

South America and Education for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Three South American countries, Argentina, Chile and Brazil, have been selected in order to study the impact of the document “The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development”. In these countries, whose people react energetically against any attempt to break the environmental balance, the synergic power of education is recognized. Therefore, it can be observed that the content sustainable development has been incorporated in the new educational schemes since 1990s in all their levels. The analysis in the formal, non formal and informal education of these countries shows us that they have the environmental issue well contemplated. But, it is necessary to emphasize the interrelations of three essential components: environment, society and economy in order to develop solidary values for improving a sustainable present and future existence. In relation to the “The United Nations Decade”, it is noticed that although different measures have been adopted, conjoint work by the region’s countries from a Latin American perspective is required.

The document “The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005-2014” highlights aspects that are in the scope of awareness of people from different countries. Its proposal to “turn an abstraction into something concrete” should be understood as the need for more striking undertakings. That is why, at the level of countries and of regions, it is convenient to adopt an organizational structure aimed at coordinated and global actions that will achieve more efficient results.

The millennium objectives constitute the guide for the Decade Declaration. They lead to development that “satisfies the needs of present-day generations without risking the potentialities of the future generations to satisfy their own needs” (UNESCO, 2003, p. 4), and as such they have been adopted by South American countries. In general, it is noticed that these concerns are expressed both in formal and in non-formal and informal education.

The American sub-continent, with its vast natural spaces, suffers greatly the problem of the preservation of its environment. Large forested areas cleared, polluted waterways, eroded soils, and the advancement of desertification are the witnesses of plundering irrational exploitation that was, and still is, the result of economic greed.

These impacts on the environment have sensitized a large part of the population that, in an organized or spontaneous fashion, reacts to these problems, often putting pressure upon governmental decisions.

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The new educational schemes put forward in South American countries in the 1990s explicitly incorporate the topic “sustainable development”. Both in educational reforms and in research articles published by specialists, the synergic power of education is recognized. Education is seen as a driver for the convergence of understanding and participation with the conceptual, procedural, and attitudinal contents, that is, with the knowing, the knowing how to act, and the wanting to act .

In Argentina’s Federal Law of Education, the content *sustainable development* is incorporated within the area of the Social Sciences under the banner of “societies and the geographical spaces”. In this document it is pointed out that “Through the study of the interactions between human activities and the different spaces, it is sought to acknowledge the potentialities and vulnerabilities of the actual territory, with the purpose of setting up the provisions and conditions to bear in mind so that the situation of future generations is contemplated in the projects of economic growth being planned in the present day” (Ministerio de Educación, 1995a, p. 175).

Of the three levels -Elementary, EGB (Basic General Education), and Polimodal- upon which the new educational system is structured, it is at the start of the second cycle of EGB, articulated to the organizer “The Natural Conditions of the Territory and the Environmental Problems Derived from its Use”, that the content *Sustainable Use of Natural Resources and the Preservation of the Environment* is introduced. In the third cycle, the topic is dealt with through the contents *Global Change and its Impact on Argentina. Sustainable Development. Institutions Related to the Preservation of the Environment*.

As for the Polimodal level, the issue is made explicit in the *Human-Social Orientation* in the block *Contemporary societies and the World Space* in relation to *Consumerism and Sustainable Development*.

Lately, in coordination with the national Ministry of Education and those of other provinces, the so-called priority learning nuclei have been set up, for which the material dealing with environmental issues is being elaborated.

Concerning non-formal education, governmental and non-governmental organizations have been established that seek to protect the environment. Many of these organizations develop programs that comprise environmental issues and also issues that have to do with the consolidation of democracy and human rights, respect for cultural biodiversity and for illiteracy reduction; that is, they approach several of the goals of the UN Millennium.

The National University of Cuyo is also receptive to these concerns through the publication of a bibliography that covers sustainable development content and strategies aimed at teachers of EGB and Polimodal levels, and of research articles dealing with topics in coincidence with those mentioned in the UN document. Quite recently, the Institute of Environmental Sciences was created with the purpose of advancing environmental studies. What is experienced at this University is also shared by the other Argentine universities, who also study environmental sciences.

Within the framework of the Ten-Year Plan for Environmental Education for Sustainable Development, and as a preparatory framework, the Regional Seminar “Education for Sustainable Development: A Contribution from Scientific Education” is to be noted. It was held in Buenos Aires on 11-14 July, 2004. OREAL/UNESCO Santiago, together with Argentina’s National Network of Researchers on Natural Science Teaching, the Faculty of Mathematical and Natural Sciences of Buenos Aires University, and the Ministry of Education of Argentina, organized this Seminar whose goal was to establish in what way scientific education can contribute to education for sustainable development.

Another important contribution, during the inaugural year of the Ten-Year World Program, was the Declaration made by the Ibero-American Seminar on Environmental

Training, called by the Union of Ibero-American and Mercosur Capital Cities and organized by the government of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires on 21-25 September 2005. The Declaration, with a remarkable critical analysis of Ibero-American reality, points out the following aspects, among others:

- The need for a reduction in the difference between conceptual advances and curricular content in formal education;
- The convenience that environmental issues be approached with the participation of all citizens;
- The acknowledgement of the irrational exploitation and squandering of natural resources, the hunger, and the exclusion suffered by an immense majority of Latin American countries as a result of the application of hegemonic productive-technological models; and
- An awareness of the loss of biodiversity and cultural diversity.

The Declaration encourages a new socio-environmental rationale taking as its starting point the Latin-American identities and highlighting environmental education as a means to create values, knowledge and attitudes in order to shape citizens capable of generating sustainable development based upon equity and social justice and respect for biological and cultural diversity.

Brazil, just like the other South American countries, has been subjected to an irrational exploitation of its soils ever since colonial times. This has created numerous environmental problems. In Brazil, the concern for the environment in education was institutionalized by the Ministry of Education in 1996 through the change introduced in the existing curricular structure, setting the Curricular Parameters based upon six main topics: Ethics, Cultural Pluralism, Environment, Health and Sexual Education, Labor and Consumption.

In 1999, Federal Law 9765/99 was passed, putting into effect the National Policy of Environmental Education (PNEA). This law enforced article 225 of the Federal Constitution, making it the responsibility of the Federal Government to promote environmental education and public awareness for respect towards the environment. As part of its actions, it also provided for the supply of teaching material to teachers for the proper design of their teaching strategies. On 25 June 2002, Decree 4281 ruled that this content be included in all the disciplines and not as an isolated discipline.

Universities are also engaging with the challenges posed by the DESD. The topics of graduate and post-graduate dissertations are varied, as well as those for research projects, all of which privilege issues such as the Amazonia, policies regarding the preservation and the sustainable use of renewable natural resources, the identification, recording and homologation of aboriginal territories, the training of local capabilities and initiatives for rural settlement projects, and the rational use of the Equatorial forest, among others.

The various environmental problems affecting rivers, soils and forests are dealt with both in formal and informal education. The action of NGO's, and in particular of local rural and urban settlers, is to be noted; these actions have sometimes become violent.

In Brazil the programs for the Decade for Sustainable Development are generated by the Ministry of Education and the Environment. The main goal is to consolidate environmental education. For such a purpose several forums were organized, like the 5th Forum of Environmental Education held in 2004 in preparation for the Decade. In 2006 the 5th Ibero-American Congress on Environmental Education was held, as well as the program *Let's Take Care of Brazil*, implemented by schools with a concern on the issue. Also, a public consultation was carried out for the National Program of Environmental Education (PRONEA), aimed at creating an environmental education

inter-institutional committee. Committees such as these have been given the task of determining the guidelines for the Decade for Sustainable Development.

In **Chile**, environmental issues have also been the cause of great concern at all educational levels. With regard to the UN DESD, the government of Chile drafted a document in which the problems for the region are analyzed, the previous experiences and records available are considered, and the need to coordinate discussion spaces is set up. The Forum of Latin American countries within the 2002 Johannesburg Summit is made reference to by way of precedent actions. In this Forum, it was stated that the goal of the intervening countries was to improve and strengthen the inclusion of the environmental dimension in formal and non-formal education. Environmental problems started to be deeply rooted in the country's public opinion and education in the 1990s, when the Base Law of the Environment was passed. In it, environmental education is defined as a permanent process of inter-disciplinary character, aimed at the formation of citizens strongly adherent to values, concepts, skills and attitudes necessary for harmonic living between human beings and their culture and the surrounding bio-physical medium. The UN Decade Declaration is approached in Chile through the decision-making process of establishing a state policy action. The draft, developed in 2005, will be the subject of study throughout 2006 so as to define a national and a regional policy. In compliance with this decision, goals, courses of action and expected results have been elaborated, discussed and dealt with in workshops such as the "Discussion Workshop on the National Policy of Education for Sustainable Development" held in May of this year.

In general, it can be observed that the countries in South America focus on environmental issues, both in their formal and non-formal or informal education. However, a coherent program in which education becomes the real synergic driver pushing ahead along three essential components: environment, society and economy, is needed.

This quick tour around some of the South American countries reveals the concern for the issue at an official level and also at the level of NGO's. But in relation to the UN Decade Program, conjoint work by the region's countries is required in order to achieve more efficient and profound actions, as some declarations are already suggesting, approached above all from a Latin-American perspective.

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