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## On Rights and Responsibilities

Contribution to GTI Forum [Toward a Great Ethics Transition](#)

Kathryn Sikkink

Brendan Mackey [draws](#) an interesting parallel between the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the various declarations that have sought to establish a similar shared ethics in the environmental areas. I welcome his encouragement to reconsider one of the most important of these, the Earth Charter of 2000. Yet, it would seem that the Earth Charter has not yet played a similar role as the UDHR, nor does it hold the same place in the eyes of environmental activists as the UDHR does for human rights activists. I don't understand the reason for this, but it appears that environmental activists may be less committed to such soft law declarations and charters. For a 2016 article, Emilie M. Hafner-Burton, Brad L. LeVeck, and David G. Victor interviewed 243 NGO activists, about half from human rights NGOs and half from environmental NGOs. The human rights activists thought the UDHR is just as powerful a tool for activists as the binding treaty protecting civil and political rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). By contrast, the non-binding Rio Declaration had not yet achieved the same status in the environmental community, who believe that binding treaties are a more powerful tool for activists than non-binding declarations.<sup>1</sup> The authors did not ask about the Earth Charter, but I doubt that it would have elicited a more positive response.

One possible explanation for these differences is that every right in the UDHR was later incorporated into hard law conventions, from the ICCPR, to the International Convention on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, and many of the general rights in the UDHR were further elaborated in specific treaties, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Women's Convention (CEDAW), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. There are even some rights that were not imagined yet in the UDHR that have now

been embodied in treaties of their own, including the Convention of the Rights of People with Disabilities. Human rights activists feel a particular attachment to the UDHR because it was so productive in leading to many other specific treaties protecting rights. The Earth Charter does not appear to have been productive in the same way.

A second point I wanted to make in response to Mackey's essay has to do with the section of the Earth Charter focused on universal responsibility. It says that to realize its aspirations, "we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities. . . . Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world." Although the Earth Charter speaks of responsibilities of all individuals, organizations, businesses, governments, and transnational institutions, as Mackey points out, it "does not specify what particular responsibilities fall upon which actors and sectors of society."

These themes echo some that I have tried to address in my recently book *The Hidden Face of Rights: Toward a Politics of Responsibility* (Yale University Press, 2020). In it, I argue for more robust norms and practices of responsibility to accompany our rights. For example, to address environmental crises, it is necessary not only to emphasize each individual's right to a clean environment but also the obligations of states, corporations, institutions, and individuals to protect the environment. Although much attention has correctly focused on the need for states and corporations to limit emissions in order to slow climate change, other institutions and individuals must complement state and corporate actions by working to decrease their own carbon footprints.

My purpose is not to argue against rights as an approach to addressing environmental or any other issues. But if we really believe that future generations have a right to a stable climate, we also know that it is insufficient to insist that only states or corporations have responsibilities. All of us connected to the structural injustice of climate change need to exercise our collective responsibilities.

The Trump Administration has completely abdicated any responsibility with regard to climate change and environmental protection. Nevertheless, various state governments, municipal governments, corporations, universities, and individuals in the United States have affirmed their

commitment to the Paris Agreement and continue to diminish carbon emissions despite the federal government's noncompliance.

I draw on Iris Young's idea of forward-looking responsibility and her social connection model of responsibility to think about responsibilities for climate change. If many more of us did this, over a lifetime, personal emissions reductions in themselves could make a substantial contribution to slowing climate change.<sup>2</sup> In addition to their actual impact, these efforts could have "communicative value" that encourages others to follow our example.<sup>3</sup> In this way, our individual emission reductions, which in isolation have little effect on overall emission reductions, may "trigger—more effective and efficient—collective types of action."<sup>4</sup> Our responsibility is thus both to act individually and to make sure this action connects to broader efforts to organize collectively.<sup>5</sup>

There is a common belief that individuals can do little to contribute to the fight against climate change. My research and that of other scholars about how social change happens reveals that norm change is often led by individual and institutional norm entrepreneurs, whose actions are essential to pressure for and coalesce changes in norms and practices by a wider range of actors.

The Earth Charter's call for an ethic of responsibility is even more relevant today than it was twenty years ago. And today we have more information about what individuals and institutions can do to exercise that responsibility. A new study of thirty-nine peer-reviewed papers, government reports, and web-based programs outlined the top ways individuals can reduce their carbon footprints.<sup>6</sup> Based on their research, the authors recommend four high-impact actions: having one less child, living car-free, avoiding airplane travel, and eating a plants-based diet. These seem radical, but if you read the article carefully, you find that avoiding just one round-trip transatlantic flight a year is the third most effective way to reduce emissions, after having fewer children and living car-free for a year. We all need to think about that the next time we plan an international airplane trip.

## Endnotes

1. Emilie M. Hafner-Burton, David G. Victor, and Brad L. Leveck, "How Activists Perceive the Utility of International Law," *Journal of Politics* 78, no. 1 (2016): 167–180.
2. Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 153–66.
3. Simon P. James, "Climate Change," in *Environmental Philosophy: An Introduction* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2015), 142.
4. Marion Hourdequin, "Climate Change and Individual Responsibility: A Reply to Johnson," *Environmental Values* 20, no. 2 (2011): 157–162.
5. Simo Kyllönen, "Climate Change, No-Harm Principle, and Moral Responsibility of Individual Emitters," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 35, no. 4 (2018): 7.
6. Seth Wynes and Kimberly A Nicholas, "The Climate Mitigation Gap: Education and Government Recommendations Miss the Most Effective Individual Actions," *Environmental Research Letters* 12, no. 7 (July 1, 2017): 1.

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## About the Author



Kathryn Sikkink is the Ryan Family Professor of Human Rights Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School and the Carol K. Pforzheimer Professor at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. Sikkink works on international norms and institutions, transnational advocacy networks, the impact of human rights law and policies, and transitional justice. Her publications include *Evidence for Hope: Making Human Rights Work in the 21st Century*; *The Justice Cascade: How Human Rights Prosecutions are Changing World Politics*; and *The Persistent Power of Human Rights: From Commitment to Compliance* (co-edited with Thomas Risse and Stephen Ropp). She holds a PhD in political science from Columbia University. Sikkink has been a Fulbright Scholar in Argentina and a Guggenheim fellow.

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