

Not just a sustainable future, but a *just, sustainable* future: Education and the global wealth gap

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Abstract

Goal 4 of the 2015 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals is Quality Education. This paper asks whether a just and sustainable future is attainable through education. We argue that education is necessary but not sufficient to achieve this future because of the global wealth-gap between North and South. Our approach is based on assumption that both justice and sustainability are unachievable in the long-term except as global phenomena because of the interdependence of ecosystems and entanglement of economies in globalization. We rely heavily on an environmental justice approach based on the principle of distributive justice (including intergenerational justice) and understanding that environmental issues are inseparably also social justice issues. For example, people experiencing extreme poverty damage their environment when daily survival needs, especially for children, are not met; at the same time, environmental damage is hardest to bear for those made most vulnerable by poverty. We assess three factors generated by the global wealth-gap that create limitations on the potential of education to achieve both justice and sustainability: lack of access to resources, the South-to-North brain drain, and nation-specific governance.

First, education gives better access to resources but cannot be mobilized when resources to access are scarce. Secondly, those from the global South who accesses higher education, especially if they do so in the global North, find employment opportunities in the diaspora. Distributive economic justice is thus not served globally—the global wealth-gap widens as the educated move across it; nor is sustainability, e.g. the North retains high-carbon practices, while the least responsible for climate change, i.e. the global poor, disproportionately suffer its consequences. Finally, countries constrained by global economics and structural adjustments through global finance can in consequence suffer poor governance, corruption, conflict, racism, gender inequalities, and extremism; stable democracy cannot be achieved through education alone because these factors determine access to education. Accordingly, although education is central in functional nation-states, a just, sustainable future requires addressing the growing global wealth-gap in order that social, economic and political stability can allow education to come to full fruition.

Quality Education is the 4th of the 2015 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Introduction

This paper asks whether a just and sustainable future is attainable through quality education. We argue that education is necessary but not sufficient to achieve this future because of the wealth-gap between the global North and South. Our assumption is that justice and sustainability cannot both together be achieved in the long-term except as global phenomena because of the interdependence of ecosystems and the entanglement of economies in globalization. We rely on an environmental

justice approach—in particular, principles of distributive justice and intergenerational justice—that takes environmental issues to be inseparable from social justice issues.

We begin by laying out the relationship between education, poverty and the ‘brain drain’ from the global South to the North. We then examine the concept of ‘sustainable development’ in the context of the global wealth-gap that create limitations on the potential of education to achieve both justice and sustainability. We conclude with a vision of how education might break the cycle of poverty that engulfs the global South, thereby rendering both justice and sustainability impossible. We show that education is central in functional nation-states toward intergenerational justice not just in a sustainable future, but in a *just*, sustainable future.

Education, poverty and the ‘brain drain’

The imperative of living sustainably, i.e. taking action responsibly towards resolving the implications on the lives of people and the planet in the future has, been the driving force for the need adequately to equip and empower the global population to change their unethical way of life. Based on this, many international bodies like UNESCO have made a call to improve access to quality ESD at all levels and in all social contexts, to transform society by reorienting education in order to help people develop knowledge, skills, values and behaviours needed for sustainable development and issues, such as climate change and biodiversity into teaching and learning. (UNESCO n/d). As noted recently, however, by Soloviy (2018), education systems have mostly prepared students to perform certain social functions in a relatively predictable world.

Meanwhile, as the world is changing, the assumption is that the changing is reflected across the different global jurisdictions. Such assumption was built on expectations that today’s students would be dealing with complex sustainability challenges that require totally new skills and attitudes (Soloviy, 2018). Accordingly, including sustainable development issues, such as climate change and biodiversity, into teaching and learning is crucial. Individuals are encouraged to be responsible actors who resolve challenges, respect cultural diversity, and contribute to creating a more sustainable world (UNESCO n/d).

Premised on this is the growing global recognition of education for sustainable development (ESD) as an integral element of quality education and a key enabler for sustainable development and a sustainable future. The ideal notion flowing from this is that education, as enunciated in the UN sustainable development goals, has the capacity to achieve the unique landmark reforms necessary for a future that is both just and sustainable. Indeed, the interrelatedness of justice and sustainability suggests that you cannot have sustainability without justice. That is, people damage their environment when their daily survival needs, especially for their children, are not met; and, environmental damage is hardest to bear for the most vulnerable, which means the most poor. The planet's most poor are overwhelmingly in the global South.

Accordingly, while arguing for an intergenerational ethical approach to a just and sustainable future, this paper posits that education as it is presently constituted in the global South, cannot lead to achieving such a goal. That is, education cannot satisfy the principle of distributive justice with respect to the world's poorest because of three related factors: inadequate resources, poor governance, and the 'brain drain.'

Education and resources are a vicious circle: an educated population can increase a country's resources; but where resources are sparse, they are not adequately provided for education infrastructure and delivery. This circle is exacerbated by corruption and conflict that direct resources away from education. Those who do get adequately educated can enter higher education overseas, but often do not come back home permanently. This is 'the brain drain' that appropriates the resources invested in a person by a country in the global South that actually enables the person to go elsewhere. That 'elsewhere' is the environmentally destructive, carbon-emitting global North.

Neither justice nor sustainability is served because there has been no real change to environmental practices or global economic systems that exploit the people and resources of the global South while burdening it with crushing debt in the name of 'sustainable development.' We contend therefore that education for a just and sustainable future might end up as nothing more than another cliché, given uni-directional development approaches based on free trade and globalization

that favor the global North over the global South. Our argument is that education is necessary but insufficient for creating a just and sustainable future because of the wealth-gap between the global North and South.

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

This section offers a theoretical overview of ESD, also called Education for Sustainability (EFS), as a tool for social change. The inception of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–14) has excited controversy over the validity of the concept of ESD, as well as reactivating a critical review of the environmental education field as a whole (Gonzalez-Gaudiano, 2005). Sustainable development, as defined originally in the 1987 Brundtland Report, is “development which meets the need of the present without compromising the ability of the future generation to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 8). It is a “process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development and institutional change are made consistent with future as well as present needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 9). Some authors argue that sustainable development means total development. As Blackburn (2000), explains the concept of sustainable development consists of many elements. These include, at the very least, consideration for future generations, a fusion of economic, ecologic and community issues, and the development of cooperative structures for dispute resolution and for daily living. Rauch (2002) views the notion of sustainable development combining both economic development and the avoidance of environmental strains.

Vaughan and Barse (1981) argue that sustainable development refers to qualitative change, that is, not only economical change, but institutional, social and environmental changes as well. Such change, according to Munier (2005: 19), requires a decrease in consumption rates of non-essential items, a decrease in water usage and increased use of recycled water many times over, a reduction in the consumption of paper and board products and use instead of fibre produced from trees in planted forests. In this sense, sustainable development is a process of change in which the exploitation of

resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development and institutional change operate in harmony and enhance both the current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations.

Conversely other scholars have argued that sustainable development is anthropocentric and seeks to elevate human values and experiences by privileging human self-interest above ecological systems. As early as 1990, Dissinger argued that “the term ‘sustainable development’ is an oxymoron – a self-contained non sequitur between noun and modifier” (Disinger, 1990, p. 3). Slocombe and Van Bers (1991) remind us that this term is only a concept, and that it is characterized by a paucity of precision. Barrett & Sutter criticize it as “mostly idea-centred” (Barrett & Sutter, 2006, p. 12). Jickling criticizes the concept for being uni-dimensional (Jickling, 2001), and later points out that the term is contested, and there is ongoing discussion about what forms the teaching about this topic should take (Jickling 2004).

According to Bonnett (2002, p. 13), “this view can be seen as lying well within that constellation of ideas which constitute the current Western view of global natural resources”. Furthermore as Daly (2006) argues, while future generations should be at least as well off as the present in terms of the flow of nature’s resources through the economy and back to nature in a non-declining manner, this flow-back process which guarantees sustainability or the endless continuity of resources is lacking in the current definition of sustainable development.

Goodland (1997), on the other hand, argues that focusing on the future diverts attention from today’s lack of sustainability. In Goodland’s view, “rather than focussing on the intergenerational equity concerns of environmental sustainability, the stewardship approach of safeguarding life support systems is preferable for intra-generational sustainability” (p. 69).

Heuristically, one of the principles of sustainability or sustainable development is the promotion of behavioural change. Sustainability or sustainable development can be attained through learning and reflection on everyday assumptions, habits of behaviour, structures of feelings and expectations. The adoption of sustainability practices can be achieved through education for

sustainable development (ESD) or education for sustainability (EFS), a method or system of education or learning that enables a person to discover and to fully appreciate the contested nature of knowledge, nature, the environment and its sustainability (Macnaghten & Urry, 1998; Sterling, 1996, 2003, 2006).

In the context of education, sustainable development involves a system of values and ethics as well as lifelong-learning based on passion for the radical transformation of society its moral character. Education for sustainability could leads to an informed and involved citizenry, with creative problem solving skills, scientific and social literacy and a commitment to engage in responsible individual and co-operative actions. Education (mainly understood as enabling the learner to acquire certain competencies) is supposed to make a significant contribution to sustainable development, (Holfelder 2019). The ESD program is a highly ambitious one; it implies the hope of actually *making* a sustainable future:

ESD is an essential contribution to all efforts to achieve the SDGs, enabling individuals to contribute to sustainable development by promoting societal, economic and political change as well as by transforming their own behaviour. ESD can produce specific cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioural learning outcomes that enable individuals to deal with the particular challenges of each SDG, thus facilitating its achievement. In short, ESD enables all individuals to contribute to achieving the SDGs by equipping them with the knowledge and competencies they need, not only to understand what the SDGs are about, but to engage as informed citizens in bringing about the necessary transformation (UNESCO [2017](#), Holfelder, 2019).

The long term goals that underlie education for a sustainable future, according to Lopez (1997), include promoting understanding of the interdependence of natural, socio-economic and political systems at the local, national and global levels; encouraging critical reflection and decision making that reflect personal lifestyles; and actively participating in building a sustainable environment of future. Meanwhile, an analysis by Huckle and Wals of the literature supporting the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development and a sample of its key products suggests that

it failed to acknowledge or challenge neoliberalism as a hegemonic force blocking transitions towards genuine sustainability (Huckle and Wals 2015). David Selby viewed ESD as weak but suggested that the idea of sustainability-related education would be enriched and enlivened by fomenting a dynamic complementarity between notions of transience and sustainability (Selby, D. 2006). Kopina (2012) in her critique of ESD argued that the focus on human welfare, equality, rights and fair distribution of resources is a radical departure from the aim of EE set out by the Belgrade Charter as well as a distinct turn towards anthropocentrically biased education. She adds further “while plural perspectives on ESD are encouraged both by practitioners and researchers of EE, there is also a danger that such pluralism may sustain dominant political ideologies and consolidated corporate power that obscure environmental concerns” (Kopnina, H. 2012).

This position by Kopnina show how ESD clearly exceeds the goal to impart knowledge and raise awareness; anchored on variety of learning outcomes that are conceived as a contribution to societal transformation whose success of education will be determined by the extent to which sustainable development goals (SDGs) are realized (Holfelder, 2019). By the implication these views of ESD can be summarised as the promotion of contextually defined responsible development, development of responsible societies, anchored on sustainability as its central core and expected outcomes (Sauve, 1996: 29)

Attaining a just and sustainable future: How education can break the cycle

Some scholars argue against the idea that sustainability can be achieved through education. Holfelder (2019) argues that such an idealized picture of education seems difficult to maintain, especially at a time when institutionalized education is not free of external influences and idiosyncrasies like pecuniary interests of the society at large. Moreover, it seems paradoxical, when the planet and its people are experiencing significant natural crises including inception of a mass extinction, to speak or even imagine the possibility of a better future. Education is neither designed nor geared to bring about equity and justice. While the North is breaking new grounds and

hence dreams of a future, the South has largely stagnated in poverty and colonial and post-colonial resource exploitation such that attainment of a sustainable future appears a mirage.

We suggest, however, that in a rapidly changing world of ecosystems in danger of collapse, when existing skills and knowledge are becoming obsolete and no longer capable of responding to global challenges, education is exactly what is needed. After all, learning is inherently a change-generating activity and it is not in the nature of knowledge to hypostatize.

In response to the constantly changing world and the need for a sustainable future, Blewitt (2006) and Kola-Olusanya (2008) argue for education that learns from experience in order to assimilate new ideas and develop new practices and skills so conceptual frameworks can be pragmatically revised. For Blewitt, this is because experience can be invested with a plurality of significant meanings (Blewitt, 2006b). Flaccavento (2002) argues that

the practice of sustainability is rarely a result of conscious decision to one's way of life, rather it emerges from a reflexive relationship between thinking about priorities and the actual experience of living in the world, of making a living and protecting the prospect of the next generation during a period of change. (cited in Blewitt, 2006, p. 30)

According to Barton, "it is by understanding everyday practice and everyday learning that we can support sustainable activities" (2002, 148). People therefore must go beyond the limits and contradiction of anthropocentrism towards an understanding of living with others and with all living creatures (Kola-Olusanya, 2008).

Conclusions

We have argued that countries constrained by global economics and structural adjustments through international finance suffer in consequence poor governance, corruption, conflict, racism, gender inequalities, extremism, and other complications that preclude both justice and sustainability. In particular, these factors determine access to education, so a stable democracy cannot be achieved through education alone. Education is necessary for functional governance in successful nation-states, but it is not sufficient without economic stability. We argue, however, that this cycle can be

disrupted by reducing the brain drain and educating toward the future rather than educating to maintain the status quo.

First, countries must find ways to keep their best educated at home. This is a difficult thing to do when the global North is in many ways an easier, more privileged and secure place to live. K-12 education can include related issues in the curriculum to teach skills needed for development planning, understanding roots of a homeland's situation and national pride can impact the brain drain. Teaching skills in small-scale soil management and urban gardening can lead to greener communities more pleasant to live in. These are preliminary suggestions for using education to change quality of life.

A further concern we have refrained from highlighting is gender in education. Gender is crucial because global differences in education are closely related to wealth and poverty, and 'the feminization of poverty' is a well-recognized phenomenon. The fundamental and immediate challenge in education in the global South is economic, and economics is a gendered practice. Global economic systems are corrupt and need to transition; gendered livelihood practices aim not so much at profit as care. Women's livelihoods in the global South, especially for example, in agriculture, food security, and other care practices, remain largely invisible, despite Waring's work exposing them in the 1980s. Women's knowledge practices can be learned from.

An oil- and extraction- based economy is the driving factor in global poverty and the environmental disaster of climate change. Greta Thunberg has demonstrated that solutions for climate change have been left to the children. The problem of global poverty is also being left to the children of the global South who will bear the brunt of both poverty and climate change. Prioritizing education from an early age on these issues is a pathway to change. after all, economics has been an academic discipline for roughly 170 years. Many livelihood systems do not depend on contemporary economics but are being crushed by it. As educators, we must evolve our curricula and teach ourselves how to provide just, green education. We cannot teach future generations to reproduce the present.

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