



# The United Church of Canada General Council

## GC34 One Earth Community

True Document Date  
August 29, 1992

### Our Vision

Life is a gift from God and elicits our respect, awe and reverence. We are one Earth community, one human family and we share one destiny. We cherish and respect the rich diversity of life and celebrate the beauty of the Earth. For us, as members of one family, love and caring are the basis of our relationships with one another and with nature. The Earth community is a sacred trust. We recognize God's call to live in harmony with this total community, to draw on the Earth's sustenance responsibly, and to care for it that all may benefit equitably now and in the future.

### The Threat

This vision has been distorted. Now the life of the Earth community is threatened with destruction. In the name of human progress, exploitation (often called development) has caused widespread and increasing poverty and increasing devastation of nature. The present world economy, with the powerful influence of technological, industrial and economic interests, makes the rich richer and the poor poorer. It has promoted consumerism and greed and the preoccupation of people

and nations with money, control and power at the cost of justice and cultural and spiritual enhancement. Massive international debt enslaves many peoples, even as it enriches others.

The streams and seas which give life are used as dumps for our wastes; the forests which give life are destroyed for commercial gain; the soil which gives life is abused both by those constrained by poverty and by those seeking short-term profit. We have become alienated from ourselves, from one another and from nature. Past development strategies have degraded cultures, threatened future generations and led to the death of millions of our brothers and sisters and the destruction of nature. They have intensified the exploitation of women and children and have further marginalized indigenous peoples. Although they have given short-term temporary benefit to a substantial minority, who have been in a position to take advantage of them, for most they have meant agony.

## **The Way Forward**

We are at a major turning point at which we can either continue along the path of self-destruction, or turn toward restoration and renewal. We need to reaffirm the importance of justice, frugality, humility and reverence for life and nature. The human family, in which the rich have dominated the poor as well as nature, must be re-oriented. The human family must learn to live in just relationship and to bring itself back into harmony with nature and the universe. Every member of the family must be a full participant in the web of life, sharing equally in the work to be done and the fruits of that work. Power must be shared equitably so that the unique value of all members is recognized and protected.

To live within such a holistic relationship requires our rediscovering the spiritual connection that unites us to the land and that nourishes our souls as well as our bodies. We need to listen to those communities which have remained close to the Earth, and recognize and incorporate the wisdom culled from the traditional links of women and Native peoples with nature. We have to realize that there are limits to "growth" as industrialized societies have defined it. The Earth's resources are being depleted and we must end the unsustainable over-consumption of industrialized societies. We must make institutions accountable to the people whose lives they touch. We must restructure economic institutions so that they serve the needs of the poor and function in harmony with ecological reality. Environmentally-sound

technology can assist in building a more sustainable future.

## **Ethical Principles for Environment and Development**

### **1. Human societies must bear a responsibility toward the Earth in its wholeness.**

The Earth, with its diverse life forms, is a functioning whole. Whatever we humans do to the web of life, we do to ourselves. The Earth is God's creation and we need to respect its inherent value and right to protection. States, financial institutions, multinational corporations and individuals have the obligation to respect the functioning of the whole. Rights and obligations need to be defined within this perspective.

### **2. To be both people-oriented and ecologically sound, all development strategies must be founded on a just economic order, with priority for the world's poor.**

We affirm the indivisibility of social justice and justice to the environment. Injustice and environmental destruction have related systemic causes. Present international economic relations oppress the peoples of developing countries and jeopardize the global environment. Industrialized countries virtually confiscate commodities of the South by paying prices nowhere near parity in relation to the products they sell to developing countries. Foreign debt exacerbates this oppression and has led to a net flow of capital and resources from the South to the North. The dominant development model itself is a contributing factor with its emphasis on capital intensive industrialization, megaprojects and economic growth. Women and children bear a particularly heavy share of the burdens of poverty and environmental degradation.

The global economic system must be reordered, as called for by the South, if poverty and environmental destruction are to be effectively addressed. Trade relations must facilitate rather than threaten greater self-sufficiency. We must acknowledge the need for limits to "growth" and a just sharing of resources in the interests of sustainable sufficiency for all. The development of environmentally safe

technology, rooted in the needs and experiences of the people who benefit from it, becomes essential in this context. Technologies already in the hands of women and Aboriginal communities provide important insights for a more just and sustainable approach. The transfer of appropriate technology from the North as well as financial resources to address environmental concerns in the South must not be made at the expense of existing development assistance.

### **3. Lifestyles of high material consumption must yield to the provision of greater sufficiency for all.**

The addiction to lifestyles based on possession and high material consumption patterns is a prime cause of social inequity both between the North and the South and within societies throughout the world. These lifestyles also represent a serious threat to ecological well-being because of their excessive use of natural resources and generation of waste and pollution. Industry and government are prime promoters of consumption-oriented lifestyles.

Domestic and international economic policies should be oriented toward helping all people meet their basic needs and enjoy the sustenance of creation. A lifestyle that enhances relationships within communities would foster the spiritual connection between humanity and nature, and prove more spiritually satisfying than the current addiction to material wealth. It would also encourage the pursuit of nourishing activities such as the arts. Learning to live in a new way not based on exploitation and injustice would allow all to flourish in health and wholeness.

### **4. Environmental destruction must stop and humanity must understand itself to be collectively responsible both for the destruction and for the repair thereof.**

The cost of environmental damage, created by lifestyle, technology and industrial activities, is to be borne by all who cause it. Acknowledging that responsibility requires a dramatic shift in lifestyle.

In addition, there are corporate, governmental and international institutions that must be held accountable for particular environmental destruction related to their activities. Not only should they have to bear the costs for clean-up, but also for changing their products and processes to minimize the potential of such damage in

the future.

## **5. The rights of future generations must be protected.**

Future as well as present generations of all peoples have a right to existence and to their share in the Earth's sustenance. This right places further responsibilities and limits on the way in which resources may be used in the present. These rights need to be incorporated into legislation and internationally binding agreements.

## **6. The carrying capacity of the Earth, regionally and globally, must become a criterion in assessing economic development.**

In the North, the excessive use of natural resources and the pollution generated by these countries are threatening the sustaining capacity of the Earth's ecological systems. For Southern nations, economic relations organized bilaterally and through international financial institutions have forced them to exploit their own natural resource base. The increase in population within this context adds further stress. Arriving at sustainable patterns of development will only be achieved with dramatic reductions in Northern consumption, the alleviation of poverty in the South and the attainment of reduced rates of population growth.

## **7. The biodiversity of the Earth must be respected and protected.**

The rich abundance of life forms on the Earth is threatened by human activity. The international patenting of biological life forms has led to the exploitation of genetic resources and should be opposed. An alarming number of local food crops and medicinal plants have also disappeared as a result of deforestation, and other assaults against nature.

The diversity of species should be respected and revered as part of the wonder of the Earth. International agreements must be negotiated that provide greater protection for the bio-diversity of the Earth while respecting the sustainable development needs particularly of the South.

## **8. Militarism must yield to nonviolent approaches to conflict resolution.**

Ecological well-being and opportunities for development are hampered by military conflict with its exorbitant drain on financial and natural resources. Despite recent reductions, nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction are still among the most immediate and long-term threats to the Earth community. This threat is exacerbated by other forms of military activity including the arms trade and the transfer of military technology. Military and repression technology are often used to subjugate people. War is ecologically disruptive in various ways. It results in widespread abuse and destruction of both the human and physical environment. The forced migration of peoples and the establishment of refugee camps has a significant impact on the environment well beyond the war-torn region. Disarmament must be a priority. Tensions must be resolved through peaceful means and strategies for non-violent conflict resolution developed.

**9. Decision-making for just and ecologically-sound development must ensure the participation of individuals and groups, especially those most affected by the project.**

All persons should have the opportunity to participate, individually and with others, in the formation and implementation of decisions affecting their lives. Governments and institutions must be accountable to their people. The opportunity to participate in decision-making is important for women, indigenous peoples, children and the poor who are particularly vulnerable to the impact of environmental degradation. The expertise of women in environmental concerns, such as food production, has long been ignored and is desperately needed by the global community.

**10. Both opportunities for learning and access to knowledge must be assured in order to facilitate sustainable development.**

Universal access to opportunities for learning is a fundamental right. Learning can help cultivate personal responsibility and concern for humanity and the Earth. The central role of women as educators and carriers of information and culture should be recognized. People should be assured easy access to information and communication on all issues, including environment and development.

**11. Development decisions must emphasize prevention of ecological damage.**

Economic responsibility for safety studies concerning activities which may damage the environment should fall on the initiators of such activities. Funds for studies should be managed by a board with representation from the proponent, government, other stakeholders and citizens with no specific investment. Decisions should be based upon adequate environmental, social and cultural impact assessments. The emphasis should be on prevention of damage rather than confidence in after-the-fact technological solutions to environmental problems.

## **12. Procedures and mechanisms must be established ensuring a transnational approach to environmental issues and disputes.**

Since the environmental crisis has global dimensions there is an urgent need for increased mutual accountability of nations. Procedures and mechanisms should be supported that would: prevent environmental damage, settle disputes among nations on environmental issues and hold states accountable for their actions. Internationally accepted standards of environmental performance need to be developed. In order to enforce such standards, an international court or other mechanism should be created.

General Council: 34th General Council, 1992

Record of Proceedings Page Ref. 1992 ROP, pp. 127-128

Document Type: [Social Policy](#)

General Council: [GC43 or earlier](#)

Originating Body: [Other](#)