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ADULT EDUCATION IN AN UNSUSTAINABLE ERA

BY Lili-Ann Wolff

Sustainability is not one alternative anymore; it is the only alternative. A large number of researchers are convinced that humanity's production and consumption have exceeded the limits of planet Earth and that the present development model is unsustainable from environmental, economic, and social perspectives. In this article I will draw on recent research results from various disciplines to show why this is so. Furthermore, I will discuss the implications of the present unsustainable quandaries on education, especially adult education, and suggest new, innovative ways to encounter the present environmental and social challenges.

I will especially focus on the following topics: the quest for sustainability; contemporary world development trends and their transboundary and intricate impacts on daily human conduct; the rise of education as the tool for sustainable development in general and especially in adult education; social movements and social innovations in relation to adult education; and last but not least, the empowerment of adults through education. To begin with, I will problematize the concept of sustainable development itself.
Sustainable development and sustainability

The world has struggled with many environmental threats since the beginning of the industrial era and even long before, but in the 1950s and 1960s, environmental protection became a common concern, and as a result, the protection of nature was regarded as a duty. In the 1980s, the non-governmental organizations IUCN and the World Wildlife Fund WWF in collaboration with the United Nations Environmental programme UNEP published the World Conservation Strategy (IUCN 1980). This document underscored that socioeconomic development and nature conservation are interrelated and that development therefore must consider environmental issues. The aim of this document was to propose guidelines for a vital world in which plants, animals, and people can share a good life. However, this idea was soon to be steered in a more ‘cost-effective’ direction.

With the 1987 report, Our Common Future, the World Commission on Environment and Development set sustainable development as a political aim for all segments of society, not the least of which is education (see WCED 1987). The report included once again a kind of universal vision of a better future and a call for new values and norms of behaviour at all levels of society. Yet this time the vision placed humankind in the central position and did not diminish the impact of technological and economic progress. According to the WCED report, sustainable development aims at meeting the basic needs and desires of all people for a better life without endangering the possibilities for future human life on earth. The discussion offered in the report, which became known as the Brundtland report, continued in the first international environmental and development conference, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 – a conference that gathered thousands of leaders and NGO members from around the world. Still more people gathered at the Rio +10 in Johannesburg 2002 and Rio +20 in Rio de Janeiro 2012.

Since the first Rio conference, sustainable development has been a common concept in political documents at all levels, and it has increasingly embraced issues of environmental protection. Since then, the concept of sustainable development has also been politically divided into three dimensions: ecological, social/cultural, and economic. Many voices have criticized this division and have claimed that the concept of sustainable development is not sustainable in itself and that its interpretation has failed. The concept has been called a slogan and a contradictory myth (see, e.g., Ingimundarsson 1997; Wolff 2011). Because of this problem with the concept, it is now more common to talk about sustainability. In this article I, therefore, prefer to use the concept of sustainability, except when I refer to sources using sustainable development.

After the Rio conference, ‘education for sustainable development’ gradually become a common concept in political educational documents at all levels, and it has increasingly embraced issues of environmental protection. As a result, the three dimensions of sustainable development are all stressed as important educational goals, and the inclusion of these three dimensions in various educational contexts has thus been a topic of ongoing concern. Already in the 1970s, the political goal of ‘environ-
mental education’ was to change learners’ attitudes, and the UN goal for education for sustainable development is still in 2014 focused on influencing learners’ values and attitudes: ‘to reorient education and learning so that everyone has the opportunity to acquire the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that empower them to contribute to sustainable development’ (Tbilisi declaration 1977; UNESCO 2014).

**Sustainability as a global challenge**

A focus on education, however, has not managed to change our unsustainable course. The world still suffers from human overpopulation, a lack of water and food, bad air quality, deforestation, decreased biodiversity, and many more problems. One of the biggest environmental threats is climate change. Climate change is a complex problem that influences many levels of life, both human and non-human, such as water availability, food production, biodiversity, health, equality, human rights, and employment. According to the Worldwatch Institute’s State of the world 2014, climate scenarios are dominated by orthodox economic views with unrestricted growth as a hidden goal.

The combination of steady growth with a growing world population is an impossible equation to solve. The world population of 7.3 billion in mid-2015 is predicted to increase to between 9.4 and 10 billion by 2050 and between 10 and 12.5 billion in 2100 (United Nations 2015). More people to feed and equip with material goods means a growing demand on diminishing natural resources. The demand is also growing for people to do hard and dangerous physical work, such as mining, the construction of roads and streets, and industrial work. Simultaneously, numerous grassroots movements are struggling to decrease climate change, species loss, inequity, poverty, and other sustainability problems. The agendas of these various groups are often in conflict with the programmes originated by governments and large corporations. Their strategies can therefore be called ‘counter activities’. I will return to these activities later, but before that I will frame a few urgent and central contemporary development threats and trends through actual examples. These examples concern climate change, the world economy, present-day slavery, technology development, inequity, and finally, the suffering caused by conflict minerals. From this diverse choice, I want to give a picture of the sustainability dilemma that is as comprehensive as possible.

**Climate change**

Besides the environmental threats that have been obvious for years, new ones often arise. According to a recent study undertaken at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research and published online in March 2015, there is a slowdown in the great ocean circulation (Rahmstorf et al 2015). Among other planetary roles, this circulation drives the Gulf Stream. The consequences could be serious, with a significant sea level rise impeding on large coastal cities such as New York and Boston (ibid.). The climate crises, like many other environmental dangers of today, are a complex mixture of political, economic, and social threats built on the myth of endless growth. Nonetheless, continuous growth is impossible on a planet with limited resources (see, e.g., Wijkman & Rockström 2012). Growth is not only a threat against the
biosphere; it also has a serious impact on the most defenceless people in the world. Severe floods and other climate-related disasters caused by climate change actually affect poor countries much more than rich ones because of their geographical locations (see, e.g., Roberts & Parks 2006). The industrial world produces the most greenhouse gas emissions contributing to climate change, but the worst effects are the most obvious in other parts of the world. Therefore, endangering the environment and the global climate is also a reason for continuous global inequality. Indeed, global climate change was already the most controversial issue at the first Rio conference, since the rich countries were not ready to contribute to global wellbeing by giving up their comfortable lifestyle (ibid.).

The world economy
Science professor William Laurence (2015), founder of the Alliance of Leading Environmental Researchers & Thinkers (ALERT), describes in his blog what he counts as the two biggest threats to our natural world today. Firstly, he mentions the G20 countries’ shocking plans for infrastructure expansion. The leaders of the world’s 20 largest economies have committed to spending “60 to 70 trillion U.S. dollars” on new infrastructure projects by the year 2030. There has never been any single bigger financial transaction in human history, according to Laurence, who sees it as very alarming and as having ‘an Earth-shaking impact’ on the environment. He lists consequences such as ‘massive increases in roads, hydroelectric dams, mining projects, gas lines, and power lines, all across the planet’ (Laurence 2015, blog text). Without doubt, these increases will also have an enormous social impact.

Secondly, Laurence (2015) mentions another alarming trend, namely, the rise of the Chinese and Brazilian development banks. These banks fund developments worldwide, and according to him, they do not prioritize the environment in the same way as many other infrastructure funders and donors. Laurence’s conclusion is that conservationists and scientists need to redouble their efforts to meet these two challenges at a time in which the world population is rapidly growing.

The labour market
Growth has an unattractive price, and numerous people in the contemporary world must work under extremely bad conditions and even against their will. About 21 million people are working as ‘forced labour’ in the world of today: 26% of them are children under 17 (ILO 2015). In practice this involves the abuse of vulnerability, deception, the restriction of movement, isolation, physical and sexual violence, intimidation and threats, the retention of identity documents, the withholding of wages, debt bondage, abusive working and living conditions, and excessive overtime (ILO 2015). Many organizations call forced labour ‘today’s slavery’.

Much food production involves forced labour, and a great number of people working in food production are children. In 2007 about 70% of the about 218 million child workers worked in agriculture (ILO 2007). Many of these child workers are involved in cocoa production in Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana. They are exposed to hazards such as unsafe tools, toxic chemicals (fertilizers and pesticides), and ergonomically harmful physical labour (ibid.). Even though the problem is worse in poor countries, labour
trafficking and sex trafficking exist all over the world (see, e.g., Ramm & Stolz 2014).

Technology

For many living in rich countries, work done on computers has become more typical than physical work. At this moment, humankind is experiencing what technology researchers Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2015) have called the second machine age. The first was industrialization. Today, digital technology is developing so fast that it is very difficult to predict what will be possible in a few years. However, the technology already exists for instructing robots to do numerous jobs and driving cars without human drivers. Computers, tablets, and mobile phones make people more and more dependent on the steady electronic communication of life online. Professor of political science Jodi Dean calls the ICT society ‘communicative capitalism’ (De Lissovoy 2015, 33). Philosopher Merleau-Ponty should probably have called mobile phones and computer mice prolonged arms for humans. They have become almost like parts of the human body, especially of the brain, but also of social life. Computer technology has even changed humans’ identities, not to mention that it already has redefined human freedom as an unreachable delusion. Instead of slow reflection and deep thought, there are only fragments of information and fluctuating ideas deeply rooted in a fixed, more or less hidden ideology. There has never been such total control over people as today. The control starts from the cradle and lasts until the grave, and it seeps into every corner of human life, even in sleep.

Undoubtedly, much of this development is praiseworthy and will save lives, effort, and time. However, there is also another side of the coin. The new inventions will increase the gap between the poor and the rich, and many people will lose their jobs (Brynjolfsson & McAfee 2015). The situation is a dream for those who are technically talented, hyper smart, and quick. As an example of a fast change with big consequences, Brynjolfsson and McAfee mention the new imaging technology that enables about 400 billion pictures to be shared every year on Facebook. Yet Facebook has very few employees compared to those working at Kodak before its bankruptcy (ibid.).

The development of information technology has, nonetheless, been a great success story in the educational arena, and the companies working in this business make huge profits. However, a great number of the computer-mediated tools for educational purposes still are far from the quality of educational tools that are based on several years of research and practice in the field of education. Many web-based educational programmes of today bring us back to the days of Skinner. On the one hand, this is a success for neoliberal policy because computer-assisted education reduces the teaching staff and saves money - or actually distributes money more unevenly than ever in this field. On the other hand, there are extensive benefits, since computer-based social networks, undoubtedly, have a crucial role in mobilizing grassroots efforts in both local and global sustainability activities.
Industry and minerals

The consequences for workers mining minerals for the mobile phone industry is, thus, a third side of the story. A very great part of the minerals used to produce mobile devices come from conflict areas, not least the Democratic Republic of Congo (this has been addressed by many newspapers around the world and is the theme of the documentary *Blood in the Mobile*). These 'conflict minerals' finance a civil war in Congo that is considered the bloodiest conflict since World War II (Kinniburgh 2014). Since 1996 the conflict has cost the lives of more than 5 million people, and nearly 50 women are estimated to be raped every hour. Ironically only 2% of the Congolese people have access to the Internet (ibid.). Furthermore, an article in World Finance in July 2015 forecast that the Democratic Republic of Congo is entering 'a new era of growth and prosperity' to meet a future as 'one of Africa's economic superpowers' (Trustfull 2015). To achieve this goal, another kind of governance is definitely needed. Furthermore, the responsibility for humans and nature needed for the production of goods stretches far beyond single states. Strong global connections indisputably exist between global economic, social, environmental, and identity issues.

Sustainability and adult education

Since the concept of education for sustainable development was introduced, many educational researchers have claimed that this concept limits education to merely a tool for reaching sustained economic growth (e.g., Huckle & Wals 2015; Sauvé 2002). The whole idea behind the concept has also been criticized for neglecting teachers as agents who reflectively promote both the ethical and intellectual development of students according to what the neoliberal society wants from them (see Jickling & Wals 2008). Likewise, some educators and educational researchers base their teaching on their own ideas of what a sustainable world is and try to market this project to students instead of triggering the students' own critical judgments and joint actions, which stimulate ethical reflections and value discussions. Since no teacher knows how the world will look tomorrow, the best approach would probably be to leave the ends indistinct, without any determined aim. As a consequence, the outcome is left undecided and makes room for all involved in the educational process to formulate their own visions and goals (see Wolff 2007; 2011).
Top-down and bottom-up initiatives

Although educational research interests concerning how to teach about sustainability have changed and expanded, especially during the 1990s and the first decades of the new millennium, there is still a deep-rooted predisposition for normative solutions. Education for sustainability aiming at behavioural change has not only been implemented among young people and in formal educational institutions, but also in all kinds of adult education and in information targeted at adults; thus it is a social policy disseminated through mass media, advertising, and other kinds of informal education. In fact, informal education and advertising targeted at adults have been growing businesses ever since sustainable development and other similar concepts such as 'eco' and 'green' became components of marketing. In this business, the target audience is not only ordinary citizens as private persons but also various professional interest groups and business people from managers to employees; that is, the practice embraces entire companies and workplaces. In the United States, but also elsewhere, educational tools in environmental protection work have emerged that supplement command-and-control and market-based methods (e.g., Dietz & Stern 2002; Leonard 2013). The users of these tools say that they strive for a voluntary change of behaviour, in other words, to generate a change that not is forced by regulatory social methods. However, as Dietz and Stern (2002) state, the influence of market-based methods might be overblown and more of a return to historical models than a new approach.

Market-based methods generally aim at profit creation through influencing behaviour, although the manipulation may be well hidden. Behavioural change due to advertising depends on skilful psychological methods and is, therefore, a high level of secret manipulation (see Schor 2004). The principal educational mission should instead be to work for voluntary change based on a completely new model of being together and jointly shaping more sustainable ways of life and experiences of acting (see also De Lissovoy 2015; Leonard 2013). On the other hand, the question may be less about inventing new models, than about challenging existing solutions, infrastructures, laws, and policies (see Leonard 2013).

The commitment to change is voluntary when it rises from an individual's own motivation and thus relates to that individual's own experiences, knowledge, self-image, and worldview. It is, therefore, wasted time to try to promote change without stimulating self-understanding and the understanding of how individuals and groups interact in the world through friendship, religion, economy, politics, education, and other systems, and without encouraging questioning of the fundamental systems and values on which our society is built (see Wolff 2011). Since it is impossible to make education neutral, the most honest solution is to make ethics and politics tangible. Teachers' and learners' backgrounds, emotions, and perspectives are all relevant in adult educational situations. Together, they shape new ideas and train students to become powerful, reflective, and creative builders of the common future. Yet the most important educational task might not be to define a sustainable future, but to openly discuss and react to what is un-
sustainable and unfair in this very moment and create learning situations that trigger students’ own thoughts, discussions, and will to know (Ibid.). The future world will certainly need citizens with the courage and tools to act in the future, however it looks.

**Environmental problems** are complicated, and their solutions need many types of knowledge, understanding, and skills. These skills relate to ecology, history, sociology, physics, and many other sciences, not least to global politics and the economy. People have known since ancient times that knowledge is not enough to trigger responsibility and that knowledge alone does not promote the will to act. To be able to bridge the gap between knowledge and action, the first step is to become aware that this gap exists and to learn what challenges must be met in closing it. Most demanding is the need to face all the fabrications and prejudices that hide in this gap. A crucial question is also who or what needs to change most to reach a more sustainable course. Is it the individual, or is it neoliberal politics and its strong infrastructures that influence the choices of lifestyles? After this is determined, the goal of changing the actions of adults may be considered unethical (see also Wolff, 2011).

**The initial** human right to freedom is daily threatened in many other ways, since influential powers intrude into homes, schools, and our innermost intimate worlds and interfere with the creation of each person’s self-image. In his book *Consuming life*, Zygmunt Bauman (2007) is concerned about the trend of living a second life online, a life where individuals market and sell themselves like objects to attract recognition (see also Bauman 2000; Illouz 2012).

He describes this as *subjectivity fetishism*, a condition where humans have to steadily seek to be recognized as either extraordinary or as able to live up to a particular standard and thus as normalized. The phenomenon is an example of what Foucault (e.g., 1978; 2000) called ‘governmentality’ – people are governed so thoroughly that the control becomes a part of their mentality. Today everyone is so incorporated into the world economy that nobody knows what her or his own will is in relation to the ‘all-inclusive’ neoliberal system. This situation is a huge challenge for adult education, but new ways are arising of promoting an adult’s own initiatives, passion for learning, and engagement.

**Social movements and social innovations**

Behavioural change is only one educational option. The role of educators changes when they strive to improve students’ joint involvement and participation in authentic environmental activities and critical discourses (e.g., Koskinen & Paloniemi 2009; Lange & Chubb 2009; Wals 2006). Then the educator becomes more like a bridge builder between various social groups.

**The quest for** learning and change is most productive when it is initiated by the target group. There are a growing number of social movements and innovations in the world today. When the interest of private profit dominates public policy discourses, public services are reduced and unemployment increases, leaving the poor as the most vulnerable. Neoliberal policy’s neglect of human needs has, therefore, led to the rise of many social movements and innovations. In these movements and innovations,
Many of the Indian innovations support grassroots groups, for example, the Honey Bee Network, which has initiated over 100,100 ideas over the last 20 years.

Learning takes place through practical joint working, as well as through participation in courses, seminars, study groups, and study trips as well as other learning activities. While learning, the participants develop a critical and creative understanding and find creative strategies for participative change.

These movements or innovations have interests in issues such as sustainability, food and gardening, healthcare, service for the elderly, the sharing of cars or other vehicles, and the organization of mutual help (see, e.g., Manzini 2014). Movements related to environmental issues are targeting animal rights, anti-consumerism, anti-nuclear power, anti-globalization, ecofeminism, environmental justice, fair trade, and many more concerns. Sometimes the issue is about mobilization when a group’s sociocultural identity or autonomy is threatened or when a group’s daily livelihood or justice for that group is in danger because of a dominant political-economic system (Leach 2013). To solve the complex problems of today, collectives have more potential than distinct experts (Heller 2014). These are creative communities acting independently to reach their own goals without waiting for policy changes (Manzini 2014). The goals to be reached by social innovations are many other than economic, but since they generate costs, social innovations have to be matched to existing capital (Tilväxtanalys 2014). Both governmental and private financiers support social movements and innovations.

The difference between a movement and an innovation is not immediately apparent. Therefore, I will try to explain the difference using a few other researchers’ views. Castells (2004, 3) defines a social movement as ‘purposive collective actions whose outcome, in victory as in defeat, transforms the values and institutions of society’. He also adds that movements cannot be classified as good or bad, they are ‘symptoms of who we are’, and ‘avenues of our transformation’ (Castells 2004, 4). Some researchers see movements as innovations, but according to Adrian Smith (2014), who studies politics and the governance of grassroots innovation for sustainability, movements are much broader than innovations. He argues that movements create new social identities and thus contribute to cultural change. Although he thinks that movements in the same way as innovations also generate new ideas, practices, processes, and products, he includes much more in a movement. According to Smith, ‘movements hold power to account at the same time as forming new power bases, they forge new identities and social understandings, develop new public discourses, cement new solidarities and social groupings, confront and resist other inter-
ests, and movements reshape the contexts of activity of other social actors in business and the state, amongst other things' (blog text). An innovation can thus be born in a movement. Manzini (2014, 57) delimits social innovations as 'a process of change emerging from the creative re-combination of existing assets (from social capital to historical heritage, from traditional craftsmanship to accessible advanced technology), the aim of which is to achieve socially recognized goals in a new way'. Smith, Fressoli, and Thomas (2014) talk about grassroots innovation movements in the sense of people and organizations outside local communities (e.g., designers and engineers) engaging the grassroots level in innovation processes, thus encouraging local knowledge and local people in the management of collective innovation activities.

There is actually no fixed definition of a social innovation; definitions of it vary from country to country (Tillväxtanalys 2014). Social innovations can include activities on local, regional, national, and international levels and involve actors that are uncommon in innovative process steered by governments, universities, or companies. The United Kingdom has a long tradition of social innovation, but the many actors define social innovations relatively dissimilarly (ibid. 2014). The definition was also broad in the choices of examples of innovations in the Finnish book One hundred social innovations (Ilkka Taipale, e.g., 2013). The book, published in over 15 languages, has raised great interest since it has emerged. Another country with many social innovations to combat poverty, save biodiversity, and produce food is India (Tillväxtanalys 2014; Govindarajan, 2014). Many of the Indian innovations support grassroots groups, for example, the Honey Bee Network, which has initiated over 100,100 ideas over the last 20 years (Tillväxtanalys 2014).

Even while social innovations are of great interest today, they have always existed in every society (Manzini 2014). In a social innovation, groups and communities create and develop solutions together to address some pressing social need. Social innovation has gained attention because it simultaneously provides grounds for participation and the means to stimulate new ideas that address complex problems. Such problems include environmental challenges that even might require societal and behavioural shifts, but the motivation to shift comes from within the group. The purpose of social innovations is to satisfy human needs in various layers of society. Social innovations relate to empowerment dynamics and give a political character to social movements and bottom-up governance initiatives. They strive to lay the foundations for a fairer, more democratic society. According to Klein (2014), social innovations are simultaneously drivers of transdisciplinary research and guides for collective actions characterized by their special epistemological, ethical, and strategic approaches. These actions must be collective and aim at holistic and sustainable goals (ibid.). Without oversight, the goals can easily turn into something else, for example, profit, but Manzini (2014), with an interest in sustainable design, definitely considers social innovations as a way to move towards sustainability.

**Design contexts**

In the design context, social innovations have become a new paradigm, a totally
new way to consider the present and the future in an unsettled creative process, according to Heller in 2014. ‘The structural order that the industrial age founders of capitalism believed they could impose is a memory. None of the old tricks work as they used to – at least not long enough to matter’ (ibid., 42). Heller also states that it is time for business to react to the reality of the state of the planet and humankind. Instead of designing exclusive artefacts for a rich urban minority, social design results in creative transformative ideas that change lives for those who cannot buy expensive goods. Social innovations, therefore, focus on people, not things, and shape interaction and participation to meet social needs with less impact on the environment than the endless production of stuff. ‘[A social innovation] creates the conditions, relationships, inspiration, engagement and access to wisdom to energize cultures and ignite creative potential – in people’ (ibid.). This means that the designers step out from their traditional studios to work in communities and with organizations to find solutions for real problems. The initiators and facilitators of the innovations function similarly to bottom-up designers, but can be like professional designers facilitating change from top to bottom or as hybrids of bottom-up and top-down design, according to Manzini (2014). The capacity of a designer is to recognize unusual potentials and possibilities in people and situations – to see others as powerful individuals capable of working for change (Heller 2014). Like designers, adult educators will have an important role to play in this respect.

Manzini (2014) recognizes two Italian innovators who act like designers even though their professions are different. They are the psychiatrist Franco Basaglia, who founded the Democratic Psychiatry movement, and Carlo Petrini, who founded the Slow Food movement. Manzini (2014) distinguishes a similar design strategy in both movements: 1) recognizing a real problem and the available social resources, 2) proposing organizational and economic structures that activate these resources, and 3) building an overall vision to unite the local activities. Below I will particularly present the Slow movement and Slow Food.

**Food as social innovation**

The Slow movement emerged as an objection against the fast lifestyle, and the slow philosophy soon gathered followers all over the world and has been adopted in various ways. The movement was started by Carlo Petrini and a group of activists after a demonstration against fast food in Rome in 1986. The aim was to support ‘regional traditions, good food, gastronomic pleasure and a slow pace of life’ (Slow Food 2015). In 1989 the international Slow Food movement had its first meeting in Paris. Today the movement has one million supporters in 150 countries. The Slow Food initiative is an example of a social innovation that grew into a social movement, which is now producing many new social innovations. The slow philosophy has spread gradually to various areas of life, such as slow travelling, slow cities, slow arts, slow sex, slow reading, slow education, slow sciences, and many more. Slowness has become something to strive for in kitchens, hospitals, concert halls, bedrooms, gyms, and schools (Honoré 2004). Slow is shortly about living a good life in a fast world. It is about doing less, but doing it better and at a speed that seems right, that is, in tempo giusto (ibid.).
The basic principle of the Slow Food movement is good food produced fairly and sustainably. To realize this idea, the Slow Food movement's activists see education on many levels as crucial. They call for knowledge and skills in areas such as farming, gardening, and gastronomy (see, e.g., Uusikylä 2012).

Other movements have organized more aggressive actions related to food production and trade, for example, the riot against the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle 1999 and the West Bengal food riots in 2007 - two of the many food riots that have taken place in different countries since the 17th century. Slow Food and riots are very different reactions to the contemporary intricacy of food. The first could be called a 'softer' and the other a 'tougher' protest against the politics, economics, and unfairness of the food process.

Empowerment and commitment

Food is a good example of a complex unsustainability dilemma that cannot be solved by mere individual lifestyle changes. Solely focusing on finding educational tools to change others’ lifestyles ignores the contexts in which people live, including all the various elements that affect their choices, such as cultural features and economic structures (Dimick 2015). The sustainability endeavour needs joint strategies and actions based on multifaceted knowledge and skills to ensure a broader and more efficient influence. Education is definitely necessary to address contemporary sustainability issues. However, the world needs a new epistemology, where knowledge is connected to practices, politics, and the way institutions are formed (Foucault 1998a; 1998b). Understanding is then much more than knowing facts; it is about self-transformation and involves understanding complex relations and causality that may even have historical explanations (Foucault 1997).

Governments have failed to steer world development, according to the Worldwatch Institute’s report in 2014. Instead of officials taking responsibility for issues such as climate change, species loss, and inequity, local people and grassroots movements all over the world have stepped in, according to the report (the result of the climate conference in Paris at the end of 2015 may hopefully increase governmental responsibility). Nevertheless, education and responsible actions are needed on many levels to address the complex dilemmas of today. All those who are willing to step up and act in favour of a more vital and equal sustainable present and future need education, encouragement, and empowerment to activate their commitment. Facing the educational needs of today is a big challenge that is urgent and cannot be delayed.

Today more and more researchers stress that education for sustainable development has neglected the fact that the education takes place in a neoliberal society with aims that are in contradiction with the idea of sustainability (e.g., Dimick, 2015; Huckle & Wals 2015; Bessant, Robinson & Ormored 2015). Addressing individuals and demanding more sustainable actions from them as if they were individualistic entrepreneurs is a distinctly neoliberal approach. It can even be considered a contradiction that those individuals are obliged to repair the collective misdeeds. Individuals are thus considered guilty in a paradoxically complex social situation.
In actuality, the entire society is built on an unrealistic steady growth paradigm that must be reconsidered. The growth spiral 'producing more – consuming more – creating more work' is not truthful and has never been, since the resources are not endless. An improved Gross National Product is actually a sustainability failure.

It is fruitless to try to teach people about sustainability if the roots of the unsustainability problems are simultaneously neglected. The history, the culture of societies (both local and global), politics, and economics on many levels make people what they are in a fast reshaping process day after day. Today the common task is to work towards new models of being together and to mutually shape more sustainable ways of life and experiences of acting (see also De Lissovoy 2015). Instead of telling others how to act sustainably and make them feel guilty for not fulfilling the aim of sustainability, the entire sustainability quest needs to be seen as a process involving people who actively take a stand themselves, are jointly creative, and search for concrete utopias. Humans are social and need to gain recognition from their fellows to grow as persons, and therefore, change is much easier to achieve if it happens collectively and spontaneously.

Conclusion

The emerging social movements and innovations are promising and strong counter forces confronting the prospects of neoliberalism; these forces can become still stronger through education. The empowerment of activists in social movements and innovations takes place through a joint learning experience that builds on the understanding of how people in different parts of the world have struggled for a better life for themselves and their offspring. Additionally, an understanding of the complexity of the present situation and its power structures reveals unsustainable and unfair structures and strategies and creates hope for the future (see also De Lissovoy 2015; Klein 2013). What is missing in contemporary sustainability education is not information or more individual actions, but a collective engagement in change that is based on commitment and a joint vision of the future (Leonard 2013).

In this moment, in order to survive, we must shift to a different social logic, a different mode of being, and a different history (De Lissovoy 2015). Hopeful directions for such a transition are presently emerging in the new global movement for democracy, social justice, decolonization, and sustainability, as well as in collective uprisings in the terrain of education.
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