

# The Importance of Education for Sustainable Development

Throughout history, humans have developed by learning, creating new ways to improve their life and in the process they amassed a large body of knowledge which was and still is currently transmitted to new generations through education. The knowledge and skills an education confers is merely an instrument and its purpose depends entirely on the individual possessing it. For the most part of history, humans have used knowledge only to improve their way of life usually at the cost of the environment but today we are faced with its unsustainability. Therefore, I shall argue that the best way of surpassing the challenge of sustainable development is enhancing our current system of education to include more aspects of sustainability. This is what I consider to be the most pressing need that should be globally addressed and highlighted by the new development agenda.

## Emphasizing education



Currently, education has been an important part of global development as one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which consists of achieving universal primary education. Over the years, the level of education did improve but it can be argued that without first eliminating poverty and hunger and also improving a child's health, education cannot be a priority. For example, in Malawi, Africa, 'attending school now is a hit-and-miss affair. Children are in and out of school with illness. Their attendance depends on how urgently they are needed at home to

fetch water and firewood, or to care for siblings or cousins; on whether they can afford to buy supplies, a uniform, and pay local fees; and on the safety of walking several kilometers to the school itself' (Sachs 2005, p.23).

On some level, all MDGs are interdependent but if the aforementioned problems can be reduced, through short-term solutions like foreign aid, to a scale that will permit children to attend school then education will become the force that drives global development. This can be accomplished through a few steps.

First of all, after achieving a basic level of well-being that allows families to send their children to school, education will eventually confer individuals the knowledge and skills necessary to improve their economic standing. They will be sufficiently competent to occupy better positions in a society with higher incomes and thus evading poverty and hunger. 'It is well established that the distribution of personal incomes in society is strongly related to the amount of education people have had. Generally speaking, more schooling means higher lifetime incomes' (UNESCO 2005, p.40) Although a quality education that provides useful cognitive skills is more important than a quantitative one (UNESCO 2005), numerous studies have found that 'the rate of return to schooling across countries is centered at about 10%, with returns higher for low-income countries, for lower levels of schooling, and frequently for women' (Hanushek & Wößmann 2007, p.2). Basically, an analysis of education and income levels leads to the conclusion that one year of education is worth a 10% increased income. This mechanism is why education is an excellent instrument for increasing the economic and social mobility of individuals that contribute to the development of a state by improving its human capital.

Another major benefit of education is that it leads to the improved health of individuals. Educated persons are able to adopt a healthy way of living by knowing all sorts of habits

that sustain and prolong life. More importantly they are 'better prepared to prevent diseases and to use health services effectively. A woman with six or more years of education is more likely to seek prenatal care, assisted childbirth, and postnatal care, reducing the risk of maternal and child mortality illness' (Center for Global Development, 2002.).

At this point it is evident that education is a necessary investment for global development because better education leads to the improvement of other current MDGs and numerous benefits like better governance. But what the previous decades have shown us is that education, even in developed countries, has not brought large scale awareness about the lack of sustainability of our way of life. The prevalent mindset adopted through education is consumerism with too little regard to caring and preserving the environment. This type of education is a part of the problem but it can also be a part of the solution because it 'is essential for improving the capacity of people to address environmental and development issues, which are inextricably tied to sustainable development'(Hopkins & McKeon 1999, p.1).

Recognizing the importance of education to all other aspects of development and that it is essential to sustainability, the United Nations established the practice of Education for Sustainable Development (EDS) and respectively, a Decade of EDS (2005-2014) led by UNESCO. In its view, EDS 'allows every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to shape a sustainable future. EDS means including key sustainable development issues into teaching and learning; it also requires participatory teaching and learning methods that motivate and empower learners to change their behavior and take action for sustainable development'(UNESCO, n.d.). In order for this new curriculum in education to be successful it needs to be preceded by a change in people's mentality. Individuals must first learn to care to protect the

world. As Stephen Sterling stated EDS is more than simply adding sustainability concepts to the curriculum but also a cultural shift in education and learning, based on a more ecological or relational view of the world.(Sterling 2001).

The importance of education in our pursuit of sustainable development is highlighted by two major aspects. First of all, education is strongly related with technological advancement. The better educated and knowledgeable an individual is, the higher the chance that he will be able to make scientific discoveries that improve the sustainability of our way of life. The best example is the large scale use of clean, renewable energy like solar and wind power that were made possible by dedicated people who research such issues. Without the proper education, these individuals would not have been able to do so. Further scientific discoveries and technological improvements can render obsolete or at least minimize the damage of our current polluting ways of producing energy and other products.



Secondly, the progress of technology tends to be rather slow when compared with the urgency of our problems, so in order to develop in a sustainable manner we have to better manage our resources. The current system and mentality has led to an immense waste and although our current technology can minimize it, not much effort has been put into it because many do not care about the consequences or either they are not aware of the impact our wasteful way of life has on others and the planet. To this problem, one of the best solutions is an education for sustainable development that can change people's mindset and bring awareness on how our actions affect the world. 'For example, overconsumption of consumer goods such as

paper leads to deforestation, which may contribute to global climate change. The ability to consider an issue from the view of different stakeholders is essential to sustainable



development education' (Hopkins & McKeon 1999, p.4). This example brings up the problem of recycling and its still small scale practice, the massive waste of roughly one third of the food produced in the world for human consumption (FOA, 2011). Food that people in the least developed countries are in

dire need of and also other resources that are squandered. By including even in basic level of education, more knowledge, skills and values that promote sustainability, these challenges can be surpassed.

Finally, the most important reason why education must be emphasized among all other development goals is because eliminating poverty, hunger, inequality and combating diseases does not bring us closer to a sustainable world. But an enhanced education can solve poverty and most of the problems associated with income insufficiency by improving economic growth; it can lead to higher life expectancy and pave the way to a sustainable world through technological improvements and better resource management.

## **Conclusion**

In spite of all its benefits, education isn't a miracle solution to all the problems of global sustainable development. To reach a high level of EDS is itself a challenge and 'while many nations around the world have embraced the need for education in achieving sustainability, only limited progress has been made on any level. This lack of progress stems from many sources. In some cases, a lack of vision or awareness has impeded progress. In others, it is a

lack of policy or funding' (Hopkins & McKeon 1999, p.1). But of all the possible solutions and means to achieve sustainable development, education is still the best option we have at the moment. At the very least, the awareness for the need of sustainability has grown, considering the changes in my mindset to be a testimony of this fact among the growing number of people and organizations who desire a sustainable world.

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