

Community learning: creating a sustainable future through critical awareness

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A learning process, which ignores critical analysis of human behaviour, protects the status quo in society and blocks the student's creative ability to think and learn. Critical thinking and analysis are among the corner stones in environmental education and if allowed can lay the foundation for dialogue, change and sustainability.

The perceptions of our reality

During the last century, American media analyst Walter Lippman documented the immense power that the media had over public opinion. He found that, because the average person spent only five minutes each day on reading a newspaper, they were most likely to pick out of that paper what their 'cultures had already defined' for them (Lippman 1922). Perceptions that have been predetermined for us shape how we see ourselves, how we communicate, how we see reality and ultimately how we act.

Lippman's observations are of fundamental importance in education, as they demonstrate the need for communities worldwide to strengthen their capacity to challenge perceptions and assumptions and, through critical action, to expose inequality and oppression. Critical thinking is not only about one's ability to challenge and question, but should also be linked to visions and alternatives for change.

The challenge to our perceptions and assumptions, along with our ability to link local circumstances to global politics, is to develop critical awareness. It is a process that cannot be forced, only facilitated.

Environmental social research in Fiji

As a part of a regional environmental and development education initiative, Live & Learn Environmental Education undertook a social research study in Fiji, which aimed to gather qualitative information on young people's perceptions and awareness of the relationship between current social interactions and the degradation of the environment. The young people who participated in the study saw education as a major tool for change, but also saw the environment as something aesthetic and biological outside the sociocultural paradigm.

Shifting the physical environment into a social framework is important not only in relation to sustainable change, but also in relation to strengthening young people's capacity to participate actively in making decisions about the environment. The young

people in the study identified primary global environmental problems, including climate change, loss of biodiversity and pollution, but saw no links between these problems and the processes that can change human behaviour. It is important to explore why the links between the environment and sociocultural processes were missing.

One reason could be the limited scope for young people to explore or learn to think critically within existing teaching methodologies. In most schools, teachers are considered as the providers of knowledge and information, and students learn to memorise and accept facts and theories, often without challenging these facts or developing an understanding of their context. While many people think it is important to link the environment to social processes, it is equally important to provide young people with inquiry skills, with which they can seek information from the local community, non government organisations, the corporate sector and government. Through such dialogue and networking, young people can broaden their mental horizons and develop skills for critical analysis and awareness.

The power of community learning

Community learning is a collective approach to learning involving local and global dynamics through horizontal and vertical dialogue, networks and debate. It can facilitate learning our way out of our current destructive pattern of living. The practical outcomes of community learning are shaped through open participation within biophysical and social equity constraints. Information exchange between the local and the global setting is critical and central to the process, as global activities often shape the local environment (and vice versa). Community learning cannot ignore the reality of globalisation, but must connect with this process through communication, networking and sharing of information.

Knowledge about biophysical limits often exists in local and indigenous communities, and this knowledge should be taken seriously when outsiders are shaping international policies for sustainability and equity. If sustainability is to be achieved then global politics have to take into account local community rules: the thinking behind the slogan 'Think globally, act locally' should be broadened to 'Act globally, think locally'.

In a practical sense, community learning is a methodology founded on environmental and social sustainability, and guided by four components:

- open participation;

- sharing information;
- networking; and
- building dialogue.

Complex issues of participation

Participation is central and fundamental to the success and sustainability of any learning process, whether it happens in the school, in a teachers' association, in the community or globally. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, participation means 'the action or fact of partaking, having or forming part of'. In this sense, participation could be immoral or moral, manipulative or spontaneous, forced or free. Participation is often associated with a positive connotation that is directly linked to a desired goal or purpose. It rarely comes to mind that participation could be manipulative, to justify an agenda. However, people are sometimes asked to participate in discussions about issues of no relevance to themselves, and the result can be actions inspired by situations outside their control. Perhaps this can help explain why donors and organisations worldwide have spent billions of dollars on development projects that have failed to produce expected results, because of a lack of relevance, poor participation models and a lack of local ownership.

The principles of community learning are founded in open participatory processes. Watching the diverse dynamics during a discussion about logging in a classroom of young people suggests that young people have a significant role in discussions outside the classroom. Young people are great creative communicators and have the capacity and passion to develop and explore collaboration across and within the community. The community learning process focuses on challenging ideas, not people. This remains one of the strong points of youth, who often have not been exposed to the same amount of prejudice as adults. With help, young people can develop their capacity to challenge prejudices, which are often caused by external forces and can block the dialogue building so central to the community learning process.

The quality of participation remains at the core of community learning. Some people within the community have predetermined advantages, and participate from a position of privilege. The facilitator and participants in any learning process have to understand this, as it can affect the learning process. Equally important is understanding that women may view the environment from a different perspective to men. This perspective should be given equal consideration to the views of men during debates and decision making. During the social research study undertaken in Fiji, girls were the ones to recognise the link between health and the environment: the boys' groups failed to recognise it.

Beyond participation

To participate also means to live, to relate differently, to gain community and individual freedom to learn and listen, and to share ideas free from fear of any predetermined conclusion, belief or judgement. If participation is to be meaningful, participants

must act responsibly and apply ethics that are directly reflected in the fundamental components of the community learning process. This will ensure the rights of all people to participate (social equity), including the next generation (sustainability).

Networking: learning from the south to develop the north

Community learning is a multilevel process that recognises that compromises are needed. On a global scale this must include both the privileged north and the less privileged south of our planet. Equitable participation is fundamental to this process, which means that the perceptions of northern organisations and governments should be moderated by the participation of southern organisations and governments.

Many people now think that the global economy has far outgrown the Earth's capacity to service it. If all countries in the world followed the industrial way of life, another six planets would be needed to provide enough natural resources to feed it (Sachs 1996). While technology must become more resource efficient, there is a greater need for the north to learn from the south through dialogue and networking, and to incorporate southern local knowledge and awareness about biophysical limits into global decision-making processes.

The inclusion of local knowledge in global decision making is directly linked, through the United Nations, to international charters in which access to such essentials as food, water and education are enshrined as fundamental rights for all. According to these international charters, reducing poverty is in a sense a human right, not a social need. If we are to enact these charters, we will have to change the way we perceive the global battle against poverty. Local biophysical knowledge must become a key factor in decision making.

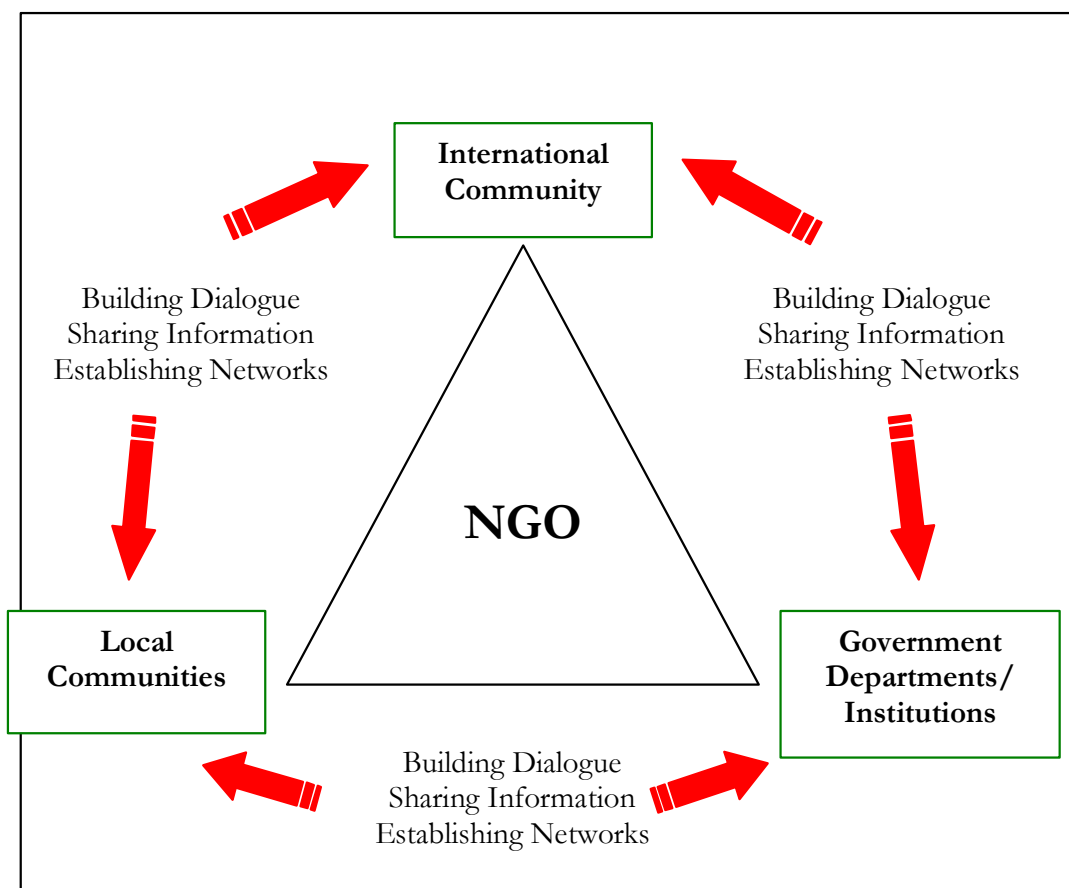
NGOs could play a key role as facilitators in levelling out the inequality between north and south, as a growing acceptance of responsibilities for human rights brings with it an acceptance of other global responsibilities. One option that might achieve global sustainability and responsibility is the south taking the lead, not only because that would be more inclusive, but also because it would mean the north learning from the south.

Dialogue, advocacy and change

During the past ten years of teacher training, Live & Learn Environmental Education has encouraged teachers and educators to facilitate, rather than influence, outcomes. The learning process in the community school environment becomes constructive and stimulating if there is a diversity of ideas, as opposed to conformity. If young people's ability to research and analyse is improved, they gain the confidence to discuss and debate, which also gives them the capacity to participate in decision making about environmental matters. Teachers and educators are vital in the process of achieving social change and sustainability.

In a world of rapid change and constant global interaction

Figure 1 Global dialogue facilitated by NGOs



and diversity, we are all learners. The realisation that the free market economy does not hold all the solutions to reducing poverty and inequality has created new opportunities for learning and education. NGOs are well placed to facilitate community learning as, being diverse, fluid and ever changing, they have the creative capacity to build dialogue between communities, governments, community organisations and international agencies.

From theory to practice

The transition from community learning theory to practice is based on simple participatory principles. The discovery learning initiative created by Live & Learn Environmental Education aims to strengthen links between students, teachers and society. Innovative educational tools, such as dialogue charts, role plays, self reflective tests and drama techniques are used to improve teachers' facilitation skills. These skills are then channelled into field based activities, such as water quality monitoring and other environmental assessments, for which students are required to research and communicate with unfamiliar sections of the community. Teachers are encouraged not to promote solutions or select problems.

The curricula in Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu are flexible and well suited to emphasising an open and analytical learning process. These countries' curriculum development units and teachers training colleges are working to improve this with

Live and Learn. During training, teachers identify 'integration areas' for environmental and development education in syllabuses on basic and social science, and look into opportunities to create social change by developing a thinking curriculum. Live & Learn field trainers travel to schools throughout Melanesia to support and improve teachers' skills.

The River Care pilot project is an example of community learning in action. A mobile Live & Learn training team visits schools in rural areas of Viti Levu, Fiji, to train teachers to monitor river water quality. The teachers will include water quality monitoring in the basic and social science curricula they teach. The newly acquired skills are passed on to the students, who will conduct practical tests in their local rivers and:

- identify pollution hot-spots;
- investigate the causes of pollution;
- analyse the socioeconomic and cultural impacts of water pollution;
- present the test to the community, the church and chiefs;
- network with NGOs and government departments on possible solutions to the problem;
- initiate a debate in the community about solving the problem; and
- initiate action through practical problem-solving strategies.

The Live & Learn training team will not be actors in this process, but will facilitate it and provide support to the students and the teachers involved. Once the pilot project has been completed, the curriculum development unit in Suva intends to include River Care in the form 3 basic science and social science curriculum in Fiji.

Conclusion: environmental education that challenges conflict and poverty

Global dynamics are often dominated by discussion in which individual countries argue for their share of a global market, or try to convince the world why their point of view is correct. These discussions can create isolation and conflict. Unresolved conflict is a major threat to the environment. It breeds inequality and poverty, which result in desperation and, eventually, in environmental and social degradation. Environmental education is directly linked to social development, and that is why a social emphasis is fundamental to the community learning process.

For young people, an effective process for learning about forests would not ask them to plant 1,000 trees, but would ask them who should be making decisions about the forests, who should reap the benefits of those decisions, and how future generations should be considered. Giving young people debating skills and strengthening their ability to communicate and interact with the unfamiliar are key weapons in the battle against poverty and environmental degradation. Creating dialogue brings to the forefront the issues of participation, advocacy and change. The benefits of such a learning process extend far beyond the local community or school ground.

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