

The Challenge of Global Empowerment: Education for a Sustainable Future (July 2002)

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The Need for Change

More than ten years have passed since the holding of the Earth Summit in Brazil, an event that sparked sharply increased awareness of the need to protect the global environment. Since then, the term "sustainable development" has become an integral part of our vocabulary, and on certain fronts progress has been made. Overall, however, the agreements reached in Rio have not been kept and the progress that has been made is not keeping pace with the degradation of Earth's life systems. It is clear that we cannot permit this situation to continue further into the 21st century.

Resolving this crisis will require the commitment of more knowledge, technology and funds. But what is even more fundamentally lacking in my view are such intangible elements as a sense of solidarity and common purpose with our fellow inhabitants of Earth, and a real sense of responsibility toward future generations.

In June of this year, I had the opportunity to meet with Mr. Tommy E. Remengesau Jr., president of the Republic of Palau, an island nation often described as a jewel set in the Pacific Ocean. At that time we discussed the environmental crisis and President Remengesau shared his deep concerns. "Global warming," he said, "is an extremely serious issue for the people of Palau. Ocean levels have risen and salt water is invading the

aquifers. The natural beauty of our islands is threatened. El Nino has caused the rains to fail and the destruction of our coral reefs is progressing. Greatly increased water temperature has caused the coral to turn white and die...." The president also mentioned that Palau is actively engaged in researching and introducing alternative energy sources that reduce hothouse gases. The times demand this kind of active response--this refusal to be a passive observer or victim of circumstances--not only at the governmental level, but also at the grassroots level of civil society.

In the film "A Quiet Revolution" which was produced by the Earth Council specifically for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), inspiring examples of such action are presented. These include people's responses to the problem of water resources in Nimi Village in India and to the threat of persistent organic pollutants in Zemplinska Sirava lake in Slovakia, as well as the example of women who have stood up to protect the forests of Kenya. Our organization, Soka Gakkai International (SGI), supporting the objectives of this film, cooperated in its production. This is because we believe that the theme running through the film--that a single person can change the world--is the message of courage and hope most needed in these difficult times.

One of the goals of the WSSD is to draft and adopt a plan of implementation that will serve as the basis for making the 21st century an era of creative coexistence between humans and nature. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has emphasized that the summit will serve as a litmus test for countries' resolve to act. The success of the summit will hinge on developing a constructive discourse that transcends conflicting national interests and focuses on the good of the entire planet and the whole of humanity.

As part of our efforts to support the WSSD, I offered, in a proposal written earlier in the year, three suggestions for possible reform of the international

system relating to protection of the environment. The first is the appointment of a UN high commissioner for the environment to exercise clear leadership and initiative for global environmental problems. The second is the phased consolidation of the secretariats overseeing the implementation of various environmental treaties, linked to the establishment of a global green fund. The third is the adoption of a convention for the promotion of renewable energy resources.

At the same time, I stressed the need to raise consciousness and change our basic ways of thinking about the environment. In addition to "top-down" reforms, such as the legal and institutional measures outlined above, any lasting solution will require commensurate "bottom-up" reforms that build and strengthen solidarity at the people's level. These are the two interlinked prerequisites of change on a global scale. In this proposal, I would like to focus on the question of how to forge global popular solidarity toward resolution of the global environmental crisis.

International Decade of Education for Sustainable Development

If people are to take environmental issues as their personal concern, and to harmonize their efforts for our common future, education is vital. Only education can provide the driving force for such a renewal of awareness. For this reason, the SGI has proposed the establishment of an international decade of education for sustainable development to follow the UN Decade for Human Rights Education from the year 2005. The objectives of the decade would be to promote education as the basis for a sustainable human society and to strengthen international cooperation toward the dissemination of environmental information. At the WSSD PrepCom IV, held this past June in Indonesia, this proposal was included in the draft plan of implementation.

The importance of education for sustainable development was clearly stated in the Agenda 21 plan of action adopted at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. At the heart of this concept--as stressed in the 1997 Thessaloniki Declaration of the International Conference on Environment and Society--is sustainability. In the words of the Declaration: "The concept of sustainability encompasses not only environment but also poverty, population, health, food security, democracy, human rights and peace." Because environmental issues are so deeply interlinked with these global issues, their resolution requires a fundamental rethinking of our way of life--as individuals, as societies and in terms of human civilization itself.

In this sense, I think the decade of education for sustainable development should be promoted with the following three goals in mind:

To **learn** and deepen awareness of environmental issues and realities.

To **reflect** on our modes of living, renewing these toward sustainability.

To **empower** people to take concrete action to resolve the issues we face.

To Learn

It is essential to deepen understanding and awareness. Everything starts from grasping basic facts: the amount of the world's forests that have been lost, for example, the degree of pollution of the air, water and soil, and the overall impact on the global ecosystem.

We also need to understand the causes and social structures driving environmental destruction. And beyond that, we need to learn to empathetically understand the realities of those who suffer, embracing their pain as our own and conscious of our interconnectedness. Such an effort will give birth to renewed awareness and determination to act.

It is vital to incorporate such efforts particularly into the early years of the school curriculum, the stage of growth when children are most rich in their sensitivity, imagination and creativity, when their desire to learn and absorb is at its height. A number of countries already promote environmental education as an integral part of their school curriculum. To cultivate in children's hearts the desire to treasure nature and protect the Earth is a vital step toward protecting their future.

At the Kansai Soka Junior High School, students have been participating in experiential learning, filming the Earth from the space shuttle and international space station as part of NASA's "EarthKAM" program. As founder of the school, I have been moved and impressed by the educational impact of the children visually confirming evidence of the global environmental crisis through this process.

For some years, I have called for a World Summit of Educators that would bring together not only those responsible for educational policy in each country, but also those engaged on the front lines of education. At the start of the decade of education for sustainable development (2005) it would be good to hold an international conference where educators from throughout the world could exchange ideas, experiences and best practice in this area.

At the same time, it is also important that grassroots movements develop opportunities that encourage a deeper understanding of the global environmental crisis. It was to this end that the SGI organized the exhibition "Toward a Century of Hope: Environment and Development" as an official side event of the Rio Earth Summit. In the United States, SGI-USA has created a traveling exhibition "Ecology and Human Life" and the Soka Gakkai in Japan has developed the "EcoAid" exhibition. These efforts, held in cooperation with other NGOs, seek to contribute to public education and enhance awareness at the grassroots.

To Reflect

Together with the provision of accurate information, it is crucial that the ethical values we share are clarified. This is particularly important in the case of environmental issues, which can be so vast and complex that information and knowledge alone can leave people wondering what this all means to them, and without a clear sense of what concrete steps they can take. To counter such feelings of powerlessness and disconnection, education should encourage understanding of the ways that environmental problems intimately connect to our daily lives. Education must also inspire the faith that each of us has both the power and the responsibility to effect positive change on a global scale.

The Thessaloniki Declaration states that "Sustainability is, in the final analysis, a moral and ethical imperative in which cultural diversity and traditional knowledge need to be respected." We can learn from the rich spiritual heritage and diverse cultural traditions humanity has fostered over history. From these we can gain precious lessons and philosophical insights into how best to live as human beings.

The Earth Charter, whose drafting was promoted by the Secretary-General of the Rio Earth Summit, Maurice Strong, and Green Cross International President Mikhail Gorbachev, compiles and melds together these many different sources of wisdom. Its four pillars are: 1) respect for all life, 2) ecological integrity, 3) social and economic justice and 4) democracy, nonviolence and peace. The Earth Charter offers a comprehensive overview of the values and principles needed for a sustainable future and as such is an invaluable educational resource.

In addition to its content, the manner in which this "people's charter" was drafted is significant. In the drafting process, efforts were made to incorporate the essential wisdom of cultures and traditions from all regions

of Earth. The language of the drafts was patiently deliberated by experts as well as by many people at the grassroots. To date, the SGI has held workshops and symposiums around the world in an effort to promote and introduce the Earth Charter principles at the grassroots level. I would hope that many efforts would be made to learn from the Earth Charter, in programs that link its principles to the specific issues of different communities and their schools.

One of the themes of the Kenyan Green Belt Movement is that the desert does not come from the Sahara, it begins in our backyards. Based on a sense of responsibility toward the future, mothers and children involved in the movement have planted and cared for some 20 million trees. I understand that children who have planted trees often enjoy friendly competition, pouring their love and concern onto the saplings, vying to see whose will grow fastest. Efforts such as this are very significant because it is through such experiences that people--and young people in particular--come to grasp the concrete realities of their community and to sharpen their awareness of the global environment.

The founder of the Soka Gakkai, the Japanese educator Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871-1944) described the local community as the world in miniature. He stressed the importance of opening children's eyes to the world through learning rooted in the local community--the place where history, nature and society intersect.

I believe that this kind of cyclical movement--viewing the world from the perspective of the local community, looking at the community through the lens of the world--is vital if we are to develop an ethical understanding and appreciation of nature that is truly rooted in the felt realities of daily life.

To Empower

Thirdly, people must be empowered with courage and hope if they are to

take those first concrete steps. Even if we establish agreed-upon ethics and paradigms of behavior, unless an increasing number of people embody and practice these in their lives, the severe realities we face will not change. In other words, if ethics are seen as merely a set of guidelines to be passively followed, an obligation imposed from without, bearing little connection to our individual lives or will, they will not enable us to respond robustly to changing circumstances. They will be abandoned in the first crisis.

It is for this reason that environmental ethics must be felt as a deeply personal vow and pledge, the fulfillment of which provides us with an inexhaustible sense of purpose and joy.

At present, I am engaged in an ongoing dialogue with the environmental economist and futurist Dr. Hazel Henderson. She has spoken of her own inspiration to act, drawn from her efforts to protect her daughter from the hazards of air pollution. "Most of us who started to work on the 'Citizens for Clean Air' campaign were mothers," she says. "Since we knew what a big task bringing children up is, we were anxious for our children to have the best futures possible. Thinking back, I realize that's what gave us the strength to endure all kinds of persecution and see the fight through to the end."

To be effective, ethics must be charged with this kind of natural and spontaneous sentiment--the irresistible impulse to act that moves us when we see the people and the world we love exposed to danger. Living ethics such as these are truly integrated into the very fiber of our humanity.

What, then, are the values that can serve to truly unite humanity, to link ordinary citizens in genuine solidarity? At the very heart of the values we seek must be a profound reverence for life itself. Such a sense of respect and reverence can awaken people to a sense of connection with all the

forms of life with whom we presently share this Earth, as well as a sense of oneness with future generations.

This appreciation of the unity and connectedness of life has been a part of many cultural traditions since ancient times; it has been passed on and continues today in many indigenous cultures. It is vital that humanity as a whole humbly attend to this living wisdom. For example the Desana people of the Amazon say that human beings cannot live in isolation and they can only thrive in harmonious coexistence with their environment. The Iroquois people of North America exhort us to make all decisions keeping in view "not only the present but also the coming generations, even those whose faces are yet beneath the surface of the ground--the unborn of the future." In this worldview, all animals and plants are seen as siblings.

A Contributive Way of Life

This reverence for life is also stressed in many religious traditions. In the Buddhist tradition that inspires the activities of the SGI, we find these words: "May all beings, those who can be seen and those who cannot be seen, those who live far away and those who live nearby, those who have been born and those still desiring to be born, may all living beings enjoy happiness!"

These words are rooted in the view that all life is interconnected and mutually supporting--a relationship described as "dependent origination" in Buddhism. What is key here is the understanding that the desire for happiness lies at the very heart of our interconnection. It is for this reason the teachings of Buddhism stress our role as the protagonists of positive change. While recognizing the influence of our surroundings on us, the focus is on our active and conscious engagement with our environment and with other forms of life. The powerful will that drives this dynamic process of change is the concern and compassion we muster for others.

Through dialogue and engagement, we draw forth and inspire in ourselves and in the lives of others a profound sense of purpose and joy. We begin a process of fundamental change that awakens a vastly expanded sense of identity--our "greater self." The ultimate objective of SGI's activities is to bring about--starting with a reformation or "human revolution" in our individual lives--a universal flowering of the philosophy of reverence for life.

In his 1903 book, *The Pedagogy of Value-Creating Education*, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi called for a fundamental transformation in the way people live their lives. He decried a passive, dependent way of life, and declared that even an active, independent way of life is insufficient. Instead he called for a consciously interactive, interdependent mode of existence, a life of committed contribution.

A passive and dependent way of life lacks a clearly defined sense of self; we live at the mercy of changing circumstance. An independent mode of living may manifest a clear sense of individual self, but lack awareness of the realities and needs of others. In contrast, a contributive way of life is based on an awareness of the interdependent nature of our lives--of the relationships that link us to others and our environment. It is a way of life in which we actively strive to realize happiness both for ourselves and for others.

Such a way of life is centered on what we now call empowerment, in particular through the kind of dialogue that unleashes our vast inner potential, inspiring people to work together for the peace and happiness of the entire global community.

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dormant human potential to the fullest."

Here I am reminded of the words of Aurelio Peccei, cofounder of the Club of Rome, whose report *The Limits to Growth* awakened the world to the environmental crisis. In a dialogue we shared, Dr. Peccei stated: "The gamut of still dormant capacities available in each individual is so great that we can make of them the greatest human resource. It is by grooming and developing these capacities in a way consistent with our new condition in this changed world--and only in this way--that we can again put a modicum of order and harmony in our affairs, including our relations with Nature, and thus move safely ahead."

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No matter how complex global issues may seem, we must remember that it is we ourselves who have given rise to them. It is therefore impossible that they are beyond our power as human beings to resolve. Refocusing on humanity, reforming and opening up the inner capacities of our lives--this kind of individual human revolution can enable effective reform and empowerment on a global scale.

To express my heartfelt wishes for the success of the WSSD, I would like to share these words of my dear late friend, poet laureate of Denmark, Dame Esther Gress.

*If you want to change the world
you must change man.
If you want to change man
you must make him want to change.*

--Esther Gress (1921-2002)

And I would like to offer these words of the renowned Nigerian writer, Ben Okri, from his poem dedicated to the new century.

*You can't remake the world
Without remaking yourself.
Each new era begins within.
It is an inward event,
With unsuspected possibilities
For inner liberation.*

--Ben Okri (1959-)