



Charter of Human Responsibilities

New challenges: new dimensions of Responsibility

At present, international life is underpinned by two agreements: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which focuses on the dignity and entitlements of people as individuals and on the defence of their rights, and the Charter of the United Nations, which focuses on peace and development. These two agreements 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; in particular, the imperative to safeguard the environment for future generations has come into view. It is clear that the two initial agreements need a further dimension to respond to current and future challenges of survival. 'Responsibility' is proposed as an ethical concept which builds on Rights and Peace as well as the emergence of a relational worldview that ensures the viability of planet earth and its peoples.



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 skills which humankind has acquired, unprecedented crises are emerging in many areas.

The growing interdependence among individuals, among societies, and between human beings and nature heightens the impacts of individual and collective human actions on their social and natural environments, in the short and long run. And yet, the social institutions which should enable the new challenges of the 21st century to be met, are increasingly ineffective. The pervasive power of international markets is undermining the traditional role of states. Scientific institutions, pursuing specialized interests, are less likely to confront the global issues 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. New possibilities are opening up to play a role in the new challenges that face humankind: every human being has a role to play in redefining responsibility and has responsibilities to assume. The feeling of being powerless can be lessened and even overcome by linking 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. Freedom, access to



information, knowledge, wealth, and power all increase the capacity for exercising responsibilities and the duty to account for one's actions.

Responsibilities are related to the present and the future, as well as 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 demands that we must act with great humility and demonstrate caution.



Principles to Guide the Exercise of Human Responsibilities

1. We are all responsible for making sure that Human Rights are affirmed in our ways of thinking and in our actions.
2. Every person's dignity involves contributing to the freedom and dignity of others.
3. Responsibilities include ensuring the fulfilment of human potential, inclusive of material needs and non-material aspirations, as well as obligations to support the common good.
4. Lasting peace can only be expected from freedom, justice, and processes for reconciliation which are respectful of human dignity and human rights.
5. Development and consumption of natural resources to meet human needs, and the quest for prosperity must be backed by a commitment to sustainability and the principle of precaution, assuring pro-active protection of the environment, careful management of its diversity, and equitable sharing of wealth.
6. The full potential of knowledge and know-how is achieved through valuing different knowledge systems and ways of knowing, sharing them, and applying them in the service of unifying solidarity and a pluralistic culture of peace.
7. Freedom of scientific research implies being guided by ethical criteria such as enhancement of biodiversity, respect for human dignity and non-human forms of life, and regard for the limitations of human knowledge.
8. The exercise of power is legitimate where it serves the common good, and if it is accountable to those over whom it is exercised.
9. In reaching decisions about short-term priorities, evaluation of long-term consequences must concur with ethical priorities of justice and inter-generational environmental stewardship, taking into account both risks and uncertainties.
10. To face the challenges of today and of tomorrow, uniting in action must be balanced with respect for cultural specificities.



Responsibility: a key notion for the 21st century

Widening economic gaps within and between nations, the concentration of economic and political power in ever-fewer hands, threats to cultural diversity, and 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.

Human beings are part of a 'woven universe' which is balanced and integrated in ways that are still far beyond human knowledge. Given the growing appreciation that human well-being is interdependent with earth systems, a re-definition of responsibility is needed in order to extend personal responsibility in the present to collective responsibility for the future.

We can express responsibility in many ways, among them accepting responsibility for the direct and indirect consequences of our actions in the short as well as the long run, joining with others and uniting for effective action. The fact that responsibility is proportionally linked to knowledge and the exercise of power does not mean that those with limited resources and influence would not be in a position to exercise responsibility at their own level and link up with others to forge a collective strength.

Responsibility is more than an ethical principle to be used at the personal level; rather, it is a commitment we make as citizens who are part of a social identity. The initiative of the Charter of Human Responsibilities encourages the exploration of the values that underpin this identity.



Values and practices: unity and diversity

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 individual and social values influence practices. In fact, practices and values mutually influence each other. Such values include the right to a life of dignity and respect for non-human forms of life, a preference for dialogue rather 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 rather 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 dilemmas, such as the need to encourage economic development while protecting the environment and respecting human rights. These issues are all interconnected and cannot be addressed separately. Overall responsible action implies that different categories of human activity have to be integrated. It requires the need for judgment with clarity of thought on values and competing imperatives. Everyone must be aware of the interconnectedness of these imperatives; and even if people's priorities may differ due to their own histories and present circumstances, those priorities cannot be used as an excuse for ignoring the other issues at stake.

Although the sense of responsibility is found among all human groups, there are differences in the ways in which responsibility is assumed. In some societies responsibility is assigned by the group to an individual, rather than taken up at his or her own initiative. In practice, the way in which people are held responsible for their actions varies. Cultural differences play an important role when it comes to giving a legal context to the concept of responsibility. 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 universally accepted ideas and principles which, whatever their origins, can be considered beneficial to all humankind, non-human life forms and the eco-systems of life.



The Charter: its history and its present

How it began

After some six years of discussions at various levels within the Alliance for a Responsible, Plural and United World, the Charter of Human Responsibilities ¹ was launched in 2001 at the World Assembly of Citizens, organized by the Charles Léopold Mayer Foundation. The idea was to encourage an international effort of renewed reflection on the relevance of individual and collective responsibility for the future of humankind and the planet, respect for Human Rights and the achievement of Peace. Subsequently an International Charter Facilitation Committee for the promotion of this Charter was created.

Who is involved

Charter activities worldwide are coordinated by members of the International Charter Facilitation Committee and their national or regional Charter committees. They comprise reflection and action with social groups at various levels of society and with professional groups. Core funding has been provided by the Charles Léopold Mayer Foundation (Paris), while local activities are also financially supported by a variety of local organisations and voluntary contributions.

A text and a pre-text for dialogue, reflection and action

The guiding Principles of the Charter are the outcome of a process of intercultural and interdisciplinary dialogue that began in 1998. Those who participated in the discussions obviously did not represent humanity as a whole. The Charter is proposed as a tool for dialogue, a starting point, within reach of everyone, towards a reconsideration of the essential meaning and place of responsibility in our societies. The guiding principles serve as a common nucleus, to be transferred and adapted into different fields of human endeavour and through translation into culturally appropriate forms.

The Charter provides both a pre-text and a text for reflection and action. As a pre-text, the Charter's assertion of a universal principle of human responsibility encourages



reflection on meanings of individual and collective responsibility and invites us to consider how to act responsibly towards one another and towards the planet. As a text, the Charter does not lay down rules; rather it proposes priorities and expresses commitments in our everyday lives. The Charter's principles challenge us to be thoughtful and intentional in our policies and practices.

An ongoing process

The Charter has been translated into some 25 languages expressing its content in culturally appropriate versions. Locally, people are invited to re-define responsibility in their own social and professional context at a time when our interdependence has become both inevitable and necessary. Reflection is expressed in community forums, workshops, cross-cultural and interfaith conversations, dialogue with local businesses on social responsibility, publications, lesson plans, and also in art, drama, dance and music. The principles of the Charter are reference points, from which all social and professional spheres may draw up their own guidelines for responsibilities. These guidelines are the foundation of a social agreement that links these sectors to the rest of society. Thus, the emergence of a worldwide consciousness, based on the notion of responsibility, will lead to an international social agreement that responds to the needs of the 21st century.

Reflection and action

Organisations and individuals around the world are using the Charter of Human Responsibilities to reflect on their own situations and inform their actions. The range of interpretations, meanings and cultural opportunities has inspired a great diversity of projects in different countries.

All information is to be found on the Charter web-site:
<http://www.charter-human-responsibilities.net>
