

Education and sustainable development in Commonwealth small states

Matthew Hiebert

Sustainable development is a concept with an inherent tension. If we look at development as being linked to growth, as we often do, and if we recognise our planet as a closed system, which we often fail to, then the tension becomes evident – within a closed system, growth can't be sustained indefinitely. Inhabitants of small island states have known this for a long time, and they developed cultural and economic systems predicated on assumptions other than growth – or they perished. While islands are not entirely closed systems, there is an immediacy to the proposition that resources are limited, which we humans often fail to perceive on the global scale. While many of us have become increasingly attuned to the effects of climate change and environmental degradation in our own backyards, these impacts do not seem closely linked to our daily lives or our economic behaviour. Nowhere is the link clearer than in small island developing states.

The 'Islands of Inspiration' study

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are strongly represented in the Commonwealth, and while they are not among the key contributors of greenhouse gases or other environmental hazards, they are among the most vulnerable nations to the impacts of climate change. In 2009, Commonwealth ministers requested the Commonwealth Secretariat 'prioritise the work to take account of global trends', including 'education for sustainable development [ESD], with particular emphasis on climate change'. Education is seen as having a particularly important role in fostering a transition to more sustainable societies, and in 2012 the Commonwealth Secretariat funded a study of ESD implementation across ten Commonwealth SIDS.¹

The study conceptualised sustainability as being in large part a cultural issue. Accordingly, education for sustainability cannot proceed on the deficit-filling conception of learning (what Freire called the banking model). In fact, effective ESD has many of the characteristics of socialisation, not just education. It must consider students' deeper learning, and the development of their assumptions and dispositions, because we are interested in changing thinking and behaviour, not just transmitting knowledge and skills. The study analysed best practices and gaps in ESD across the ten countries in terms of availability and quality, as well as the management and co-ordination of related initiatives. Some of these countries, such as Nauru, are indeed small in terms of land mass. Some of them have, literally, everything to lose. What is at stake is the very ground under their feet.

It may not be surprising, then, that many of these countries have made a profound commitment to sustainability. They are striving to



Children in the Maldives learn about climate change adaptation (with local NGO Bluepeace)

demonstrate leadership, to show what can be done and to stand with integrity. The study, entitled 'Islands of Inspiration', identified a wealth of innovative ESD programmes across the Caribbean, Pacific and AIMS (Africa, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean and South China Sea) regions. These initiatives spanned formal, non-formal and higher education systems, and ranged from the establishment of high level policies to networks of institutions, to specialised training programmes, as well as much more subtle approaches aimed at revitalising traditional cultural practices which were inherently sustainable. Perhaps the most striking feature of the findings was the sheer breadth of approaches.

Mauritius

In a number of cases, there are over-arching programmes stemming from the highest levels of government. Mauritius, for example, is endeavouring to reorient its country around the concept of sustainability under the auspices of its programme, 'Maurice Ile Durable'. Through this process a number of fundamental educational policies are being reconsidered, with a working group created specifically to formulate proposals and targeted action plans to transform the current education system

into a true embodiment of ESD. This working group has established a vision grounded in the local context, which elaborates four sub-themes:

1. Empowerment of citizens
2. Environment education
3. Education for sustainable development
4. Public health education

A wide range of school-based initiatives are also being introduced, including an 'eco-school' concept that will give students direct experience 'doing' sustainability. This is not merely education about sustainability – this is education in, and for, sustainability. And it's an important distinction.

Guyana

Along similar lines, in Guyana all branches of government have begun working in relation to the country's Low Carbon Development Strategy. Moreover, the country benefits from transnational programmes such as the Guiana Shield Initiative, which is looking at protecting vast expanses of natural resources based on the global importance of the 'ecosystems services' they deliver to support measures like carbon sequestration. An important element in both cases is the linkage being made between environmental sustainability and economic integrity. Increasingly, these are being seen as complementary.

While these initiatives sound like top-down approaches, there is also ample evidence of grass roots or bottom-up activity. In Guyana, for instance, the Bina Hill Institute has been working in rural areas with indigenous populations to deliver environmental education and skills training for employability in environment-related fields. Bina Hill works in association with the Iwokrama International Centre for Rainforest Conservation and Development, which has advocated the idea of an 'environmental leadership ladder', providing not only training but also opportunities, creating space and connections for emerging leaders to continually expand their knowledge, skills and impact.

The Pacific

Meanwhile, in the Pacific there have been a number of initiatives that have worked to tackle the economics of sustainable development through more culture-oriented approaches based on livelihoods. Programmes like the Pacific Regional Initiative for the Delivery of basic Education (PRIDE) project in Nauru have worked successfully to reconnect children and youth with traditional cultural constructs, which are infused with principles of sustainability and well-being, as a counter-current to the growth-addicted paradigm of modern industrialism. At the time of implementation, the country was facing serious economic hardship and there was a need for a return to traditional skills to supplement the income of families who had previously worked in the phosphate industry. There was genuine concern that such traditional life skills had been lost. Working from locally identified needs, a team of project personnel and classroom teachers developed culturally appropriate methodologies in order to seek out local elders and access traditional knowledge. This process involved consideration of Nauruan ethics, and of traditional

knowledge systems and deeply held beliefs about human relationships to the local environment, in order to begin documenting skills related to earning a livelihood from the land and ocean. These skills, along with other more contemporary skills such as handicraft-making and bicycle repair, were then woven into teaching units for introduction into schools.

While conventional K-12 education systems are notoriously slow to change, there has been a good display of responsiveness on the part of post-secondary institutions. A number of universities are offering programmes that focus on priority areas for sustainable development. Predictably, the most common examples come from programmes in environmental science, or tourism and leisure, supplying an important economic niche with graduates who have a grounding in principles of conservation and sustainable resource management. One example of a university aspiring to go beyond this is the University of the South Pacific (USP). In the humanities, USP is implementing a project aimed at enhancing ESD opportunities in a variety of fields through innovative curriculum development and programme delivery methods. The project addresses a number of ESD priority areas, and has led to the establishment of many new programmes, concentrations and diploma options. Through these programmes, it is hoped that new and expanding sustainability-oriented sectors of the economy will continue to grow.

The Caribbean

In the Caribbean, the important recognition has been made that effective ESD must involve more than programmes, and must also consider the sustainability of educational institutions themselves. The Mainstreaming Environmental Sustainability in Caribbean Universities (MESCA) initiative has been working to support and monitor the integration of sustainability into higher education, not just as subject matter but as an operating principle for the universities themselves. Mainstreaming sustainability campus-wide has the potential to impact graduates of all programmes and not just those dealing explicitly with sustainability.

Identifying and plugging the gaps

While these initiatives are collectively very exciting in terms of their potential contribution to an economic shift towards sustainability, the study also identified some important gaps in this area. Unemployment rates remain high across many SIDS, and are of particular concern with regards to youth. Effective ESD must consider not only the inculcation of social and environmental values through education, but also the economic participation of working-age students and graduates. While there is a lot of activity under way linking education to sustainability, and a good deal being done in an effort to reorient economies towards sustainability, the conventional approaches linking education and economic participation are not, as yet, incorporating the corresponding principles of sustainability. Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and entrepreneurship training are two of the relevant areas where significant opportunity remains.

Business practices are beginning to shift. Terms like corporate social responsibility (CSR) are entering common usage, and relatively new concepts like the 'triple bottom line' and 'social enterprises' are becoming increasingly well known. Certain industries have begun

incorporating their own certification standards, such as the LEED (Local Economic and Employment Development) programme in the construction industry. In this context, one would expect to see a corresponding reorientation in market-driven programmes like TVET and entrepreneurship training. However, this orientation has not yet come about.

Many SIDS have well-established TVET programmes, and entrepreneurship training is a staple of many civil society organisations (CSOs) involved in supporting economic development in SIDS. However, the study failed to identify any interventions, in any of the ten target countries, working concertedly to incorporate sustainability into either of these fields. To the contrary, while education in general may be slow to change, the TVET field appears to have been particularly slow in responding to issues of sustainability and climate change. While there have been a number of international symposiums in recent years making reference to ESD through TVET, a review of papers and presentations available online, including those from several of the study's focus countries, suggests that the emphasis remains far more on the quality of TVET programmes in general than any substantive emphasis on addressing sustainability. TVET programmes appear to remain, largely, grounded in the era of industrialisation, and their modernisation has mainly meant an increase in technical sophistication and modernisation of administration, rather than a response to pressing environmental or social issues.

The field of entrepreneurship training, similarly, is ripe for change. While discussion in business circles increasingly includes reference to relatively new concepts like social enterprises and 'benefit corporations', entrepreneurship training appears to have done little to incorporate the corresponding vocabulary of social or environmental entrepreneurship. As a point of reference, in recent years, 20 US states have adopted benefit corporation legislation, creating a new form of legal status for businesses that are working to deliver more than just profit. Such changes have, in turn, spurred an interest in related 'impact investment', as well as incubator initiatives that offer seed funding and technical assistance for social entrepreneurs. And yet entrepreneurship training, across the countries surveyed, remains grounded in traditional approaches to doing business.

The donor community has an important role to play in filling these gaps. In interviews with dozens of CSOs in the ten countries, one of the recurring themes was the importance of funding. Many lamented the shifting tides of donor funding – focused one year on biodiversity, the next year on climate change, and the following on adaptation and disaster preparedness – leading to a sense of insecurity, as well as instability that undermines the best intentions of all parties. Most of the organisations implementing ESD programmes are heavily reliant on outside funding, either directly from donors or from local governments, and their programming is therefore constrained by the priorities set by the donors. On the other hand, donor funding serves an important role in drawing

attention to emergent issues, and incentivising work to address those issues. It is in this sense that the community might support a shift towards employment and entrepreneurship training that prioritises sustainability. In SIDS, where sustainability is increasingly prominent as a national priority, there is excellent opportunity for the formation of new partnerships that bring together education and economic participation, with sustainability as a common value.

Endnote

- 1 Hiebert, M. (2012). *Islands of Inspiration: Education for sustainable development in small states*. London: Commonwealth Secretariat.

Further reading

ACCU-UNESCO Centre of Excellence, University of the South Pacific (<http://www.usp.ac.fj/index.php?id=9846>)

Benefit Corporations and Social Entrepreneurship (<http://www.bcorporation.net>)

'Bridging the Gap Between Policy and Practice in Education for Sustainable Development' (presentation to 18th CCEM, Mauritius 2012) <http://www.aroundsquare.com/home/2012/8/30/islands-of-inspiration.html>

Guiana Shield Facility (2011). Retrieved 2 June 2012 from <http://www.uncsd2012.org/content/documents/414GSF%20info%20for%20Rio20.pdf>

Holung, J. (2011). 'Report of the audit: Mainstreaming environment and sustainability in Caribbean universities'. Obtained from UNEP Panama Office.

Impact Investing (<http://giirs.org>)

Institute of Education, USP. (2010). 'PRIDE end-of-project completion review report: Nauru case study'. Obtained from the Institute of Education, University of the South Pacific.

Iwokrama International Centre for Rainforest Conservation and Development, Guyana (<http://www.iwokrama.org>)

Low Carbon Development Strategy, Guyana (<http://www.lcds.gov.gy>)

Maurice Ile Durable (MID, Mauritius) Information available at: <http://www.uom.ac.mu/sites/mid/files/resources/AnalysisandSynthesisReport.pdf>

MATTHEW HIEBERT (matt@aroundsquare.com) is an education specialist with Agriteam Canada Consulting, and an associate faculty member at Royal Roads University. He has international experience with education management, teacher training, curriculum development and assessment systems. Alongside his education work, Hiebert also develops and distributes creativity-oriented sustainably manufactured wooden toys. His MA research was on education for sustainability in western China. He is currently a doctoral candidate at the University of Calgary, where he is researching the deeper role of education in sustainable development and democratisation.