

What We Need to Learn to Save the Planet

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Abstract

The author argues that education, as we see it today, is more a part of sustainable development's (SD) problem than a part of its solution because it reinforces the principles and values of an unsustainable lifestyle and economy. He argues for an economy that is not centred on free market and profit, and which circulates wealth with a logic of cooperation rather than competition. Solidarity economy has incorporated the principles of inclusion and social emancipation. Sustainability and solidarity are emergent and convergent themes. Gadotti proposes that without social mobilisation against the current economic model, education for sustainable development (ESD) will not reach its goals. In addition, education for a sustainable life—not only for a sustainable development—is required. The Decade of Education for Sustainable Development is an opportunity for formal education to construct a new quality of education, a social-environmental quality, to replace the current education model that has been eroding the planet since the nineteenth century.

As Paulo Freire (1997) has taught us, changing the world is urgent, difficult and necessary. But, in order to change the world, it is necessary to know, read and understand the world, both scientifically and emotionally, and above all, to intervene in an organised way.

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Nowadays, people who are the most educated are the ones who are harming the planet because of their unsustainable lifestyles. The countries that offer the most access to education are the countries that have in their history, habits and values that are deeply harmful to life on the planet.¹

Education, as we see it today, is more a part of sustainable development's problem than part of its solution because it re-enforces the principles and values of an unsustainable economy. It is urgent to end this paradigm. It is not enough to introduce the theme of sustainability without rethinking other school subjects under a different logic, a communicative and emancipatory one, and without changing habits. For educational systems to incorporate education for sustainable development (ESD) in their pedagogical process, they need, first, to be educated about and for sustainability.

We need to distinguish, without separating them, 'education *about* sustainable development' from 'education *for* sustainable development'. The first refers to acquiring awareness of theoretical discussions and collecting information and data on sustainable development; the second refers to how to use education to build a more sustainable future. It is, therefore, a matter of going beyond theoretical discussions to give examples of sustainable life. Education *for* sustainable development is more than knowledge about the environment, economy and society; it must encompass new attitudes, perspectives and values that guide and impel people to live their lives in a more sustainable way.

A NEW PARADIGM

The beginning of this millennium is characterised by huge technological achievements and also by an appalling lack of political maturity that continues to generate poverty, degradation and endless wars. Five hundred transnational companies control 25 per cent of the global economic activity and 80 per cent of the technological innovations. Capitalist economic globalisation has weakened states by imposing limits to their autonomy and forcing them to follow the economic logic of transnational companies. Gigantic external debts hinder the implementation of social policies in developing countries. Transnational companies work for 10 per cent of the world's population that is located in the richest countries, generating a deep and inadmissible exclusion.

Classical paradigms are inadequate in this context. They are not able to explain this transition nor to take part in it. The neoliberalism paradigm proposes more power to transnational companies and the authoritarian state paradigm proposes more power to the state. The real answer lies in strengthening the citizen's control over both the state and the market. Civil society must enhance its capacity to govern itself and create tools for nonstate public management. Here we find the important role played by education and training for an active citizenship that is capable of choosing its own future's quality indicators. For this we need an entirely new and radically democratic pedagogy.

Solidarity Economy

The solidarity economy has emerged as a rich ongoing process in the world, one that is guided by the principles of solidarity, sustainability, inclusion and social emancipation. In this sense, it represents a great hope: 'Solidarity economy is a movement of global reach that was born among the oppressed and the ... excluded, the ones whose work is not valued by the capitalist market, who don't have access to capital, technology or credit. It is from them, from activists and people who promote the solidarity economy, that emerges the desire and aspiration of a new paradigm for organizing economy and society' (Loureiro 2002: 162). It is actually a demercantilisation of the economic process, a basic programme for the construction of a new socialism. This demercantilisation does not mean demonetisation nor the end of the market, but the 'elimination of profit as a category' (Wallerstein 2002: 36).

We need an economy in which free market and profit are not the centre of everything. There are relationships, natural resources, public goods, knowledge, education and, above all, human beings that should not be subject to free market. Food is not the only human need. People also need dignity, autonomy to decide upon their own existence, culture, knowledge and awareness. Every human being needs self-determination. It is not a matter of extinguishing wealth and the market through which it circulates. It is a matter of making wealth circulate with a logic of cooperation rather than competition.

The solidarity economy has incorporated the concepts of ecology and sustainable development. This incorporation represents a possibility of widening the scope of the solidarity socio-economy ventures as happened when gender, human rights and defence of local and social control approaches were incorporated. Sustainability and solidarity are emergent and convergent themes. The solidarity economy's practices involve cultural changes that are only possible through cultural groundwork and deep changes of values and principles that guide human behaviour towards the concept of what is sustainable and what is not.

Globalisation

Globalisation may be inevitable, but we must differentiate between economic globalisation, undertaken by transnational companies, and citizen globalisation. Both use the same technology, but with opposing logic. The first, which is led by capitalist interests, dominates nations; the second—the 'other' globalisation, in the words of Milton Santos (2000)—is done through organisations of global civil society.

We are able to build networks upon networks through the Internet by using imagination, intuition, emotion and reason for the gigantic effort of discovering ways to live better on this planet. We are seeing the birth of the planetary citizen. We have not yet been able to imagine all the consequences of this unique event. We do feel, notice and are moved by it, but we are not yet able to grasp the significance of this spectacular happening in human history.

EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

It is not enough to educate for a sustainable development; we need to educate for a sustainable life. A sustainable life is a lifestyle that harmonises human environmental ecology by means of technologies, cooperative economies and individual effort. It is an intentional lifestyle whose characteristics are personal responsibility, commitment to other people and a spiritual life. A sustainable lifestyle maintains a balance between the environment and the economy and between fulfilling current needs and guaranteeing the fulfillment of the needs of future generations.

While sustainable development refers mainly to the ways in which a society produces and reproduces human existence, a sustainable lifestyle is, first of all, related to the options that people take in daily living.

The concept of a sustainable life has been forming slowly, profiting from various reflections in the last decades, especially within the ecological movement. It bases itself in a philosophical paradigm developed by Edgar Morin (1993), Boaventura de Sousa Santos (1995), Paulo Freire (1997), Leonardo Boff (1999), Sebastião Salgado (2000) and Milton Santos (2000).

Among the educational objectives of educating for a sustainable life are:

1. **Global thinking.** In an era of information, considering the speed at which knowledge is produced and grows old, there is no need to accumulate information. But it is vital to know how to think. We need to reconsider what knowledge is; what is knowing how to learn and how to know; what are the methodologies and organisation of school work. We must educate so that people understand that we have only one home.
2. **Feelings.** Human beings are the only creatures who ask about the sense of life. We must educate to feel, to care, to take care and to live every moment of our lives making sense. We are humans because we feel, not only because we think.
3. **Our identity on the Earth as a vital human condition.** Our common destiny is to share life on the planet with others. Our identity is at once individual and cosmic.
4. **Planetary awareness.** Understanding that we are interdependent. The Earth is a single nation and we, the people on Earth, are its citizens. We don't need passports. Nowhere on the Earth should we be considered foreigners. Separating the world into the First World and Third World means dividing it so it can be ruled by the most powerful. This is a globalist division between the globalisers and the globalised, which is opposite to the process of planetarisation.
5. **Understanding.** We must educate for human ethics rather than for the market ethics. Educate for communication, not for an exploiting communication that takes advantage of others, but for a communication that

helps us to understand each other better. Intelligence is not only the ability to solve problems (instrumental intelligence), it is also the capacity to manifest a life project with solidarity. Solidarity is not only a value; it is a condition for our survival.

6. **Voluntary simplicity and quietness.** Our lives need to be guided by new values: simplicity, austerity, quietness, peace, serenity, listening, living together, sharing, discovering and building together. We need to choose a world that is more responsible in opposition to the current dominant culture, which is a culture of war, and start acting concretely by putting sustainability in practice in our daily lives. Simplicity is not simple-mindedness and quietness is not silence. Simplicity must be voluntary—willingly changing our consumption habits and reducing our demands. Quietness is a virtue which can be conquered through inner peace, not through imposed silence. Quietness has to do with hearing, listening, knowing and learning with others, which is different from giving readymade speeches that dictate rules to listeners.

A Sustainable Life

The Earth Charter explicitly talks about ‘sustainable life’. The Earth Charter is a group of planetary principles and values that will lead us to a world where the values of solidarity and sustainability are dominant. It is a project, a movement, a process that can turn the risk of extermination into a historical opportunity, turn fear into hope.

In my book *Pedagogy of the Earth* (Gadotti 2001), we defend the need of having an Earth Charter associated to a peace process, a culture of peace. Since the Earth Charter is an ethical document, it involves a movement of cultural change and needs education to become better known. But we don’t need to change only people’s awareness. We need structural changes in the economic field, as *Agenda 21* has proposed. The Earth Charter also needs to be associated with *Agenda 21* in order to have greater support from civil society. Governments can sign treaties or adopt the Earth Charter, but they won’t keep their promises if civil society does not pay attention and pressurise them to do what they have promised. Something that has been socially built can be socially transformed. Another world is possible; another globalisation is possible. We need to get there together and in time.

Educating for Another Possible World

John Holloway (2003) showed us in his book *Changing the World without Taking Power* that educating for another possible world is to educate to *dissolve power*. In his opinion, a social revolution today must overcome relationships of power and subordination in order to mutually recognise the dignity of each person. We must understand power as the ‘capacity of doing’, as a ‘service’, asserting that ‘we’ are the ones who can change the world, we, the ‘common people’, have the capacity of changing the world.

That is why educating for another possible world means to do what Paulo Freire called 'defetishising'. The fetishism of neoliberal ideology holds that the world is immutable. Fetishism transforms human relationships into static phenomena, as if it were impossible to modify them. When fetishised, we are incapable of acting because the fetish blocks our capacity of doing. When fetishised, we only repeat what has been already done and said, what already exists.

Educating for another possible world makes visible what has been hidden by oppression and gives voice to the ones who are not heard. The feminist struggle, the ecological movement, the Zapatist movement (Mexico) and the landless movement (Brazil), among others, have made visible things that were invisible due to centuries of oppression. Educating for another possible world must include a pedagogy of absences. As Boaventura Souza Santos (2005) said, it means to show what has been 'absented' or left out of history by dominant cultures. For example, western rational scientific cultures often undervalue nonscientific, traditional knowledge.

Educating for another possible world is to give rise to what does not yet exist, to utopia, to the 'possible not yet seen' (Paulo Freire).

Educating for another possible world is to make spaces in education for training critical minds rather than for training only a workforce for the market. It invents new spaces for complementary training and denies the hierarchical form of formal systems that gives orders and promotes subordination.

Educating for another possible world is educating for life in networks, being capable of communicating and acting in groups and creating cooperative methods of production.

The earth is our first educator. Educating for another possible world helps one find one's place in history and in the universe. It is educating for peace, for human rights, social justice and cultural diversity, and against sexism and racism. It is educating for planetary awareness and planetary conscience and helps learners to deeply feel the universe (Gadotti 2007).

THE DECADE OF EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The Decade of Education for Sustainable Development document (UNESCO Brazilian edition, May 2005) grants that there is not a universal model of education for sustainable development. It is possible to translate this concept into different realities and different pedagogies, such as Paulo Freire's pedagogy which begins by reading the world and respecting each one's context and offers an emancipatory and dialogical methodology.

The UNESCO document states that,

The Decade's main goal is to integrate principles, values and practices of sustainable development to all aspects of education and teaching. This education effort should encourage changes in behaviour in order to create a more sustainable future in terms of the integrity of the environment, of economic viability and of a fair society for

present and future generations Education for sustainable development demands the re-examination of educational policy, in the sense of reorientating education from kindergarten to university and lifelong learning, so that it is clearly focused on acquiring knowledge, competencies, perspectives and values that are related to sustainability (UNESCO 2005: 57).

But, ESD without social mobilisation against the current economic model will not reach its goals. This is affirmed in the document itself, which asserts that, 'market global economy, as it currently exists, does not protect the environment nor is it beneficial to even half of the world population' (UNESCO 2005:56). Therefore, in order for education for sustainable development to be efficient, it must be political education. And this is also in the document: 'Sustainable development does not look for maintaining the *status quo*, on the contrary, it looks for acknowledging tendencies and the implication of change' (UNESCO 2005:39). It concludes: 'Transforming education is necessary; an education will give contributions to make possible the urgent and fundamental changes brought by the challenge of sustainability However, a learning experience, within the education for sustainable development programme cannot limit itself to a personal sphere—learning must lead towards an active participation in the search for and adoption of new organisational standards and changes' (UNESCO 2005: 42 and 45).

In the United Nations there are a great many ineffective declarations and programmes. There is no guarantee that the Decade will achieve its goals. Mechanisms of evaluation and monitoring are urgently needed so that we can assess its progress.

The Decade recognises the Earth Charter as 'another international initiative' (UNESCO 2005: 41). Strangely, the Decade does not recognise it as a strategy or as a global movement. If the Earth Charter is recognised as a movement for ethics and as a global initiative, a global cause, it should also be present in the strategies for implementation and not only as one more initiative. The Earth Charter, due to its 12 years of existence, the Earth Charter can make great contributions to the Decade.

I agree with the UN document. However, I wish it had given more importance to the work being developed by nongovernmental organisations and social movements. We are, essentially, a society of networks and movements. Maybe, the Earth Charter and the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development should also be more involved with social movements such as the World Social Forum and the World Education Forum.

Challenges for the Decade

The greatest challenge for the Decade is implementation: how to transform its declaration of principles into concrete actions. The discourse of the proclamation is expositive and enunciative, while the discourse of action is more communicative and dialogical. It is not enough to define the Decade's mission and main objectives. At this point, the most important thing to do is to create a participatory movement that will show the best ways and create alternatives in the process.

The Decade needs to pertain to a movement in order to change the world which demands more sensitivity than scientific knowledge. The meaning of the process does not come from knowledge or from the ecological discourse, but from problems of daily life. The process needs to make sense to the participants. This way, the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development is a true call. It is not a programme, but a challenge, a philosophy of life for a sustainable existence.

In order to change the dominant educational paradigm, we need to recognise the knowledge crisis caused by the positivist model that reduces the environment to an object of study. Education for sustainable development must continue working with environmental education which brought a new view of human relationships with the world environment—which is no longer conceived as an object, but as a living creature that shares the same destiny with human beings. Environmental knowledge is ethical and political. It isn't only a matter of understanding ecological principles, but also involves a new concept of reality.

The Decade is an opportunity for formal education. Education for sustainability can help rebuild educational systems which are still based on a predatory view of the world. Environmental education and education for sustainable development, when associated with human rights, gender rights, democratic rights, peace and sustainability, are fundamental to these reforms. That is why I believe that the Decade's major objective will end up being the construction of a new quality of education, a social-environmental quality to replace the current education model that has been destroying the planet since the nineteenth century.

It is widely thought that we must have a 'common view' of sustainable development and education for sustainable development, when, in fact, we need to build this view from good practices. We all don't have to agree in order to start acting. Our consensus may be built through common actions in order to achieve common views.

Note

- 1 'Just as statistics are so convincingly demonstrating that people in the wealthy part have the longest and most advanced education, their lifestyles are consuming most of the world's limited resources' Lindberg 2007: 38.

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