Challenges in Educating about Sustainability and Development Theory

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Abstract

The idea that brought the world to rethink development emerged from limits to growth and offered humanity to give a different direction to development theory. This article proposes to examine and explore sustainability as a goal in the life of an individuals and to understand whether the growing consciousness among people results in some affirmative action by developing a critique of the key concept of sustainability and interconnectedness.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of sustainability arises only when one acknowledges the crisis of the obvious. And, acknowledging at a deeper plane is the central concern of education. Education offers answers to all our questions pertaining to survival, success, and transformation. Since environment is taken for granted by public at large instead of paying due attention to environmental concerns, life is lived only to serve the day. It is only in an alarming situation that individual or the community begins to observe environmental degradation and the quality of life. Observation is the first step in bringing positive change. This alone leads to scientific understanding where detailed description becomes the main objective followed by developing some logic of categorising raw environmental data that attends to complex web of environmental issues. Knowledge so generated by a layman, expert or community is of little use unless it is disseminated

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extensively and in a lucid manner. This step logically leads to awareness related to environment. It is a crucial step where internalisation begins followed by celebration of environment and finally culminating in affirmative action.

This article attempts to understand the nature of growing consciousness among the people all over the globe of being interconnected and pursuing the goal of sustainability. With a strong critique of the idea of development that emerged from the west, sustainable development became a rallying point for policy makers all over the globe. At a time when the western policymakers came to understand that the destruction caused to the environment is irreversible, their understanding of the world changed. And a complex set of compulsions led in the direction of sustainable development. Sustainable development began to catch the attention of those who over-exploited natural resources and now felt the need of moving in the direction of correcting the imbalance. A lead was taken by articulations from locations that reached their limits of growth. And this growth did not always result in happiness or fulfillment. Soon, the idea of sustainability in sustainable development gained prominence and was intensely debated. As the heat around the debate over sustainability settled, it was generally agreed to be the desired goal for humanity and was projected as "perhaps the ultimate

culmination of development theories" (Bells and Morse, 2003.)

To realise the ideals of a sustainable society the need for equity and democracy are considered crucial. But the idea of achieving equity is fraught with the "need to balance the basic conflict between the two competing goals of ensuring the quality of life and living within the limits of nature" (Chambers et al., 2002). Chambers writing about one of the twin goals of making sustainability a reality put forward the case of improving "the quality of life" which he considered to be a "a shorthand for good institutions, equity and fairness, safety and security, excitement and opportunities, material and mental well-being" (Chambers et al., 2000). The argument that inequality causes environmental damage is acknowledged by almost all sustainability experts, for instance, Dresner says "one price of inequality is environmental destruction" (Dresner, 2002). Bruntland too had stated that inequity "is the planet's main environmental problem; it is also its main development problem" (WCED, 1987).

Now to overcome inequality, sustainability is posited as the desired goal. When we think of sustainability, it has to be thought over and contemplated on a global scale. Since, the issue of sustainability cannot be dealt with in a piecemeal fashion, it is understood to be a comprehensive term with overarching possibilities. According to Dresner, "Sustainability

is global. There can be no such thing as 'sustainability in one country'." (Dresner, 2002). Similar sentiments are expressed by Martinez Alier, who identifies the rich-poor divide within and beyond nation boundaries as a challenge to sustainability goals. He draws a roadmap of sustainability— "The 'environmentalism of the poor' rather than the 'environmentalism of the rich' will be the force that creates a more sustainable global community" (Martinez-Alier, 2000). The understanding of social, economic and political realities is central to achieve the objectives of sustainable development. The Bruntland Report, therefore, argues for achieving sustainable development at the global level by initiating political and social changes. It suggests—

"Elimination of poverty and exploitation, equal distribution of global resources, an end to the current pattern of military expenditure, new methods of ensuring just population control, lifestyle changes, appropriate technology, and institutional changes including democratisation, achieved through effective citizen participation in decision-making" (WCED, 1987).

Thus, the role of people is central to the project of sustainability. The sentiment expressed by Bells and Morse "SD is a move towards the 'peoplisation' of development; taking it out of the hands of the technocrats and making it a matter of key interest to all." (Bells, 2003) Meaningful sustainable development is not possible without people participation and their collective awareness and commitment to the principles of equity and democracy. This depends a great deal on the production of affordable opportunities made available to humanity to collaborate, exchange and contribute.

Today globalisation is viewed as a process responsible for growing global interconnectedness. It refers to 'time-space compression' brought about by the development of new communication technologies— satellite TV and information technology. Robertson firmly holds the view that world compression has intensified 'global consciousness'. 'Time-space' compression is not the same as time-space destruction. It amounts to a virtual annihilation of space through time but is "experienced differently across the globe" (Kiely, 1998). Contrasting modern with non-modern performances of globalisation, Lloyd hinted at the essentially 'transcendent' nature of the pre-modern one— "modern globalisation tends to be one of space alone and how technology shrinks or compresses that space by its power to transcend physical distance. In non-modern thought, to be 'globalised' (or its local synonym) could well mean to be a transcendent being, devoid almost of physical determination, or a universal being in the sense of participating in a universal culture or society that mediates all local differences." (Kiely et al., 1998).

Globalisation redefines once again the 'shrinking of the world' but does

not always mean coming together of people. The phenomenon of increasing interconnectivity is understood as one of the feature of globalisation. Schech and Haggis (2000) "define globalisation as the intensification of global interconnectedness" (Potter et al., 2004). Kiely, however, avers that "globalisation refers to a world in which societies, cultures, politics and economies have, in some sense, come closer together" (Kiely, 1998, p. 7). The same author goes on to note, however, that globalisation involves substantially more than interconnectedness. The process also involves the intensification of worldwide social relations, serving to link events in widely separated places (Potter, 2004, p. 126). This adds yet another dimension to interconnectivity where one has to live the dilemma of experiencing local lives as physical persons while experiencing phenomenal world that are truly global. As a result, one becomes more aware of the social divisions due to unequal access to new technologies because of annual income, gender and ethnicity. The challenge is to reimagine then the core fundamentals of sustainability, because interconnectivity besides bringing people together also highlights the divide among people located in different locations all over the globe.

The concept of sustainable development surfaces conflicts between the interest of the present and the future generations; a conflict between human and nature's well-being; a conflict between poor and rich; and a conflict between a local and global focus (Keekok et al., 2000. How this realisation of being interconnected has made the globe much more secure and sustainable? How do people and governments respond to the challenges of equity and democracy? What pressure global community can generate to better manage globalisation that connects and generates inequality? Joe Stiglitz, who diagnosed that "globalisation today is not working for many of the world's poor" also hinted at the need of managing it better as it has also brought great benefits. Stiglitz put squarely the blame on those managing globalisation— The problem is not with globalisation, but with how it has been managed' (Clark, 2003).

There are many who celebrate the coming of the 'information society' and others who pin their hopes on the internet's potential for democratising development, still others who project it as an opportunity for nations to 'leapfrog a stage of development' must be careful to recognise the truth of highly uneven development pattern in the world. Though internet users have grown exponentially, but they are still confined to western Europe and the USA. Access to computers as well as telecommunication is limited in underdeveloped countries. And though the countries may be connected to the internet, the masses living in such locations just cannot afford to make good use of

the internet due to the high costs it entails. It is appropriate to cite the case of Tunisia where charges for internet access are equal to average monthly income US $ 100. A net connection required US $ 1000 as installation fee and a further US $100 per month fee for use (Potter, 2004). Thus, it is very difficult to agree to the claims made in the name of benefits of globalisation. Instead of uniform linking of places in the global world, what one witness is the emergence of local concentrations within continents all because of differing access to technological innovation among masses (Potter, 2004).

One may ask what role technology plays in furthering interconnectivity among people. Since there is an inherent paradox in the use of technology that generates divide and inequity among people there is a big prize to be paid for interconnectivity. According to Potter, 'the digital divide is likely to exacerbate the differences existing between the world's haves and have-nots in the 21st century. There is yet another price which people pay to their own detriment by depending on technology that alienates the self and endangers the project of sustainability.

Due to the forces of globalisation interconnectivity has increased, but it has grown only for those who were already interconnected. People who have no recourse to the gifts of development continue to survive in the margins. Thus, increased interconnectivity is among people located in the developed world. It is they who experience the compression of the globe, because to them technological innovations have greatly reduced time factor to traverse spatial distances. Steger in his short introduction to globalisation after identifying four distinct characteristics of globalisation defines it as "Globalisation refers to a multidimensional set of social processes that create, multiply, stretch, and intensify worldwide social interdependencies and exchanges while at the same time fostering in people a growing awareness of deepening connections between the local and the distant" (Steger, 2003). This growing awareness may be harnessed in the project of sustainability if dominant inequities do not play themselves out to further the divide. But, the unacceptable face of inequity persists as one attends to the ratio of the incomes of the world's poorest peoples to the richest that have more than doubled from 30:1 in 1960 to a staggering 78:1 by the mid 1990s (UNDP, 1997).

How positive is the realisation that we are connected? How does one feel when one finds oneself connected with the people around the world? Does this connectivity makes the world more secure? Does this concept do away with the conception of otherness responsible for insecurity in the world? Are we all part of a global community? The notion of global community is unique in our times as the previous projections

of global were tied invariably to the transcendent. Due to technological innovations, humanity has reached that stage where a community need not gain its legitimacy by referring to a particular space. Thus, the community may or may not ground itself in concrete constructs. Moreover the internet has made possible the 'virtual' communities and has unleashed innumerable fabricated and constructed communities.

According to Perrons (p.199) "it is possible to be a citizen of in cyberspace while still being oppressed within the home." He says in the same strain "the worldwide nature of the web allows greater connectivity between more and less developed regions" (Perrons, 2004). And such communities operate on the global scale, but no one can stop them from proliferating either in the name of sustainability or in the name of economic development. So the idea of being interconnected does not essentially mean global community meeting the desired sustainability goals of equity and democracy. No doubt an emerging global community may promote and actively champion the cause of sustainable development. Still one must acknowledge the predicament of these virtual global communities adjusting to conflicting pressures of fulfilling sustainability goals in diverse locations. Lloyd captures the problem of being grounded in local experience and global constructs on modern world, by contrast, the

process of becoming global (as opposed to international) now carries a foreboding negative connotation of destruction of local peculiarities, traditions and communities. And even if people realise that now they are part of a global community what satisfaction do they draw from such realisation? Is it a concrete or tangible realisation? Can this realisation translate into joy and fulfillment for keeps or is it just any other realisation that the humanity is accustomed of getting addicted to— perishable, woe begetting, and transient? In what ways does this realisation benefits humanity? Does this realisation of being part of a global community make the quality of life better in our universe? How does this interconnectivity change the way of life at different locations all over the globe?

Citing many reasons for pessimism, David Held said "Globalisation has not just integrated people and nations, but created new forms of antagonism. The globalisation of communication does not just make it easier to establish mutual understanding, but often highlights what it is that people do not have in common and how and why differences matter" (Held, 2003). After a couple of lines, he further states. "Ethnic self-centredness, right-wing nationalism and unilateralist politics are once again on the rise, and not just in the West." R. Potter exposes the biased reading that identifies global culture as a stereotype or

marked by sameness everywhere. He sees it as "a distortion and a gross oversimplification." No doubt MNCs dominate world patterns of consumption and production and still it is far from uniform. Resistance from local and national cultures make the idea of single global culture difficult to stay. Secondly, as argued by Potter "rather than serving to erode local differences, global culture often works alongside them and sometimes it even works via them" (2004).

CONCLUSION

How this consciousness changes the behavioural pattern of people located far and wide? Are the people now more responsive, sincere, and act out taking full care of the consequences of their actions? If they have become more informed about the results of their actions, do they restrain themselves from contemplating actions disastrous to life on earth? The ultimate question is whether the growing consciousness among people of being interconnected generates a happy feeling in them or it makes them more tense, stiff, and competitive? Does this realisation bring people together to cooperate and share or does it bring them together for the struggle that life has become in today's competitive world? It is indeed hard to crystallise the challenges in educating and sensitising about sustainability, still the feeling of being part of a global community could be really great if it makes the world a better place by enriching the experience of life. But, togetherness that acknowledges some kind of hierarchy is rather bad for humanity and life in this universe. One may conclude that growing interconnectivity alone cannot help in achieving sustainability goals, it will work if it allows to play the consciousness of different people located all over the globe who acknowledge the grim reality of our times articulated in Oxfam document—

"In today's globalised world, our lives are more inextricably linked than ever before, and so is our prosperity. As a global community we sink or swim together. No country, however strong or wealthy, is an island" (Oxfam, 2002).

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