

# **Higher Education and Sustainable Development in Mexico's Universities: A Critical Approach to Education for Sustainable Development**

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## **Abstract**

As we all know, on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005, the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) will begin. This event has prompted reactions of acceptance and rejection all around the world. What is certain is that this is not a simple subject and that it must be analyzed from several perspectives (Edgar González-Gaudiano, 2004).

According to the UNESCO's information about the UNDESD, "The Johannesburg Summit confirmed that Education is the basis for a Sustainable Development [...] The creation of an educational system which takes into consideration gender differences as well as differences among all sectors, whether it is formal or non formal education, to reach the non communicated communities, is considered as a fundamental element of Education for a Sustainable Development (ESD) [...]"

For the last 30 years, Environmental Education (EE) has played an important role in several discourses. For some, it has been more part of the problem than of the solution, for example, when isolated and naïve actions are promoted, or when natural sciences approaches are used without considering others. Nevertheless, EE has become a source of inspiration for many of us. It has become a social process of construction of a pedagogical object, plural, as full of contradictions as reality itself.

Environmental educators here in Mexico and in Brazil, for instance, although doing different things and dealing with different needs, have been able to define strategies of pedagogical research, to build collective identities, to identify and share strategies to find common objectives and to persevere as we reach for them. These projects and experiences are also shared with other regions, like Galicia and Granada in Spain, and Quebec and Yukon in Canada, among others (Edgar González-Gaudinao, 2004). This is why many of us consider that we cannot renounce EE in order to assume Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), without critical and profound analysis and debate.

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## **Introduction**

The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) recommended to the United Nations General Assembly that it "...consider adopting a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development starting in 2005" (UNESCO Online) In December 2002, resolution 57/254 on the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development beginning on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005 was adopted by consensus.

According to the UNESCO, "education needs to reorient its own programs to include the changes required to promote sustainable development. Improving the quality of education and reorienting its goals to recognize the importance of sustainable development must be one of the world's highest priorities". It also states that "there is no universal model of education for sustainable development", and that although, "there will be nuanced differences according to local contexts, priorities and approaches, there *should* be an overall agreement on the concept" and that, "Each country has to define its own priorities and actions. The goals, emphases and processes must, therefore, be locally defined to meet the local environmental, social and economic conditions in culturally appropriate ways. Education for sustainable development is equally relevant and critical for both developed and developing countries" (UNESCO Online).

### **Some of the most important objectives of the Decade are**

To promote education as a basis for a more sustainable human society and to integrate Sustainable Development (SD) into education systems at all levels. The Decade will also strengthen international cooperation towards the development and sharing of innovative ESD programs, practices and policies.

ESD is a dynamic concept that utilizes all the aspects of public awareness, education and training to develop the knowledge, skills, perspectives and values which will empower people of all ages to assume responsibility for creating and enjoying a sustainable future.

The Decade is an opportunity to put the human element at the forefront of efforts to facilitate the plan. The understanding, values, commitments and skills that only education can provide, will support the more technical elements of the plan, reminding everyone—children, youth, and adults—that the agenda of SD is in fact an agenda for all of us. It is about the way we live our lives, the way we respect the lives of others—far and near, present and future—and our attitudes to the world around us.

ESD is not a new program, but a call for a process to re-orient educational policies, programs and practices so that education plays its part in building the capacities of all members of society to work together to build a sustainable future.

## **When did the debate between Environmental Education (EE) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) begin?**

The debate between EE and ESD is not recent. It started in the middle of the last decade, when the first attempts of the UNESCO for this substitution started to become clear. Lucie Sauvé (1999), among several other authors, from a wide variety of countries, has made a number of contributions in this matter.

“According to the proponents of these integrating frameworks (ESD), there is an international consensus on the relevance of or need for ‘reshaping education’ for sustainable development”. “UNESCO is now placing sustainable development at the heart of the project of planetary education, considering it to be the ultimate ‘goal’ of human development. EE is here reduced to being an instrumental tool in a long list of other types of ‘education for...’, all intended to serve such a finality”. “Unfortunately the proponents of the ESD projects offer a narrow view of EE, restricting it to a naturalist approach or to a reactive process that focuses essentially on solving problems of a biophysical nature. However, EE is an essential component, and not a mere accessory, of education. Indeed, it involves nothing less than the reconstruction of systems of relationships among persons, society and the environment” ( Sauvé, 1999).

Lucie Sauvé also emphasizes that, “like EE, and despite its most recent history, ESD is also a product of modernity. It emerged in reaction to the ‘progress’ of western civilization caused by the exhaustion of resources and the destabilization of social balances of power. The concept of sustainable development stresses the close links between the economy and the environment (as does EE), but it emphasizes the developmental pole of the problematic”(1999). She also presents a detailed analysis of a ‘new’ proposal, Education for the Development of Responsible Societies, for which it is clear that the terms ‘development’ and ‘responsible’ must be clearly defined.

Arjen E. J. Wals and Bob Jickling make a very interesting analysis of SD, and of the risks and possible advantages of adopting ESD: “While sustainability has a clear meaning in particular contexts (literally it means to keep going continuously), as an aim it is dubious. Education for sustainability runs counter to prevailing conceptions of education: it breathes a kind of intellectual exclusivity and determinism that conflicts with ideas of emancipation, local knowledge, democracy, and self-determination.

Talking about sustainability is quite different from making it the end, or aim, of education”(2002). In the same article, the authors present the educational potential of sustainability and describe some of the possible implications of integrating sustainability in higher education. For instance, the fact that it pre-supposes the re-thinking of institutional missions, involving all actor groups in the university. “Higher education (and I would say, education in a general sense) has first and foremost something to do with creating possibilities, not defining or prescribing the future for our students” (A. E. J. Wals and B. Jickling, 2002).

## **The hypercomplex object of EE: the network of relationships among persons, social groups and the environment.**

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Environmental educators here in Mexico and in other Latin American, for instance, although doing different things and dealing with different needs, have been able to define strategies of pedagogical research, to build collective identities, to identify and share strategies to find common objectives and to persevere as we reach for them. These projects and experiences are also shared with other regions, like Galicia and Granada in Spain, and Quebec and Yukon in Canada, among others (Edgar González-Gaudinao, 2004). This is why many of us consider that we cannot renounce EE in order to assume ESD, without critical and profound analysis and debate.

## **Mexican universities and SD**

On September 9 and 10, 2004, the First Forum for the Discussion on Higher Education and Sustainable Development took place in the Technological University of Leon, in Leon, Guanajuato. This event was planned several months, if not years in advance, by the COMPLEXUS, Mexican Consortium of Universities with Environmental Programs for Sustainable Development, a consortium of 12 public and private universities. The Technological University of Leon and the University of Guanajuato were responsible for the organization of this forum.

The Center for Education and Training for Sustainable Development, of the Mexican Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, (Cecadesu-Semarnat), provided vital financial support to this meeting, as did the National Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutions .

*The most important objectives of this forum were*

- ♦ To analyze the different positions and approaches, in Mexico and other countries, related to SD, and the possible benefits and risks of making it the purpose of higher education.
- ♦ To encourage critical analysis related to the adoption of ESD in substitution of EE, in Mexican universities.
- ♦ To create a document that reflects the position and proposals of COMPLEXUS and other higher education institutions in Mexico, in relation to the Decade.

There were two kinds of activities: six papers were presented by important contributors from Mexico, Spain and Canada, and two discussion sessions were held in which faculty from several universities in Mexico and people from other sectors participated.

The conferences were presented by

Dr. David Barkin, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Mexico; Dr. Ernest García, Universidad de Valencia, Spain; Dr. Edgar González Gaudiano, Secretaría de Educación Pública, Mexico; . Javier Riojas Rodríguez M.Sc., Universidad Iberoamericana DF, Mexico; Dr. Guillermo Foladori, Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas, Mexico; and Dr. Lucie Sauvé, Université de Québec à Montreal, Montreal, Canada.

This forum was directed mainly at those universities that have institutional environment programs, or their equivalent, and therefore, at the professors and students of these universities, as well as local and federal government offices and NGOs. About 330 people assisted this event, and about 100 worked during the thematic discussion sessions during the afternoons, where the main conclusions of this forum were elaborated.

#### *Expected products of this forum*

- The criteria that could be considered for the discussion related to SD in Mexican universities.
- The position of the universities participating in this forum with regard to the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, and the activities that should be developed.

The subjects of interest to the participants were:

- Deep and critical analysis of SD in the universities and other sectors.
- Are EE and ESD essentially the same thing? If not, what is the difference?
- Possible advantages and risks of replacing EE with ESD.
- Deep analysis of the weaknesses of EE in Mexico and other countries.
- Is there another and better proposal instead of ESD?

#### **Final Ideas**

The documents that were generated during these sessions were analyzed, and the main ideas discussed were:

- This is just the first step of a deeper analysis that should be made in order to reach a consensus and to create a document that can be widely distributed in universities, other academic institutions, and all the sectors related to this subject, as for instance, the Ministry of Public Education in Mexico.
- We recognize that the actual model of education is mechanistic, reductionist, individualistic, and fragmented—characteristics that do not

correspond with those of EE, or even with the discourse of SD, which need a systemic and interdisciplinary approach, that includes complexity.

- EE and its contributions should constitute the frame of sustainability, understanding it as a process. Therefore, sustainability can be considered as an axis of development that specifies the actions that should be undertaken in search of a better quality of life.
- It is urgent to find communication channels and to promote dialogue between the different disciplines. Integrated knowledge, and cooperative work have not been valued in most academic institutions.
- The objectives of EE are different in each part of the world. There is no one model of EE, because each one responds to different realities. This is why in most Latin American countries there are instances where EE programs have had an integrated vision, and others where EE programs have focused mainly on ecological education, which we recognize as being a weakness. • Universities in Mexico have adopted the perspectives of a model of development based on consumption, which opposes that of SD, although the discourse of SD has already been integrated into universities, in different ways and at different levels.
- The proposal of sustainability should have a regional context. The ecological approach should not be the only one, although it is essential. SD is a paradigm in construction that will include environmental values to encourage its progress.
- Universities and environmental educators should consider ESD an important international proposal that could contribute, with economic resources, to the development of both existing and new EE programs.

The people who participated in this analysis and discussion agreed that a good way to combine both concepts, without losing EE's history and achievements, or the opportunities that the Decade could provide to all countries, could be a new proposal—Environmental Education for Sustainability.

## Conclusion

Finally, we think that the results of this forum and the final document that will be elaborated, hopefully during January and February 2005, are significant to the interests of EE and ESD, and to the people working and studying in Mexican universities, who represent an important reference for further analysis in these universities, and in other universities around the world. At the same time, these results are a good source of inspiration for the academic communities and environmental educators, who must take advantage of the Decade, in order to develop EE programs, both in formal and non formal ways.

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