

THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGE

The term 'sustainable development' was first used in 1980 in the World Conservation Strategy published by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. It came into general usage following the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development. It is defined as, "development satisfying the needs of future generations, as well as the current one." Subsequently, a series of United Nations Summits and Conferences has led the world to become involved in the Decade of Sustainable Development, in a bid to raise international awareness of the issues of environmental, economic and social sustainability. As you are well aware, sustainability is now well publicized and is a very pressing issue, brought to our attention almost daily in news and current events discussions.

Students need to learn about the steps we have to take in order to create a global set of relationships that meet the needs of the world's nations, without impairing the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Policies and programmes have to be created and implemented that enable individuals and communities to lead healthy, sustainable, culturally rich, lifestyles.

While nation states work to overcome poverty, secure adequate utilities and provide quality education, active consideration has also to be given to the finite nature of the earth's resources, its environmental and climatic limits, nature's recuperative powers, and the power of science to address many of the issues humankind is now facing. Sustainable development has a lot to do with promoting harmony in terms of environmental preservation and socio-economic development. Sustainability acknowledges that there are many intergenerational and regional issues within nations and between nations. It focuses on a facilitating the emergence of fairer and more peaceful societies based on collaborative models of interaction. Young people readily understand this agenda for the 21st century, if we place it before them.

The goals of the United Nations Decade of Sustainability in essence are moral and holistic. When the peoples of the world become less suspicious of one another and see each other as fellow global citizens, nations will have more chance of living together harmoniously, rather than ring fencing themselves in isolationism and fear. Regional and global alliances, plus trade agreements, if well set up, have a significant role in creating sustainability so every human being has an opportunity to have their place in the sun.

Kofi Annan, the former United Nations Secretary General, just prior to his departure from the role in late 2006, said, “Our biggest challenge in this new century is to take an idea that seems abstract - ‘sustainable development’ - and turn it into reality for all the world’s peoples.”

Since there is no shortage of human talent, and since many of the issues humankind faces are man-made, it is logical that man-made solutions can be constructed to solve them. Global action over recent years on the ozone hole, caused largely by the use of hydro fluorocarbons is an example of such a solution. Schools have a vital role in preparing their students to constructively face the range of emerging challenges to life on the planet and to understand that their commitment is needed to work on solutions, whether at the local or the global level.

Sustainable development is not just environmental protection. It includes ecological, social and economic issues and it requires people to adopt transformational attitudes. At rock bottom, much of what is encompassed in the concept of sustainability involves spiritual considerations. It is predicated on a world where peace occurs and where there are structures in place which enable conflicts to be worked out intelligently.

Ultimately, we have to convince one another that, “yes, it is possible to live together on our planet, which is our home.” Therefore, looking out for one another’s long term good is the moral framework education processes have to operate within.

All of the above resonates strongly with young people. It is relatively easy to capture their enthusiasm and idealism to do something, however small, to bring about a world that addresses these issues. Survival, when put in this setting, does sharpen and focus the mind.

Patrick J. Lynch
July 2008