

Environment and Heritage Committee
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

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12 May 2006

Dear members of the committee,

UnitingCare NSW.ACT welcomes the suggestion that Australia have a Sustainability Charter, and this inquiry into the content of the charter, and thanks the committee for the opportunity to make this submission.

We suggest that the charter needs to be both visionary and practical. It needs statements of principle and vision, and targets, benchmarks and indicators that allow Australians to monitor the extent to which we are fulfilling those principles. Vision and principles are important so that targets about particular matters do not become an end in themselves; the targets are means to an end, rather than the end itself.

We write this submission primarily to affirm the ethical importance of a sustainability charter. We do so both because the environment has intrinsic value and because environmental damage harms human beings, usually exacerbating existing disadvantage. The planet and its ecosystems are irreplaceable and must be treated with respect. When human beings destroy the environment, they destroy the basis of their own wellbeing.

Christians believe that God, as the Creator of the universe, calls us into a very special relationship with the creation – a relationship of mutuality and interdependence. The environment is a gift from God that carries with it responsibility and accountability. But humanity has not always taken this responsibility seriously and so we find that the well-being of the environment is in great peril. Effective action is needed.

Sustainability is holistic

Sustainability cannot be achieved simply through targets in the areas of water, energy, transport, etc. It needs a **holistic approach**. Ecological sustainability is about meeting the needs of people within the limits of a finite earth. This requires that dealing with ecological issues takes place in a policy context that is also shaped by human rights and democratic processes. Sustainability requires economic decisions; these must take account of the human rights of the most disadvantaged, as well as environmental imperatives.

The West Australian Sustainability Strategy, for example includes the following principle under the heading of sustainability and human rights: “Sustainability recognizes that an environment needs to be created where all people can express their full potential and lead productive lives and that significant gaps in sufficiency, safety, and opportunity endanger the earth”.

Another example is the approach taken in Canada’s NRTEE *Environmental and Sustainable Development Indicators for Canada*, which recognises the need for an expanded system of national accounts to measure natural, human and social capital <http://www.nrtee-trnee.ca/Publications/HTML/Report_Indicators_E.htm>.

Working with the environment

Targets alone are not sufficient to achieve sustainability. The focus of the charter must be on learning to work with the environment, instead of against it, understanding its rhythms and processes instead of imposing human demands on it.

This requires a recognition of environmental processes and what they contribute to the maintenance of life. Natural capital needs to be preserved and in many cases restored. For example, Australia desperately needs significant measures aimed at restoring water flows in rivers, combating the scourge of land salinity, ending broad-scale land clearing and engaging in reforestation projects.

Measuring progress and wellbeing

Sustainability requires a change in the way we measure and assess progress. Substantial work has been done on this by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the CSIRO, and the Australia Institute, *inter alia*. Sustainability requires a deliberate shift away from measures such as GDP or GNI, so we move from profligate to more restrained consumption that focuses on people’s real needs. Australia significantly over-consumes. Research by the Australia Institute and others shows that over-consumption does not increase, and may reduce, wellbeing (as reported by the people themselves).

The assumption that a healthy economy is a growing economy needs to be challenged. The charter should clearly identify that the economy needs to be modified so that it operates to preserve natural capital. Economic activity is of no use if the earth is so badly damaged that it is no longer able to carry out basic ecological services such as the water cycle, the carbon cycle and the nitrogen cycle.

For example, WA principles talk about (a) the need for long term economic health, innovation, diversity and productivity of the earth, and (b) the need for net environmental, social and economic benefit from development. They do not use the concept of economic growth.

It is worth noting in this context that GDP often counts social and environmental negatives as economic positives. For example, the Exxon Valdez oil spill (in)famously added considerably to GDP, as will Cyclone Larry, the planned new prison in the ACT, illegal land clearing, and divorces, to name a few. GDP also counts the extraction of natural capital in the form of mining when in economic terms this should more properly be considered the liquidation of an asset.

It will be much easier to promote sustainability to the electorate and to business when GDP is removed from its pedestal and joined by other measures as one among many that track human welfare.

Precautionary Principle

The precautionary principle needs to be included and adequately explained. There also need to be indicators to help identify whether the precautionary principle is being followed or ignored.

Informed decision-makers

Sustainability requires the education of politicians, bureaucrats and business people, so that they understand how the activities for which they are responsible affect the environment, and how impacts on one part of the environment can have unexpected effects elsewhere as one ecosystem overlaps and interacts with others. They need to be equipped to understand how to incorporate responsibility for the environment into their normal responsibilities.

Targets

We support the inclusion of targets in the five areas listed in the discussion paper, namely built environment, water, energy, transport and ecological footprint. However, these alone are not sufficient. Obvious additional environmental matters that require targets are biodiversity, waste, greenhouse gas emissions, pollution, noise, population and restoration of damaged environments such as river systems.

In addition, if the charter is to work, there need to be targets regarding outcomes for society, in areas such as adequate affordable housing, public education, strong civil society, employment, civil society. The focus should be on people experiencing their human rights, as set out in the international human rights covenants. These should set the priorities when difficult policy decisions need to be made.

Ecological footprint

We welcome the inclusion of the ecological footprint in the list of matters to be covered by targets. Reducing the ecological footprint, when accurately measured to take account of all human activity on which Australians depend, is most important. The other targets contribute to this but the concept of ecological footprint helps to keep the focus on the overall goal of reducing impact – otherwise achieving targets that reduce some specific problems may be accompanied by new problems in other areas of activity.

Research

We leave it to others to define the detailed research necessary to undergird the charter, and make only one point. Australia needs to improve the effectiveness of sustainability policy. It is therefore important to learn from policy research so that the charter is part of a workable sustainability policy that will bring about change. There has been some serious research on the specific matter of what has worked and not worked in implementing sustainability policies in Australia and elsewhere. This research needs to be taken into account. We need a sustainability policy that will actually make a difference.

Consultation draft

The Discussion Paper is a helpful document for initial scoping of the work required for the charter, but does not engage most of the public in the discussion. We urge that there be a consultation draft of the charter and associated documents, and a well designed consultation process. This should aim to test the content for adequacy, and to engage and stimulate the interest of the public in living sustainably.

Yours sincerely



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