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## Education in global environmental politics: why the discourse of education for sustainable development needs attention

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**Abstract:** The concept of sustainable development and the emergent discourse of education for sustainable development (ESD) present both challenges and opportunities for individuals, communities and governments to engage in conscious processes of reassessment of their roles. As an emergent discourse, ESD also raises critical questions on its relationship with environmental education and other parallel traditions. Much as this discourse continues to attract international attention, it is also and rather sadly, a non-issue in some countries. This paper foregrounds learning for sustainable development as an emergent educational discourse that requires urgent political and social attention. It explores the discourse's capacity to make significant contributions to contemporary educational thinking and practice by locating its emergence and development in global environmental politics. Against the background of history and the analysis of major conversation moments, the paper discusses conceptual differences and similarities in parallel traditions such as environmental education, place-based education or community-focused learning. The paper calls for well-thought-out pedagogical responses to the diverse challenges of our contemporary times.

**Keywords:** education; sustainable development; corporate values; discourse; neoliberal policies; partnership learning.

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**Biographical notes:** Bob Offei Manteaw is an Assistant Professor at the Eastern Washington University in the USA. His current research focuses on the discourse of education for sustainable development with a particular interest in multi-sector learning and action partnerships. He explores the thinking and practice of education for sustainable development from different socio-cultural perspectives, paying particular attention to business roles in sustainability education. He has also previously worked in different capacities for the World Bank and UNICEF on development education and institutional capacity strengthening programs. He is originally from Ghana and is a member of the Education and Communication Commission of the International Union of the Conservation of Union (IUCN).

## **1 Introduction**

The United Nations has declared and launched a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014). It is a period of conscious and concerted international awareness creation and educational action to move communities around the world towards sustainable livelihoods. As an emergent dialogue, education for sustainable development (ESD) has its foundations in global environment and development debates that have evolved over time. UNESCO (2002) describes it as a new vision of education that has the capacity to provide opportunities for all humans to benefit from learning the values, knowledge and skills that are critical for the creation of sustainable societies. It is life-long and life-wide and is believed to have the unique ability to foster interdisciplinary and multi-sector learning partnerships that encourages learners to make creative connections between intellect, competence and experience (Orr, 2004; St. Julien, 1992).

Education is discussed within the rhetoric of global environment and development politics; however, most references to education in the past have framed education as an afterthought or an instrument to be employed to solve problems. The growing crisis of the human project on the planet has now made it an urgent requirement for education to lead and direct our actions rather than to be employed as a tool to clean up our mess. For this to be possible, Sterling (1996) was right to have noted that sufficient attention must be given to education as a subject of change itself. ESD has, therefore, emerged to provide that much needed opportunity to rethink educational philosophies and practices around the world. The Decade has been launched as a global project by the United Nations to help in that direction and countries around the world are being urged to take the necessary actions to reorient their educational systems for sustainable development. UNESCO, the educational arm of the United Nations, has been nominated by the world body to oversee the general implementation of the Decade around the world.

Although, the Decade is almost halfway through and some countries have already responded by taking the necessary policy steps to reorient their educational systems, the USA, at least at the federal level, has been silent. This is worrisome, especially when one considers the fact that as a country, the USA prides itself in providing political and moral leadership to the rest of the world. Sustainable development, as I will soon discuss in some detail, is a moral issue as much as a political and an educational issue. Even more importantly, any attempt to move the world towards sustainability should be a collective endeavour that calls for collaboration and active participation. It is baffling, therefore, that the world's economic, political and moral leader is quiet on this very important subject of sustainable development to the extent of blatantly ignoring a United Nations sanctioned project.

Even though the political hierarchy of the USA tactically shies away from the discourse of sustainable development, obviously because of the country's obsession with international competitiveness and the economic growth agenda, there have been a few crusading individuals and institutions who have been championing the cause of sustainable development. Former President Al Gore is one of such people and together with a few non-governmental organisations, they have been striving hard to bring the issues of environment, development and human actions and inactions to mainstream attention. Their efforts, even though significant and worthwhile, are not making the desired impacts simply because federal government support is lacking. It is therefore not surprising that many educators are unaware of the United Nations Decade of Education

for Sustainable Development Decade or even the idea of global sustainability. This is disturbing, but understandably so considering the fact that current public school policy in the USA is modelled on the economic growth paradigm and competitive market advantage, which requires that students are first and foremost seen and treated as resources to be developed for profitable use.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy has vigorously and persuasively been defended by politicians and some educational leaders with a now familiar rhetoric: 'we need to prepare our children to compete on the international economic stage'. Within the context of sustainable development, such an approach to schooling is a contradiction; preparing students for economic growth purposes while at the same time expecting them to learn to conserve natural resources. In fact, this is one controversy that lies at the heart of the concept of sustainable development and one that makes this discussion even more relevant. It is imperative that the concept of sustainable development is critically examined and clarified to allow an understanding of what it means to educate for sustainable development, especially within the current school language and culture of high stake testing, accountability, competition and job-readiness. It is also important that the discourse of ESD is located within different socio-cultural contexts and to examine what sustainable development means in different places and what forms ESD might take in these different places.

As an African educator and a student of environmental and development education, my cross-cultural experiences, both as a student and a professional in different countries in the west, have not only impacted on my critical understanding of the concept of sustainable development, but also, have convinced me that interpretation of the concept of sustainable development must be culturally-specific and locally-relevant. Currently, the manner in which the concept is used, especially in the west, standardises expectations and imposes meanings as derived from the west on less powerful countries in the south. Such conceptualisation ignores local realities and cultures by defining what their realities should be. Inherent in the discourse of global sustainable development are critical geopolitical and cultural issues which are usually overlooked. This is even truer in formal education settings where what it means to educate for sustainable development in an urban inner-city school in the USA could be different from what it means to a school in rural Ghana. The declaration of an international decade of educating for sustainable development, therefore, provides an opportunity to foreground some of these underlying issues and to examine what it means for educational thinking and practice.

Therefore, in this paper, I will provide an overview of how global environmental politics have evolved from a historical perspective and trace how the discourse of ESD has emerged. Secondly, I will focus on the broader concept of sustainable development by exploring its implications and applications. I will discuss why it is important for educational systems to embrace sustainability thinking in teaching and learning. In doing so, I will also argue that in spite of the growing recognition of the importance of education in sustainable development, the place of the concept within the current school language and culture of competition, economic growth and market advantage makes it contradictory. Finally, I will discuss ESD within the context of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development and show its capacity to influence contemporary educational thinking and practice. I will also provide specific recommendations for dialogue and action and discuss why it is important for countries such as the USA to give it the desired attention. It is important to indicate that even though much of the discussions in the paper focus on ESD or the lack of it in USA public

school system, I bring in international perspectives as a way of showing the capacity of the discourse to impact educational thinking and practice in diverse societies.

## **2 Global environmental politics: a historical overview**

Modern environmentalism, according to Dresner (2003), has two key concerns: the limits to control that were emphasised by Leopold and Carson and also the idea of a global environmental crisis; limits of scale on a small planet. These concerns have helped shape the political construction of the environmental discourse historically and have in different ways influenced the role and perception of education within the discourse. From the conflicting ideologies of conservationism and preservation that dominated environmental debates in the USA in the 19th century, environmental politics has evolved to extend its focus onto the global level and has made human actions and inactions on the natural environment a major concern. Central to the environmental debates is the element of fear and uncertainty about the future of humanity on the planet, a situation that persists today as a result of our unsustainable patterns of living in our places. These are issues that have defined global environmental politics in all its different forms.

### *2.1 Silent spring and the new environmental politics*

The quest for human progress (development) and its damaging effect on the natural environment first captured widespread attention with Carson's (1962) revolutionary work, *Silent Spring*. It sparked a new awareness and catalysed the modern environmental movement. Her work criticised DDT as a technology by drawing attention to the destructive effects of technologies. Through her exposure on the effects of DDT on nature, Carson demonstrated how human actions that interfered with complex natural systems could lead to serious environmental damages with serious consequences. Her challenge to technology was in effect a challenge to what was considered human progress. It raised a red flag to signal the dangers inherent in the obsessive idea of human progress and development. With her work, she opened a new chapter in environmental politics and initiated a new kind of conversation that resulted in the critical examination of what human progress means.

Environmental debates from this point onwards focused on human impacts on the biosphere and this included population growth and its effects on scarce natural resources. The 1960s saw intense debates on the future of planet earth and its capacity to contain human progress. The issue of space and the carrying capacity of the planet dominated discussions; the modernist belief of an endless frontier was condemned by Boulding (1966) as an irresponsible assumption in his book, *The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth*. He pointed out that the idea of boundless space on the planet was not only wishful but deceitful and that human activity on the planet had increased to such an extent that there are no frontiers. The message therefore was this: no more space remains for humans to dispose of their environmental problems and problems needed to be confronted and solved where they are. Boulding's work also drew attention to issues of population, resource use, economic growth and its relationship with the natural environment.

The metaphor 'spaceship earth' as used by Boulding generated new fears and awareness of a potential global environmental crisis. Concerns were raised about

exponential population growth and the possibilities of a population bomb (Ehrlich, 1968) that will lead to famines in certain parts of the world, especially Africa and Asia. There were also talks about an imminent collision of humankind's activities with the planet's natural limits, these talks invoked fear and aroused attention around the world for urgent actions. Subsequently, a major international conference was convened in 1969 by UNESCO called, 'Man and His Environment', which paved the way for other environmental actions to emerge. Following this, the first Earth Day celebration was held in San Francisco, California in 1970. This is significant in the sense that San Francisco, so named for St. Francis, is the patron saint of the ecology. Coincidentally, San Francisco is also the birth place of the United Nations.

## *2.2 An agenda for the future: from Stockholm to Johannesburg*

Another United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was held in Stockholm in 1972. The official slogan for the conference was: 'Only One Earth', a theme that invoked Boulding's message of no endless frontier. Many commentators have identified the 1972 conference as the first event that seriously put the environment on the international political agenda by ensuring the incorporation of environmental considerations in political decision making. One legacy of the Stockholm conference was formation of the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) and the formalisation of environmental education, a process that resulted in a series of UNESCO-UNEP international environmental education programs between the periods of 1983–1994.

In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development published its report, 'Our Common Future', in which they proposed a new model of development, one that sustains and expands the environmental resource base (WCED, 1987). They named this new development model as sustainable development, which was defined as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' [WCED, (1987), p.43]. Sitraz (1993) wrote that perhaps the most lasting accomplishment of the Brundtland Commission, however, was to thrust the concept of 'sustainable development' into the mainstream of world debate.

Following the Brundtland Report was the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) (1992), often called the Earth Summit, which took place in Rio de Janeiro. The conference provided yet another forum to address the environmental and development crises of the world and to critically debate the meaning of sustainable development. In the final conference document, titled *Agenda 21* (Agenda for the 21st century), Chapter 36 was entirely devoted to the promotion of education and public awareness and training. The chapter notes that 'education is critical for promoting sustainable development and improving the capacity of people to address environment and development concerns' (Section 3). This assertion has since provided a strong basis for education to play a role in the creation of sustainable communities and livelihoods.

Ten years after the Rio conference, another World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) was held in Johannesburg, South Africa. The conference acknowledged the fact that the desired changes for sustainable development have been slow in coming, or not at all. The issue of education was revisited and the role of education in sustainable development was made a central focus of the conference. The conference also confirmed the need for the world to make the first decade of the new century one of reflection and action to clearly map out the future of our world. Based on

this need, Japan, supported by other countries such as Sweden, proposed a United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, which was subsequently approved by the UN General Assembly at its 57th session in December 2002. The Decade as it is now widely known was officially launched in New York in March of 2005 and runs as a UN project through UNESCO. The central role given to education in the concept of sustainable development underscores the importance of that quest and how it has become, perhaps, one of the most important global challenges of our time.

### **3 Sustainable development: the challenge of our time**

In spite of the growing popularity of the concept of sustainable development, its actual implication and application remains unclear to many people and has resulted in a situation where people with diverse backgrounds and interests use it to serve their own agenda. Even though the origins of the concept are steeped in environmentalism, its inability to hold down precise definitions has allowed variations in usage and implication. Economists, politicians, environmentalists and many others have all used the phrase in different circumstances to describe different things. The meaning of the concept remains imprecise and is contested at different levels by different interest groups. The most popular definition, however, remains that which was provided by the World Commission for Environment and Development (1987), in what is now popularly known as the Brundtland Report: development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Even though this definition is widely cited, different interpretations and definitions have also emerged as the concept evolves. Its implication and application might remain unclear and contested; however, as a concept sustainable development succeeds in capturing three fundamental issues: the problem of environmental degradation, economic growth imperatives and issues of social inequality (Adams, 2006). These are contradictory issues, which imbue the concept with both peril and promise: the promise of a new era of continued economic growth is set against the threats and dangers that growth-oriented policies pose to the environmental resource base.

Sustainable development, according to Irwin (2001) offers the promise of reconciliation between apparent irreconcilables: economy and ecology, equity and survival, technological development and long-term interests, international policy making and local action. These are inherent tensions within the concept, which compels some critics to dismiss it as 'diversionary and shallow' [Irwin, (2001), p.38]. A full appreciation of these tensions, however, require a historical understanding of how global environmental problems have been defined over time and how the quest for global solutions has led to a particular form of environmental politics. The unusual juxtaposition of a biological metaphor (i.e. sustainability and an economic discourse – development), is one of appeasement for both economists and environmentalists (Orr, 1992). It creates a convenient relationship, which unifies green and capitalist discourses.

Razee (2002) observed that, within this opposing association, nature is captured in two distinct senses: first, as an ecocentric conception, which presents nature as a valuable entity that needs to be preserved and second, as an anthropocentric conception that portrays nature as an instrument for human progress. These apparent tensions have their roots in the Brundtland Report, in which the commission stated the possibility of a new era of economic growth, one that must be based on policies that sustain and expand the

environmental resource base (WCED, 1987). This undoubtedly is contradictory and the point of confusion derives from the strange wisdom of pursuing accelerated economic growth while at the same time ensuring that natural resource bases are sustained and even somehow expanded.

It is this paradox that has brought environmentalists and the business world into conflict over the real meaning and implication of the concept. Environmentalists often see sustainable development as nothing but 'business as usual', a potential smokescreen to cover the continued destruction and exploitation of the earth's limited resources in the name of development (O'Riordan, 1988). Economists on the other hand, see the concept as being too cautious about the future, resulting in sacrifices of economic growth for the sake of unnecessary concerns about depletion of natural resources (Dresner, 2003). These opposing view points have been the basis of an ideological and linguistic power struggle as both environmentalists and economists employ a particular line of argument to shape social cognition and understanding of the concept. Orr (1992) also talks about two meanings of sustainability: 'technological sustainability' and 'ecological sustainability'. The former, he says, lies within the economic growth paradigm and advocates of this paradigm believe that every problems have a technological answer or a market solution. Advocates of the latter call on humanity to rethink our ways of living by seeking alternative lifestyles to those that have created our unsustainable present.

The core demands of rethinking human lifestyles, particularly as they relate to our understanding of human progress or development, constitutes the challenge of moving the world towards sustainability. This, perhaps, is one of the greatest challenges of the twenty-first century, a fact that has been affirmed by Porritt (1996) when he contended that sustainable development is one of the most important political challenges of our age by far. At the start of the twenty-first century, the growing array of social and ecological challenges has become self-evident in almost every human community in the world. Global warming and climate change have become every day discourses in most communities especially in the West, even though their real implications are not getting the desired attention. In poor developing countries, the discourse on global warming and climate change might not have become as politically intense and contentious as it is in Western industrialised countries; however, the impact of change is already being experienced in different ways. Coupled with that is growing threats and dangers of disasters, sometimes wrongly called 'natural' and of wars, violent conflicts, poverty, health and inequality, both within and between countries, have become everyday realities in different communities around the world.

These problems are complexly interrelated and result in chain reactions of cause and affect both at the local and global levels. They could well be described as the problems of global unsustainability or our unsustainable present and it is from this that the intrinsic meaning of sustainable development is derived. Against this background, the real challenge of sustainable development is not about the creation of a universally accepted meaning or definition. It is also not about the (in)convenient reconciliation between apparent irreconcilables. It is about awareness, knowledge and understanding of what is wrong in our current patterns of life and how we can, as individuals or communities transform them, if at all possible. This, in my view is the work of education and that is why the current global campaign for concerted educational effort for sustainable development needs attention from all nations and their local communities. The debates on meaning and application of the concept, even though helpful, have gone on for far too long and at the expense of concrete and timely interventions for alternatives to our

current unsustainable life patterns and methods of learning. At worst, the concept of sustainable development is only contestable and within the different contestations lays a certain potential to highlight the core essence of the concept.

### *3.1 A protean concept or a contestable concept?*

Dresner (2003) described the various interpretations of sustainable development as nothing but a linguistic confusion. Dobson (1996) also wrote that between 1987, when the phrase was given its official boost in our common future and 1996 more than 300 different definitions for sustainability and sustainable development were identified. This number is likely to have increased by now and what this means is that the expanse of usage and application of the concept is boundless and keeps expanding, making it somehow problematic to hold up a single definition.

Like justice and democracy, sustainable development is often dismissed as a contestable concept whose goals most people support, but disagree on what exactly they mean, or how to achieve them. Such disagreements have never served as reasons to dismiss them as worthless, neither have they stopped people from pursuing them. Dresner's (2003) description of a 'linguistic confusion' may be a fair assessment in view of the fact that the different language forms used in creating different meanings only succeed in creating more confusion rather than clarify. In spite of all the confusions – linguistic, conceptual and even perceptual, the importance of the concept has never been lost. According to Adams (2006), the idea of sustainable development continues to gain widespread acceptance precisely because of its looseness and elasticity. Environmentalists, governments, economic and political planners and business people use 'sustainability' or sustainable development to express very diverse visions of how economy and environment should be managed. The diversity in usage and interpretation, if anything at all is highlighting the truth and realities of our time and the more people disagree, the more we agree that there is a global crisis.

What is needed, perhaps, is an elementary understanding of the concept of sustainable development, an understanding that could easily be derived from the awareness and knowledge of the dynamics of the ecological and cultural crisis that have now become commonplace. From this, the interrelationships that exist between systems and structures and among the varied problems of our global community could be well appreciated to begin a process of exploring ways of preventing them. The differences in view points, as far as meaning and application are concerned, may not necessarily make them irreconcilably divergent. What is important, according to Orr (1992) is a middle ground and that is why and where education could possibly play a role. Orr writes that these two perspectives are partly complementary, but their practitioners tend to have very different views. It is the hope of synthesising these seemingly divergent, but complementary positions that sustainable development has become a global project, which is being pursued through an international educational drive.

## **4 Education and sustainable development**

As the discourse of sustainable development or sustainability begins to gain roots both in the political and social arenas, it has also become clear that people need to know and understand its full implications in order to be able to take responsible actions around



issues of environment, economics and social justice. This, therefore, makes sustainable development an educational issue (Fein, 1995), one whose cause must be championed by schools and educational systems through innovation in teaching and learning. The rhetoric aside, the significance of the concept and the urgency it requires in reversing our unsustainable present is unquestionable, yet not many people recognise this need. In fact, most schools continue to educate the young as if there were no planetary emergency (Orr, 2004). The ability of current educational systems to expose the prevailing truths of our time and to lead the charge for transformation remains doubtful. Formal educational systems, especially in the United States, have been shaped by the language, values and practices of the so-called 'free-market' and competitiveness-at-all costs economy (Porritt, 1996) and therefore appear incapable of engaging in discourses that are based on truth and current realities. Even though such neoliberal practices were commonly identified with schools in capitalist economies, the reality of globalisation and the inevitability of competition on a so-called global economic stage have made it imperative for some developing countries to reform their educational processes in accordance with such global expectations. As a result, corporate and managerial discourses continue to influence the conduct of schooling both in the West, as represented by the USA and poor developing countries.

#### *4.1 Corporate values, schooling and sustainable development*

The need for the school to serve as a sorting machine to separate and train human resources to meet the demands of the labour market (Spring, 1998), has resulted in what is now described as the corporate model of schooling. The current trend is for school systems both in the USA and internationally, to adapt corporate management principles of accountability, standardisation and competitiveness and to consciously educate students to fill the workforce needs of global corporations. The goal of education is to serve the economic system by training a workforce that does not revolt against the existing economic system (Spring, 1998). Training in the form of schooling, therefore, comes with an ideological control, one that suits capitalists' desires of profit-making and exploitation of resources for market gains. By emphasising innovation, economic growth and competition at all costs, students are systematically imbued with corporate values, which eventually succeed in diminishing their own personal, social, ethical and moral options or values. Interestingly, such dominance of corporate values, language and practices in schools are sometimes explained and defended within the broader quest of sustainable development. This is because, under the new flagship programs of corporate social responsibility, businesses form alliances within the social sector, including schools and they strive to do good deeds to earn their moral license to operate. Such activities vary in nature and are always connected, somehow, to the quest for sustainable development.

My desire here is not to be overly critical of the roles corporations and businesses play in schools and educational systems. School, community or business collaborations are essential as there are numerous evidences to suggest its positive impacts on the teaching and learning process (Sanders, 2006; Fitzgerald, 1997; Bucy, 1990). However, it is important to raise critical questions concerning such associations and the real implication of educating for sustainable development, especially in Western industrialised nations where capitalists' values and aspirations are at variance with the ideals of sustainable development. Clearly, corporate aims of competition and economic

growth contradict the ideals of sustainability, which are natural resource conservation and intergenerational equity. Within the current climate of schooling, at least in the USA, a great deal of emphasis is placed on students being competitive in the world economic stage and this, of course, is a major incentive for businesses to influence what goes on in schools.

The troubling aspect of this tendency of business involvement in schools is that it ignores some moral and ethical implications. Too much emphasis is placed on competition, profits and wealth accumulation. In fact, the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) now has family days and organises sessions on 'Stocks Kids May Like' exclusively for parents and their children. For the NYSE, this is good business which sets its eyes far into the next generation of future investors. This is done at the expense of other key skills and knowledge that are essential for the growth and development of children as future leaders, not only of business, but also society and the environment. In such an instance where children are prematurely exposed to wealth accumulation, what is seen as business or investment education for children totally ignores the 'value of good communities or the human costs of narrow destructive economic rationality that valued efficiency and economic abstractions above people and community' (Lynd, 1982). The question then becomes: What roles will children play in the future sustenance of our fragile planet? What is ESD all about and what roles should formal and non-formal systems of education play?

## 5 ESD: what does it mean?

According to UNESCO's (2004) Draft Implementation Scheme for the Decade (2005–2014), ESD concerns itself with three key areas of sustainable development:

- *Society*: an understanding of social institutions and their role in change and development, as well as the democratic and participatory systems which give opportunity for the expression of opinion, the selection of governments, the forging of consensus and the resolution of differences.
- *Environment*: awareness of the resources and the fragility of the physical environment and the effects on it of human activity and decisions, with a commitment to factoring environmental concerns into social and economic policy development.
- *Economy*: a sensitivity to the limits and potential of economic growth and their impact on society and on the environment, with a commitment to assess personal and societal levels of consumption out of concern for the environment and social justice.

With the launch of the Decade, it is now clear that ESD has established itself as an educational movement, which is increasingly gaining grounds in educational policy discussions around the world. Having emerged out of the discourse and politics of global environmentalism, the environment remains central within ESD discourse; however, the broader application and implication of the concept of sustainable development necessarily expands the focus of ESD. There have been various discussions on the relationship between environmental education (EE) and ESD; Tilbury (1995) asks whether ESD is the next step in the development of environmental education or whether

it represents a fusion of EE and development education (DE). Others, including Sterling (1996) have wondered if it is a convergence of all those 'adjectival educations' oriented towards social change; citizenship, peace, health, political, human rights, multicultural, futures.

These are all legitimate concerns, but one fact remains certain: at the end of the 1980s and the start of the 1990s, a new vision of education was taking shape, it was a vision borne out of the conceptual and pedagogical narrowness of what was then known as environmental education. Sobel (2004) observed that many educators are ready to move beyond environmental education, feeling that the term is too narrow and carries too much baggage. The general belief was that by employing certain pedagogical and didactical approaches, environmental education became a discipline that only succeeded, more or less, in reproducing certain aspects of society without equipping learners to develop innovative ideas to transform society (Rest, 2002). It preoccupied itself with pessimistic and alarmist predictions: rainforest destruction, ozone layer depletion, species extinction etc, compelling some to see it merely as 'catastrophe education'.

### *5.1 ESD, EE and other parallel traditions*

ESD then emerged as the new vision for education; however, no matter how ESD is perceived, there is no doubt that it maintains a strong foundational relationship with environmental education and other parallel traditions that can not be over-looked. Traditions such as place-based education (PBE), community-focused learning (CFL), EE, citizenship education (CE) and many others, all share a common perspective that unites theory and experience (practice) and they all bring valuable resources to teaching and learning. They may have their unique histories, advocates and practitioners, however, they share a common aim of helping to reconnect living and learning by harnessing the natural interests of learners in where and how they live. A key concern, therefore, is to focus on local places and communities and to get learners to see these places as valuable resources for learning and action. Place-based education is therefore an appropriate description for almost all these different traditions.

As Gruenewald (2003) indicated, the practices and purposes of place-based education can be connected to experiential learning, contextual learning, problem-based learning, constructivism, outdoor education, indigenous education, environmental and ecological education, bioregional education, democratic education and multi-cultural education. These are all action-based approaches in the Dewey tradition and their core philosophies are premised on the deep and intimate knowledge of local places and sensitivity to broader ecological and social issues (Lane-Zucker, 2004). The guiding belief is that, solutions to many of the ecological, economic and social problems of the world are inter-connected and solutions require approaches that encourage the utilisation of the cultural, human and natural resources of particular local places and regions. If there was need for an overarching name that describes all these traditions, then ESD has emerged to serve that need.

### *5.2 ESD: what is the scope?*

Many of the debates about the scope and nature of ESD had drawn comparison between ESD and EE and understandably so. The main difference is that the focus of ESD goes beyond the traditional conceptualisation of EE, which of course emerged out of the

growing awareness of environmental crisis and the need for action. EE was notoriously becoming preoccupied with nature preservation and conservation, nature watching, community cleaning and tree planting. In fact, in some instances EE had become almost synonymous to tree planting. ESD then emerged to make these preoccupations more meaningful by bringing diverse themes such as poverty, rural development, gender equality, peace, human security, biodiversity, health, wasteful consumption and many others together. The role of education was therefore not seen as an end in itself, but a means to an end. In doing so, the principles of life-long and life-wide learning are emphasised to underscore the need for an active learning society that must strive to know and understand the complexity of the relationships that underlie these diverse themes.

Having emerged out of the concept of sustainable development the essence of ESD is to shape ethical values by providing humankind with the opportunity to acquire the knowledge, skills and ability to make informed and ethical choices and to be aware of their individual and social responsibilities towards the preservation and enhancement of the biotic community. Even more importantly, ESD aims at increasing people's capacities to transform their visions of society into realities by actively participating in the decision-making processes in their communities. Orr (1992) describes it as connective education, one that has the capacity to integrate disciplines and to challenge learners to make that much needed connections between what is learned in schools and in real life. UNESCO (2002) defines ESD as an emerging but dynamic concept that encompasses a new vision of education that seeks to empower people of all ages to resume responsibility of creating a sustainable future. In my view, ESD is fundamentally about values; diversity, knowledge, behaviours, attitudes, beliefs, lifestyles and world views. It focuses on helping individuals and whole communities to understand the worlds in which they live, from local to the global and to address the complex interconnectedness of life's different aspects.

As the growing worldwide cultural and ecological crisis becomes more apparent, many educators acknowledge that our current educational practices have contributed to the problems we face. Education, therefore, must be made the subject of change. Orr (2004) talks about the problems of education as opposed to the problems in education; he attributes many of the problems of education to the fact that schools, colleges and universities have been uncritically accepting of and sometimes beholden to, larger economic and political forces. Prior to this, Bowers (1997) had expressed similar concerns about the intellectual and moral double binds in what is being taught in our public schools and universities and how public school teachers and even university professors fail to recognise how modern values and behavioural patterns are connected to the ecological crisis of our time. In the face of these challenges and honest acknowledgements of the complicity of our current forms of education, it is only by re-examining our current educational practices and philosophies and re-orienting them towards sustainability, that we can realise our preferred futures.

### *5.3 Key characteristics of ESD*

As I have already indicated, ESD encompasses environmental education by setting it in the broader context of socio-political issues of equity, poverty, democracy and quality of life. Here, I expand UNESCO's (2004) description of key characteristics of ESD. On this basis, ESD must be:

- *Interdisciplinary and holistic*: Learning, especially in formal situations must be embedded in the whole curriculum by consciously making creative connections between different subjects by showing how life, as represented in these subjects have different but inter-connected parts.
- *Values-driven*: It is important that assumed norms, principles and shared values of groups, communities and regions are made explicit in the learning processes and are critically examined, applied and tested in ways that demonstrate how they underpin, or undermine the principles of sustainable development.
- *Community-focused and problem-based*: Learning processes must aim to address verifiable local community issues and problems. Such issues must be diverse enough to reflect the broader cultural, ecological, social, economic and political contexts and should necessarily aim at imbuing in learners, critical-thinking, action-oriented and problem-solving skills. These approaches must lead to a surge in confidence in exploring and addressing the dilemmas and challenges of sustainable development as they pertain in communities.
- *Locally relevant and globally related*: Learning should first aim at addressing local issues and needs, but must make an effort to show the relationships between the local and global. Issues of global nature must be given a local focus using the common language(s) of learners or the local community. Concepts and principles of sustainable development must be carefully expressed in relevant local languages to reflect the socio-cultural and linguistic variations in the expression and interpretation of concepts.
- *Participatory, democratic and experiential*: Both learners and facilitators of the learning process must have mutual respect for each other and should engage in open and equal exchanges that lead to the creation and recreation of knowledge. Knowledge once created must be applied in context to test and verify its validity.

## 6 Why the discourse needs attention

As the Decade unfolds, there is no doubt that its success as an international educational enterprise will depend on the levels of awareness, knowledge, understanding, commitment and passion on the part of teachers and educators both in formal and non-formal education systems. This will, however, not happen if conscious efforts are not made to engage teachers, educators and civil society in debates and conversations on the subject of sustainable development. It is precisely because of this that ESD is described as being life-wide and life-long, its interdisciplinary and multi-sectoral nature require that different learning and action partnerships are formed to facilitate a coordinated effort. The complexity of such a learning project and the need for full political commitment and leadership, is perhaps, why some observers (Porritt, 1996; Jucker, 2002; Rest, 2002) see sustainable development as a political challenge and one that makes it imperative for politicians in all countries to muster the necessary political courage and moral convictions to make it a subject of national priority.

As it is currently the case in the USA, the lack of political affirmation of the concept of sustainable development in many ways explains the disturbing silence and ignorance

on both the concept of sustainable development and the Decade in schools and the wider society. As the world's biggest economy, with an equally big contribution to the world's environmental problems, it will be disingenuous, at least, on the part of the USA to remain silent on this very important subject. Also, as a dominant coloniser of the planet's resources, it is surprising that educational system of the USA acts at cross-purposes with the goals of sustainable development and the role of education in that quest. The need for all countries, including the USA, to pay attention to the Decade is not simply a matter of responding to an international call, but a way of acknowledging our currently unsustainable present and ensuring that learning and action efforts around the world are coordinated and concerted over the agreed period. Such an approach will provide a rare opportunity for the international community to take stock of our situations at the end date (2014) and to assess and establish how far we have come and what else needs to be done. Also, even though it is a global campaign, the Decade provides the opportunity for individual countries and their communities to carefully reflect on their current situations and to explore what educational approaches will be appropriate to address these social and environmental problems. In short, the Decade provides the opportunity for educational and social revival in all communities, both local and global.

In many ways the Decade is an awakener; its essence opens our eyes and minds to current challenges and realities and the need for action. It offers an opportunity for momentum building towards a universal recognition and acceptance of the need to rethink educational approaches for sustainable development. Undoubtedly, the Decade has the capacity to influence contemporary educational thinking and practice if it is given the desired attention. This attention must not be seen as one that is forced on countries and their communities by international agreements, but one that has become imperative because of our current conditions. It is my hope that by offering the following recommendations for action and dialogue, different communities around the world can begin the process of responding to the many educational challenges of sustainability and sustainable development.

- Under the momentum provided by the Decade, countries and their communities at the local levels must organise local level awareness campaigns and conferences to brainstorm current conditions, how they have come about and how they can be addressed.
- Schools, educational systems, civil society leaders, politicians and businesses must form authentic learning and action partnerships with a view to critically examining existing knowledge forms, especially those provided by school curricula and the media to ascertain what is included, excluded, marginalised and more importantly, what purposes different knowledge forms should serve in the advancement of communities towards sustainability.
- The current culture of 'bottom line' and 'investment' education focusing on economic efficiency and neoliberalism, especially as it pertains in Western industrialised societies, must be reconsidered to expose and rectify the destructive impacts of narrow and selfish economic rationalities that value profitable outcomes above, people, places and the ecological mechanism of the biosphere.
- Processes of learning, both in formal and non-formal settings must be re-examined to underscore the fact that how learning occurs is as important as the content of what is learned. Learners in all communities, both privileged and underprivileged must be

given the chance to reconnect with nature, local and distant places and to understand what is required, as well as their own roles and responsibilities in the quest for global sustainability.

## 7 Conclusions

ESD has emerged out of global environmental politics and holds tremendous potential to shape educational thinking and practice in all societies if given the needed attention. With talks and awareness of global environmental problems such as climate change and global warming growing, the role of education will always be central in global environmental politics. Concern for the natural environment and its impact on the social condition is gradually regaining its place in contemporary political discourses, as politicians, economists and environmentalists all strive to bring the environment into the forefront of policy debates. Whatever changes that are hoped for will, however, not happen if people do not have a clear sense of what is at stake and what the expectations are in terms of action. In the end, it becomes the work of education and awareness creation and that is yet another reason the Decade as it is currently running deserves attention.

Education remains humanity's best hope for sustainability, but only when it is employed as a tool to lead and direct our actions rather than as a last minute instrument to clean up our mess. ESD, therefore, provides that clarion call to redirect the world's attention to how the quest for global sustainability can be transformed into a life-long and life-wide learning quest. The Decade leads that call and provides the avenue for a united front for this very important endeavour. As an African educator with an international perspective on issues of environment and development, my vision is to see a world awakened from our sleep; the sleep of selfish and narrow conceptualisation of what progress or development means. These conceptualisations are wrongly informed by capitalists' discourses and ideologies of endless frontiers and bountifulness as far as resource and wealth accumulation are concerned.

Worrying accounts of the current human condition on the planet are suggestive that the time has come for humanity to rethink and redefine our roles and places in the world and ESD provides the necessary pedagogical resources for that exercise. It is my hope too that as the world unites to pursue the sustainability quest, the Decade, as it unfolds will foreground issues of otherness, diversity, local, global, to help people in different places to understand how diverse the world is, but also, how united we are in our destinies. Responsibility to positively influence our destinies therefore rests with all humanity and the challenge is how we can collectively respond. ESD and the Decade provide some answers, they may not be all that the world requires in changing our destinies, but they surely provide an avenue through which all other avenues could be explored.

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