



CALL ON GOVERNMENTS

Towards RIO+20 and beyond

**A proposal for a *Charter of Universal Responsibilities*
on the agenda of the international community
at the UN Conference RIO +20**

4th January 2012

The undersigned, members of the [International FORUM on ETHICS & RESPONSIBILITY](http://www.ethica-respons.net)¹, who represent professional and social networks nationally and internationally, call on their respective Governments to show determination to address the current crises facing humanity and the planet. The RIO + 20 UN Conference on sustainable development, to be held in June 2012, provides a pivotal moment for governments to boldly declare responsibility for the challenges that urgently need to be met. This Conference can be turned into a historical moment of change, a first step on the road towards the adoption of a *Charter of Universal Responsibilities*.

Growing exasperation

In numerous countries of the world the pressures on the population are aggravated by environmental disasters and the consequences of the financial and economic crises. There is also a low expectation of effective agreements at international political levels.

A missing link

The protection of Human Rights is laid down in the Universal Declaration of 1948 and the subsequent conventions for implementation that gave rise to national and international jurisprudence. There is **no** such **international reference text** pertaining to the **obligation to**

¹ www.ethica-respons.net

assume responsibility, to evaluate the impacts of far-reaching decisions and to account for the consequences of actions, whether the actors are individuals, organisations, corporate businesses or governments.

And yet, *responsibility* for safeguarding the environment and ensuring a life of dignity for present and future generations, is a *common* task that has to be *shared* by all, be it in different degrees.

Filling the gap

A new *international ethical founding text* is needed, a “**third pillar**” for international life, as an **indispensable complement** to the Charter of the United Nations on *Peace and Development* and the Universal Declaration of *Human Rights*. A Charter of Universal Responsibilities is bound to stimulate the application of the principle of precaution, to encourage a sustainable use of natural resources and to enhance social equity and well-being. Moreover, it can provide an *international juridical basis* for counteracting breaches of responsibility at various levels and sectors of human activity.

1992... a moment of hope

Twenty years ago, the first Rio Earth Summit took place. Many of those involved had high hopes for global progress. Three years before, the Berlin wall had fallen and a new peaceful world order sustained by a world wide expansion of democratic rule and the free market, was supposed to emerge. At the same time the RIO 1992 Summit acknowledged that climate change and environmental degradation had to be addressed. The concept of sustainable development was introduced. It was meant to guide efforts to bring about coherence between environmental, economic and social activities.

2012... disenchantment

Twenty years after: who could deny that there is disenchantment? The global economy has spread prosperity, but high levels of poverty remain and inequality has increased significantly. In many countries social cohesion is at risk. And in spite of the *idea* of *sustainable development*, the actual negative impact of human activities on the biosphere and its subsequent impact on human beings, is growing. All this is spreading doubts on the dominant development model and the space it is leaving to financial capitalism.

Rio+20... turning the tide?

In this context, there is widespread concern about the outcome of the Rio+20 conference. At the same time there is a strong desire emerging from civil societies to avert a failure and to find a way forward to meet the challenges of this millennium. How?

First, the issue of **global interdependence** has to be squarely addressed. Political and economic leaders, whose actions affect the whole world, are only accountable to their constituency, electors or stakeholders, and legally bound only in the terms of their national laws. **Global interdependence**, however, requires **accountability at international level**.

Secondly, the present agenda of the conference is intended to focus on: a) Green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication and b) the institutional framework for sustainable development. However, the question is whether the discussions on these themes will address the **fundamental crisis** that is **underlying** the present environmental, economic, financial and social ones: the absence of an unequivocal agreement on the essential question of **who is responsible for what and accountable to whom?**

A failure of Rio+20 can be avoided. Considering the huge common challenges the world is facing, the governments representing their peoples could show the world their determination to declare their share of responsibilities -along with those of civil societies- by using the RIO+20 Conference for setting out **a road map towards** an additional founding pillar of international life: **a Charter of Universal Responsibilities**.

In order to highlight the idea of **co-responsibility**, a dialogue on this new fundament of international relations will gain considerable impact when conducted in consultation with representatives of all relevant sectors of civil societies.

Responsibility... a universal notion

The idea of responsibility can be found in every culture. It is the core of the social fabric, the basis of reciprocity in human relations and the corollary of human rights. And **as interdependencies have become global, so have responsibilities**.

We think of Bangladesh and other low lying countries or Island States. With the rising of the sea due to greenhouse gases and climate change, their very existence is at stake. Is this an outcome of their own actions, or a result of a wider negligence? Who to turn to when it comes to providing a coordinated plan to diminish this probable and silent crime against humanity? Identifying responsibilities is needed to build paths of solutions to such disasters.

Everywhere we see a call for responsibility emerging, illustrated typically by a worldwide movement in favour of corporate social responsibility. These calls need to be supported by a response at international political level. If not, they will only be a search for scapegoats.

Time has come to accept the fact that *global interdependence must be translated into international directives*. This is why the endorsement by the UN General Assembly of a third pillar to sustain the global community, is needed. Rio+20 provides a unique opportunity to start this process.

Civil societies have taken the lead...

Over the last ten years, the undersigned, participants in the international Forum on Ethics & Responsibility, have initiated a process in some twenty countries around the world with social and professional groups aiming at “cultures of responsibility”. Given the unprecedented seriousness of the situation humanity is now facing, we feel that time has come to turn to our Governments asking them to follow up on these initiatives, consolidating and reinforcing them by establishing an international reference text on human responsibilities.

...will governments follow up?

We appeal to National and International leaders to exercise courage and discernment in their duties toward the people who elected them. RIO+20 can become the historical occasion where governments commit themselves to **a new and concrete approach** to the creation of a “**community of destiny**” based on the recognition of tasks to be shared.

We are at the crossroads of history. In order to turn the RIO + 20 Conference into a significant moment of change, we call on our governments to support any initiative from one or a group of countries to start up a process at international governmental level that sets out a road map towards the adoption of a **Charter of Universal Responsibilities**.²

² Attached is a Draft for a Charter of Universal Responsibilities to provide an idea of what such a Charter could be.

This Call on Governments is signed by Partners in the Forum on Ethics & Responsibility

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