

## **2025.07.26\_UNAAQ\_EarthCharter\_Report by Fien Van den Steen**

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As [United Nations Association of Australia](#) Queensland [Earth Charter International](#) representative, I attended the Earth Charter +25 Conference in The Hague, in the Netherlands, from 1-3 July 2025. Over 3 days, 340 participants from 35 countries, together with 92 speakers gathered around Earth Charter, a document created decades ago, but that has never been more relevant than today. It was "a gathering rooted in hope, action, and global solidarity", because "we cannot leave this mess to our children." The conference wasn't just a commemoration of the history of the document, it was an expression of hope, action and gathering momentum for the present and future, to generate "a new era of peace, justice, and ecological integrity".

### **War and peace**

Chaotic times as today where the foundations of human and ecological integrity are shaken because of trespassing of the planetary boundaries and the boundaries to human rights, geopolitics, war and peace, the world needs to re-align with what is right to do, instead of flying dark out of fear, despair or angst for the unknown.

*Co-existing systems that thrive and flourish together*

Unfortunately, in a time when we need to stand together against the collective treat of environmental degradation and climate change, polarisation and war are pitting people against each other and against nature. However, if we degrade the soil, pollute the waters, the air and destroy the forests, the biodiversity, those parts of the planet that provide us food, fibre, shelter, oxygen and water, then what will be left when the wars are over, when the peace returns?

Let's focus on regenerating our ecosystems and our societies together, in tandem, not as two separate entities that can be traded off to one another, but as co-existing systems that thrive and flourish together.

### **Human Rights Charter and Earth Charter**

To that end, the Earth Charter provides us a set of ethical principles to guide decision-making when we sail through unknown waters, a moral compass that helps us to navigate the current challenges and guide us towards the future we need. It provides us a compass, rooted in intergenerational justice, rights of nature, planetary ethics, and business values for a regenerative future. Similar as the Human Rights Charter helps us navigate policies and take the right decisions and actions, so does the Earth Charter help us navigate sustainability policies and ensure we create

synergies between ecological and ethical integrity, between planetary and societal wellbeing.

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After all, 'sustainability' isn't a tick-of-the-box, it isn't an add-on, it is a mindset, a way of being and thinking and an ethical imperative that goes beyond 'survival' of all species on this planet. It aims to ensure that all species 'thrive' and flourish with dignity, justice and peace. Freedom and peace are not merely the absence of war and conflict, but the ability to live a flourishing life to one's full capacities. To that end, peace, environmental, social and economic justice and flourishing co-exist harmoniously rather than being traded off.

## 10 Key Take Aways from Earth Charter +25

Below I wrap up my key take aways of the 3 days conference. 10 key take aways to enable the Earth Charter to navigate these times

*Our cathedral thinking combined with interconnectedness and a moral compass, can enable us to create the future we want. Today.*

1. **What is Earth Charter?** Like the United Nations' Human Rights Charter forms the backbone and ethical framework for all global, national and local policies related to human wellbeing, the Earth Charter forms the backbone and ethical framework for environmental wellbeing, but it is more ... it provides a simple set of principles to enable all ecosystems, societies and economies to flourish harmoniously, it helps us understand what environmental justice is. The 16 principles are grouped in 4 topics: **Respect and care for the community of life, Ecological integrity, Social and economic justice, and Democracy, nonviolence and peace**
2. **Why Earth Charter?** Earth Charter provides an ethical framework without which we would not achieve anything in international policy and law. It guides ecological and ethical literacy that reminds us 'why' we act and inspires us to create transformational change rather than applying tokenism when implementing international laws such as the UNFCCC Paris Agreement and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. It motivates environmental stewardship and leadership.
3. **How Earth Charter?** 25 years ago, the Earth charter was created through multicultural and multisectoral consultation and collaboration merging the Green Cross and the Earth Council, bringing East and West, North and South together. The first draft was published at the UN Earth Summit in 1992, and in 2000 it was finalised and implemented. Since then, countries, businesses and education institutions across the world have implemented the Earth Charter in their daily operations, as a way to think, lead and act.
4. **A matter of Peace and Justice.** Earth Charter was signed 25 years ago in The Hague, the Peace Palace, where the International Court of Justice (ICJ) is based. Justice is foundational to the aims of Earth Charter, because justice, peace, societal and planetary wellbeing are intrinsically connected. They enable and reinforce each other,

or in their lacking, they undermine each other. Peace is not just the absence of war, but the ability to live life to one's full capabilities. Therefore, justice isn't only a moral choice, but a principle of survival. Moreover, as Sam Crowell said, "peace is the wholeness that comes from the right relationships with ourselves, with each other and with the earth, and with the larger whole." Peace is not just the title of the Peace Palace or the task of the ICJ, it is to be built every day through our actions.

5. **A Compass.** Daily actions and decision-making can be fatiguing and confusing, especially in these times of rapid and often destructive change. Therefore, Earth Charter was created as a set of principles that form together a moral compass, instead of being prescriptive or dogmatic. Like the Human Rights Charter, it can guide decisions towards a just and sustainable destination. It enables integrity and counters tokenism or decision-fatigue. Rather than being overwhelmed by the current challenges and changes, it enables us to stay on track to what we think to be a just world. Earth Charter provides an ethical framework that is constructive and visionary.
6. **From Hope to Action.** Earth Charter is about turning consciousness into action. It isn't based on a naïve optimism of an unattainable vision. It works towards the actionable hope of a future that we need and can create today. When faced with systemic challenges, from geopolitics to planetary crises, people tend to go through different phases in the present before they can create the future they want out of the changed present. From denial and withdrawal, people move up towards actionable hope. Hope as a blend of anger with the way things are, and courage to make the change. Earth Charter was created in a time of hope and optimism, after the end of the Cold War, when the focus was on renewal, a new future, a focus away from destructive war to constructive envisioning. Today we seem to be back to the decades just before that period of optimism: states act as if International Law does not apply to them, eroding the legitimacy of and the confidence in International Law and international institutions such as the United Nations. At the same time, we are trespassing the planetary boundaries and hitting annually the warmest year on record. In these turbulent times we tend to restore in withdrawal, denial, inaction, and even despair; it all seems above our heads and we cannot make the difference. But we can; as history has proven time and time again. If we can move from this paralysis into actionable hope, we can create systemic change, guided by the principles of Earth Charter, that the world we want is not only a vision, but a possible scenario that we can create together, if guided by a new set of ethical principles.
7. **Ethical and Ecological Literacy.** Ethical and ecological literacy is the understanding of the interconnectedness between ecological systems - the interdependence of living organisms, ecosystems and how our activities affect them - and ethical principles - focused on the sense of moral obligation towards future generations and the environment, beyond the self -. Beyond pure knowing, it induces stewardship, an ethical way of thinking and being that guides our actions to minimise the negative impact on the environment and promote the long-term well-being of all ecosystems and societies.
8. **Intergenerational and intercultural.** This next level of integrity requires the integration of different perspectives, inter- and intragenerational, inter- and intracultural. It requires countering the current escalating polarisation in the Western world where generations and cultures, nature vs humans, are pivoted against each other, while we are all connected and have different perspectives, wisdoms and knowledge to contribute. During the conference there was a lot of emphasis on intergenerational and intercultural justice, collaboration and dialogue, a foundational peace that brought and keeps Earth Charter into life.

9. **From transactional commodity to relational community.** Often today's problems are blamed to the anthropocentric world view, whereby humans are seen as separate and better than nature, whereby all elements including other people are seen as 'other' commodities that are to be traded, transact and discarded. Whereby a worldview based on ratio and brainpower solely governs the human dimensions of the heart and hands. An alternative worldview based on ethical and ecological integrity does not 'other' but include, does not commodify, but build community, does not trade but relate. It is this shift in thinking whereby other species, other individuals and other communities (ecological or human) are seen as parts of the whole that are related to each other, and hence of which the wellbeing of the sum depends on the wellbeing of the parts and the whole. Ecological and ethical integrity regenerates this relational worldview that was part of human communities before the episode of colonial capitalism applied 'divide et impera' to separate humans from humans, humans from nature and nature from nature. This can be enabled by reintroducing the heart and hands dimension into education, beyond the 'head' only. In business it means ethical and ecological stewardship instead of commodification of resources. In politics it means applying systems and futures thinking, advancing the whole in time, space and across systems, rather than short-sighted gains for a few that trade off the long-term wellbeing of the whole.
10. **Togetherness.** Living according to these principles, requires and brings a form of togetherness and wholeness. After all, we are one planetary community that flourishes together. Instead of the divide et impera paradigm that has polarised and separated us from nature, us from each other, us even from ourselves, we need a return to unity because *El pueblo unido jamás será vencido*. Together we can create a moonshot mission for the planet, invigorate the ethical and planetary integrity within which we all thrive. Our cathedral thinking combined with interconnectedness and a moral compass, can enable us to create the future we want. Today.

