

Getting bigger or getting better?

Education for sustainable development is the key

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The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development begins with a strong statement: "Eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development." [1] The point of this paper is to explain why, as reasonable as it may seem, this assertion can lead to some misunderstanding, as different experts have mentioned for different reasons.

Confusing development with growth

First, as Efosa Ojomo recently summarized, "because poverty almost always shows itself as a lack of resources in poor communities –food, safe water, sanitation, education, healthcare– it's reasonable to theorise that poverty is a resource problem. So, based on that assumption, we execute a push strategy of development –pushing the resources poor communities lack in order to solve the issue. But while we might alleviate poverty, we don't do much else." In other words, "our strategies will not create sustained growth that leads to prosperity because we are solving the wrong problem." [2] What is the reason for it? Confusing development with growth. "The word 'growth' has two fundamentally different meanings: 'expansion' and 'development.' Expansion means 'getting bigger;' In development means 'getting

What is the relation between development, expansion, prosperity and education? A superficial reading of the 2030 Agenda can give the impression that eradicating poverty is what really matters, as if sustainability had to do only with the present generation.

The very essence of sustainable development has to do not only with meeting "the needs of the present", but also "without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" in its three dimensions –environment, society, and economy–, especially in the way we face the growth in cities.

That is why education for sustainable development is so important, because it calls for solutions to make the world more livable for this and future generations.

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better,' which may or may not involve expansion. This is no mere semantic distinction. Many communities have wasted a lot of time and energy pursuing expansion because that's what they thought they needed, when what they really needed was development. To avoid this confusion, let's define growth only as getting bigger —expansion— and development as getting better." [3]

One study case for this is the growth of cities worldwide. According to the World Bank, today's urban population of about 3.5 billion people is projected to reach 5 billion by 2030, with two-thirds of the global population living in cities. City leaders must move quickly to plan for growth.

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The speed and scale of urbanization brings challenges for all family members such as children, parents, youth, persons with disabilities and older persons. The capacity to tackle challenges is essential to assure a safe growth of all family members that live in the city. The challenges are, of course, how to assure that getting bigger is not getting worse. [4]

Kinsley shows with a physical example that not every growth means improvement. "Human growth after maturity is cancer. When a town continues to expand after maturity, its cancer becomes manifest in many ways: spiteful controversy, higher taxes, traffic, sprawl, lost sense of community."

On the contrary, "after reaching physical maturity, humans continue to develop in many beneficial and interesting ways: learning new skills, gaining deeper wisdom, cultivating new relationships, and so on. Similarly, a community can develop itself without necessarily expanding. It can create affordable housing, protect public safety, and improve employment, health, cultural, and educational opportunities. In fact, a good definition of development is the creation of jobs, income, savings, and a stronger community." [5]

Therefore, this is not to say that all expansion is bad, but that it is essential to distinguish it from development in order to make choices that truly benefit families, and because of that also individuals and societies.

Confusing development with solving the present

And this is precisely where the concept of 'sustainable' acquires its fullest dimension. "Sustainable development is a difficult concept to define; it is also

continually evolving, which makes it doubly difficult to define. One of the original descriptions of sustainable development is credited to the Brundtland Commission: 'Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' [6]. Sustainable development is generally thought to have three components: environment, society, and economy. The well-being of these three areas is intertwined, not separate. For example, a healthy, prosperous society relies on a healthy environment to provide food and resources, safe drinking water, and clean air for its citizens. The sustainability paradigm rejects the contention that casualties in the environmental and social realms are inevitable and acceptable consequences of economic development. Thus, the authors consider sustainability to be a paradigm for thinking about a future in which environmental, societal, and economic considerations are balanced in the pursuit of development and improved quality of life."

Therefore, there is a close connection between sustainability and demography. A healthy society will be prosperous as long as the newborns can find the right environment to grow up and become responsible future citizens. Usually, this means belonging to a stable family, a strong community and a viable society.

Kinsley also underlines that "a growing number of communities are discovering that there's an alternative to economic 'development' strategies based on expansion. They're embracing sustainable development, a more balanced approach that weighs social and environmental considerations alongside conventional economic ones." Expanding cities need not give up prosperity as they slow their expansion. Families with little prospect for expansion need not give up their dreams. There are plenty of development options that don't require expansion.

When placed in front of the word 'development,' the word 'sustainable' offers both opportunities and constraints. It offers opportunities because its new perspective reveals development options that previously weren't obvious. It offers constraints because, when proposals are considered in light of their long-term effects, some options that might otherwise appear attractive are seen to be unworkable, or not worth their negative effects.

Education is the key

Sustainable development cannot be achieved by technological solutions, political regulation or financial instruments alone. We need to change the way we think and act. This requires quality education and learning for sustainable development at all levels and in all social contexts.

Rosalyn McKeown, in 'Education for Sustainable Development Toolkit' states that "an important distinction is the difference between education about

sustainable development and education for sustainable development. The first is an awareness lesson or theoretical discussion. The second is the use of education as a tool to achieve sustainability. In our opinion, more than a theoretical discussion is needed at this critical juncture in time. While some people argue that 'for' indicates indoctrination, we think 'for' indicates a purpose. All education serves a purpose or society would not invest in it. Driver education, for example, seeks to make our roads safer for travelers. Fire-safety education seeks to prevent fires and tragic loss of lives and property. Education for Sustainable Development promises to make the world more livable for this and future generations. Of course, a few will abuse or distort it and turn it into indoctrination. This would be antithetical to the nature of it, which, in fact, calls for giving people knowledge and skills for lifelong learning to help them find new solutions to their environmental, economic, and social issues." [7]

While expansion was once seen as the only track to prosperity, the good news for both declining and expanding communities is that there is an alternative. Prosperity doesn't necessarily require expansion; it requires development that is sustainable.

Some guidelines

Kinsley also suggests some guidelines for families to move toward sustainability in a holistic way (even though, of course, not every guideline will be applicable everywhere): [8]

1. Use renewable resources no faster than they can be renewed: unsustainable communities spend these capital assets as if they were income. All towns based on the extraction of non-renewable resources must eventually find another basis for their economy. Many have transformed themselves into tourist towns. Others have attracted software designers, stock traders, and other entrepreneurs of the information age. Still others have evolved local economies based on arts and crafts. In general, the smart ones anticipate the shift and ensure a hospitable environment for other, more renewable economic activities well before the change takes place.
2. Seek ways to strengthen the economy without increasing 'throughput': any material process has its inputs and outputs, and the sum of the materials that are processed, used, and turned into waste can be termed 'throughput.' Innovative communities and businesses create more jobs by further refining their products before exporting them out of the community. Instead of harvesting more, they 'add value' to what they've already harvested; instead of making more widgets, they make better widgets; instead of wooing more tourists, they create more interesting experiences that encourage tourists to stay longer.
3. Focus more on getting better, less on getting bigger: as mentioned earlier, a smart community looks for ways to develop itself without necessarily expanding. It

understands that communities have more options than just accepting another subdivision, a big-box retailer, a casino, or another industry.

4. Seek development that increases diversity and self-reliance: a town with several kinds of export businesses is stronger and more resilient than another with only one. With more diversity, fewer jobs are likely to be jeopardized at one time by fluctuations in the national or international economy. Diversity tends to come not only from big, attention-grabbing plant openings, but also from "micro-enterprises" starting up in garages, living rooms, and barns. Other things being equal, twenty new businesses with two employees each are far preferable to one new business with forty employees.

5. Put waste to work: waste is simply a misplaced resource. Innovative business people and families are finding less expensive—even profitable—ways to reuse, recycle, or biodegrade discarded materials, and they're putting people to work doing it. The motto these days is 'waste equals food': the byproduct from one business or process may be useful as the raw material for another.

6. Regard quality of life as an essential asset: high quality of life is usually good for business. Wise community leaders are realizing that quality of life and a strong sense of place aren't intangible options; they're vital assets that nurture residents and support the local economy. In addition, an increasing number of community residents are willing to say out loud that development means

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more than business, it means preserving and enhancing a great place to live. They're saying that they want their towns to continue to be places they and their children can call home. They won't sacrifice their home for short-term gain.

7. Consider the effects of today's decisions on future generations: if a community economy is based on the stewardship of such important local assets as trees or the nutrients in the soil, then future generations will be able to make a living in the same way. In contrast, economic activity that depletes resources creates a daunting future for a community's children. This concept is also sometimes referred to as 'generational equity.'

8. Consider the off-site effects of decisions: unfortunately, most communities fail to consider all the off-site and indirect impacts. Off-site concerns

may lead the community to turn down the proposal, or they might lead to creating a better one with more appropriate access that hurts no one.

9. Consider the cumulative effects of a series of decisions: by failing to consider the cumulative effects of decisions, local leaders only worsened the problems they were trying to solve. They didn't ask themselves what unintended consequences might result from each 'solution' they chose.

10. Measure whether actions actually do what they're intended to do: sustainable development views the economy, community, and environment holistically; it looks at the big picture, paying careful attention to underlying causes and effects.

How can parents and carers help

Family relationships and expectations have a major influence on children's social development. Family relationships set the foundation for children to relate to others. Children learn how to manage relationships by observing the ways that parents, carers and other family members relate to others.

Some guidelines regarding this holistic approach to the role of parents and carers: [9]

1. Teach social and emotional skills, such as listening to others, taking turns, making friends and resolving conflict. Emphasise skills for cooperative and respectful relationships and acknowledge children's efforts to use them.

2. Use positive discipline: setting reasonable expectations for children's behaviour, and communicating them clearly and respectfully, sets the tone for cooperation. Being consistent and positive in your approach to discipline communicates to children that they are valued, even if a particular behaviour is not.

3. Talk about values and read stories that emphasise values with your children. Ask their opinions on whether they think a particular action is respectful, responsible, caring etcetera. Discuss the pros and cons of different kinds of values for promoting effective social relationships. Make talking about values and opinions part of everyday conversation, for example, by talking about things you see on TV.

4. Capitalise on 'teachable moments'. When something happens that requires a response which draws on values, it presents a 'teachable moment'. Ask children to think about what the problem is and what they could do to improve the situation.

5. Involve children in family discussions and decision-making, encouraging children to contribute to family discussions and decision-making gives them practice in listening to others' views and seeing things from different angles. Listening and contributing to family discussions helps children understand what your values are and shows them that their voices are valued. Involving children in these ways in family discussions and decision-making promotes respectful and responsible behaviours.

6. Promote a strong sense of identity. When parents and carers notice and acknowledge what children do to help, it shows children that their contributions are worthwhile. This gives them a sense of pride and encourages them to 'do the right thing'. Help children to work out ways to stand up for what they believe in and let them know that you are proud of them when they do. This helps children to build confidence in their own strengths and values.

7. Supervise media use. It is very important for parents and carers to supervise children's media use and ensure that the things they view are appropriate for their age and level of understanding. When children are repeatedly exposed to violent or inappropriate media images they can see these things as normal. Children often imitate the behaviour they see on TV or on the internet.

[1] *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly on 25 September 2015.*

[2] 'Obsession with ending poverty is where development is going wrong', *The Guardian*, 8 February 2017.

[3] Michael Kinsley, 'Sustainable development: Prosperity without growth', *Rocky Mountain Institute*, 1997.

[4] Cfr. *Urban Development*, *The World Bank*, 2016.

[5] Michael Kinsley, 'Sustainable development...'

[6] *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: 'Our common future'*, 1987.

[7] Rosalyn McKeow, 'Education for Sustainable Development Toolkit', 2002.

[8] Michael Kinsley, 'Sustainable development...'

[9] Cfr. *Kids Matter Primary information sheets for families and school staff*, *Department of Health and Ageing, Australia*.