ESD in the Asia-Pacific

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Abstract The article is an attempt to describe the challenges and opportunities in integrating ESD into mainstream policy-making in the Asia-Pacific. The role of education in development is variably understood. It is widely recognized as a *sui generis* guarantor of personal and collective development. Educating for sustainable development has much untapped potential both in driving development in general and improving the contribution of education as a sector within development. ESD in the Asia-Pacific has diverse forms of expression. Effective, frank and constructive intellectual exchanges could lead to significant progress in ESD. Reorienting "quality" in education should assume priority position in education and will ideally, for the sake of its relevance, appeal and continued development, include several dimensions of sustainable development.

Keywords Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), quality education, Asia-Pacific

INTRODUCTION

The Asia-Pacific region is geographically vast and both culturally and ecologically speaking extremely rich in diversity. It is also home to the majority of the world's population, witnessing an unforeseen period of positive change both economically and politically. Unfortunately, it also hosts a wealth of serious global challenges. More than two-thirds of people lacking basic sanitation, underweight children and the extreme poor live in the region (UNDP, 2012). These lives in the margins of human existence are also the most at risk and worst prepared for the perils of disasters, be they "natural", man-made, or economic in character. Threats to life in the region are not theoretical - the Asia-Pacific is, for example, considered the world's most vulnerable region when it comes to natural disasters (UNISDR, 2011).

All of the above calls for serious changes in how we are managing our lives and maintaining human dignity of our fellow human beings. Correspondingly, integrating the principles of sustainable development in education has been agreed to be one of the answers in meeting these challenges. While the vision of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD 2005-2014) is "a world where everyone has the opportunity to benefit from education and learn the values, behaviour and lifestyles required for a sustainable future and for positive societal transformation", the stated goal of the Decade is to "integrate the principles, values, and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning" (UNESCO, 2005, p. 6). This is quite naturally impossible to achieve in one decade and requires significantly more resources and political commitment than has since been awarded to programmes and projects implementing the UN decade.

Countries in the Asia-Pacific have had varied approaches to ESD and some have been far more ambitious than others. It is to be noted, however, that approaches which have not been labeled ESD explicitly may have had and continue to have excellent results in advancing sustainable development. Two such processes come to mind easily: the philosophy of "sufficiency economy" in Thailand and the Gross National Happiness process in Bhutan.

Excellent and diverse approaches to integrating sustainability in education can be found in most countries, for example in Australia, Brunei, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Nepal, Republic of Korea, Thailand and Vietnam.[1] In the field of ESD, Japan must be mentioned as being incomparable in supporting other countries' efforts and having a major role in the creation of the Decade itself, and by boasting a large number of ESD initiatives at all levels of education.

EDUCATION AS DRIVER OF DEVELOPMENT

Education's role in human development is widely recognized as being central. It is argued that sustainable development calls for more education. This is somewhat contradictory given that on average, where economic progress and education systems are at their most mature, ecological footprints are often also the largest (see, for example, Cantell and Elias, 2011). ESD therefore advocates for changes in the status quo, to instill a broader understanding of the causalities surrounding our lives. Such understanding can seem a trivial skill to provide to poor communities struggling with day-to-day subsistence. In reality it means providing them with the requisite skills to develop beyond survival and holding authorities accountable for progress in this area. In this vein, ESD is often seen as a systematic approach to integrate sustainability into education systems, processes and practices (Richmond, 2008). The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD, 2005-2014) comprises four major thrusts, around which ESD is globally expected to revolve: improving access to quality basic education; reorienting existing education programmes; developing public understanding and awareness; and providing training (UNESCO, 2005, p.7).

But similar to sustainable development, ESD, too, is not universal one in its colour and shape. For the Asia-Pacific region, UNESCO has in consultation with its member states formulated the following operational definition for ESD, which aims to "facilitate the degree to which an education system is prepared for, and is responsive to, existing and emerging challenges (e.g. disasters)" (UNESCO, 2011, p.2). This definition all but spells out the salience and centrality of change and the importance of education's ability to prepare citizens for it, without prescribing it in a pre-emptive fashion.

SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGES IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

As a region, the Asia-Pacific is far from a socially cohesive one, as are its constituent countries. In the face of newly acquired economic power and growing consumption, vast differences in living standards exist and emerge within countries. A recent report put the dilemma in blunt terms: "[i]n 17 countries, 10 per cent or more of the population subsists on inadequate diets. Other people aspire to the high-consumption lifestyles of the global consumer class" (UNDP, 2012, p.5).

For individual countries the details of development challenges, and consequently answers to them, differ markedly. In Cambodia, where a third of the population lives in conditions of extreme poverty (Hayden and Martin, 2011, p.31), the priority may be obvious. Further, Cambodian political history with its utter devastation of organized, intellectual society and education, directly lead to current challenges, including largest sizes of classes in Southeast Asia (ibid., p.44) and societal inequities spilling over to and bequeathed by education with potentially "catastrophic consequences" (ibid., p.43).

ESD CHALLENGES IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

Sustainable development is like most good things. It is easy to agree on in principle and impossible to implement to perfection. Among other metaphors, it has been said to resemble a journey, to underscore its not being a preset destination. It is also more often than not described by what it is not, by highlighting the problems it intends to prevent and solve. The magnitude of the world's problems carries with it much weight and brings about processes intended to alleviate them. However, with lacking or no reliable monitoring mechanisms in place to read progress by, an illusion of perfect has often become the enemy of the good, also in the area of ESD.[2]

And yet, the inescapable reality in a typical political decision-making situation remains. One will always want highest attainable quality to the greatest number possible at the lowest cost. And yet, in education, most systems are so structured that quantity in access greatly reduces quality while exponentially increasing cost. It is most often this mindset that the minister of education has when allocating funds to initiatives.

ESD may not always play very well in this paradigm and system of thinking. For it is saying, among many other and potentially contested thematic emphases, that the current educational priorities might be wrong. Numeracy and literacy will never go out of fashion, but traditional teaching and learning techniques, corporal punishment and studying irrelevant information to the test may not bring about the kind of development one desires. It is such important and profound (if slow) changes that, coupled with locally defined relevant content, ESD queries tend to lead to. The implications would not be few if fully taken into account - these will typically include reform in teacher education, curricular content, sector planning and school management, but the resources to instigate change with have generally been rather ludicrous in comparison with the needs.

Lack of financial resources to work at country level and increasing demand from its member states led UNESCO to an idiosyncratic conclusion in the Asia-Pacific. Having conducted a series of subregional workshops with member state representatives and experts, UNESCO produced regionally a guide ("the Astrolabe") on ESD coordination and implementation at the national level (UNESCO, 2011). This guide was intended to move the process of sustainability integration in education one level higher and ensure a close connection with the overarching national policies and strategies. A process of identifying the most salient sustainable development priorities and translating them into implementable action at community and classroom was put forth in the guide.

Therefore, in theory, the countries themselves were going to select priority areas of action and implement much of the expert work previously expected of UNESCO. As this would have made coordination highly demanding, in reality there was a further attempt within UNESCO to operationalize the concept into a manageable number of priority areas, which would make sense for most member states. These areas were general support to implementing the UN Decade of ESD (2005-2014) and member states' own work through the Astrolabe guide publication; climate change education and disaster risk reduction; supporting and developing efforts to (quantifiably) measure the impact of ESD and its contribution to the quality of education; and tracking trends in ESD (e.g. education and sustainable business models, ESD's role in promoting health and cognitive development).

Strengthening networks and partnerships and extracting evidence of functioning ESD models is as much a necessity in the Asia-Pacific as elsewhere. While UNESCO is doing this at the global level, regional collections have a tendency to carry more weight among peers. Research in ESD-related pedagogy, skills and monitoring is in need of support, which can oftentimes be simply a mixture of moral support and increased visibility. Evidence of what works and needs to be further promoted and/or researched will be a priority in any successful ESD programme, which will then use this newly established evidence base in focused policy advocacy for maximum performance in the fields of teaching and learning, school management, and education policy and planning.

The last component in particular was an attempt to return to the education sector's internal discussions on quality. For as we know, cognitive development has long since been identified the major explicit objective of all education systems (UNESCO, 2004, p.17), but it is also a wonderful indicator as regards several sustainability issues - health, social progress, wealth distribution, geographical cohesion - and whether or not the education delivered is relevant in reality.

What is perhaps in highest demand and what will likely yield the largest dividends in the region, however, is the work on ESD indicators. It is an effort that may be as likely to fail as it is to succeed, but it will drive progress forward, and is vitally important for ESD. Country representatives look for guidance in this regard for practical reasons. Having indicators would help concretise an otherwise diffuse programme and, most of all, helps set political targets. It calls for the collaboration, data and expertise of statisticians at ministries of education, which in turn will help make the case for ESD in the political arena. Suggested measurements have included existing rates between school employing ESD programmes and those that do not as well as, between rural and urban schools (UNESCO, 2011).

THE POTENTIAL OF ESD TO SUPPORT EFA

EFA has been vastly successful in getting as high a percentage of the population as possible to be a part of education. Clear, measurable targets have helped fast track processes and funnel funding where it has been needed in many cases. Criticism has ensued also for EFA being allegedly in reality excessively number-oriented and grappling with intelligent ways of measuring quality. The process may also not be able to effectively to inform decision makers if and when education is not in the best interest of the child. Teacher absenteeism and poor quality in particular violate the student's right to quality education. Violence in schools and tutoring fees are other critically important factors which can go unseen despite their gravity.

ESD for its part is concerned exactly with what type of education would best serve societal, environmental and economic interests of both the individual and her community. Importantly, as a senior UNESCO staff remarked, it is "not simply an addition to existing education systems, processes and practices, an optional extra that countries may or may not incorporate into their plans and programmes. Instead, ESD properly understood requires a fundamental reorientation of the purposes and tasks of education" (Richmond, 2008, p.3). He goes on to say how deep the implications go: "in due course, no aspect of educational provision will be left unaffected. [ESD] is an approach that embraces an holistic vision of education and one that takes in the key building blocks of a comprehensive and integrated framework: educational planning, policy development, teacher education (initial and in-service), curriculum renewal, textbooks and other learning materials, assessment and examinations, as well as a recognition of all modalities of provision" (Richmond, 2008, p.3).

In the realm of development, everything ultimately relates to everything. It would be foolhardy to not concentrate scarce resources of the education sector for the benefit of human development. In development at large, such synergies are forming and evidence is emerging. As an example, UNISDR (2011) quotes experiences from several countries how a more integrated approach to disaster risk management and climate change adaptation contributes to sustainable poverty reduction and other development outcomes.

Every challenge presents with it an opportunity. Advice given at an inconvenient moment, when the lead organization of the UN Decade is trying to make ends meet and keep key processes in motion with what is at its disposal may be inappropriate, but from the margins of a specialized UN agency with arguably the best and most noble mandate in human development, this would appear the moment to consider the future direction of education and the most central dividend it is capable of producing, sustainable human development. At the time of this writing UNESCO is facing what some call a temporary cashflow crisis following the United States freezing its dues making up for over a fifth of the organization's regular budget. The depth and temporal length of the crisis remain to be seen and much energy is being used to debate the negative consequences. It has been noted elsewhere that fundamental reforms of the education sector often only take place in times of drastic changes. Perhaps this financially taxing time could provide the necessary impetus towards finding more practical synergies between existing programmes? EFA as the flagship programme of the Education sector is coming to a close (or at least an interim one) in 2015. Having been highly successful in several of its stated objectives and measurable goals, it has all the potential in the world to mature further from a race between numbers to more quality and developmental impact, reflecting its shifting role from education only to an overall development agenda priority item.

Again, this means reorienting how we measure quality. If and when education has a central role to play in human development, its indicators should logically include those reflecting community and societal development. If a school of migrant children in a middle income country[3] can by focusing on sustainability transform itself from being unattractive to the children's families and ridden with seasonal disappearances and high incidences of pushouts, to a school whose students surpass the average grades in the national language examinations - the children's second or third language in every single case - in a matter of years, what can systemic changes yield? The changes

were controlled yet subtle and had to do with the community's needs and the children's joy and ability to learn.

CONCLUSION

This paper has given an overview of the processes involved in ESD implementation in the Asia-Pacific and some recommendations to the way forward. UNDP's (2012, p.6) recent human development report for the Asia-Pacific reads: "Countries thus have to strike a balance between cutting back on the over-exploitation of their resources and simultaneously increasing consumption of energy services, better food, water and sanitation services that would enable poor communities to become more resilient. The region must also look ahead. Human development involves expanding choices for all, including the generations to come." Such massive expansion of choice in the region will call for the best available education to each individual.

Integrating sustainability in education is a complex undertaking, and one which requires the attention of both the political elites and technical experts, but it is attainable if shades of grey are considered progress, and if debates concerning ESD remain constructive and productive at the same time.

To some extent, sustainable development is universal and timeless as its best practices and principles often date back to the ways of peoples which today are referred to as indigenous. Take the principle of the seventh generation practiced in some indigenous cultures. Certainly a cornerstone of planning for sustainable development, this precautionary principle calls for deliberation which takes into consideration the impacts of any decision on the seventh generation to come. An Asia-Pacific idiosyncrasy appears to a European observer to be the pursuit for equilibrium, another central tenet of sustainability thinking. As with all displays of human reasoning, these two examples are crude generalizations of thousands of local, national and transnational approaches and ways of thinking. An area in need of further attention and study for its high relevance remains then the multifaceted relationship between sustainability understood and implemented in local communities and cultures on the one hand, and international commitments and goals on the other.

NOTES

1) *See, for example, for Australia and Lao PDR UNESCO, 2011a, p.5; Brunei Darussalam <http://stepcentrebruneiblogspot.com>; China <www.unesco.org/new/en/rio-20/single-view/news/education_for_sustainability_governments_get_the_message/>; Indonesia UNESCO, 2009, p.12; Nepal <www.accu.or.jp/esd/projects/ip/ip01_nepal.shtml>; Malaysia <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001929/192914e.pdf>; Republic of Korea <www.unesco.or.kr/eng/front/resource_center/data_center_01_view.asp?articleid=82&cate=>; Thailand <www.accu.or.jp/esd/forum_esd_2010/program/program08_02/index.html> and Vietnam <www.unesco.org/new/en/hanoi/education/education-for-sustainable-development/>.*
2) *UNESCO concluded a Japanese Funds-In-Trust supported ESD Monitoring and Evaluation project in the Asia-Pacific some years ago. The project employed structural and often binary indicators such as a strategy being in place which do not measure ESD outcomes intended here. A new project has been launched in 2011 with UNESCO, UNU and IGES.*
3) *Reference is made to Bansungkon school in Chiang Rai province in Thailand.*

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