



## GLOBAL ACTION PLAN<sup>SM</sup>

### **The blind men and the ESD elephant**

*Marilyn Mehlmann*

The United Nations launched its Decade for Education for Sustainable Development in March 2005, and we all applauded. Fantastic! Finally! Around the world, conferences and meetings were held to discuss what it means and how to do it. In Europe the lead was taken by UN ECE, coordinated by Russia and Sweden. National governments signed undertakings to develop strategies and programs.

One year after the launch, the coordinating body, UNESCO, noted on its web site that nonetheless, not much had happened. A particular disappointment was a continuing tendency to confuse Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) with environmental education, and indeed in general to address different aspects of the topic separately. But if ESD is about any *one* thing, it is about transdisciplinary systems: the way things are linked together across every border we humans ever set up – thematic, geographic, sectoral.

When we try to capture a description of ESD, we sound like the group of blind men trying to describe an elephant. 'It's like a tree,' says the one who got hold of a leg. 'No, it's like a rope,' says the one with the tail. 'More like a wall,' says the one who found a flank.

Having been working with ESD since before it was called that – since 1989 – I believe I have at least one eye partly open. So let me describe what I see.

#### ***For, not About***

I see that the ESD Decade is *For* sustainable development, not *About* sustainable development. Our main task as educators is therefore to equip our students to *act for* sustainability, not primarily to be able to answer questions about the theory.

In a way, this should be a relief. After all, the theory is rather thin! We know quite a lot about the characteristics of a sustainable society but practically nothing about how a sustainable society might function on such a crowded planet.

In other words, we know very little about the destination, but we do know approximately the direction in which we need to move. And there are methods and tools available to help us do so.

So Education for Sustainable Development needs to

- Clarify the direction and scope of sustainable development; the quicker we can move in the desired direction, the more options will be open to us
- Evaluate, offer and improve methods and tools for moving in that direction
- Not least, make it easier for us to learn from our own and other people's experience; we need to significantly improve our collective learning process.

### ***Elements of ESD***

Clarify the direction of sustainable development  
Make tools available  
Deepen the collective learning process

### **Beyond goals**

*'Life is a journey, not a destination'.*

I see a tendency to place a lot of faith in goals. But SD is a journey of exploration. So goals, while useful, are not the whole story.

In fact, I begin to believe that if you have an SD project and you only reach your pre-determined goals, you have probably failed. Why? Because what you know in advance can't possibly be the best you can accomplish if you bring all your creativity to bear.

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So ESD needs also to be about transcending goals, stimulating creativity, innovation and risk-taking. And in order to come to that point, it needs to encourage and empower students to extend their limits – but one step at a time, with high levels of self-assessment (are we really headed in the right direction?) and flexibility.

### ***Some basic tools for ESD***

Create images of a desired future  
Identify action opportunities  
Ongoing dialogue, feedback and assessment  
Participation and empowerment

### **Trans everything**

I see the strong temptation to segment sustainable development into comfortably familiar disciplines, and to teach one thing at a time. A lot of environment, a little democracy, some social integration and new technology – and a sprinkle of economics.

Somehow it misses the point. If we improve the environment but go bankrupt, how sustainable is that? If we clean up pollution by introducing dictatorship, how sustainable is that? If we save a lot of money by reducing resource use, and spend it on weapons, how sustainable is that? If we introduce radical and effective political measures towards sustainable development, and get voted out of power before they take effect, how sustainable is that?

No, if sustainable development is about anything it's about transcending boundaries. There are no easy solutions, but somehow we will find ways to work in a transdisciplinary and transsectoral way – scientists, engineers, politicians, business people, activists, economists, municipal planners, teachers, philosophers... to enrich each other's ideas about sustainability and challenge our own mental boundaries.

There is also the question of geopolitical boundaries. SD problems today are by their very nature global – but solutions are of necessity local. We need to teach in a way that enables us to tackle local issues and concerns within a global context. Making things better for ourselves by making them worse for our neighbours is not too sustainable, either!

And how about cultural boundaries? They may be very obvious, such as groups of people with different languages, lifestyles, dress codes. Or they may be more subtle, as between men and women, adults and children – or teenagers. But one way or another, we are all needed. *Everyone has something to contribute.*

### **Some characteristics of ESD**

Transdisciplinary  
Transsectorial  
Local solutions from a global perspective  
Inclusive and integrative

### **What comes first?**

I remember a conversation with Korean buddhists where we arrived at the conclusion that it doesn't really matter whether you begin with the spirit and end in the garbage pail, or begin with the garbage and travel to spirit – the main thing is to be on the journey of sustainability.

However, I also see that many people – including some leading EU and national political figures – take for granted that of the three pillars of SD, economic sustainability must come first. The reasoning is that when we have generated a budgetary surplus, we can think about investing in social sustainability, and in ecological sustainability.

But wait a minute... ecological sustainability has an immutable 'bottom line'. As Karl-Henrik Robért points out, you can't negotiate with a living cell. Either it will survive in a given environment, or it will not.

Social sustainability is somewhat more negotiable, because we humans are amazingly flexible. Amazingly, but not infinitely. We know something about what humans need to feel good. And humans who feel good are a defining element of sustainability – no? A society in which humans *don't* feel good must by definition be unsustainable?

Economic sustainability, on the other hand, is 100% negotiable. Not because money is not important, but because it is a human invention. We invented money to serve our own purposes. We have re-invented it several times. And now it no longer serves our purpose, we need to re-invent it again.

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So indeed, maybe economic sustainability is the crucial issue. But not in the conventional, 'try-harder' way. Today's economic systems have been a key factor in creating and promoting *unsustainable* development, and as long as they are unchanged our long-term prospects will continue to deteriorate. As Albert Einstein is reputed to have said, it is impossible to solve a problem from the same perspective that created it.

Economics is about human relations – about how we choose to relate to each other and to the rest of the world. Can we educate ourselves to think creatively and freshly about those choices, and about how sustainable choices can be reflected in complementary economic, social and environmental solutions?

That question is perhaps the single most important key to getting a full view of the ESD elephant.