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Editorial / Editorial

Education for Sustainability: A Snakes and Ladders Game?

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The vision of education for sustainable development is a world where everyone has the opportunity to benefit from quality education and learn the values, behaviour and lifestyles required for a sustainable future and for positive societal transformation (UNESCO, October 2004).

Over twenty years after the 1992 Rio Summit, no nation has yet made significant advances towards sustainable development. The State of the World reports produced annually by the WorldWatch Institute document the lack lustre agreements from international conferences that have failed to commit governments to meaningful climate change legislation, have been unable to address poverty where it matters most or enact change that would halt the systematic efforts that exploit people and planet. Nevertheless, the reports do capture trends and global steps that suggest that world is heading very slowly in the direction of sustainable development. The 2014 Report is ultimately optimistic, although «clear-eyed» about making progress and focuses on an assessment of citizens' ability to govern for sustainability. By highlighting both obstacles and opportunities, the State of the World 2014 shows how to effect change within and beyond the halls of government. It marks a departure from the critique on governance to focus on what is possible through the power of convening actors that understand their sphere of influence and opportunities to bring about change for sustainability.

It is within this context, that UN has launched a *Global Action Plan in Education for Sustainable Development*. Recognising the power of education to transform our thinking as well as our actions, UNESCO established a global platform that will bring together implementation partners, from across all sectors and from around the world, to work towards two key objectives:

- Embedding education into plans and efforts to address sustainable development.
- Embedding sustainable development into education institutional priorities, curricula and pedagogy.

The partners have been grouped around five key Priority Action Areas: policy support, whole-of-institutional approaches, educators, youth and local communities. GAP Partner Networks met for the first time in Paris on the 26th-27th May 2015 to map plans for implementation. The UN meeting hosted 70 stakeholders from all regions of the world, including representatives of government, inter-governmental, civil society organisations as well as the private sector and academia. It signalled a move away from expert group framed agendas and a focus on National Commission driven initiatives to a more networked and systemic implementation approach to progressing global change in Education for Sustainable Development.

It is early days and difficult to predict whether this new approach will be a game-changer. The UNESCO Decade in Education for Sustainable Development «Shaping the Future we Want» (2014) was released at a critical juncture as UN Member States prepare to conclude negotiations on the global post-2015 agenda and launch a set of Sustainable Development Goals. It brought to the attention of policy-makers and actors from across the world, the significance of education in the sustainable development dynamic. Without learning to change, we will be able address the deep economic and social inequalities, environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, disruption caused by natural disasters and climate change that are currently testing our global community.

Knowledge and awareness of the problems is not sufficient; neither are single actions in response to campaigns or themed days. We need change in our mindsets so that we can learn to live and work in ways that sustain a healthy planet and create just socio-economic and environmental contexts for all. The UNESCO DESD Final Report documented accomplishments in a variety of forms, but most notably, in the recognition that education and specifically ESD is critical to the sustainability journey. Its visibility in national policies and international agreements has increased as has its presence in formal school, college and higher education systems. Some are more systemic and socially critical in their responses to ESD creating pools of change, and in often currents, in an

ocean of education efforts. Higher education stood out as the most advanced in embedding ESD into teaching and to identifying research solutions, particularly within their local communities. Increasingly, businesses and governments are recognising the value of having a knowledgeable and skilled workforce that can contribute to developing greener economies (UNESCO 2014). The report signalled positive advances in the area of early childhood and in social networking for change. It makes for a very interesting read as statistics capture the emerging trends and a global snapshot of ESD globally. As would be expected, the Report concludes that much more needs to be done.

In June 2015, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe hosted a Steering Committee on Education for Sustainable Development with the purpose of consolidating a future Education for Sustainable Development implementation plan for the region. Whilst celebrating good practice across the region, UNECE has pushed for deep changes in the way that the education system responds to sustainability. It calls for transforming education, challenging structures and practices that do not support sustainable development as well as the embedding of competencies for educators and learners so that they can better participate in the regional and global transition. It interprets Education for Sustainable Development as a cross-cutting process that is relevant to all institutions as well as students and citizens. It calls for educational processes that support critical reflection, greater awareness and empowerment so that sustainable development visions can be constructed (UNECE ECE CEP AC.1£/2015/4). The detailed and ambitious implementation plan will be considered by Ministers at a Conference to be held at Batumi, Georgia from 8-10th June 2016. It is expected to be a milestone event as the future of ESD in the region will be carved.

Too many of us engaged in Education for Sustainable Development, the experience aligns to that of a «snakes and ladders» game. At this moment in time, we are in the middle of the game board seeing the ladders or opportunities that can help us make concrete progress. The GAP, the UNECE Implementation Framework, the new Sustainable Development Goals all provide platforms to secure the agenda and provide the frameworks to support efforts in our countries, institutions, curricula or community groups. We are also aware of the snakes or slippery slopes that mean we often have to take several steps back before we are reposition ourselves to progress in the right direction. The economic challenges, the shifting sands of education policy, political elections and new agendas, lack of understanding of Education for Sustainable Development, and our inability to work across disciplines or sectors often provide those obstacles that restrict our progress.

There are, however, some challenges that are welcome – although they will again slow down our ability to reach the top of the game board. The inclusion of new stakeholders in Education for Sustainable Development efforts is an example. Those new to this education movement often take many of us engaged in Education for Sustainable Development back to revisit the «what», «why» and «how» before so that we can have the impact and reach we require. There is a question we must ask ourselves: are we playing the game with those who are already quick at the dice – i.e. familiar with sustainable development and already working to progress it within their own spheres of influence? Perhaps we need to engage with new players and be prepared to slide down before we can go forward to create a more sustainable future.