

*Note: This is the current draft (as of 30 June 2015) of the global Water Ethics Charter which is being developed by an international Steering Committee advised by a growing list of expert reviewers. We anticipate several subsequent drafts over the coming two to three years before it is finalized. In this version, we have tried to incorporate most of the suggestions made by the reviewers, even where these are contradictory. For the time being, we feel it is more important to be comprehensive than consistent. Please suggest additions, changes, or provide feedback on how the Charter might be of use to you in your work..*

## **Water Ethics Charter - Draft 2.0**

30 June 2015

### **Part 1. Introduction**

#### **A. General Statement**

This Charter establishes the moral and ethical foundations to guide decision-making around the use of water and the protection [stewardship?] of water basins and water-reliant ecosystems. The intent of this Charter is to engender water policies and practices that are environmentally sustainable, economically responsible, socially just, respectful of cultural and spiritual diversity and which will help safeguard the welfare of future generations. [ADD: Respectful of bio-physical diversity?]

This Charter has been developed through a consultative process involving the organizations and individuals cited in Annex 1... [ADD: Further explanation about the process]

#### **B. Purpose of this Charter**

*[Purpose]*

The aim of this Charter is (1) to educate water policy makers, water users, and the public at large about their moral responsibilities in making choices which involve water directly or indirectly, (2) to foster an ethical attitude towards water bodies, and in so doing, (3) to improve water management and governance.

*[Why this purpose is important]*

We believe that a better understanding of the moral implications of water policies and practices can contribute to water security through sustainable management of water resources, and thereby promote both human and environmental health, meeting the needs of humans, non-human creatures, water-reliant ecosystems, and the whole of Nature.

*[Note: The essential "purpose" here is about "ethics". What "ethics" includes is explained in the sections that follow. The question of Why ethics is important, however, belongs here, as it is not addressed in any other section. The question of Why ethics is urgently important "now" is not included because it seems obvious, but could also be added to this section.]*

### **C. Scope and Structure of this Charter**

The Charter is a moral statement intended to inform and guide policies. It lays out general ethical principles which are intended as guidance for the development of operational policies and practices in specific contexts.

The Charter is structured around five dimensions or themes: (1) Environmental, (2) Economic, (3) Social, (4) Cultural, and (5) Governance. Key moral principles are identified which each theme. In addition to these particular thematic principles, there are also certain general principles, which are applicable to all the themes. These general principles are presented in the following section.

### **D. General Principles**

*[Precautionary Principle]*

Human use of water brings together the natural and human worlds in highly complex socio-ecological systems. We should approach this interconnectedness between humans and nature with an attitude of humility and adopt the fundamental principle of precaution to guide our management interventions.

*[Water as a commons]*

Water connects us all, either actually, or potentially. Even an isolated aquifer in the Pacific island of Fiji is now shared throughout the world. Thus, water is inherently a common resource. We all depend on water and we all have a shared responsibility for its management.

*[Intergenerational Justice]*

Water connects all of us through the generations. We have inherited water from our ancestors, and the water we experience today will flow to successive generations. We have a responsibility to all future generations to be good stewards of their water today.

*[Education]*

We have a moral obligation to generate knowledge about water in all its aspects and attend to the governance (cf. the writings of Nicolai Foss) of that water knowledge

## **Part 2. Environmental Issues**

We need to transition to a world in which human demands are attuned to what is possible within a healthy environment. We need an environmental ethic which will safeguard the integrity of water ecosystems in the face of unprecedented

human pressures and climate change.

## **A. General Concepts**

Water ecosystems have inherent rights, and intrinsic value over and above their utilitarian value to people. The resilience of freshwater ecosystems to sustainably support basic ecological functions (e.g., environmental flows of reasonably clean water) must be held as a fundamental priority. It is our moral responsibility to adjust human demands for water to accommodate healthy ecological functions. In cases where unsustainable levels of water demand are deemed necessary for meeting urgent and basic human needs, this should be done as a temporary measure, to be replaced by a sustainable water management strategy as soon as possible.

### *[Ecosystem Services]*

Water ecosystems have value not only for the range of tangible and intangible services they provide to people, but also for the services they provide to Nature, and their existence value. Human use should (a) respect the coping capacity of water bodies, including their hydraulic and biological functions, and (b) recognize the fundamental interdependence of social and ecological systems.

DG: Principles of complementarity and maybe synergy - social value of water (human right) doesn't interfere with economic uses, but rather in guides the kinds of economic uses and contexts. Privatizing water and selling it to the poor is not an option because it interferes with social principles. Same logic can be applied to a dam that will do massive environ harm; it should not be an option for that reason, and the economic proponents need to come up with a different approach (not a "solution" because there's not really a "problem", but only a context and a challenge (How to make use of the river for economic development without harming the river in the process); or how to bring energy into this region without violating the Water Ethics Charter...

## **B. Operational Principles**

The complex physical inter-linkages between water-ecosystems and the rest of nature, as well as the complex inter-linkages with socio-cultural systems render interventions inherently unpredictable. The principle of precaution should be applied when taking decisions which will, or which reasonably could, have severe and long-lasting negative impacts. At the same time, the implementation of thorough and objective environmental impact assessments is important for reducing risk and contributing to ethical decision-making.

Other guiding operational principles are the following: (1) "no net loss from current conditions" and (where local impacts are unavoidable), (2) offsetting environmental destruction with (nearby and reasonably equivalent ) environmental restoration. A more stringent framing principle could be "regenerative watershed sustainability", which would imply not only respecting

the needs of nature, but also contributing to maintaining and improving these. Examples of regenerative activities here could be day-lighting of urban streams (to provide fish habitat), natural water filtration through wetlands, etc).

Educational activities related to water have ethical importance beyond behavioral change (e.g., promoting water conservation), for example, in fostering awareness about the intrinsic value of water, or promoting research and debate about the meaning of "healthy conditions."

The condition of water ecosystems is very closely linked to the efficiency and "reasonableness" of water use in the major water use sectors: agriculture, manufacturing and extractive industries, and urban and domestic water systems. Efficiency per se is fundamentally an economic ethic, but the reasonableness or legitimacy of the product becomes an ethical concern for the environment. Thus, the agricultural production of ethanol can be done more or less efficiently (economic ethic) but the product itself has been shown to be an inefficient use of land and water resources. Overall sustainability of both water and agriculture might be enhanced by growing a different crop.

One approach to address this ethical concern could be to create an inventory of anthropogenic activities in a water basin and to evaluate their impact on the basin's water status. A related approach would be to consider the perceptions of local people about the overall value (in their eyes) of the various water utilization systems within the basin.

### **Part 3. Economic Issues**

Water has an inherent economic dimension in all its uses, and economic principles are essential for comparing impacts and benefits from proposed water investments or interventions. Economic thinking is not limited to questions of monetary value, but applies equally (though with far less precision) in considering tradeoffs and opportunities related to non-economic values (e.g., social and environmental). Economic analysis is most robust when it is applied within a value category (e.g., comparing one type of social benefits with another type of social benefits), and it is most suspect when seeking to monetize values which are inherently non-commensurable (e.g., the culture heritage value of water).

#### **A. General Concepts:**

Water use should be reasonable and frugal, using only as much as needed for a given purpose. The re-use of water should be favored over extracting fresh water from nature. Existing water stocks should be maintained and their resilience and sustainability protected (e.g., in the management of aquifers and lakes). Given the inherent nature of water as a commons (both globally and locally), private ownership of water must be balanced with accountability to the larger society.

## **B. Operational Principles**

Water for basic human needs (e.g., the right to water and sanitation) should be effectively free, whereas water used in economic activities should have a market cost. The operational principle is that water markets can be important tools for good management but must be subject to the higher order ethical principles outlined in this Charter.

There are several important economic principles which should guide water use:

- User-pay and polluter-pay principles;
- Principle of cost-recovery for water services ;
- principle of fair, transparent, and efficient financing arrangements for water -related investments;
- Principle of monitoring and sharing information about the status of water stocks (feeding into the principles of education and knowledge governance).

## **Part 4. Social Principles**

Water is intimately connected to society, forming a socio-ecological system that addresses social needs and provides opportunities. Social arrangements are instrumental for both socially just and economically effective water management.

### **A. General Concepts:**

Water should be explicitly recognized as a central feature of life for individuals and the larger society. Water is a human right, but it also carries individual responsibilities for engaging in water decisions, and collective (governmental) responsibilities for empowering and legitimating that engagement. [This links to Governance Principles.]

Water is a common good which belongs to everyone, under the principles of fairness, equity, solidarity, and social justice. Everyone has a right to safe water to meet basic needs (UN Resolution) and to sanitation (which protects water quality and promotes good health). There is a further moral "right" to a healthy water environment (not only clean water, but ecologically healthy water ecosystems) for purposes of both practical (economic) and aesthetic (cultural) enjoyment.

### **B. Operational Principles**

Promote universal access to safe water and sanitation, promote water security, and ensure "water justice" for all segments of society, including youth, women, minorities, and most especially future generations. The principle of *water justice*

includes access to water and healthy water ecosystems for meeting economic and livelihood needs, as well as aesthetic, spiritual, and psychological needs.

## **Part 5. Cultural and Spiritual Principles**

Water and water ecosystems provide cultural and spiritual meaning of fundamental importance. Since these values are intangible (though often represented in architectural monuments and other artistic expressions) they are easily overlooked.

### **A. General Concepts**

Cultural diversity, and the rights of indigenous and traditional peoples to live according to their cultural traditions, is a fundamental right, articulated in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Cultural traditions related to water include basic economic livelihood strategies such as fishing, as well as religious ceremonies which revolve around water bodies or particular forms of water use. These cultural uses of water should be protected, and the rights of local communities to engage in traditional water-related practices should be recognized and honored.

### **B. Operational Principles**

Water infrastructure development (e.g., dams, levees, river diversions, etc.) should accommodate customary cultural uses as a matter of priority. Rather than pursuing a strategy of compensation for cultural impacts which are incommensurable with monetized settlements, the preferred strategy would be to adjust the infrastructure design to meet cultural parameters. The converse of this principle of "Do no harm" to traditional cultural values is look for alternative technologies and strategies that would support those values. Proposals for water development, particularly when they originate outside the local cultural context should be subject to the "free prior and informed consent" of the local stakeholders.

## **Part 6. Water Governance**

The arrangements by which water is managed, and particularly the ways in which local stakeholders are involved in water decisions, can contribute to a wider democratization process. In so doing, the manner of water governance can enhance civil society's awareness in water and the environment more generally, leading to better decisions about natural resources management.

### **A. General Concepts**

Water systems are closely integrated socio-ecological systems and water governance needs to reflect both of these dimensions, by (1) adopting a broad ecological frame to incorporate whole watersheds, aquifers, and interactions

between freshwater and marine ecosystems, and (2) reflecting the interests of all stakeholders, with particular emphasis on those groups who have the least political power.

The principle of subsidiarity (management at the lowest practical level) should be favored for specific water management functions (e.g., irrigation system management).

Water governance should include "knowledge governance" including the guidance of investments in research and development.

Water utilities in particular, but all water users, whether corporate, governmental, or individual households, have social and environmental responsibilities which the governance system should address

## **B. Operational Principles**

The principles of "integrity" should be applied to water governance, namely (a) transparency, accountability, and participation/engagement of stakeholder groups. Water governance is a shared responsibility of both public institutions and stakeholder groups. Informal water systems that may co-exist with public systems also need to be accommodated. Finally, water conflict mechanisms need to be designed into the governance arrangements.

## **Part 7. Other Issues**

*[New topics can be added here.]*