bring it forward in a new way, which is we want to know who else ... We knew a lot of people from conferences and those kinds of things, but we wanted to also get to meet and help bring together these diverse voices, which are really saying the same thing. I think we are, and that's how we met Sam, and then we met so many others. It's just been great. It's just been really great.

Actually out of this now has come an organization that's based out in Texas that we're part of that is going to give accreditation to non-traditional education organizations. [*The International Council for Accrediting Relationship-based Education (ICARE)*]. We think that's so important because it allows people to feel more confident to participate in non-traditional education, and also allows them to qualify for grants, and all these different ways. In other words, it improves their income streams. So we've been part of that growing now too, and it's moving ahead. It's moving ahead nicely. More and more just we need to form a web that's really strong, and these podcasts are a small part of it.

Mirian Vilela: I like to hear that.

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Ba Luvmour: So we've been on the front lines, and all of our work has also been formulated out of fieldwork not just research. I mean we do all the research, but the fieldwork, being with kids, being with parents, being with people, that's been at the center of our work for all these 40-plus years now.

CLOSING:

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Our sound engineer is Demitri Young. Our webmaster is Nathan Young. Transcription and production is by Josette Luvmour. All podcasts are transcribed with show notes and can be found at **remarkable-educators.com**

This is Ba Luvmour reminding you that, holistic relationships with children leads to joy and self-knowledge with the adults in their lives. With respect for you and for children everywhere.
See you next time.

RESOURCES:

Book:

The Earth Charter, ecological integrity and social movements. Westra, L., & Vilela, M. (Eds.). (2014). New York: Routledge.

"The Earth Charter is a declaration of fundamental ethical principles for building a just, sustainable and peaceful global society, with ecological integrity as a major theme. This book provides a series of analyses of ecological integrity as it relates to the Earth Charter, social movements and international law for human rights. It is shown how the Earth Charter project began as a United Nations initiative, but it was carried forward and completed by a global civil society initiative. The book also shows the strong connection between ecological integrity and social justice, particularly in the defense of indigenous people, and includes contributions from both the North and the global South, specifically from Central and South America."

Websites:

The Earth Charter

Values and principles to foster a sustainable future

earthcharter.org

ICARE – International Council for Accrediting Relationship-based Education
<http://www.enlightignite.com/>

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