

Charter of Human Responsibilities

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Résumé

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Alliance for a Responsible, Plural and United World

Presentation of a Proposal for a Charter of Human Responsibilities

Concept, content and drafting process of the Charter of Human Responsibilities

The idea

"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 indivisible."

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

That was a crucial milestone in the history of the Alliance's Charter, which has been a process of wide-ranging, intensive dialogue among 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, on its legitimacy, on its nature, on who would endorse it, on how it would work, and on its ultimate place in both civil society and within international institutions.

Throughout this process, the 'text' proved to be a 'pre-text' in both senses of the word: it stimulated intensive intercultural and interdisciplinary dialogue, and it was subject to proposals for change.

Why another Charter ?

The Alliance was launched in 1993, when it published its founding document : "Platform" for a World of Responsibility and Solidarity. This text was a call for us to come together to overcome our feeling of powerlessness in the face of the major crises of today's world : the gulfs between South and North, between poor and rich, between men and women, between nature and humankind. The "Platform" played an essential role in mobilising people across all continents to share experiences and ideas in most fields of human endeavour, and to frame proposals for a life of dignity for all human beings and for the preservation of the planet.

During this first stage, those involved concluded that to face up to the massive challenges of the 21st century, a new social compact among human beings was urgently needed, to found a partnership which could ensure the survival both of humankind and of the planet. Such a compact should take the form of a Charter to be endorsed by citizens from all over the world, and later by international institutions.

A "third pillar"

At present, international life is underpinned by two pillars : the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which focuses on the dignity of individuals and on the defence of their rights, and the Charter of the United Nations, which focuses on peace and development. These two pillars have been a framework for undeniable progress in the organisation of international relations. But the last fifty years have seen radical global changes. Humankind now confronts new challenges. It is clear that these two initial pillars are no longer enough to come to grips with current and future change.

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 revived during preparations for the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, but no Earth Charter finally emerged because governments were unable to reach consensus on a wording which truly addressed the global challenges.

Since then, many draft charters have been prepared from various parts of international civil society, demonstrating that many are now convinced that a "third pillar" is more urgently needed than ever. The Alliance has made the collective drafting of such a Charter one of its objectives.

The drafting process

The process of framing a Charter was an iterative one, based on the twofold imperatives of unity and diversity : to lay shared foundations for action while respecting cultural, linguistic, economic, political and geographic diversity. The text had to be repeatedly revisited so as gradually to build consensus.

From 1995 to 1998, André Levesque and his team organised workshops in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe. They aimed to draw out some common values and principles from the daily realities of life in different societies. The result was a first draft of the Charter (1999).

From 1999 to the end of 2000, the draft Charter was systematically tested out for its specific applicability in various fields of human activity and in different cultural contexts. Meanwhile many Alliance working groups, each in its own field, were at work on proposals to address the new challenges of the 21st century. The reactions to the 1999 draft Charter, and to these proposals, led to the decision in 2001 to prepare a new text embracing all these ideas.

The drafting committee submitted its first draft in autumn 2001 to a Committee of Wise Persons whose comments considerably improved the initial text. The revised draft was submitted to the World Assembly of Citizens organised by the Alliance in Lille, France, in December 2001. The participants tested the draft against their own varied backgrounds. Their comments led to a

revised text which, after the Lille Assembly, was submitted to the Allies for further comment, leading to this final text, which has been widely disseminated since October 2002.

The voyage does not end in Lille

After the Lille Assembly, the Charter must win acceptance within civil society, and hopefully at some stage among international institutions. The Alliance will continue to test out the relevance of the text in various cultural contexts and among various socio-professional groups.

The Charter : a common kernel to the diversity of ideas brought together by the Alliance.

The Charter of Human Responsibilities is not an end in itself. It highlights the essence of the common elements of the many suggestions from Alliance working groups : a call to recognise the imperative need to assume new responsibilities at the individual as well as the collective level.

These guiding principles are offered as a common nucleus, to be transferred and adapted into different fields of human endeavour and through translation into culturally appropriate forms. To use a metaphor : this common ground can perhaps be seen as the roots of a tree like the banyan, which produces a large number of branches and new trunks; these new trunks correspond to the application of the common guiding principles in various cultural contexts and in various fields of human activity.

Key features of the Charter

The key features of the Charter are as follows:

- It is a Charter of Human Responsibilities in the face of the challenges of the 21st century.
- It is not a document of the here-and-now, a response to short-term concerns or to any one human activity. Rather, the Charter enshrines general principles, to be shared by all those who endorse it.
- The Charter must be the basis of a new social contract, creating new rules for every social and professional group in its relationship with society. It aims to provide a new framework, not only for personal conduct, but for the political, institutional and legal domains as well.
- Its general principles must be translated into a variety of contexts, and gradually applied as a yardstick in specific spheres of human activity as guidance (for people themselves, for communities, for socio-professional groups, for governments, for business, 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, in the way in which responsibility is assumed. In some societies responsibility is assigned by the group to one individual, rather than taken up by one person or another at his or her own initiative. So the way in which each person is held responsible for his actions in practice varies. And cultural differences are even more marked when it comes to giving a legal context to the concept of responsibility.

The crisis now facing humanity means that these differences must be overcome. Just as the world's nations have accepted the idea of "Human Rights", the time has now come to introduce the concept of "Human Responsibilities". Global co-operation and global governance, indeed, are inconceivable without certain universal ideas and principles which, whatever their origins, can be considered beneficial to all humankind.

Responsibility for life itself

The magnitude of the social and environmental crises of our time insist that what is now at stake is the very gift of life. Life is not created by human beings : life is the mystery that quickens everything that lives, that recreates itself endlessly, in nature as well as within humanity, and in the relationships among them all. Yet in spite of its diversity, humankind now has the common responsibility of safeguarding the right to life itself. That is why a Charter based on this awareness is "universal" in the real sense of the word : it touches on all that exists, the visible and invisible alike. It enshrines something that is beyond human understanding and human control, but for which humanity as a whole is responsible.

Inherent in this basic responsibility is the need to create and safeguard space for other peoples and other forms of life. Just how that space and that responsibility are to be shared out will vary from one context to another, but the preservation of space for others and for other forms of life constitutes an integral part of the preservation of life itself.

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

Charter of Human Responsibilities

Six theses as the foundation of the Charter

- 1. Facing the radically new situation of humankind, a third ethical pillar, common to all societies and all social spheres, is needed to serve as a complement to the two existing pillars which underpin international life : the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Charter of the United Nations.**
- 2. The same ethical principles can be used at the personal level and the collective level, both to guide individual behaviour and to underpin law.**

3. The notion of responsibility, inseparable from any human relationship, constitutes a universal principle. It is the common ethical basis of the Charter of Human Responsibilities.
4. Given the impact of human activities and the interdependence among all human societies, a broader definition of responsibility is essential. It comprises three dimensions : accepting responsibility for the direct and indirect consequences of our actions; uniting with one another to escape from powerlessness; acknowledging that our responsibility is proportional to the knowledge and power which each of us holds.
5. The Charter of Human Responsibilities does not lay down rules; it proposes priorities and prompts choices.
6. Every social and professional sphere is invited to draw up, on the basis of the Charter of Human Responsibilities, which is shared by all, the rules of its own responsibility. These rules are the foundation of the contract which links it to the rest of society.

Preamble

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

In spite of the immense possibilities opened up by these ever-increasing inter-relationships, and in spite of the new powers which humankind has acquired, unprecedented crises are emerging in many areas.

Widening economic gaps within and between nations, the concentration of economic and political power in ever-fewer hands, threats to cultural diversity, or the over-exploitation of natural resources, are creating unrest and conflicts world-wide and giving rise to deep concerns about the future of our planet : we are at a 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 narrow specialist interests, are increasingly pulling back from analysing and confronting the global issues and their interactions which challenge humanity. International economic institutions have failed to turn the rising tide of inequality. Business has often pursued its profit goals at the expense of social and environmental concerns. Religious institutions have not adequately fulfilled their role to provide responses to the new challenges faced by our societies.

In this context, every one of us must take up his or her responsibilities at both the individual and the collective level.

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 towards developing a legal framework within which these responsibilities may be exercised.

Nature of responsibilities

The growing interdependence among individuals, among societies, and between human beings and nature heightens the impacts of individual or collective human actions on their social and natural environments, immediately or far away.

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.

Although all people have an equal entitlement to human rights, their responsibilities are proportionate to the possibilities open to them. The more freedom, access to information, knowledge, wealth and power someone has, the more capacity that person has for exercising responsibilities, and the greater that person's duty to account for his or her actions.

Responsibilities attach not merely to present and future actions, but also to past actions. The burden of collectively-caused damage must be morally acknowledged by the group concerned, and put right in practical terms as far as possible.

Since we can only partially understand the consequences of our actions now and in the future, our responsibility equally demands that we must act with great humility and demonstrate caution.

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 - has been that fundamental change in society is impossible without fundamental change in the individual.

These values include respect for all forms of life and the right to a life of dignity, a preference for dialogue sooner than violence, compassion and consideration for others, solidarity and hospitality, truthfulness and sincerity, peace and harmony, justice and equity, and a preference for the common good sooner than self-interest.

And yet, there may be times when these values have to be weighed against each other, when an individual or a society faces hard choices, such as the need to encourage economic development while protecting the environment and respecting human rights.

In such cases, human responsibility dictates that none of these imperatives should be sacrificed to the others. It would be futile to believe that sustainable solutions could be found to problems of economic injustice, disregard for human rights, and the environment, by tackling each issue separately. Everyone must become aware of this interconnectedness; and even if their priorities may differ due to their own histories and present circumstances, they cannot use those priorities as an excuse for ignoring the other issues at stake.

This is the thinking that lies behind the following principles.

PRINCIPLES to guide the exercise of human responsibilities

We are all responsible for making sure that Human Rights are reaffirmed in our ways of thinking and in our actions.

- To face the challenges of today and of tomorrow, it is just as important to unite in action as to express cultural diversity.
- Every person's dignity demands that he or she contribute to the freedom and dignity of others.
- Lasting peace cannot be established without a justice which is respectful of human dignity and of human rights.
- To ensure the full flowering of the human personality, its non-material aspirations as well as its material needs must be addressed.
- The exercise of power can only be legitimate if it serves the common good, and if it is monitored by those over whom it is exercised.
- Consumption of natural resources to meet human needs must be integrated in a larger effort of active protection and careful management of the environment.
- The pursuit of prosperity cannot be separated from an equitable sharing of wealth.
- Freedom of scientific research implies accepting that this freedom is limited by ethical criteria.
- The full potential of knowledge and know-how is realised only through sharing them, and through using them in the service of solidarity and the culture of peace.
- In reaching decisions about short-term priorities, the precaution must be taken of evaluating long-term consequences with their risks and uncertainties.