

Sustainable Development: The Search for the Tipping Point

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Abstract: The United Nations recently launched the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. Literature indicates the need for an authoritative definition of *sustainable development*. Sustainable Human Development is analyzed through the lens of Gladwell's *The Tipping Point* as a framework for guiding ethical development practice and instigating changes in human behavior.

“We all want to believe that the key to making an impact on someone lies with the inherent quality of the ideas we present” (Gladwell, 2000, p. 131). Author Malcolm Gladwell argues in *The Tipping Point* that more is involved in effecting change than simply having a good idea. The Tipping Point is the moment of sudden change when messages take hold and alter behavior. Gladwell views change from an epidemiological perspective. Given that “epidemics are a function of the people who transmit infectious agents, the infectious agent itself, and the environment in which the infectious agent is operating” (Gladwell, 2000, p. 18), he posits three basic rules for tipping ideas or making change happen: (a) *the stickiness factor*, wherein memorable messages are packaged to make them personal and practical; (b) *the power of context*, in which behavior is a function of social context and ideas can spread by adjusting details of the immediate environment; and (c) *the law of the few*, which argues that a very small number of people – Connectors, Mavens, and Salespeople – are linked to everyone else in a few steps and the rest of us are linked to the world through those special few.

Change is the stated mission of UNESCO's “Decade of Education for Sustainable Development” initiative, launched on March 1, 2005. “The overall goal of the DESD is to integrate the values inherent in sustainable development into all aspects of learning to encourage changes in behavior that allow for a more sustainable and just society for all” (UNESCO, 2005, p. 5). In order to transform this good idea into reality, educators must be able to define *sustainable development*, values inherent in the concept, and behaviors leading directly to sustainability. Gladwell tells us that educators can spark action by communicating a sticky idea – specific, personal, practical and persuasive. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the concept of sustainable development to distill its Stickiness Factor, so that educators, the special Few, can instigate change in the critical Context: our planet's poor environmental and economic health.

Method

A review of extant literature was used to collect data for this paper. The data collection procedure involved a search of ERIC documents, policy briefs, executive summaries, books, professional journals, as well as significant websites, including UNESCO. Once these data were collected, they were placed in categories for analysis. Interrelated reliability analysis was conducted by reading and re-reading data and crosschecking to keep track of common themes and patterns evident in the literature.

Historical and Theoretical Perspectives

Defining Sustainable Development

In 1987, the Brundtland Commission defined sustainable development as growth “which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet

Doscher, S. P. (2006). Sustainable development: The search for the tipping point. In M. S. Plakhotnik & S. M. Nielsen (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Fifth Annual College of Education Research Conference: Urban and International Education Section* (pp. 19-25). Miami: Florida International University.
http://coeweb.fiu.edu/research_conference/.

their own needs” (*Our Common Future*, 1987, p. 43). Used by environmentalists to call forth the inextricably close relationship between human activity and nature, the term *sustainable development* has been appropriated by economists, industrialists and politicians to justify global market consolidation and neo-conservatism. As Herman Daly observes, although the Brundtland statement “implies something about what ‘sustainable’ means...it does not even try to define ‘development’” (Daly, 1996, p. 2). Purposefully broad, the definition provides little direction; since Brundtland, continued emphasis has been placed on traditional development’s short-term aggregate effects on the economy, while too little attention has been paid to its long-term effects on human health and natural resources. The result has been large-scale environmental inaction and irresponsibility (Strong, 2004, p. 39-40). In search of consensus, UNESCO is currently conducting an online consultation on its United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development home page, calling for a definition of sustainable development in 25 words or less (*Vision and Definition*, n.d.).

The lack of an authoritative definition for sustainable development has sparked debate over the underlying values of the concept and exacerbated the need for an ethical framework for developmental decision-making. According to Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen, “the growing concern with ‘sustainable development’ reflects a basic belief that the interests of future generations should receive the same kind of attention that those in the present generation get” (Anand & Sen, 2000, p. 2030). Sen argues that the underlying value of sustainability is ethical universalism—a basic mandate for impartiality—both between and within generations. “But this goal of sustainability—increasingly recognized to be legitimate—would make little sense if the present life opportunities that are to be ‘sustained’ in the future were miserable and indigent” (Anand & Sen, 2000, p. 2030). In other words, the moral significance of sustainability depends as much on the quality of what we have now as what will be available in the future. The conception of human development can easily be expanded “to accommodate the claims of the future generations and the urgency of environmental protection” (Anand & Sen, 2000, p. 2030). Sustainable development therefore denotes quality for both present and future generations. Its underlying value, ethical universalism, commands improvement of present-day living conditions as a basis for those of future generations.

Operationalizing Sustainable Development

The problem of operationalizing sustainable development practice remains. Members of the Millennium Project Task Force maintain that “unfortunately, the concept of...sustainability does not provide clear operational guidance for choosing policies and outcome targets” (*Investing*, 2005, p. 90). Commissioned by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, the Task Force’s report is touted as the most comprehensive plan ever put forward for combating poverty and a cost-effective blueprint for reaching the Millennium Development Goals (MDG’s) by 2015 (*UN*, 2005). According to the report, the proper outcome of development is human capital building; the Goals are considered both ends unto themselves and capital inputs (*Investing*, 2005).

In essence the authors have adopted the Capability or Human Approach to development, conceived by Sen and elucidated by him and others (Alkire, 2002; Alkire, 2003; Fukuda-Parr, 2002; Robeyns, 2003). Sen refers to capabilities as the range of options people have available to them (their capability set), and functionings as the things people do to achieve them. Necessary functionings include individual freedom and democratic discourse, to which he assigns three levels of importance: (a) direct importance – freedom of choice has value in and of itself, regardless of results; (b) instrumental importance – liberty of thought and action can lead to secondary positive results; and (c) constructive importance – freedom is an educative process

that plays a critical role in public discourse and the assemblage of community consensus on values, goals, and priorities (Gasper, 2000; Sen, 1999). Sen views the expansion of real freedoms as both the means and ends of development. Democratic discourse and human agency are central to the process of achieving those freedoms.

Development policies generated from the Human Development Approach necessarily rise from the ground up, beginning with the development of human capital. The foundation for this approach is the explication of a set of incommensurable, irreducible, and nonhierarchical dimensions (Sen's functionings) of human capability (Alkire, 2002). Leading edge thinkers such as Martha Nussbaum, Deepa Narayan, Robert Cummins, Maureen Ramsay, and Manfred Max-Neef are engaged in a debate as to which human needs/values should form the essential framework for human development. For "...without agreement on some kind of multidimensional framework cum procedure-for-identifying-locally-valued-and-relevant-capability sets, the multidimensional approaches to development are operationally vacuous and risk being *misunderstood* and *misoperationalized* by practitioners" (Alkire, 2002, p. 184-185). Although differing theorists present unique matrices, definitions and specifications, overlapping dimensions of capability include bodily and social well-being, physical and environmental security, economic sufficiency, education, and self-direction (Alkire, 2002). The Millennium Development Goals are another contribution to the lively debate; applied to the world stage, they are intended to spark the kind of individual and community discourse prescribed by Sen. Assuming good governance, development aid will come in the form of long-term partnerships and compacts for achieving realistic, data-driven goals for enhancing human functionings in context (*Investing*, 2005).

Sustainable Human Development: A New Perspective

The Stickiness Factor

Combined with human capability, sustainable development can become a sticky idea. The Human Development Approach stands apart and redirects interest away from traditional development of aggregate trends in the global marketplace. Coupling an ethically universal form of sustainability with old-style development becomes insupportable; market forces alone will not rescue poverty-stricken communities and nations. "Without basic infrastructure and human capital, countries are condemned to export a narrow range of low-margin primary commodities based on natural (physical) endowments, rather than a diversified set of exports based on technology, skills, and capital investments" (*Investing*, 2005, p. 6-7).

Ethically universal sustainable development can be achieved when partnered with the Human Development Approach. Given this fundamentally different interpretation, it is advised that analysts and practitioners revise their use of the term "sustainable development" to include the word "human." *Sustainable Human Development* is defined here as the enhancement of present and future human well-being *vis-à-vis* environmental health and other dimensions of human capability. This definition brings sticky specificity to development policies and practice by focusing attention on its inherent values: ethical universalism and human capabilities.

The Power of Context

Viewed in context, Sustainable Human Development offers clear operational guidance for development policies and targets. A case-in-point is the Quick Wins.

One of the innovative aspects of the Millennium Development Project is its assertion that significant worldwide poverty reduction is practical and affordable. The community of nations possesses an unprecedented understanding of basic obstacles to quality of life and ample wealth to mitigate or remove them. Quick Win initiatives are simple, cheap strategies for meeting the

MDG's and they allow rapid scale-up in multiple sectors by focusing on local marginal needs. One example is the elimination of school and uniform fees to ensure that all children, especially girls, are not out of school because of their families' poverty. Eliminating user fees for basic health services and distributing free insecticide-treated bed-nets in malaria-endemic zones significantly lowers health-related absences. Human capital-building is supported by providing impoverished farmers in sub-Saharan Africa with affordable replenishments of soil nutrients, and providing access to electricity, water, sanitation, and the Internet for all hospitals, schools, and other social service institutions using off-grid technologies. The reformation and enforcement of legislation guaranteeing women property and inheritance rights is another Quick Win strategy.

Grounded in solid research (*Investing*, 2005) and ethical philosophy (Alkire, 2002), the Quick Win initiatives follow Gladwell's prescription for change by addressing the context in which development is viewed and practiced. The Quick Wins are aimed at human capital-building rather than material consumption; although they do not guarantee equal well-being for present and future generations, they do level the playing field. They possess direct importance in and of themselves, but their instrumental importance is the responsibility of individuals and local communities. Quick Wins are corrections on the margin, but they represent a sea change for the practice of development. "For the billion-plus people still living in extreme poverty, the Millennium Development Goals are a life-and-death issue" (*Investing*, 2005, p. 4). Indeed, for all people in all countries achievement of the MDG's in all sectors is vital. Although many developed nations possess high aggregate GDP and quality of life, pockets of poverty, deprivation, and suffering still endure and missing the goals will have an impact on future development (Abu-Ghaida & Klasen, 2000).

The Law of the Few

Education is key to realizing the promise of sustainable human development through the Quick Wins and other Millennium Development strategies. Apart from its intrinsic value, education enables individual and community responses to development opportunities (Abu-Ghaida & Klasen, 2000). Additionally, "assuming that the amount of human capital of a person is the outcome of a combination of innate abilities and education" (Klasen, 2002, p. 351), education is instrumentally important to economic growth. Educators as Connectors, Mavens, and Salespeople are in a unique position to tip the idea of sustainable human development by advancing the idea through curricula, teaching contextually critical knowledge and skills, and directing special attention to another group of Connectors, Mavens, and Salespeople: females.

Gender inequality in education has been empirically demonstrated to negatively affect long-term economic growth (Abu-Ghaida & Klasen, 2004; Klasen, 2002; Self & Grabowski, 2004). Gender bias in education has further negative effects on other development goals such as rates of reduction in fertility, child mortality, and undernutrition; expansion of educational opportunities to offspring; and decreased wage disparity and unemployment (Abu-Ghaida & Klasen, 2004; Klasen, 2002). Without "assuming a 'special link' between women and the environment, either on a spiritual level or as 'caretakers'" or identifying them as a "homogenous category characterized by their victimhood in inequitable systems and environmental contexts of deterioration" (Goebel, 2003, p. 77-78), women can be acknowledged as primary networkers, conflict mediators, organizers and fund-raisers in community endeavors (Perkins, 2003). Although many consider assurance of basic nutrition and healthcare more important to a community than women's rights, development experts assert it is impossible to make long-term gains when women's voices are marginalized (Vartan, 2004).

Women's educational, reproductive, decision-making, employment, and land-ownership rights instrumentally affect long-term local and national economic health. Moreover, women's capacities affect those of their husbands, sons, and daughters. Siblings strengthen each other's educational success and couples with comparable educational attainment support mutual life-long learning (Klasen, 2002). Development practices that enable increases in the educational levels of women result in high returns; "one of the only 'win-win' development strategies" (Klasen, 2002, p. 370), the reduction of gender inequality in education is necessary to tip an epidemic of sustainable human development.

Conclusions and Implications

The simplicity of Gladwell's recipe for change belies the complex reality of producing the intended outcome; simultaneous orchestration of multiple variables is easier analyzed than done. This author, while arguing for an authoritative definition of sustainable human development and recommending common principles for instigating change, concludes that differences in context deny formulaic responses to development dilemmas. Whereas common ethical, diagnostic, and critical processes should guide development decisions, inputs and outputs will differ between communities, nations, and regions.

It is impossible to "identify *one* good that is both necessary and sufficient for human flourishing. Human flourishing seems to be marked by a variety of goods, and reasonable, ethical people may well disagree in their assessment of which goods are most important" (Ottensmeyer & McCarthy, 1996, 11). The effort to set off an epidemic of human flourishing must be informed by qualitative and quantitative research on the relative merits of seeming benefits. Applicable analyses should be conducted in the following areas: (a) measurements of well-being as defined by sustainable human development; (b) intergenerational and secondary effects of the Quick Wins and similar contextual strategies on economic growth and other development goals; (c) methods for achieving gender equity and equality in education; (d) intergenerational and secondary effects of female primary, secondary, and tertiary education on economic growth and other development goals; and (e) teacher preparation and curriculum design for assessing and addressing contextually specific development needs.

Viewed through the lens of Gladwell's *The Tipping Point*, Sustainable Human Development appears to be an idea whose time has come, but its being a good idea is not enough; real changes in human behavior are necessary. Combined with adjustments in context, Sustainable Human Development is a transformational, sticky paradigm capable of being transmitted through the power of education. The launch of UNESCO's "Decade of Education for Sustainable Development" symbolizes the world's inclination towards change in development priorities and practices. Gladwell states that there is a world of difference between being inclined towards something and actually doing it (2000, p. 166). The difference between large-scale human stagnation and growth may well lie in educators' ability to push Sustainable Human Development to its tipping point.

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