

## **Education for Sustainable Development: we must learn if the Earth shall sustain**

### **ESD: What sort of Education? What sort of Learning? What sort of Decade?**

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#### **Introduction**

In my talk today I'm going to draw on work that my colleagues and I have been carrying out at the University of Bath for the past few years, in particular, the work I have done with Stephen Gough. I shall comment on the UN's draft international implementation scheme for the Decade, as it seems to me that this is a document which is worthy of close scrutiny, as what it says is likely to influence what happens to a large degree. It could even be that this text will evolve into some sort of authorised version of ESD, but you all know enough about texts to appreciate that how people read them is just as important (if not more so) than the actual words on the page. And, given that sustainable development is a broad church, there may well be sharp tensions between literal and interpretive readings, or if you prefer, between fundamentalist and liberal dispositions. I'm also going to discuss some current ESD developments in the UK, and end by looking forward to the Decade, and the sort of learning that we might promote.

#### **The relationship between sustainable development and education**

I want to begin, however, with a few preliminary thoughts about the relationship between sustainable development and education and how this tends to be conceptually framed. It is worth noting at the outset that there is quite widespread scepticism about the idea of education for sustainable development. This is based, in part, on a concern that education should not be for particular social purposes, although, of course, it has to be for something, as this extract from the English national curriculum shows:

Foremost is a belief in education, at home and at school, as a route to the spiritual, moral, social, cultural, physical and mental development, and thus the well-being, of the individual. ... Education should reflect the enduring values that contribute to these ends. These include valuing ourselves, our families and other relationships, the wider groups to which we belong, the diversity in our society and the environment in which we live. Education should also reaffirm our commitment to the virtues of truth, justice, honesty, trust and a sense of duty.

This sort of rhetoric will be familiar to you in your own context; and the Unesco text says much the same thing. The scepticism about ESD is also based on a wariness about the many such education movements that we've seen over time: education for the environment, for example, education for citizenship, education for this, and for that. The danger in such approaches is that education is seen as an instrumental process to achieve particular goals. In such cases, learning can easily become a matter of accepting and doing what experts or those in power tell us. The possibilities of this with ESD are obvious.

Scepticism clearly also relates to whether there can be any certainty about ESD's purposes, when agreeing what an ESD programme should try to do depends on how sustainable development itself is conceptualised. And here, the temptation to rely on experts is very strong; after all, what do most of us actually know about the practicalities of:

- keeping within ecological limits
- the elimination of poverty
- maximising social justice, etc?

The complexity and uncertainty of it all can be debilitating. However, too much reliance on certainty and experts seems rather misplaced, given the ineffable quality of sustainable development. This unknowability was captured well by Brundtland which stressed that sustainable development was a process of change with the future in mind:

A process where the exploitation of resources, the orientation of technological development and institutional change, are made consistent with the future as well as present needs.

Hamm and Muttagi see the goal of sustainable development like this:

A capacity of human beings to continuously adapt to their non-human environments by means of social organisation.

which seems very much the same as the second statement here:

A capacity of human beings to learn to adapt to their non-human environments by means of social organisation.

Because of arguments like this, many people (including me) now think that the only sensible way of viewing sustainable development is as a process through which we can learn to live more in tune with nature – that is to say, to live within environmental limits. The way I have expressed this shows a central place for learning, but doesn't say anything about the inter-relationship of these two entities. I'm going to argue that we need to recognise that learning is integral to sustainable development which will simply not be happening unless learning is taking place. This is another way of saying this:

Sustainable development is a learning process through which we can (if we choose) learn to build our capacity to live more sustainably.

So, as I read the Unesco text I asked myself these three questions:

1. What sort of view of sustainable development is espoused here?
2. What sort of education is proposed in relation to this? and
3. What, if anything, does this tell us about the learning that will now be needed?

### **Unesco's view of sustainable development**

So, what sort of sustainable development appears to be espoused by Unesco?

It has become fashionable to talk in terms of a 'triple bottom line', and this makes a lot of sense in relation to the business sector to remind us that there is more to social responsibility than ensuring that an enterprise is profitable. But Unesco's drive to stress the social and the environmental (as well as the economic) has been uneven with much more focus placed on social justice than on ecological security. Perhaps this is understandable given that the evidence of social injustice is so much more tangible than environmental insecurity, and has been more obvious for much longer.

Late last year, the UK parliament's environmental audit committee scrutinised our government's record on sustainable development. In its report, the committee wondered whether the idea of environment had become lost in our government's thinking. It noted this:

#### **The Sustainable Development Strategy: Illusion or Reality?**

The concept of environmental limits is fundamental to sustainable development. While such limits cannot, as yet, be firmly established in many areas of human activity, it is nonetheless certain that they exist. The new [sustainable development] Framework and Strategy should place greater emphasis on the concept of environmental limits, and the Government should devote more effort to developing this concept

It seems to me that the notion of environmental limits in relation to both the availability of resources, and the integrity of ecological systems, is a fundamental idea which underpins everything else, and that the idea that there is some sort of equivalence between social, economic and environmental dimensions is highly misleading. This key idea – that the real bottom line is the ecological integrity of the biosphere – is implicitly within the Unesco text through its espousal of ideas from Brundtland and the IUCN:

Development ... should occur in such a way that the capacity of the natural environment to meet present and future needs is not compromised [Brundtland]

Improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems [IUCN]

But let me offer you two contrasting texts from adjacent pages of the Unesco draft:

A respect for human rights is a sine qua non of sustainable development

The protection of the Earth's ecosystems is an important challenge

It will seem to many that these emphases are the wrong way round and that it is the protection of ecosystems and biospheric systems that is the imperative.

The dominant ideas set out by Unesco in relation to the environment are those of balance and respect. For example, we have these statements:

The need to balance economic and social progress with concern for the environment and the stewardship of natural resources.

Respect and care for the greater community of life in all its diversity which involves the protection and restoration of the Earth's ecosystems.

each of which falls well short of the idea of limits. 'Balance' is a particularly deceptive idea which can only make sense – that is, be put into operation, if there is a coherent theory underpinning it. For example, the idea of a balanced diet has meaning because there is a theory of human nutrition informing it. It seems to me that the idea of balancing economic and social progress with concern for the environment can only have meaning for us through a theory based on environmental limits. And, of course, there are such theories, for example, expressed in relation to critical natural capital – but the idea of 'limits' only occurs in the Unesco document in relation to economic growth, and throughout the text, issues of social justice always come first.

However, it is axiomatic to many people that no one can actually be working towards sustainable development unless they understand the idea of environmental limits. Let me put this bluntly, whilst progress in social and economic terms is clearly important and must be pursued, there will be no material prosperity, social justice, or ultimate well being unless essentials in the environmental sphere are protected.

This argument goes like this:

- The natural environment places constraints on our social and economic choices
- The social and economic choices we have made in the past, and are continuing to make, now seem to be testing these constraints (perhaps to the limits) – though unevenly and with a good deal of unpredictability
- Thus we need to rethink – individually and socially – the choices we make.

Nowhere in the document is the argument made as clearly as this which is a pity because this sort of language has a chance of reaching, and being meaningful to, those to whom ESD is aimed. So, in relation to sustainable development, it is important to ask what sort of world is it that Unesco envisages? That is, what sort of world is it that ESD is supposed to bring about?

There is a strong focus throughout the text on co-operation. The document says this:

Human relationships characterised by justice, peace, and negotiated, mutual interests lead to greater equity, respect and understanding.

It is these qualities that will underpin strategies of sustainable development.

Now, it is of course, difficult to be against all this – in the abstract, at least. But it would surely have been more helpful had the opposite – not been labelled like this:

Naked self-interest: and exemplified as greed, envy or lust for power.

The document's stance reminds me of the position of the Real World Coalition. This is an association of campaigning organisations whose objectives are:

Social justice eradication of poverty peace and security democratic renewal environmental sustainability: all of which, taken together are described as the "key policy constituencies of sustainable development".

Like the Unesco text, the predisposition of the Real World Coalition is to an egalitarian rationality, and to collaborative problem-solving. And it is an articulate and extremely well-informed response to the conditions of complexity, uncertainty, risk and necessity, that we see around us. It is written from a perspective where things social, economic and environmental will be all right, if they are fair and there is certainly something in this. Equally certainly, there is more to it than this, and faced with the same conditions others might make an

equally strong case from an individualistic, competitive rationality through, for example, free trade, economic growth, and personal choice. You'll be familiar with the arguments.

But a sustainable world will not only be a world of justice and collaboration, because no such world is possible. For example, when Unesco mandates this:

balancing economic and social progress with concern for the environment and the stewardship of natural resources

it is hard to see how this can be done without losers being created who, whatever the curriculum tells them, are unlikely to be pleased about it. These are issues which cannot be wished, legislated, or educated away, no matter how some might want to. My point here today is not to adjudicate between such claims, but to suggest to you that the Unesco text is one-sided in its choice of ecological metaphor – co-operation – resulting in other worldviews and rationalities being missing or, at least, insufficiently explicit. All of this has severe implications for the choices it makes in relation to what to emphasise in ESD.

But, it seems obvious that whatever sustainable development ultimately looks like it will need to have room for human ingenuity and inventiveness in manipulating the environment, competition for environmental and economic assets, rule-making, rule-breaking, and the self-interest of individuals and groups. And ESD will have to face this otherwise it will just be another futile exercise in human perfectability.

### **What sort of education is proposed? What sort of Learning?**

As suggested here, a better question, perhaps, is what sort of learning is envisaged. As the document notes, learning is an idea that has much wider social locus than education. Unesco sets out 5 key roles for education, and identifies 6 features that it says will characterise ESD. The key roles are:

#### **Education**

- must inspire the belief that each of us has both the power and the responsibility to effect positive change on a global scale
- is the primary agent of transformation towards sustainable development, increasing people's capacities to transform their visions for society into reality
- fosters the values, behaviours and lifestyles required for a sustainable future
- for sustainable development is a process of learning how to make decisions that consider the long-term future of the equity, economy and ecology of all communities
- builds the capacity for such futures-oriented thinking

In many ways, these social transformation ideas will be as familiar to those in the educational mainstream, as they are to those who work through environmental or development education activities because, if you remove reference to sustainable development, they still make perfect sense as you see:

#### **Education**

- must inspire the belief that each of us has both the power and the responsibility to effect positive change ~~on a global scale~~
- is the primary agent of transformation ~~towards sustainable development~~, increasing people's capacities to transform their visions for society into reality
- fosters the values, behaviours and lifestyles required for [the] ~~a sustainable~~ future
- ~~for sustainable development~~ is a process of learning how to make decisions that consider the long-term future of ~~the equity, economy and ecology of~~ all communities
- builds the capacity for such futures-oriented thinking

Similarly, for the 6 features that ESD is supposed to demonstrate:

- Interdisciplinary and holistic
- Values driven
- Critical thinking and problem solving
- Multi-method
- Participatory decision-making
- Locally relevant

None of these is specific to considerations of sustainable development. Many interested in education in my country might tick all these. In essence, what we have here is a particular form of education that ESD is being identified with, rather than anything specific to ESD – but that is good, perhaps, as ESD is tapping into a vein of established practice. But there is also a down-side, as there seems to be little here specific about ESD. It is possible to be more specific. For example, where ESD is an education that:

- takes the idea of environmental limits seriously
- enables and encourages people to take a critical interest in what science seems to be telling us about these limits and how society interprets this
- enables people to tell the difference between correlation and causation; between fact and assertion; and between argument and polemic
- encourages and enables people to consider how they live and how we all might all live well – individually and socially – within environmental limits.

Something like this has the advantage that you can immediately see how it can fit into what schools already do. And you can see the sort of curriculum and pedagogical issues that will arise. For example in relation to climate change:

What and how can education contribute to people's:

- knowledge and understanding about climate change and the uncertainties associated with that knowledge?
- understanding of the effects their lives have on biosphere processes?
- awareness of how the political processes can be used to address how all people can try to live well on the earth, without compromising either the biosphere or the future.

Surely ESD needs to address such specifics. Without doubt, many people now see the greatest threat facing us is that of finding ourselves in the position where we have to make a forced choice between human well-being, and the integrity of ecological systems that provide a fully-functioning biosphere. Perhaps this is what ESD should really be focused on.

### **ESD and Universities**

I want to say something now about ESD and higher education, and tell you a cautionary tale from the UK. Unesco and others give a prominent role to universities in sustainable development. A recent project saw that universities might make a significant contribution towards sustainable development through the following key roles:

- places of learning and research; forming & informing the leaders and decision-makers of the future
- major businesses; where prudent resource use not only saves money but safeguards reputations
- key community players; as employer, purchaser and amenity provider with a major impact on the wider world of influential ideas and technological development

The first of these is particularly significant in influencing how society develops. It was no surprise, then, that when the UK government published its 'Sustainable development action plan for education and skills', it asked the Council responsible for Higher Education funding to develop a sustainable development strategy.

The Funding Council did this by producing two interlinked documents: a support strategy and an action plan. The support strategy sets out the Council's vision for higher education's contribution to sustainable development. The action plan sets out a series of practical actions the Council proposes to take. What is happening here is significantly ahead of work in the schools sector.

The Council is currently consulting on both documents and has invited everyone involved in higher education to respond. It has 2 ways of doing this. The first is to send the documents to all universities. The second is to hold consultation meetings around the country.

Reactions have been mixed. At a consultation I recently attended, there was a welcome for the strategy and, if anything, the Council was urged to do more. The reaction from universities, however, has been broadly hostile judging from press comment and what university managers are saying to each other. Let me give you a flavour from a University leader writing in the Guardian newspaper:

"It is not the job of universities to promote a particular political orthodoxy; it is their role to educate students to examine critically policies, ideas, concepts and systems, then to make up their own minds. The Funding

Council should support that objective, including, from time to time, telling the government that the university curriculum is none of its business.”

Of course, the Vice Chancellor protests too much. It is absurd to pretend that political orthodoxies of the day have no influence on teaching and research in universities that are heavily funded by the State. Quite the opposite is true.

So, in trying to understand why there have been these opposing reactions, there are a number of issues to note. Firstly, the audiences for these consultations have been quite different: the people who turned up to the meeting were either enthusiasts or activists, or were those, like me, for whom ESD is a research interest. There were no disinterested, or opposing, voices.

University leaders, by and large, fit none of these categories; their role is to run universities in difficult financial times, and the reaction we have seen seems to have been based on a straightforward: threat / opportunity analysis of the Funding Council’s proposals. And this has been the case even where a university as an institution takes sustainable development seriously – as my own does.

It would seem that the Funding Council now has quite a problem – caught as it is by a demanding government and outraged institutions. So how did it get into this position, and what can we learn to help us with ESD? I think the problems lie in both processes and assumptions. In terms of process, the Funding Council used a working group to determine its strategy, but there were no disinterested academics or university leaders represented on this. Thus, strategy was developed in a comforting vacuum.

In terms of assumption, the Funding Council was optimistic about just how ready universities were to hear its messages, and muddled about what the messages ought to be. When colleagues and I were asked to comment on a draft of the strategy, we said this:

At present, the paper takes an optimistic and uncritical view of university staff’s awareness of sustainable development and

We think you have got the relationship between universities and sustainable development wrong: it’s not the universities’ role to promote sustainable development.

So, what does this tell us about the introduction of ESD? What might have made all this better? Well, the Funding Council might have realised that, in order to engage universities, it needed to persuade them that sustainable development has some potential to help them become more successful institutions, that is, to do better teaching and research. Saying this to a lecturer:

‘Here’s a way of changing how / what you teach so you can address sustainable development’

is never going to be popular, especially as many will see it as yet another top → down initiative. But to say to someone,

‘Here’s something that might improve your teaching and your students’ learning

may well be quite another matter. Helping people do what they want to do more effectively will be more helpful than telling them they should really be doing something else. Doing this, and respecting the varied institutional and professional contexts recognises that people have unique contextual insights and strategic understandings, and that they also have on-going institutional commitments that demand much of their attention. The Funding Council might also have realised that there is successful practice to be built on and shared.

It might have asked universities to take stock of what they currently do that bears on sustainable development, and to report this with their own action plan for development. The Council might then have enabled a cross-institutional sharing of good practice and development.

My final point relates to making sure we ask the right questions. When I said that universities might take stock of what they currently do in their teaching, how you ask that question will influence the kind of answer you might get. But it is very easy to get unhelpful answers. Take these quite similar questions:

1. How do your university’s teaching programmes engage students with the idea of sustainable development?



## 2. How does your university contribute to sustainable development through how it engages with students?

It seems to me that question 2 is the much more important, but there is a problem. While question 1 is quite easy to answer, Question 2 is unanswerable at present because there is not yet an agreed (and accepted) means of doing so - that is, there is not an agreed way of knowing what 'contribute to sustainable development' means. This seems a fairly urgent research agenda.

### The Decade: what might it achieve?

It is hard to see any of the UN's goals being achieved without a great deal of learning across all sectors – learning from experience, from work in schools, colleges and universities, from training, and through professional and institutional development. But we need to get away from the idea that learning is only important after experts have decided what – in terms of development, health, good governance, trade, environment, and so on – should be learned or done.

Sustainable development, if it ever happens, will be a process in which everyone learns all the time, and its cause is unlikely to be advanced by any group that simply asserts its right and authority to teach others without learning itself. Teachers, for example, know that their job is to promote learning by their students, rather than to promote sustainable development. Thus, if sustainable development does require learning, then learning goals must be a fundamental part of it. Environmental and other goals – supposedly to be achieved through learning – will just not do by themselves. Further, even where it is possible to say what needs to happen from a particular perspective (development, say) and/or a particular discipline (economics, say), such views will not necessarily agree. Under these circumstances, simply seeking to promote learning without too many preconceptions seems the only sensible way forward.

If learning can sensibly be viewed as a social process to make our experience of the future somehow better, then sustainable development might be understood and operationalised in this fashion:

Sustainable development –

a process of making the emergent future ecologically sound and humanly habitable *as it emerges*, through the continuous responsive learning which is the human species' most characteristic endowment

This kind of centrality for the concept and practice of learning represents a radical shift of view. From this new perspective, it is in the dynamics of social learning that sustainable development exists.

The Unesco text was kind enough to quote Stephen Gough and myself when we wrote something very similar:

By learning throughout our lives we equip ourselves to choose most advantageously as the future unfolds.

and we went on to say this:

This would not bring about sustainable development. Rather, it would be evidence that sustainable development was happening.

In all of this, of course, it is hard to get away from the uncertainty and the sheer unknowability of much of the future. However, while many problems related to sustainable development are likely to continue to be characterised by uncertainty, it is possible (and important) to chip away at this.

It is possible to know things: but it is important to be absolutely honest about when we really know something, and when we just wish we did. There is nothing scientifically rigorous about assuming values for unknown variables and then building these into policy prescriptions behind a screen of fine words and/or complex mathematics. Such factors are fundamental to our being able to think about sustainable development, and for progress to be made in ways that make contextual and cultural sense to us.

### A final thought

I want to leave one final thought with you, which sums up what I have been saying. It is to suggest to you that there is a particular way of thinking about sustainable development which captures the core role for learning as a collaborative and reflective process, the inter-generational dimension, and the idea of environmental limits. It is this:

Sustainable development –

- a social learning process of improving the human condition;
- a process which can be continued indefinitely without undermining itself.

This seems to me to neatly capture the existential and moral challenge we face. If that's right, then determining the most effective ways of encouraging and enabling such learning seem the most appropriate task for the Decade.

William Scott  
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