

DRAFT**ARE EDUCATORS READY FOR THE NEXT EARTH SUMMIT?**

Since 1992 the treatment of education consistent with the objectives of Agenda 21 has given rise to some disquiet. Many organizations have a stake in it - international and national, governmental and non-governmental, formal and non-formal. If there are problems they cannot be blamed on any one of these or on any particular sector: they make up together a cluster of complex systems interacting with each other and the society to which they belong, so the position will also vary between countries and regions. But if the problem is genuine it is important now to identify its causes and the means of addressing them. What follows is an attempt to draw together relevant issues as a basis for discussion among educators and for further study as appropriate. It is intended for readers already committed to promoting such learning, however labelled and in any of its contexts, in hope that its tentative diagnoses and lines of treatment can be added to and adapted as required, or else provoke alternative proposals for treatment. The outcomes might help to guide future policy for redeeming the position of education in this context.

In the year 2002 the nations which gathered in Rio de Janeiro ten years earlier to assess the state of the Earth will come together again in Johannesburg for the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development, to find out among other things what progress has been made in putting the Rio action plan, Agenda 21, into effect.

In Agenda 21 education received more mention than anything else besides government, not only in the relevant chapter, Chapter 36, but throughout the text. Evidently it was considered to be important for achieving the much wider aims of the plan. Chapter 36 itself, on Education, Training and Public Awareness, was passed almost without comment. Mention of it continued to be made repeatedly in the major UN conferences which followed Rio, from 1994 to 1996, but at the UN General Assembly Special Session in 1997 it got much less prominence. UNESCO, as the task manager for education, had already reported to the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), set up to monitor progress, that "education is the forgotten priority of Rio". National delegations had seemingly given education their blessing, passed it over to their education ministries for attention and then dismissed it from their minds.

A growing preference during the 90s for talking about learning rather than education (taken here to mean the guidance of learning), e.g. learning societies, self-directed and distance learning, open learning systems and learning approaches to change, may have improved the environment for learning in this context but has not significantly relieved the concern over its continuing low profile or uncertain coverage.

And the result? Although awareness of the issues has certainly spread considerably since 1992, mainly through the media, there has been no real evidence of any widespread change in formal learning relating to sustainability, nor of much improvement in public understanding of it, and certainly no great increase in the allocation of resources for the revision of professional practice in this direction. Nor has there been a new surge of concern to develop relevant non-formal learning opportunities. Education has not, therefore, done what it might have done to support the progress of sustainability. Why not?

What has happened since Rio?

Real progress has been made, however, including the following:

- National strategies for Environmental or Sustainable Development Education (EE or SDE) were prepared in many countries with back-up from the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and other international and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs), although not all of them found their way into active government policy.
- Major international conferences were held, notably at Toronto in 1992 and New Delhi and Thessaloniki in 1997, to keep track of progress, backed up by many other smaller, more specialised or more regionalised meetings, internet conferences and an unremitting flood of books and papers exhorting those responsible to reform their systems to keep pace with change. A good case in this business does not, however, guarantee good attention, let alone implementation.
- Some kind of consensus has been reached as to what SDE is about, in comparison with its predecessor EE. Authority is still needed to establish its educational identity, particularly since the newer title has proved vulnerable to quite diverse interpretations arising from the different worldviews of its promoters, thus presenting practitioners with problems of authentication and interpretation which they may not be well equipped to handle.
- Bringing the proponents of the green, ecophysical environment and those of the socio-economic environment together into the same enterprise has made some progress (*e.g.* the Education for Sustainability Forum in the UK, Harvey's Education 21 model, the Education Caucus at CSD). Real differences exist, *e.g.* in professional training (natural sciences as against social sciences, economics, the humanities or the arts), and their respective targets, priorities and frames of reference, but joint action is clearly practicable.
- Many successful projects on the practice of SDE/EE now exist and offer good working models for others. Most of them have depended on the efforts of talented enthusiasts already trying to underpin protection or improvement of either the 'green' or the socio-economic environment and often working as volunteers far beyond the call of duty. Their work should be better disseminated, within a broadly accepted structural framework.

So the progress since 1992 has included a lot of talk along with the provision (perhaps even over-provision) of exhortatory and advisory publications, and improved but still localised practice, most of it undertaken by committed people without much extension to the unconverted, especially when seed-money runs out.

Some things need more attention

Some are broadly conceptual:

- Those not involved in SDE/EE are still apt to think of it as a subject to be taught whereas it would be better identified as a competence, a permeating quality like personal or social competence, emerging as a way of thinking.
- SDE/EE has been caught in a slide away from education's liberal origins onto a vocational-managerial route. Correcting this may require a wide-ranging critique of the current paradigm of relevant education and a new emphasis on what Stephen Sterling has described as relational learning.
- Socially-motivated educators are often concerned about policies which they see as too

'environmental' (in a 'green' sense), while landscape and wildlife conservationists are equally anxious over a socio-economic take-over of sustainability. So long as the different interests in sustainability feel it necessary to defend their own patches against each other then combining them in a single system is more difficult.

- Mutual dependence between human lifestyles and a cluster of ecological and social processes is not yet widely recognized by society at large, and the greater political appeal of some socio-economic aspects of sustainability gives them more funding potential than others, leading to imbalances within the environmental spectrum. Some educators respond to this by separating again into more congenial specialisms like biodiversity education, energy education, human rights education, peace education etc., another form of the fragmentation of thinking which EE and SDE were intended to counteract.
- Non-educator administrators at all levels tend to treat education as an instrument for improving people's capacity to become employable citizens, to be handled by professional educators in the public and private sectors in accord with directions from above, using well established practices and kept updated in content by the appropriate professional institutions. Other less formal learning channels are not sufficiently considered.

Others are more political:

- In many countries national strategies for EE/SDE were prepared on western models, to appeal to foreign funding agencies rather than meet local needs, and gave insufficient attention to indigenous knowledge and circumstances. Practice based on theory derived from a different culture cannot be expected to succeed. How far does this comment also apply within industrialised countries?
- The people directly involved have not yet multiplied into the critical mass of educators needed to alter the policies of governments or to divert funding to a potentially troublesome (because cross-disciplinary) innovation. For those not involved the initiatives have not yet been perceived as leading to sufficient improvements in lifestyles to raise public political pressure in their support.
- Internationally the education community was not recognized by the CSD as a Major Group of stakeholders, perhaps because it was not well enough organized when these were first set up. It is thus at a disadvantage compared with the nine existing major groups, most of which are backed by strong international NGOs to maintain CSD attention. In consequence the views of educators are not expressed so effectively as those of others, e.g. at CSD meetings. Where environment-related policy is determined (other than specifically education policy) educators are not normally invited to contribute and decisions which reflect on their work are passed over for education ministries to implement.
- Education Ministries with many other problems to contend with - underfunding, low teacher morale, pressure groups of many other kinds often more vociferous and better supported politically, a disinclination to move away from the safety of the formal sector and the product-orientated priorities of government - are understandably likely to locate these issues low on their lists.

Some are quite practical:

- Practising teachers in the formal sector are often poorly placed to take part in cross-curricular experience unless it is deliberately planned for them, and their training remains as a rule constrained within subject boundaries.

- The work of enthusiasts does not always survive them, and the responsible authorities which were happy to benefit from the reflected success of good projects may be less interested in investing the funding needed to insure their continuity.

These observations suggest that critical gaps exist for the implementation of SDE/EE between different stakeholder interests: solid pieces of progress have been made but vital connecting links to bring them into practice are missing. Gaps in the net have to be found and filled. Perhaps past endeavours have been too easy to ignore: educational change of this well-intentioned sort is often perceived as a 'soft' issue, not spicy enough for media attention, a distraction which governments can safely pass over.

In summary it appears that the policies for learning which we are advocating are not yet well enough defined and substantiated in many people's minds and overly dependent on individual enthusiasms. Education relating to environmental issues has a weak political position within the structure of government both internationally and nationally, an unsupportive political and social climate for the sort of reforms being promoted, insecure ideas of the nature and role of both sustainable development and education in that context, and an inadequate sense of public responsibility for how and what people learn outside the formal sector. How can the position be improved?

A model for better understanding

A more orderly assessment might be made by examining the interactions between the main stakeholder groups involved. Initially three such groups can be recognized, (i) the promoters of SDE who are usually issue-centred, (ii) the practitioners both in the formal and the non-formal sectors who are unhappy about indoctrination and may see themselves as student-centred, and (iii) the target population, members of the public who, as the receivers of all this attention and lifelong learners, really comprise everybody including both promoters and practitioners when in learning modes. In one form or another the priorities of the public may at heart be security - home and family, lifestyle and status, job and future prospects.

All of these groups both influence and learn from each other. There need be no real confusion that some people appear in two or all three groups: the capacity of people to adopt different positions on the same issue according to their current circumstances is familiar. Each of these interactions should be examined critically. They reveal problems of understanding and qualities of structure in the system within which educators work, and by which they are strongly affected. These are likely to include:

- Failure of both environmental administrators and NGO environmental activists to acknowledge that:
 - the guidance of learning (education) happens both inside and outside formal institutions;
 - adult behaviour towards the environment is the product of a sustained learning experience influenced by many things, *e.g.* direct experience both pleasant and unpleasant, the example set by others ranging through the immediate social circle to the demands of employers and the exercise of public authority, as well as from instruction (legislation and commercial persuasion in addition to schooling);
 - the formative stages of development are as much part of society as the final stages; and so

- the guidance of sustained learning experience should be part of the overall planning process;
- the practising educators here are members of society at large and its institutions, not all of them regarding their primary functions as educative.

Until this extended view of learning and education gets home to people, and to policy makers in particular, progress may be slow.

- Founding education on three fundamental competences, personal, social and environmental competence, and making education learner-centred, to help the learner make personal judgments on environmental issues, are apt to be submerged in the current concern to produce conforming members of society who are employable in a competitive market. One could not deny to people the education they need to find a fulfilling place in society, but they are entitled to find in it also a concern for the quality of their environment and its treatment. Without pressure to the contrary the sustainable use of resources, the lives of those less fortunate in the competition (especially if they belong to a different social or cultural set), the effects of action that are distant in place or time, even long term security, are apt to be valued against short term economic criteria or else to be passed over as virtuous but unrealistic frills, irrelevant to real life in the crowd. Even the language of education has sometimes changed to a marketing language of targets and delivery, of management, of win-win situations and end-of-pipe products. Neither the political nor the social climate seems genuinely favourable to less material objectives.
- The intractability of formal education systems which may not look kindly on attempts, however well meant, of non-educational institutions and individuals to tell them how to run their business, generally without marketing incentives at a time when resources for development are inadequate and morale in the profession often low.
- The difficulties which many professional people, both within and outside education, experience in handling complex multidimensional, multisectoral systems, having themselves had an education favouring reductive approaches, together with the challenges of feeding such systemic approaches into general educational practice.
- The uncertainties occasioned by the many ways in which terms like sustainability, sustainable development and a sustainable future are interpreted. (Is this solely a problem for anglophone countries?)
- The lack of an international professional body to bring forward the views of practising educators which can give both the CSD and national governments authoritative guidance on the issues raised by Agenda 21 as applied to education, and which is not identified as representing a sectoral interest in either the biophysical or the socioeconomic environment.

Missing from this review is the Political system comprising both government and political party machinery, and both elected representatives and their paid officials pursuing interpretations of government policy. Although they should represent the public interest the objectives and priorities of this system are likely to differ from those of the other groups, and within it there are subcultures associated with individual offices and personalities, not always identifiable but potentially key determinators. Both the nature of interactions among the other groups and the courses of action available to them are liable to modification through interaction with this fourth system.

Each part of the political system is likely to have its own preconceptions, its own duties and agenda, its preferred interpretation of terms, its own view of a secure and conformable course of resultant action, its own expectations and visions, and within its own society still some room for further limited interpretation by individual executives. No wonder that the clarity of messages passing through this sequence often ends up somewhat fogged. Policy makers yearn for fewer intractable problems and those where failure to solve is not followed by obvious retribution may not receive action. Problems a generation hence will not be theirs anyway, and education is notoriously slow to produce results.

The development of an effective strategy for promoting an appropriate and workable programme of change in learning opportunities will therefore entail looking critically at each interaction between the three stakeholder groups and also at interactions with and within the political system. Only when each of these, together with its political status, has been included in the design process can one hope to progress new programmes significantly.

A possible procedure

The designers of learning strategies consistent with sustainable development, at all levels of operation, might therefore find it useful to proceed as follows:

1. Identify the main groups of stakeholders concerned in the promotion, operation and reception of the initiative in question, and assess their outlooks on the issues involved;
2. Identify the channels of communication and influence within each group and between them, and analyse their strengths and weaknesses in relation to the objectives of the initiative;
3. Devise any remedial action necessary to optimise the effectiveness of each channel in support of the initiative;
4. Relate proposed actions to existing structures and processes and design them so as to make a smooth and unthreatening transition from the old to the new, if necessary dividing the process into small achievable steps;
5. Assess the relevance of each proposed action to the expressed policy of the responsible authority, governmental, non-governmental or both;
6. Reorganize or rephrase the proposals to conform as far as possible with overall policy and the language in which it is expressed, while remaining consistent with the ultimate learning objectives, and then present them as a constructive response to identified needs of public policy, perhaps with some credit accessible to those who pass them on to the public.

It may not always work but perhaps its chances of success will be better, and careful wording can allow a remarkable degree of freedom for implementation.

This approach ought to be helpful at any level of strategy. There seems no reason why it should not be relevant even at international level, provided the approach is made from a position of sufficient authority to capture the attention of member governments, and that the lower levels of strategy nested within it are based on the real needs of their own levels, not on presumptions of higher level expectations. But success at each level is constrained by comparable factors. Neither delegates to UN conferences nor educators in the classroom are likely to invest time and effort into an enterprise which does not sufficiently conform with the policies of those on whom they rely for resources and reward, whether they be the voters and taxpayers who sustain governments or the education authorities and examining bodies which measure learning success.

Improving the position

Several particular measures seem to spring out of this review which might lead to guided learning taking a more effective part in the achievement of sustainability policies. They are interconnected.

- Create an international NGO representing facilitators of learning in both formal and non-formal sectors to help **give education and learning a higher status** in UN. It could be a coalition of existing national practitioners' associations, relevant international bodies, education units of appropriate NGOs and the like, but should be seen to be independent of any particular part of sustainability policy in order to emphasise its broad constitution. Such a consortium might be able to redeem the CSD Major Group deficiency if the opportunity arose and also facilitate other measures, including those following.
- Use this authority to clarify for administrators of policy both internationally and nationally the **meaning of sustainable development education** and the requirements for its support. They might even reconsider its title, but would also have to assess the danger of further confusion from changing names - assuming they had a better one. Is there a need for a standing group of trusted experts to maintain balance?
- Persuade decision makers that developing (learning) phases in the human life cycle are an important component of society and justify **recognition in the planning of public policy** beyond education policy, to ensure an environment where learning by experience and example can proceed in conformity with sustainability policy.
- Sustainability issues generally arise within complex systems, encompassing ecological, social and economic elements together, for which most people are poorly prepared. Bring **systems approaches** out of the specialist areas of education where they presently exist into the education of all. Education cannot realistically instill comprehensive knowledge about all these component factors, but can help people to recognize what they are, relate them to each other in defined systems under study and to the dynamics between them, and guide students to sources of expertise for necessary detail.
- Sustainability lies within an ethical system which in many ways is out of phase with the current market and growth orientated worldview. Develop **a critical approach to the values** operating within a system as an important part of learning about it, and note that political sensitivity may mean that guidance is needed on how this is best accomplished.
- **Identify the gaps** which exist in the system between promising projects or experiences and education policy or practice, and fill them by better understood linkages, by new elements in teacher or facilitator education, or by whatever means may be needed at particular places and times.
- Recognising the constraints on formal education, give more explicit support to **other learning channels** such as community learning, distance learning, and the internet, better opportunities for controlled experiential learning and full acknowledgment that this is an integral part of community dynamics and the real foundation for sustainable development.
- Focus fresh attention on the **professional bodies** which control continuing professional development, and influence initial professional education to encourage greater interprofessional cooperation in promoting and implementing SD principles.

- Recognise **the educative power of example**, whether private or public, requiring the commitment of policy makers and implementers alike as an influence which if neglected or misdirected may render many other measures a waste of time and resources. Everyone is an educator.
- Be sensitive to **the current priorities of different groups** and ensure that they are recognized in practice. For example the implications, ecological, sociological and economic, of globalization and its consequences for education are currently of concern to many, along with poverty, violence, and the effects of increased movement of people around the world whether as ecological or political refugees, as salesmen or as tourists. Threats to biodiversity, and the influence of changing climate are becoming better articulated. More localised issues may, however, be perceived as far more important by particular communities.
- Establish that the aim of education is **to help people to assemble and evaluate the determinants** of issues and appropriate courses of action, to appreciate uncertainty and risk, but not to promote any particular sectoral remedy or value system.

Conclusion

We seem to be dealing with a chronic illness of humankind in the new millennium. Even if we have the diagnosis correct, and sound suggestions for treating the causes, the symptoms of ill-health may not yet be painful enough for us to persuade the patient to start treatment.

Perhaps we should not have been misled by the ease with which education was received as an important issue at Rio. Susana Calvo has a maxim "*Donde todos piensan igual, nadie piensa mucho*" - when everyone thinks the same, no-one thinks much. At a time when targets are not being met for implementing major political measures agreed at Rio, any more than for meeting universal basic education targets set at Jomtien in 1990, what chance is there that our targets will even be set up? What kind of proposals can educators make that will cause delegates of all sorts to sit up and think afresh?

The foundation for progress is recognition that we are concerned with a single, global system, comprising life support systems and the diverse machinery through which they are maintained in a variable world, together with the totality of humankind in all its variety of culture, the performance of which now greatly influences the functioning of the whole system. Relationships between these components are now in a state of rapid change. It is vital that people learn how to sort out the nature and implications of what is happening. Education has the role of guiding that learning.

The educational issues which are contentious seem to cluster around two focal positions. The first is that education is a means of fitting people to live in conformity with government policy (e.g. towards their environment and its exploitation) and that educators are primarily trained people carrying out this task as directed by others, in formally recognised institutions. The second is that education is a means of guiding people's development so that they can understand better their own relationships with their social and biophysical environment, so as to provide active and informed participation in the formulation and implementation of policy, and that educators are in effect everyone concerned with other people and the future quality of their living space. There are, of course, intermediate positions and the focal points are by no means irreconcilable.

It is perhaps time, however, for education to be at least partly de-institutionalised. This does not mean to deny institutions their continuing role but to make plain the reality that education of the whole person, extending into the whole life, is a responsibility of the whole community. The formal sector of education will continue to have a vital and definitive role but public learning processes are something in which everyone plays a part, whether knowingly or not, and every policy towards society and its environment has an educational spin-off whether good or bad. Glossy publications and glamorous photography cannot substitute for the realities of life on the ground.

We are close to calling for a redefinition of education as used in international policy pronouncements, more in line with the overall guidance of learning, less exclusively tied to the formal system. It would have implications for the formal system, e.g. less centralised quality criteria, provision for greater sensitivity to locality-specific knowledge and priorities, movement from learning based on certainties to learning about management of uncertainties. Responsibilities for learning outside the formal system would need more official recognition. Could it all be done without stressing further an already overstressed profession, an opening of doors rather than more closures? Might there be within these thoughts a set of proposals which would make, for example, non-educator delegates at CSD think about education more constructively?

Agenda 21 called for education in support of environmental competence, *i.e.* learning to be environmentally competent, to be as basic for people as literacy and numeracy. Can we afford another ten years putting that in place?

This is too lengthy a paper to be read outside the circle of those committed to it. But it could provide arguments for a much shorter paper containing concise proposals. This paper has formed itself around some guiding principles, notably:

- ***The aims of sustainability require that biophysical, social and economic aspects of an issue be considered together and that any policy in which one of these is deficient must be suspect.***
- ***Learning to approach issues systemically should now be a necessary component of experience.***
- ***The guidance of learning for life in a sustainable society and environment should also be treated as a whole issue, comprising all the channels through which it can pass, formal and otherwise.***
- ***The effect on public learning of any policy for action in the field should be one of the major criteria on which the policy is judged.***
- ***Learning consistent with sustainability should be anchored in the local community and extend to the global implications of local and national actions.***

Can concise proposals be devised which would conform to such principles? What should they be?

N.B. This review is adapted and developed from a longer, referenced paper recently published in the journal *Environmental Awareness* (vol.24, part 3, pp.85-97).

The first draft was circulated to a few colleagues and I am particularly grateful to the following for their encouraging and constructive responses, although I have not necessarily incorporated all of their suggestions into this draft - John Baines, Chris Blackmore, Susana Calvo Roy, Sabiha Daudi, Alastair Lavery, Ulrich Loening, Kate McLeod, Violeta Orlovic, Pam Puntenney, Michel Škapa and Stephen Sterling.

Further comments are now invited, to **jcsmyth@compuserve.com** from anyone who cares to make them.