

Education for Sustainable Development: A Framework for Jamaica

Shermaine Barrett, Education Division, Faculty of Education and Liberal Studies, University of Technology, Jamaica.

Abstract

This paper proposes a framework for conceptualizing, planning for and implementing an education agenda for sustainable development within the Jamaican context. The strategic questions informing this framework are: What is the context within which sustainable development is being proposed? What are the educational needs that arise within the given context? and what mechanism would best facilitate these needs thus satisfying the sustainable development objectives?

The central thesis of the paper is that "sustainable development ultimately depends on enhancing people's capacities as individuals and groups to improve their own lives and to take greater control over their own destinies" (Ogun, 1982 p.2). Thus, education is contended to be a critical tool for achieving sustainable development. The educational implications of sustainable development within the Jamaican context are therefore assessed using the national social policy goals (2003) as the agenda for sustainable development. This assessment is facilitated through secondary and primary data collected through document analysis and interviews with a number of professionals working within the social and environmental sectors.

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in its first Human Development Report of 1990 described human development as "a process of enlarging people's choices. The most critical of these wide-ranging choices areto live a long and healthy life, to be educated and to have access to resources needed for a decent standard of living. It stated further that ".... the process of development should at least create a conducive environment for people, individually, and collectively, to develop their full potential and to have a reasonable chance of leading productive and creative lives in accord with their needs and interests." (United Nations Development Programme, 2000 p15).

Analysis of the definition above reveals traditional developmental ends that are primarily social and economical in focus. Sustainable development adds to these two ends the dimension of the environment. Thus sustainable development speaks to development that considers social, economic and environmental factors and the relationship among them.

DEFINING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), otherwise known as the Brundtland Commission posited the following definition of sustainable development, "economic and social development that meets the needs of the current generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." (Dalal-Clayton and Bass, 2000, p 9)

Dalal-Clayton and Bass (2000) offer the following interpretation of the Brundtland definition which highlights the triple dimension of sustainable development and helps us to delineate the elements that must be addressed in setting a sustainable development agenda.

"Meeting the needs of the present" they argue means satisfying: Economic needs - including an adequate livelihood or productive economic activity; also economic security when unemployed, ill, disabled or otherwise unable to secure a livelihood; Social, cultural and health needs - including a shelter which is healthy, safe, affordable and secure, with provision for piped water, drainage, transport, health care, education and child development and protection from environmental hazards; Political needs - including freedom to participate in national and local politics and in decisions regarding management and development of one's home and neighbourhood within a broader framework which ensures respect for civil and political rights and the implementation of environmental legislation.

Their interpretation of "without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" include: monitoring use or waste of non-renewable resources for example how we use petroleum and minimizing the waste of scarce mineral resources for example our sand mining activities; Sustainable use of renewable resources - including using freshwater, soils and forests in ways that ensure a natural rate of recharge and keeping within the natural capacity of the environment to absorb human generated waste

The conclusion is that Sustainable development promotes a development approach that is holistic in nature and rejects a survivalist tendency which speaks to survival at all cost.

PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

This paper will outline the role of education in fostering sustainable development, examine the sustainable development needs within the Jamaican context and then outline a framework for sustainable development education premised on the notions of inclusion and participation.

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Tilbury et al (2002, p. 7), quoted Schumacher as saying education is the "greatest resource" for achieving a just and ecological society." Chapter 36 of the Agenda 21 document identifies promoting education, public awareness and training as part of the sustainable development agenda demonstrating an agreement that education was critical for promoting sustainable development and increasing the capacity of the people to address environmental and developmental issues.

The importance of education to the sustainability process was reiterated in the discussion paper for the Thessaloniki conference on Environment and Society: Education and Public Awareness for Sustainability when it stated that: "...education is the most effective means that society possess for confronting the challenges of the future.....it is not the whole answer to every problem but education, in its broadest sense, must be a vital part of all efforts to imagine and create new relations among people and to foster greater respect for the needs of the environment." (Tilbury et al, 2002 p. 7)

One's experiences during the learning process and the impact of that learning on society have a direct correlation with the underlining belief that defines the education programme experienced. Educational planners and developers have held varying views regarding what end education should serve. The important question is what is the educational goal that would facilitate a process of sustainable development? From a sustainable development perspective educators must articulate a vision in which "social development, ecological well being, and economic prosperity are addressed and which is founded on an ethic in which the common good or social justice underpins a respect for all learners" (Stevenson 2002, p.187).

In this regard Shaeffer (1994, p. 7) offers three points that are useful in helping us to outline the educational goals that would facilitate a process of sustainable development: to "encourage a more integrated view of how the world operates and how development does (or does not) occur; make students more critically aware of how their actions, individually and collectively will hinder or help the world to meet

future challenges; and help to mobilize and empower people with the knowledge and skills to participate more actively, more democratically and more collectively in the development process.”

CONTEXTUALIZING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN JAMAICA

Jamaica was one of the countries that signed the Agenda 21 agreement at the 1992 Earth summit in Rio de Janeiro. The agreement called for a global partnership for sustainable development. Through this agreement Jamaica like many other countries committed itself to promote sustainability through a great variety of activities. But, as with many other Latin American and Caribbean countries, Jamaica (since 1977) was forced to undertake painful structural reforms to stabilize its economy greatly impacting in a negative manner its agenda for sustainable development.

Structural adjustment has been most traumatic for Jamaica. The government has divested many of the public operations e.g., electricity, transportation. The cost of accessing health care and a good education has risen. Many Government agencies are now Executive Agencies meaning among other things they must earn their keep. These former government agencies that got their yearly budget from the central budget no longer enjoy that benefit rather they must begin to develop new strategies to provide the public with efficient and cost effective service. This often means an increase or introduction of user fees for many social services. In the meantime the private sector struggles with liquidity and there are numerous accounts of businesses collapsing, others strategically choosing to scale back operations through restructuring, downsizing, layoffs and redundancies, leaving many without employment.

The results of the structural adjustment programme are clear and include high unemployment and reduced standard of living for many, the exacerbation of poverty and inequality, a net outflow of wealth from the country, social unrest, increased incidents of crime and violence to name a few. The adverse macroeconomic environment and the attendant policies adopted to overcome the economic problems facing the country have put pressure on the taxpayer's ability to foot the bill for the delivery of various social services including education and health (Garity and Picard, 1996; The Commonwealth Foundation and Association of Development Agencies, 1999).

Within this context the United Nations Development Programme, Jamaica Human Development Report (2000) identified a number of issues related to vulnerability and human insecurity in Jamaica. These issues include: poverty evidenced by dilapidated house, no sanitary convenience, inability to care for children, hunger, no job or steady income; violence and crime severely affecting community spirit and social relations due to fear, distrust, interpersonal conflicts, destruction of community infrastructure and political tribalism; inadequate housing/shelter, land tenure and social amenities impacted by low income of households and resulting in the absence of protection, access to services and amenities, privacy, access to jobs, income, recreation and socialization; inadequate food, nutrition and health resulting in low weight for age, anemia among young children, and pregnant and lactating women, nutrition related chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, cardiac diseases and stroke; environmental threats mainly related to water and air quality, the impact of improper waste disposal and the impact of natural disasters and environmental accidents.

The report states that “the factors outlined impoverish the lives and directly or indirectly threaten the economic, physical, and emotional/psychological well being of a large number of persons in Jamaica.” In other words for those Jamaicans their own sustainability is under threat and so despite a context of structural reform the government must intervene to steer development towards sustainability for all and any programme of sustainable development must address those social, economic and environmental issues present in our local context.

On the positive side is the emergence of some important developments that provide a sound base for the participatory education programme proposed in this paper. The first development is a process of decentralization, replacing the traditional centralized, bureaucratic decision-making and governance approach inherited from colonialism.

Decentralization unlike centralization is based on the premise of inclusion. Participation and consensus building, legitimate instruments of democracy, are given greater relevance or importance in a context of decentralization. The notion of rulership 'with' the people rather than rulership 'of' the people gets prominence. In Jamaica decentralization include the restructuring and strengthening of local government and the establishment of parish development committees - bodies at the parish level made up of representatives from the various communities within the parish. According to the Social Development Commission (1998) these committees provide a mechanism for coordinating the planning, implementing and monitoring process at the parish level.

The other development is the resurgence in the type and number of civil society groups around neighbourhood security, social services, human rights and justice, environmental protection, governance and free and fair elections, providing opportunity for the voice of the people to be heard in a clear organized manner. This emergence paves the way for a more cohesive society and again indicates a deepening of the democratic functioning of the society. (Munroe, 1999).

THE JAMAICAN FRAMEWORK

As stated earlier, a programme of education for sustainable development must address the social economic and environmental issues relevant to its context. This speaks to education that is appropriate and relevant. What does this mean for Jamaica? It means sustainable development education in Jamaica must contend with the challenges of poverty and inequality, debt, ill-health, poor nutrition and environmental degradation. It must play the central role in establishing cohesion and harmony within the local context of mistrust, social unrest, violence and aggression. It must bring people together in creative collaboration and cooperation to assist in breaking down ethnic, economic, class, gender and political barriers that cause people to feel alienated, It must respond to the challenges that threaten the disintegration of the Jamaican society through greed, insecurity and a lack of will to contribute to or protect the common good (Clarke 2005, p 46). It must involve, learning the knowledge, skills, perspectives and values that will guide and motivate people to lead sustainable livelihoods, to participate in a democratic society and to live in a sustainable manner (Hopkins and McKeown, 2002).

However, meeting the capacity needs of individuals and groups to respond to the demands of the Jamaican environment cannot be accomplished through the traditional educational system with its narrow instrumental focus. It requires the involvement of more than the traditional players such as the Ministry of Education, Youth and Culture, teachers and other educational personnel. The need exist for greater participation from partners such as families, communities, private sector, government local and central, non-governmental organizations, the informal education sector: television, radio and newspaper, non-formal sector: public health educators, agricultural extension agents and others in planning and implementing the education that is required. "We cannot expect the formal education system which in reality touches the children for a fraction of their lives to teach people everything about living, working and governing in a manner that will achieve sustainability for their community and nation" (Hopkins and McKeon, 2002 p.13).

The plea is being made for a participatory approach which includes national, civil society and private sector actors in the design, implementation and monitoring of sustainable development activities and in particular, education. It is against this background that the Learning City framework is recommended.

The Learning City Concept

There are many variations to the Learning City concept but for this paper it is defined as a framework for organized learning in which a region mobilizes resources and its economic, political, educational, social cultural and environmental structures towards the development of the potentiality of its citizens and the region. Regions in this context, includes cities, towns and communities (Longworth, 1999)

The Learning City model is collaborative and acknowledges and invests in learning that is over and above institutional learning so that while the region would seek to revitalize and improve formal institutions of learning it also invests resources, (human, money and time) in other informal and non-formal learning spaces and programmes.

The notion of the Learning City is philosophically grounded in the theories of lifelong learning, learning as self actualization, learning for social and economic development and learning as social reconstruction. The Learning City promotes certain values which are very relevant to contemporary Jamaica.

From a learning perspective the Learning City concept reinforces an education agenda, officially acknowledges the central role of learning in helping a country meet the needs of the society, promotes cultural shifts in the perception of the value of learning, promotes lifelong learning and continuing education, acknowledges and celebrates learning as a critical tool to facilitate development, facilitate democratic communities of learning, and sees learning beyond what happens in schools, institutions of higher learning, training and workshops.

From a developmental perspective the Learning City offers a holistic approach to community and urban development. It promotes a change in the process of governance, acknowledges and empowers people as partners in development, restores the power of the local people to initiate, formulate and implement activities and programmes regarding their own future and the future of their communities, helps to deal with threats that need urgent attention, tap into the various opportunities for social and economic growth that does not compromise the environment and promotes and celebrates accomplishments and successes of citizens.

The Learning City gives primacy to the needs of the region in formulating an agenda for action such that solutions are derived from the local context, respond positively to current and emergent economic, social and environmental conditions, facilitate development that is inclusive by embracing the principles of participation and partnership and allowing all citizens to participate more freely and fully. It also seeks to build a strategy that can empower and affect social, political and economic growth in a sustainable manner.

How does the Learning City work? At the implementation level the Learning City operates on three legs: participation; partnership and performance. In terms of partnerships, the Learning City seeks to foster partnering relationships between various sectors and institutions within and without the specific region to access needed resources. As noted earlier these partners would be drawn from national, civil society and private sector agencies and would depend on the educational focus at the given time.

Participation speaks to finding new ways to engage citizens in how their communities will be governed and changed. It is the process of involving the targets of development in the planning, implementation and evaluation of developmental progress. It implies an active role for citizens, a role established by virtue of citizenship within the region. The idea is that the objectives of sustainable development are more likely to be more relevant, more supported, more successful, and more enduring to the extent it involves the targets in the planning and evaluation (Shaeffer, 1994).

Performance speaks to the participants being creative in learning to think of new ways to learn and to act on their world. This would include participants engaging in assessing the needs of their region and setting educational goals and objectives, planning collaboratively and implementing educational activities across the region.

CONCLUSION

The major benefit of Learning City framework is people empowerment. People gain knowledge and awareness of their own social, economic political and environmental conditions; they gain a more integrated view of how the world operates and how development does (or does not) occur; they become more critically aware of how their actions, individually and collectively will hinder or help the region to meet future

challenges; and help to mobilize and empower people with the knowledge and skills to participate more actively, more democratically and more collectively in the development process; they learn to take action and to construct their own futures through a process of analysis and action and gain control over the goals and processes of development within their region and ultimately the country. All these serve to build a solid base for development that is sustainable.

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MAJOR POINTS

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