

Learning for sustainable development – the Gothenburg story

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Abstract

Shortly before the EU summit in Gothenburg in 2001, the University of Gothenburg and Chalmers University of Technology arranged their first international conference in learning for sustainable development, entitled 'Knowledge and Learning for a Sustainable Society'.

At the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg 2002, Sweden offered to arrange an international conference on learning for sustainable development. The conference was held in Gothenburg on May 4-7, 2004 and was entitled 'Learning to Change Our World – the Gothenburg Consultation for Sustainable Development'. Some 350 delegates from more than 70 countries took part. At the end of the conference the chancellors of the two universities promised to arrange another conference as a follow up.

To preserve the knowledge and experience gathered at the consultation in 2004 and to prepare for the follow up conference, the Centre for Environment and Sustainability (GMV) initiated four international workshops on learning for sustainable development in higher education, in school, in preschool and in informal learning.

The final workshops and conference, 'Visions and Preparations for a Common Blueprint on Education for Sustainable Development' took place in Gothenburg, 2008, at the invitation of the two UNESCO Chairs in education for sustainable development, Professor Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson, University of Gothenburg, and Professor John Holmberg, Chalmers University of Technology. Some 50 delegates from more than 15 countries took part in the workshop, which brought together ESD experts as well as policy-makers and decision makers for an exchange of ideas of ESD.

The final document is called 'The Gothenburg Recommendations on Education for Sustainable Development' and calls on governments, civil society, and, in particular, educators to prioritise processes that develop and strengthen education for sustainable

development. This document was also later fed into the UN mid-term review held in Bonn spring 2009.

1. Introduction

The Centre for Environment and Sustainability (GMV) in Gothenburg, Sweden, is a network organisation at University of Gothenburg and Chalmers University of Technology. The centre promotes research and education for sustainable development. GMV creates and encourages research projects and multidisciplinary initiatives. Both research and training are firmly founded in existing scientific disciplines. About 500 scientists and 500 representatives from industry, local authorities and other environmental organisations, are involved in GMV's research network.

Initiative on EU summit in Gothenburg in 2001 resulted in an initiative from the rectors of the two universities in Gothenburg, University of Gothenburg and Chalmers University of Technology, to actively work with Education for Sustainable Development, in the Centre for Environment and Sustainability, GMV.

2. Pre EU summit meeting in Gothenburg in 2001

This meeting was held immediately before the real EU summit meeting in Gothenburg as a Pre EU summit meeting by initiative of the two universities in Gothenburg and the Centre for Sustainability and Environment. Margot Wallström, EU minister of Environment at the time, Susan George, vice chairman of the international Attac, Roland Scholz, ETH, Zurich, Christian Azar, Chalmers University of Technology, Sven Erik Liedman, University of Gothenburg and others took part in a panel discussion on Education for Sustainable Development. The outcome of the meeting was a commitment by the two university rectors to take a leading position in the development of Education in Sustainable Development.

3. The conference “Knowledge and Learning for a Sustainable Society” in Gothenburg 2004

At the World Summit for Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, 2002) the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan emphasized the need to make the abstract concept of sustainable development “a reality.” When recommendations for a decade on education for sustainable development emerged from this gathering, Sweden made a commitment to host an international conference on learning for sustainable development. This project was entitled

“Learning to change our world – the Gothenburg consultation on learning for sustainable development” and was the collaborative effort of our two universities in May 2004.

Some 350 delegates from more than 70 countries took part in the conference May 4-7, 2004. The conference was arranged as an “open forum” Open forum meaning that the questions to be dealt with in work group sessions were not set before the conference, but set during a process in the first day of the conference. During the four days of the conference the delegates were offered seminars, work group discussions and study visits to different departments and schools in the city.

The outcome of the conference was two different reports, one that was a final report for the conference participants and one SOU (Swedish Official Investigations) to the Ministry of Education, made by a working group with participants from the 2 universities, ministry of education, ministry of foreign affairs and NGOs.

The SOU also contained a suggestion to the Swedish parliament to include a paragraph about sustainable development in the Higher Education Act. In 2006 this sentence was adopted as a paragraph in the Higher Education Act: “In their activities, higher education institutions shall promote sustainable development that ensures present and future generations a healthy and good environment, economic and social welfare and justice.”

4. UN decade for Education for Sustainable Development

The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014), for which UNESCO is the lead agency, seeks to integrate the principles, values, and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning, in order to address the social, economic, cultural and environmental problems we face in the 21st century. Education for sustainable development aims to help people develop their attitudes, skills and knowledge to make informed decisions for the benefit of themselves and others, now and in the future, and to act upon these decisions. University of Gothenburg and Chalmers University of Technology have participated in this work with several conferences, workshops, papers and also have two UNESCO chairs in Education for Sustainable Development.

5. Two UNESCO chairs in Education for Sustainable Development

In the start of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development several professors worldwide were assigned as UNESCO chairs in Education for Sustainable Development. Two of these professors were placed in Gothenburg, and of course have contributed a lot to the development of learning for Sustainable Development.

Professor John Holmberg, Chalmers University of Technology, was assigned the UNESCO chair for “Education in sustainable development especially in higher education” in 2007. Professor Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson, University of Gothenburg, was assigned the UNESCO chair for “Early childhood education and sustainable development” in 2008.

6. International workshops on learning for sustainable development

Five international workshops on learning for sustainable development were held in the universities in 2005-2008. In the final workshop all the previous discussions were summed up in the Gothenburg Recommendations on Education for Sustainable Development.

6.1. Drivers and barriers for implementing sustainable development in higher education, Gothenburg Workshop, December 7-9, 2005

Four themes were discussed at this workshop;

- 1. How can sustainable development be understood and what new challenges does it bring to the universities?*
- 2. How does the traditional discipline-based structuring of knowledge and research affect the implementation of learning for sustainable development in higher education?*
- 3. Separate courses and programs or/and an integrated perspective throughout the whole education?*
- 4. What role does research for sustainable development have in the process of crossing barriers and creating drivers for education for sustainable development at a university level?*

The discussions at the workshop were organized in smaller groups covering each theme and were then followed by presentations in the plenary session. Together the conference participants tried to summarize the discussions under the different themes as well as the concluding list of recommendations.

6.2. Drivers and Barriers for Implementing Learning for Sustainable Development in Pre-School through Upper Secondary and Teacher Education, Gothenburg Workshop, March 27-29, 2006

At the summing up at the end of the workshop there was a strong request from some participants that as part of the preparation for the next consultation a short introduction concerning ESD should be produced. The tension between “guiding principles” and “allowing for local context” should be discussed. Coming to an agreement on an evaluation program is

important, in order to check whether the work with ESD is making progress or not. This should be done in relation to global guidelines.

To some extent the aims of the workshop achieved, drivers and barriers were identified, but it was obvious that the understanding of ESD differed a lot, which made the discussions more difficult than was previously expected. It also seems necessary to discuss the ethical dimensions of ESD such as the democratic aspects. Education for everyone? Welfare for everyone? Gender equality for everyone?

6.3. The Role of Early Childhood Education for a Sustainable Society, Gothenburg Workshop, May 2-4, 2007

At the workshop the participants identified a list of twelve major recommendations, which could be put forward in the upcoming international conference on education for sustainable development. In conclusion, what emerged is an image of a sustainable society as an *inclusive society* where all people are united through their common humanity and where differences are respected and valued. Sustainable development is greatly facilitated when all groups of people – regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, places of residence or capacities – participate in finding solutions and constructing a sustainable future for our common habitat. Sustainability challenges us to go beyond segregated societies, which exist in many parts of the world today, and to transform them to ones that are more inclusive.

6.4. The Right to Knowledge – Public Learning for Sustainable Development, “Laboratory for Democratic Learning”, Gothenburg Workshop October 11–13, 2007

The process of the Learning Laboratory was set in the context shared by liberal adult education, museums and academia. The task of identifying drivers and barriers for sustainable development and public learning was tackled in many different ways by the speakers as well as during the group sessions. In addition, it could be observed that many factors were identified as being both drivers and barriers. For example, language can be a barrier to understanding and a driver of good communication.

Some central features from the discussions were:

1. *The key characteristics of a learning environment that promotes sustainable development encompasses all aspects of sustainability and development and focuses*

on the importance of voluntariness and participation in order for sustainable learning to occur.

- 2. The “go visiting” concept was used to emphasize that to achieve sustainability there is a need to combine all types of knowledge.*
- 3. Ways to promote gender equality as well as equality among social classes and ethnic groups.*
- 4. Need for basic welfare as a prerequisite for sustainable development and learning.*
- 5. The consumerism in western societies was clearly seen as a threat to the necessary changes in lifestyle needed to ensure sustainability.*
- 6. For sustainability to be reached, all groups of citizens have the right to knowledge and to information about the functioning of society.*

6.5. Visions and Preparations for a Common Blueprint on Education for Sustainable Development, November 10-12, 2008

The final workshop, ‘Visions and Preparations for a Common Blueprint on Education for Sustainable Development’ took place in Gothenburg, November 10-12, 2008, at the invitation of the two UNESCO Chairs, Professor Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson, University of Gothenburg, and Professor John Holmberg, Chalmers University of Technology. Some 50 delegates from more than 15 countries took part in the workshop, which brought together ESD experts as well as policy-makers and decision-makers. The Swedish Government contributed to the event through the Swedish International Centre of Education for Sustainable Development (SWEDESD), The Ministry of Education and Research and the Swedish National Commission for UNESCO. The purpose of the workshop, based on the previous work, was to generate recommendations for learning for sustainable development that could be used in many different future processes, for instance through the UNESCO.

At the end of the workshop, a specially invited professional negotiator, Mr Svante Bodin from the Swedish Ministry of the Environment, assisted the group in finalising the document in a consensus-based process. The final document is called ‘The Gothenburg Recommendations on Education for Sustainable Development’ and is presented below.

The report was presented at the UN decade for Education for Sustainable Development half time meeting in Bonn 2009.

7. The Gothenburg Recommendations on Education for Sustainable Development

This document calls on governments, civil society and in particular educators to prioritize processes that develop and strengthen education for sustainable development (ESD).

The purpose of ESD is to reorient education in order to contribute to a sustainable future for the common good of present and future generations. ESD recognizes the interdependence of environmental, social and economic perspectives and the dependence of humanity on a healthy biosphere. Participation and involvement are necessary components of ESD, with an emphasis on empowerment and agency for active citizenship, human rights and societal change. Re-orientation is necessary at all levels and in all phases of education, and encompasses community learning, thus making ESD a wider process challenging the form and purpose of education itself.

In the book there are eight general recommendations.

1. Access for all to a process of lifelong learning

Access for all to education is a necessary, but insufficient condition for ESD. ESD needs to transcend understandings of access for all, and be of a quality and form that helps society to reorient and transform towards sustainability.

2. Gender

ESD should actively promote critical engagement with norms that define gendered ways of being, doing and living together, and should particularly value the role and contribution of women in bringing about social change and ensuring human well-being.

3. Learning for change

Learning for change is based on relating multiple perspectives to each other at all times. These perspectives include: space, time, culture and different disciplines, as well as a non-anthropogenic perspective. ESD development is based on principles and values as well as a holistic and interdisciplinary approach. This involves learning to know, learning to do and learning to be, and learning to live together and should involve translation of knowledge into real life contexts.

4. Networks, arenas and partnerships

ESD should promote relationships between different educational levels, sites and perspectives, and recognize that they are interdependent in the wider context of social reorientation towards sustainability. Networks and partnerships that strengthen international and intercultural cooperation and knowledge exchange should be extended and supported.

5. Professional development to strengthen ESD across all sectors

In order to strengthen ESD, professional development must include teacher education, professional education for educational leaders, and community educators. Education of extension officers, business trainers, journalists and others involved in education in its widest sense are equally important.

6. ESD in curriculum

ESD should be embedded in curricula, steering documents, and learning materials. This includes curriculum review and development of new curricula.

7. Sustainable development in practise

Educational settings should practice values and principles of sustainable development to provide learners to participate in and model solutions to sustainable development issues.

8. Research

There is a need to promote research, evaluation and practitioner enquiry in order to strengthen and extend education for sustainable development. Research must embrace the multiple sites and foci of ESD, include community participatory research, and mobilize indigenous and local knowledge.

8. Concluding remarks

The work with 'The Gothenburg Recommendations on Education for Sustainable Development' has shown that educators from all levels of education, policy-makers and other stakeholders can work together, discuss and finally find a common set of recommendations for education for sustainable development. Much of the work was done in accordance with the final recommendations, but the processing of all different visions and ideas of the participants was a necessary procedure to reach the final standpoints in the document, although it was a time consuming process over several years.

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