

Let's take care of the planet: education for sustainable societies

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Paulo Freire, one of the most famous Brazilian educators, pointed out that “the possible dream has to do exactly with a liberation education, not with a domesticating education, while at the same time practicing utopia... Utopia in the sense of the practice that leads to a dialectical dynamic and entails the denunciation of an unjust society with exploitation, and pointing toward a possible dream for society.” This is a dream that we now call sustainable development or sustainable societies.

In Brazil, the past seven years (starting on World Environment Day June 5, 2003 and culminating on June 5-10, 2010) have witnessed an astounding force of mobilization and passion permeating environmental education for sustainable societies in schools. Over this period, the National and International Children and Youth Conferences for the Environment were implemented in secondary schools all over Brazil and, later on, throughout the world, ultimately becoming reference points for public environmental education policy management.

In 2010, a cycle of three National Children and Youth Conferences, Let's Take Care of Brazil, which culminated in a successful inter-

national conference, Let's Take Care of the Planet, came to a close. Each one pioneered innovative topics and actions shaped by creativity, cumulative learning, complex concepts and methods that were expanded over time. Local, regional, national and international conference processes have contributed to amplify the voices of children and of their schools and communities, and to effectively empower and include adolescents in the international dialogue.

The Children and Youth International Conference for the Environment is included in the framework, mission and goals of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD), 2005–2014. The main themes of the Decade are citizenship, community values, diversity, interdependence, sustainability, quality of life and social justice, all of which correspond to the goals of the conference. However, above all, the conference seeks to contribute to the incorporation of a new generation that constitutes a large portion of humanity and that is traditionally thought of as the future but that nevertheless lives, thinks and acts in the present.



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The Government of Brazil organized and hosted these events with an international focus, and received institutional support from agencies for development and cooperation such as UNESCO, UNICEF and UNEP; and from civil society bodies such as the Fondation Charles Léopold Meyer pour le Progrès Humain (FPH). Each conference, as well as the resolutions arising from it, is the expression of a collective action between international organizations and institutions, national governments, civil society and schools.

The youth conferences satisfy elements of the Brazilian National Constitution of 1988, which asserts the rights of present and future generations to quality education and to a healthy and ecologically balanced environment. They also reaffirm values and actions proposed by international civil society, such as the Treaty on Environmental Education for Sustainable Societies and Global Responsibility, the Earth Charter, Agenda 21 and the Charter of Human Responsibilities, and help to further the debate on the United Nations Development Programme's eight Millennium Development Goals.

A great pedagogical opportunity for intercultural dialogue

When thinking about sustainable development, it is important to be aware that the environment cannot be reduced to worries about ecology or an area of biological science or nature that constitutes the basis for sustaining life in the biosphere. In modern society, nature has been transformed into areas of action in which we need to take political, practical and ethical decisions. The conference process is one of these areas of action, aimed at contemporary education where all of us are learning about sustainability. In environmental education, each school has an opportunity to be a space for permanent learning, based on dialogue and respect for all life forms.

The Children and Youth Conference could be seen almost as a 'pedagogical pretext' to promote and update the debate so urgently needed in society, from a critical and participative environmen-

tal education perspective. From the first, essentially Brazilian cycle, new possibilities arise, involving other countries on all continents that have already begun their own processes of school, regional and national conferences and supported us in the construction of the International Conference. In the countries represented in Brasilia, various cycles are being produced in many places with other people and cultures, shared and transformed according to their own realities.

The success of the Brazilian National Conference is reflected in the figures: the first, in 2003, involved 15,452 schools and mobilized 5,658,877 people throughout the country. The second, in 2005-2006, reached 11,475 schools and communities and 3,801,055 individuals, and witnessed our youth delivering a Charter of Responsibilities to President Lula. This charter, Let's Take Care of Brazil, is committed to constructing "fair, happy and sustainable societies with responsibilities and actions that fulfil dreams and needs".

The Third National Conference process was held during 2008 and 2009 in 11,670 schools, involving over four million people in the school- and state-level debates, culminating in a national event in April 2009. As this conference occurred in the midst of a global environmental/economic crisis, the environmental education system has been confronted by a triple challenge:

- *The psychological:* building significant knowledge without creating fear of the catastrophe studied or paralysis in addressing potential destruction
- *The educational:* proposing a contemporary education solution, which may rescue the social function of the school as a creative and transformative learning environment. The ministry's Education Development Plan promotes integrated



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full-time education in an initiative that seeks quality in the teaching-learning process and student retention

- *The planetary*: engaging in a high-level debate, so as to be able to address global environmental change through sustainable societies. Thus, the Third National Conference received 70 international observers from 43 countries, in preparation for the International Children and Youth Conference, 'Let's Take Care of the Planet'.

The Third National Conference involved the topic Global environmental changes: think and act in the school and in the community. Quality didactic materials were distributed to all secondary teaching networks in the country (58,000 schools) with the objective of contributing to improving school performance based on the results of the Basic Education Development Index, encouraging the inclusion of sustainability and the socio-environmental challenge in the school Political-Pedagogical Plan, and strengthening the role of the school in constructing public education and environmental policies. The material provided tools for navigating environmental issues and inter-disciplinarity in the classroom, while respecting the complexity of the subject by not over-simplifying. Socio-environmental changes beyond climate change are treated systematically and integrated into the sciences, history, geography and languages.

The topics involved the four elements — earth, water, fire and air — in discussion of contemporary problems affecting people and natural systems throughout the planet. Each topic included debate on sustainable actions for mitigative, adaptive, preventive and transformative measures. The material proposed changes to the world-view to protect values that improve quality of life and rethink human responsibilities for the present and future of life on earth. Although the material relates to the Brazilian environmental contexts and policies, several countries asked for English and Spanish translations.¹



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Following the Education and the Environment Ministers' formal invitation to all countries, the preparatory year began with each country defining, adapting and adjusting the process to its own contexts. 62 countries from all continents responded positively to the Brazilian invitation, 52 of which constituted a National Organizational Committee to coordinate school processes and a National Conference, and delegations from 47 countries participated at the international event in June 2010. The mobilization of the Brazilian initiative in this preparatory phase can be illustrated by some data provided by 40 of the participating countries, which directly involved 87,258 schools and 13,153,229 children. In India alone, 80,000 schools and nine million children participated!

The International Conference, a five-day intensive event, involved 600 young students aged 12 to 15 years from 47 countries (38 per cent from the Americas, 24 per cent from Asia/Pacific, 21 per cent from Africa and 17 per cent from Europe), who were elected by other youth in their countries, maintaining a relatively equal representation between gender, delegates from rural and urban areas, capital regions and other cities, public and private schools, and delegates from ethnically diverse and varied cultural backgrounds. The youth gathered to debate a subject that affects all humanity: global socio-environmental changes with a focus on climate change. Together they constructed the Charter of Responsibilities, Let's Take Care of the Planet, with actions aimed at sustainability.

The event was organized as a community where everyone is a learner, realizing the role of youth as social actors capable of intervening now. The International Conference had three dimensions: youth

selects youth, meaning that the delegates formed the centre of decision-making; youth educates youth, where the 69 facilitators aged 19 to 27 years old encouraged participation, facilitated contents and workshops and constructed the entire event together with the coordinating team, through trust in their capacity to assume transformative actions; and, one generation learns with another, whereby the 110 adult chaperons participated intensely, both in caring for their delegations and in debating educational policies amongst themselves, resulting in a solid partnership between several generations. This characteristic becomes especially important since it allows innovative ideas to circulate — while children and youth easily absorb new tendencies, they depend on adults to provide the conditions for changes to happen, based on deeper knowledge and effective dialogue.

In other words, by assuming a dialogical, co-educational and inter-generational approach that encompasses the diversity of natural life, culture, ethnicity and plurality of knowledge and understanding, the conference setting amplified the dimensions of learning and policies of education for sustainability. This initiative can be considered an environmental education open to the ‘pluriverse’, a term coined by Indian philosopher Raimon Panikkar.

The final event as a whole could be considered a harmonious and stimulating environment. Each participating adult, youth and child provided positive evaluations, with an average of 90 per cent of the responses to all questions (methodology, culture, well-being and organization) being ‘excellent’ or ‘good’. Qualitative terms such as ‘marvellous’, ‘great’ and ‘incredible’ appeared many times on the written forms. One adult made a generalization and nicknamed Brazilian education a ‘pedagogy of happiness’!

Where to from here?

The question remains: how can all of this be incorporated in formal education inside the classroom? How could we create a school community with a responsible and committed attitude towards local and global socio-environmental issues?

The debate began with the Brazilian Ministries of Education and the Environment inviting national governments to transform their schools and local communities into public spaces of education for all, throughout life, in the search for healthier societies. Now that the event is over, the debate returns to the school communities, which are not limited to reproducing knowledge, principles and responsibilities, but above all can become producers of new knowledge and further actions.

This first Children and Youth International Conference, Let’s Take Care of the Planet, needs to be a lot more than a beautiful memory of an event. It should become a reference for educators in different countries and regions of the world in unveiling methods and concepts to be studied, adapted and replicated, and especially for contributing to the diffusion and advance of fundamental learning practices for addressing global socio-environmental changes.

Through the activities and the inter-generational dialogues, big steps were taken in the direction of great objectives: empowering delegates to assume global responsibilities and local actions, strengthening youth networks and movements, and advancing the implementation of integrated and sustainable educational policies with educators from the participating countries. This commitment is expressed in the Musical Charter: Let’s Take Care of the Planet,² composed by the children during the conference.

Such a successful educational process, which reached so many countries and involved extensive cooperation, continues at a distance through a Virtual Learning Community (VLC),³ which encourages more school communities to think globally and act locally for sustainability. The delegates mobilize their schools as well as other individuals who participated in the preparatory stages and International Conference activities. In the VLC, everyone can reaffirm and spread the knowledge of sustainability from their local cultures, while at the same time expressing their dreams and enjoying a rich sharing of information. In this way, the network of care for the planetary biosphere expands.

In future, Brazil will promote continuity by orienting a new international cycle, namely the Second Children and Youth International Conference, Let’s Take Care of the Planet, beginning in 2011 and ending in 2014. The new cycle requires articulation at least in three areas:

- A national government that, through its education ministry, invites countries and hosts the event
- International organizations of multilateral cooperation that support the host country in mobilization and organization activities
- Civil society organizations, which may anchor the conceptual and methodological principles of care, participation and democracy in the process and the event, and maintain the concepts of responsibilities and actions.

Further articulation includes involving students, teachers, youth and school communities in building sustainable societies, founded in equality, diversity and justice.

The conference’s main theme, climate change, still brings further needs and deeper educational challenges, as highlighted by the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change publications. In Brazil, besides the conference cycles, this issue was also included in the 2008 National Plan on Climate Change, making the Ministry responsible for “implementing sustainable educational spaces through adapting buildings (school and university) and management, and through teacher education and including the subject of climate change into the curricula and teaching material.”

The Ministry now seeks to achieve new goals for addressing global social and environmental changes through launching even bolder and more progressive policies that integrate school disciplines with traditional knowledge, and constructing school communities that consider all aspects of quality of life – environmental, economic, political, social, cultural and ethical. In the name of concrete action, and inspired by the British experience, this new programme, Sustainable Schools, trains teachers, students and communities to build, manage and study sustainability.

To consider schools as a reference for sustainable spaces that have the intentionality to educate local communities may be another possible dream to be pursued by the global networks fostered by the DESD.