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Abstract: Humans have always lived in eras of more or less obvious crises and risks. When Ulrich Beck wrote about the risk society in 1986, he talked about risks as invisibility lacking spatial and temporal boundaries. The environmental risks of the modern society may often appear diffuse, even if, for example, the climate change dilemma has progressively become noticeable. However, this year, people on Earth have had to face a most obvious risk. The effects of Covid-19 have reached such proportions that the human world probably will never be the same again. However, the extent of jeopardies is not similar for all world inhabitants, neither are the tools to handle the risks. To face the threat and learn from it, humans need to change manners on many levels and in many social and physical areas. Some of the main questions to reflect on and discuss in this feature issue of *Sustainability* are: What will the most urgent role of sustainability education be now and in the future? What kind of teaching, learning and educational policies are most relevant? What issues are most crucial in sustainability education research?

1. Introduction

In *The Risk Society*, Beck claims that risks in the *second modernity* society are not distributed according to wealth or social positions; they hit the entire society. However, he also argues that the ability to prevent risks depends on access to knowledge and information. Yet, what he meant with risks was not real catastrophes, but rather believed expectation of catastrophes [1]. The risk of Covid-19 has become a real jeopardy and it has radically changed the world. For people daily struggling with insecurity, poverty and hunger, this is only one more obstacle in their life, while for others it has become the core issue. Sustainability elements became more obvious when the business did not go on as usual, but an unexpected break occurred. Covid-19 has taught even those who had not experienced it so obviously before that human life is vulnerable. Nature is unpredictable, and in such an extreme sudden situation, you cannot trust any institutions anymore. International as well as national politics have reacted in impulsive and random ways. The economy has started to sway uncertainly, and science has not had any fast remedy to offer. In a world that in general highly values experts, there is suddenly a lack of expertise. Even if a pandemic has been a possible scenario and risk for a long time, there were not enough concrete plans available when it hit the world. In addition, there was no help found upon looking back. All of a sudden, social wellbeing challenged individual freedom. Not even basic human elements like nutrition and a network of social relations are self-evident anymore. Every step outside one's home raises the questions of who it is safe to meet, where one is allowed to go, how close to another human being is it wise to step. The risky situation causes stress and insecurity. Often, there is no one to trust than oneself and one's own common sense. Many persons have become dependent on electronic devices for their work, studies and relationships. Simultaneously, it has become possible for

authorities in many countries to monitor people's lives through their smartphones and other digital tools. Thus, human lives became more fragile and open for manipulation.

Yet nature suffers less, when humans are more immobile, and working and consuming less. Changes that it was not possible to agree on through decades of repeated negotiations about emissions and how to decrease climate change have started to take shape in a very short time span. However, the social consequences of Covid-19 are huge in many places in the world. Like many other things, a catastrophe hits unequally. The situation has made many people consider the need for a changed route towards a more sustainable lifestyle, which consumes less resources and cares for both present and future generations. In such a change, education has an important role to play.

2. Sustainability, Sustainable Development and Change

The concept of sustainability indicates a long-term goal towards a more sustainable world, whereas sustainable development implies the processes on the road to this goal [2]. The visionary concept of sustainability emerged from multiple sources in the 1960s [3]. The idea of a sustainable development became one of the driving forces of world history at the end of the 20th century [4]. The reason for its occurrence as a new paradigm was the failure of fair economic growth and an increasing awareness of a forthcoming ecological crisis. Soon, the concept became a buzzword [4] and its implication illusive [5]. According to Serge Latouche, sustainable development is an oxymoron, and he sees the word development as especially problematic [6]. In addition, different stakeholders have their own ideas of what the concepts of sustainable development and sustainability mean, and about how to promote sustainable activities. The quest for sustainability provokes core human values with an influence on most areas of human life. Sustainable development is often illustrated as a division in the three dimensions, ecological, economic and social, but this does not necessarily make the concept easier to grasp but may instead confuse, since the dimensions are so strongly interconnected. There are also spokespersons for other views that regard this division as peculiar and passé.

Not only has the general idea of sustainability met a lot of critique, so have also the attempts to solve the unsustainability problems by means of large world summits and strategies like Agenda 21, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and Agenda 2030 with its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In 1999, Sullivan accused the Brundtland Commission of allowing the rich part of the world "to have our cake and eat it too" [7] (p. 113). According to Carant [8], the MDGs and SDGs embody competing values, representations and problem-solution frames that challenge and resist the dominant economic discourses. Nevertheless, Agenda 2030 has its strengths and is historical for including the first internationally agreed development goal to reduce economic inequality [9]. However, the problem is not only about finding agreements and writing strategies; it is chiefly about how to make the agendas real.

Many researchers have started to call our time the Anthropocene, implying that humans live in a new geologic epoch, in which humans have started to alter the biological, physical and chemical conditions of the Earth. Clive Hamilton sees a problem in humans using autonomy without responsibility [10]. He asks for another attitude towards nature built on an understanding of human power and responsibility. He also asks for a cognitive leap, a shift from merely focusing on humans and human culture to a focus on the earth's systems and how humans influence these systems. He actually wants humans to learn to live in this world as it is, instead of nourishing egoistical dreams.

After the millennium shift, many voices have asked for a paradigm alteration. A total worldwide revision is not easy: even if the paradigm is the foundation, it has to be practicable. However, in a tricky situation, there are many trials to find a mending agenda when the current route appears unbearable.

> "Planet earth is our lifeboat. And yet earth is becoming a planet of the shipwrecked. Those with power loot the earth and seas, leaving the looted to drown without lifeboats. Islands of preposterous wealth are created in the midst of rising seas of destitution, golf courses in a planet of slums. Extreme poverty and inequality, climate and ecosystem disaster, the erosion of politics and democracy – we are heading towards a bleak future" [11] (p. vii)

The cynical quotation above is from the first paragraph in Giorgos Kallis' book *Degrowth*, where he calls for an exit from existing economic theories and a mobilization of new forms of knowledge [11]. *Degrowth* is an interdisciplinary dialog with multiple sources of knowledge, cultures and perspectives, and implies that economics would not be the core of political action anymore. The spokespersons for degrowth are critical to colonial heritage and the view of life, and want to introduce a Southern perspective challenging the Western ideas of a steady development [11]. Striving towards degrowth is thus not the same as, but an alternative to, sustainable development. It is more a critique of the development idea than a critique of the call for sustainability.

In the sustainability discussion, the role of education has often been the rescuer, with a mission to change both individuals and the society. This is undoubtedly an overestimation of the role of education on individual level as well as of its role in society. Neither educators nor schools are free agents in society. Both individuals and institutions are deeply included in their own societies, and values develop in distinct discursive practices. A discourse produces knowledge related to the broader episteme (structure of knowledge) of a specific historical period. The power within a social order produces discourses and sets the rules and categories that legitimate the truth [12]. In every particular educational situation, in which teachers decide on the aims, methods, timetables and other teaching-related factors, they are parts of an often-neglected complexity of hidden power constellations [5].

Conflicting interests cause contradictions and complicated circumstances that make sustainability difficult to address effectively in education. Gilding writes a blog text about Covid-19 and sustainability, and he argues that this pandemic is not any single black swan, but one of many predictable events [13]. Others are climate change, social and economic inequality, ocean and eco-system collapse, mass refugees mobility, etc. The question is how it is possible to initiate a transformation on both individual and collective levels, since both are driven by the global and national economy as well as politics.

3. Covid-19 and Sustainability

On the 17 March 2020, Thomas L. Friedman wrote a column in the *New York Times* about what he calls a new historical divide: before and after the Corona virus emerged [14]. Three days later, Yuval Noah Harari stated in the *Financial Times*: "Yes, the storm will pass, humankind will survive, most of us will still be alive—but we will inhabit a different world." [15]. What kind of world this is, is up to all of us to decide, but especially the leaders we voted for. In UN News, UN Secretary General António Guterres paralleled the threats of Covid-19 with climate change [16]. He requested brave visions and collaborative leadership: "As we recover, we must build a better future for all," he says [16]. It is worth remembering that leadership can also rise from below, from the grassroots, and this is what often increasingly happens today.

According to Harari, humankind will face two particular choices [15]. The first is between totalitarian surveillance and citizen empowerment, and the second is between nationalist isolation and global solidarity. In addition, I want to emphasize a third choice, between giving nature back its position as the foundation of human life or continuing the exploitation of nature resources. COVID-19 has begun a transformation on the world. "We cannot afford to miss the momentum created by the changes now taking place to decisively tackle biodiversity loss, and the related climate change crisis", was IUCN Acting Director General Grethel Aguilar's statement for the World Environment Day, 5 May [17]. She also declares that it is time for humans to recognize the crucial link between a healthy planet and healthy people. Where all these choices will end up also strongly relates to education.

The Coronavirus disease, Covid-19, pandemic has been a blessing for nature, at least temporarily, since NO_2 emissions have decreased remarkably worldwide [18]. This is mainly due to reduced industrial activities and transports. However, global inequalities will deepen, and worsen already horrible poverty levels, and millions of people will fall back into poverty, since the pandemic attacks societies at their core [19]. Even if the pandemic affects all segments of the population, it is especially damaging to the most vulnerable groups of the world population, like the poor, the old, refugees and indigenous people. This makes the achievement of sustainability still more urgent than before

Covid-19 [19]. The researchers Sabin Bieri, Thomas Breu, Andreas Heinimann and Peter Messerli declare in a blog on the 15th May: "We know enough, and the corona-virus crises has shown how new alliances of decision making can emerge. The future is now" [20]. This means that the present time is the time to act and make a change.

4. Sustainability Education after Covid-19

Since the 1970s, there has been a request for change in sustainability education that is a request for learning aiming at transformed attitudes and conducts. Transformative learning is a core concept in the sustainability education debate, but transformative attempts are difficult and may even be risky [21]. It is undoubtedly an urgent request for changes on a social level, but if transformation becomes the same as purposefully changing other peoples' attitudes, which has often been presented as a necessary aim of education for sustainable development, education might turn into behavioral change and a kind of indoctrination.

> *"It is not self-evident that it is necessarily right to try to purposefully change another person's behavior, no matter how urgent the purpose might appear. Both teachers and researchers have to be aware of that they might have to make a choice between self-determination and indoctrination."* [5] (p. 99)

In sustainability education, deep reflections on aims and epistemology are of greatest importance, but so are also the careful choice of methods, equipment and technology. They all relate to ethics. In the Covid-19 situation, many in the field of education see digital learning as the solution. However, there is a big risk that this leads to a still bigger gap between winners and losers on the global arena, as well as among students. It will also accumulate money to businesses with an already extremely strong economy. Digital learning is dependent on technical devises, and so-called 'conflict minerals' (tin, tungsten, tantalum and gold, 3TG) [22,23], and the possibility of companies determining the origin of these minerals is minor [24]. Technical devises also become problematic electronic waste, with hazardous health consequences for the so-called e-waste scavengers in poor countries that agree to receive the used e-waste [25]. The mining of the conflict minerals, also called 'blood minerals', the production of tablets, smart phones and computers, as well as a steady waste disposal, is thus a risky business that affects people in countries with corrupt infrastructures, and even causes armed conflicts and human rights abuses [26]. For example, the cruel civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo relates to the mining of conflict minerals [24,26]. These activities are unethical, and therefore problematic for both nature and people, and a threat to human rights and global equality. Even if many people have become dependent on online learning and working by means of digital devises, no one can pretend that this is a very sustainable solution. The digital devices save resources and time. They decrease the need to travel (mainly in the rich countries), but they have a dirty backside and do not promote sustainability in the present international legislation situation.

5. Conclusions

In the contemporary Covid-19 crises, one might ask: What is the basic role of education? Maybe the entire idea about education needs a transformation. As long as there is an illusion about education, including sustainability education, as neutral and unpolitical without connections to economic interests, nothing will ever change. Education needs to raise doubts about questions like the immanent idea about what education is, what it means to be human, and what a just global society is. How education research in itself can become critical and itself make a change and promote societal change, is another side of the sustainability education quandaries. Still, a question is what the most urgent focuses might be in education policy. Finally, education must leave the door open and make it possible to question the entire idea of sustainable development as the right trail, and inspire the students of today and tomorrow to create new visions and paradigms to make this world a better place.

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