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Honoring the Pluriverse

Contribution to GTI Forum [An Earth Constitution: Has the Time Come?](#)

Ashish Kothari

Glen Martin's [essay](#) on an Earth Constitution and a World Parliament is based on a completely tenable proposition: that the earth needs some form of global coordination to get out of the mess in which we find ourselves, and that nation-states (and a nation-state-based United Nations) are not fit for purpose. There are a number of progressive elements in the proposal.

I find, however, several problematic ones, too. Perhaps these lie in the way the proposal has been framed and is being put forth as “a finished document ready for ratification.” The process involved five initial drafters, helped by a drafting committee of twenty-five, and consultations with “hundreds of world citizens.” Given that it took twenty-three years, I can understand why it would be put out as ready for ratification. I tried finding out more about the “hundreds of world citizens” who were involved, but could not get details on the website for the Earth Constitution. The names I did find of people supporting the idea of a world government or of the Earth Constitution itself made impressive but confusing reading, with lots of radical thinkers and activists but also a number of political leaders who have been autocratic, racist, or otherwise hostile to democracy. But more importantly, I could find no evidence of the central involvement of Indigenous peoples, fisher communities, small farmers, artisanal craftspersons, etc. Indeed, around the time the drafting was taking place, the vast majority of these people across the world (especially in the Global South) would hardly have had access to forms of communication used by the Global North. Were they involved? And if not, or not substantially, is it legitimate to call this a “finished document ready for ratification”? In how many languages does it exist, to be taken to such people to understand and ratify?

A Global North perspective seems to infuse the proposal in other ways too (and please note that I include people like Prime Ministers of Southern countries like India as part of the Global North, in that they are part of an elite that is not necessarily representative of or sensitive to the voices and needs of the world's marginalized peoples). There is a rigidity of the prescriptions, for instance that there will be 1,000 World Electoral Districts of substantially equal population. Perhaps in the history of the making of this proposal there is some justification given, but consider this: each District would comprise some 8 million people. This would necessarily combine several Indigenous nations of the Amazon (or of China, or of India) with some of the biggest nearby cities and populations of non-Indigenous, and it does not take much imagination to figure out who will dominate, and who will represent this District at the world level—most likely not an Indigenous person. A very large proportion of self-defined “peoples” of the world have small populations, and they would be swamped out in such a system, much as they are swamped out by the nation-state system in the UN.

Then, the House of Counsellors is made up of academia. The assumption is that these are the learned people, who can counsel the other two Houses. But surely, we now know that the knowledge and expertise needed to save the world lies not only in “institutions of higher learning” but also in the Indigenous people and other local communities, many of them perhaps not even able to read or write but able to gauge the moods of the earth and the interactions amongst nature much better than those with PhDs? A certain neo-colonialism peeps through in any proposal that prioritizes the formal processes of education over the non-formal experiential processes of learning.

Another reflection of such a Global North approach is the tendency to universalize. The world is a pluriverse, an incredible diversity of cultures, ecologies, economies, polities, worldviews, and so on; to try to govern it with one universal set of laws and rules is, to my mind, a recipe for erasure, howsoever well-intentioned. This, combined with the kinds of powers that the World Parliament is to be given and the kind of composition being proposed that also includes the continuation of nation-states, has the very real danger of this becoming a super-government, with the same disastrous centralization of powers that is currently the reason that nation-states are not fit for purpose, on an even more gigantic scale.

A World Constitution is perhaps needed, and a global people's body (or bodies) too, but if it is truly to be founded on the principle and practice of direct, radical democracy and respect of diversity (natural, cultural) on the ground, I am doubtful that a rigid, centralized, universalizing approach is fit for purpose. What is instead needed is a process in which the diversity of peoples is able to discuss and deliberate, on their own and then through networks of solidarity and dialogue, the principles of an earth constitution (or charter), evolved in multiple tongues. This can happen through, and help further evolve, the frameworks and principles of people's assemblies from ground to globe. The links between [radical ecological democracy](#) on the ground and peoples' global assemblies need to be carefully thought through, such that the latter remain accountable and answerable to the former. Simultaneously, we must develop institutions of bioregional or biocultural landscape/seascape level governance that can replace nation-state boundaries which are currently dividing ecosystems and natural/cultural flows; such institutions, too, would be represented in global peoples' assemblies. And in all these forums, places have to be kept for other species, with custodians nominated who can speak on their behalf, so that is never an anthropocentric model of governance. Obviously, this is not the place to lay this out in greater detail, but such a truly democratic and ecocentric approach would be very different from the proposal under discussion.

About the Author



Ashish Kothari is a founder of the Indian environmental group Kalpavriksh. He has taught at the Indian Institute of Public Administration, coordinated India's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan process, and served on Greenpeace International and Greenpeace India boards. An active participant in peoples movements, he helps coordinate the Vikalp Sangam Global Tapestry of Alternatives processes and Radical Ecological Democracy network. His books include *Churning the Earth: Making of Global India* (with Aseem Shrivastava), *Alternative Futures: India Unshackled* (co-edited with KJ Joy), and *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary* (co-edited with Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, Federico Demaria, Alberto Acosta).

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