

Education for sustainable development: examples from Commonwealth small states

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Introduction

Sustainable development is fast becoming a forerunner in educational policy planning across the globe. It can be seen in university course offerings, institutional vision statements, academic conference proceedings and perhaps most notably as a feature of the post-2015 development planning process. As global citizens, many of us see the need to change the trajectory of current patterns of consumption and development that threaten our viability, and indeed, in the case of some Commonwealth small states, the very existence of a homeland. The Commonwealth Secretariat has thus prioritised work in the areas of sustainable development (SD) and education for sustainable development (ESD), resulting in a wealth of information on integrating SD into policy approaches (Strachan and Vigilance, 2011), partnerships (Springer and Roberts, 2011), international investment agreements (VanDuzer, Simons and Mayeda, 2013), and in attending to environmental and natural resource challenges faced by small states (Nath, Roberts and Madhoo, 2010).

Sustainable development is indeed a slippery and multi-dimensional topic. While understandings of 'what is' sustainable development are becoming clearer, considerable work remains to be done in grappling with the 'stuff' that is SD; what does it consist of, and how can ESD be implemented to the benefit of students, schools and universities, communities, countries and ultimately the wider world? In an effort to understand what SD and ESD are, we often find ourselves seeking examples of how they have been successfully implemented elsewhere. There have been a number of ESD initiatives in Commonwealth small states from which others can learn, particularly within the environmental aspect of sustainable development. Recent work commissioned by the Commonwealth provides some much-needed insight into the design and delivery of ESD as reported in the recent study carried out by Hiebert (2012).

At the Education in Small States Research Group (www.smallstates.net) at the University of Bristol, UK, we seek to highlight ways in which others can learn from the experiences of small states. This specialist research group is located within the Research Centre for International and Comparative Studies (ICS) at the Graduate School of Education. The small states research group celebrates its 20th anniversary in 2014 and, since its inception, has been led by Professor Michael Crossley. Throughout this period, we have worked in partnership with researchers within and from many Commonwealth small states – often in collaboration with colleagues within the Commonwealth Secretariat. In doing so, we have consistently applied the comparative dimension of educational

studies, not only to learn lessons from other contexts, but to caution against simplistic policy borrowing. Central to this message is the need to avoid the pitfalls of uncritical international policy transfer (Crossley and Watson, 2009; Crossley, 2010). With this in mind, our recent work, conducted with partners across small states worldwide, has sought to identify examples of ESD in small island developing states (SIDS) from which other states, both small and large, can learn (Crossley and Sprague, 2013). Like others (Sem, 2007; Nath, Roberts and Madhoo, 2010), we argue that small states are at the sharp end in experiencing the impact of climate change and global recession. In this moment of global urgency, much insight can be found from small states' strong and varied experiences with ESD.

Examples of ESD initiatives

In boxes 1, 2 and 3, we draw attention to material from three key resources that focus upon recent developments in small states. Further examples and analysis can be found in a recent

Box 1

Infusing sustainable development within the curriculum in Tonga and Solomon Islands

In a relatively ambitious approach spread over the past eight years, Tonga has undertaken a broad review of its education sector, leading to the development of the Lakalaka Policy Framework, which foregrounds considerations of culture and progress; a teacher professional development plan, which makes reference to sustainability; and perhaps most notably, a new curriculum framework entitled Quality Education for a Sustainable Future, which places considerable emphasis on ESD.

An example from Solomon Islands is somewhat more representative of how ESD is being incorporated into reform efforts. In 2008, the country undertook a curriculum review, resulting in a national curriculum statement which calls for an outcomes-based approach to curriculum development across the system, while also highlighting the importance of values and attitudes that will be useful in later life. The statement identifies environmental and health education as guiding principles and highlights ethics and citizenship as key learning outcomes for the development of curriculum at all levels.

Source: Hiebert, 2012, Islands of Inspiration, p.11, published by the Commonwealth Secretariat

International Journal of Educational Development article (Crossley and Sprague, 2013), which discusses in greater detail the history of SD, ESD and the strategic role that SIDS have played, and continue to play, in this area.

The policy-makers, teachers, community leaders and participants in the three ESD initiatives in small states have valuable insights to offer schools, universities and community groups in other contexts. One way of sharing these insights is through contributions to the international literature on ESD. The Commonwealth has done much to develop resources about SD and ESD in small states and this serves as valuable material for member states and for others elsewhere. The University of the South Pacific has also developed a series of useful publications on ESD. Produced by the School of Education and the Asia/Pacific Cultural Centre for UNESCO (ACCU) at the University of the South Pacific, these texts offer further

insights and material for use within and beyond this region. The first volume in the series, titled *Continuity and Survival in the Pacific* (Nabobo-Baba et al., 2007), focuses upon how a range of 'insiders articulate their realities' and identifies regional educational challenges and possibilities. The second volume, *Pacific Stories of Sustainable Living* (Koya et al., 2010), engages with ESD through the innovative use of traditional stories and art derived from a variety of indigenous knowledge systems in the Pacific, while the third (Furivai, 2009) serves as an annotated bibliography of further resources.

Through such literature-based contributions, not only can practical experiences and insights of ESD be shared, they can also add to the much-needed theoretical debates surrounding ESD. We cannot afford for ESD to become limited to international policy rhetoric or be minimised to the level of tokenistic action. ESD is not a

Box 2

Mainstreaming ESD in higher education at the University of the South Pacific

The University of the South Pacific is one of five partners in the Asia/Pacific Cultural Centre of UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development Project (ACCU-ESD). As such, it has been selected as a Centre of Excellence and has undertaken a project titled 'Mainstreaming ESD at USP to Enhance Education based Capacity Building for Sustainable Development in the Pacific Island Countries'. Building upon their well-developed distance and flexible learning (DFL) framework, USP has initiated this three-pronged project, one area being Sustainability Education:

Given the importance of capacity building for the sustainable management of environment and natural resources in the Pacific Island region, USP has been offering a number of courses and Programs in a variety of fields. While these training programs are of excellent quality, most of them are highly disciplinary in nature and can be pursued only by those with the necessary pre-requisite. Courses with multi (trans) – disciplinary and cross-cutting foci are relatively few. At present, most of the environment courses at the postgraduate level are offered through on-campus teaching, restricting their regional access. There is thus an urgent need for additional new courses and programs in areas relevant for environment and SD at USP.

Bearing this in mind, it is proposed that a substantial value addition be made to the existing training programs and those in the pipeline. The following five focal areas have been identified, mainly focusing on postgraduate training, an area where the outputs are expected to make a direct contribution to national level sustainable development initiatives: Postgraduate Diploma in Sustainable Islands and Oceans Development (PGD SIOD); Postgraduate Diploma in Environmental Sciences; New Master of Laws (Environmental Law); Interactive Multimedia System: i-Browser; Resource Material Preparation.

Source: ACCU: Asia/Pacific Cultural Centre for UNESCO, 2007; http://www.accu.or.jp/esd/projects/coe/coe01_fiji.shtml

Box 3

The Sandwatch Foundation

Sandwatch is a volunteer network of schools (students, teachers and principals), youth groups, non-governmental and community-based organizations working together to monitor and enhance their beach environments. The network is coordinated by the Sandwatch Foundation, a non-profit organization. It seeks to modify the lifestyle and habits of children, youth and adults on a community-wide basis and to develop awareness of the fragile nature of the marine and coastal environment and the need to use it wisely. It is an educational process through which school students and community members learn and work together to scientifically monitor their beach environments, so as to critically evaluate the problems and conflicts, and then to develop and implement sustainable activities to address these issues.

Sandwatch started in the Caribbean in 1999, and has become an international activity involving islands as far apart as Cook Islands in the Pacific, Seychelles in the Indian Ocean, and The Bahamas in the Caribbean, as well as countries in Europe, Africa, Asia and South America. Sandwatch presents an opportunity for people and ecosystems to respond to climate variability and climate change. Beaches are among the ecosystems at risk as they face rising sea levels and more intense storms. Through Sandwatch, people can contribute to building ecosystem resilience and adapting to climate change. Sandwatch is a practical example of education for sustainable development and seeks to empower people of all ages to assume responsibility for creating and enjoying a sustainable future. In particular, it develops skills relating to critical thinking and conflict resolution, and instils a sense of caring for beaches and the environment. Sandwatch also contributes to the further implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States.

Source: Sandwatch Foundation, 2011; <http://www.sandwatch.ca>

bandage, a quick fix or simply an educational add-on. As the Commonwealth has already pointed out, 'ESD is not a new initiative to be undertaken on top of everything else, but rather, a set of principles that can be interwoven into existing initiatives and programmes to add value to their delivery' (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2013: 1).

Beyond the sharing of experience, there is growing evidence that education groups within larger states are beginning to learn from and collaborate with small states in order to benefit from their unique knowledge and experience with climate change adaptation and associated ESD activities. Bodies like our own Education in Small States Research Group are increasingly facilitating these types of exchange. Similarly, other organisations based in the southwest of the UK have begun to pioneer collaboration with small island locations on the topic of ESD. Sazani Associates, an international not-for-profit research and development organisation in Wales, undertakes teacher exchange programmes between Wales and Zanzibar, allowing secondary school teachers to share lessons and the experience of teaching ESD in formal and non-formal settings. The multi-disciplinary Cabot Institute, based at the University of Bristol, 'carries out fundamental and responsive research on risks and uncertainty in a changing environment' (Cabot Institute, 2013). This is currently stimulating the development of connections with researchers and teachers at the University of the South Pacific with the aim of strengthening ESD offerings at both institutions.

A sustainable future

At the level of international debate, it is hoped that Commonwealth small states will make a strong contribution to the ongoing post-2015 development planning with particular regard to sustainable development and education for sustainable development. Eight SIDS are uniquely poised to do so through their participation in the UN-led Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals. When the impact of climate change and global financial downturn is increasingly urgent, let us continue to listen, to seek knowledge from and to strengthen linkages between small and large states in order to better learn from the distinctive experiences and perspectives of those who are at the sharp end of the consequences of global climate change. The Commonwealth continues to have a key role to play in this vital exchange and in promoting the experiences of small states in the area of ESD for the future benefit of small and large states alike.

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