

## **The Latin-American perspective on the debate on education for sustainability<sup>1</sup>**

By Edgar González-Gaudiano

It is difficult to disagree with the lucid, well-balanced article by John Smyth published in the July/August edition of the *Environmental Communicator*. This essay puts forward many proposals which refresh the argument over the displacement of the concept of environmental education in favor of education for sustainability; this with a view to avoiding inopportune polarisations.

Nevertheless, I feel that the voices of Latin-American educators should be added to the polemic; we have our own very distinctive history right from the establishment of environmental education to the current state of play.

### **A few facts.**

Environmental education appeared in Latin America and the Caribbean almost a decade later than in the industrialized countries, principally the United States, Canada, Australia and western Europe. When the first organizational steps were taken, we found ourselves taking up diametrically opposed positions. On the one hand were Tbilisi's recommendations as rediscovered so splendidly at several of the regional meetings held in Latin America, and on the other the promotion of the *International Environmental Education Program's* educational approach, which had already been included in proposals dealing with behaviorism and the green environment; that is to say, Tbilisi heralded the arrival of a new pedagogical field closely tied to a strong political and social commitment very much in keeping with a critical Latin-American tradition of popular education projects based on the ideas of Freire, Mariátegui, Mella and Puiggróss.

Nevertheless, IEEP activities, along with the wealth of published matter on the new field arriving in our countries principally from the United States, brought about an education devoid of or showing weak links with social commitments, centered on possessing knowledge of the dynamic processes of nature, and based on the subjects studied by a de-politicized science which claimed to be objective and non-judgmental.

The internal ambivalence displayed by the field generated a variety of struggles. On the one hand there is the ongoing struggle of all environmental educators within our own spheres of influence because it recognizes the value and importance of environmental education as a social practice in public policies and institutions to arrest, correct and reverse the state of deterioration in which we find ourselves. On the other hand, there exists a struggle within the field itself between those who simply want to put into practice environmental education proposals formulated by well-known personalities with the backing of prestigious organisms and those who proposed to structure environmental education from qualitatively different premises which gave a better response to the Latin-American critical tradition which we suppose are more suitable for a reality such as ours, full of necessities and cultural diversity.

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<sup>1</sup> Publisher at: *Environmental Communicator* 1998 (28) 5: 11-12

## What has happened?

During the last fifteen years Latin America has seen the tortuous growth and acceptance of an environmental education more in touch with this critical dimension, albeit alongside official programs. In parallel, we have also seen the evolution of the effects of international politics on the environment.

So when we were presented with an outline of the proposal which UNESCO intended to put forward in Thessaloniki, we saw the ratification of international legitimacy for our posture. The need to link this field to the problems of poverty, peace and population growth among others was accepted (by the way, wealth was not mentioned). All of this was already part of our strategic and pedagogic planning, which made it hard for us to understand why this in itself justified changing the name from environmental education to education for sustainable development. Why should this change occur, then? Would it not mean the loss of a political position which had cost a great deal to achieve?

Consultation with colleagues in the countries to the north let us see that the problem lay in the fact that environmental education was associated with infant education and with an approach linked to nature which would be difficult to modify to accommodate the new proposals. But this was not the case in Latin America, where environmental education had been developed more along the lines of informal education in rural areas, and with an approach linked to adult labor (women, Indian peoples, peasants, community health, human rights, etc.) In other words, what is now considered to be the new trend.

The Thessaloniki Declaration proposed the name **education for the environment and sustainability**<sup>2</sup>. Many of us thought this was Solomonic; if it was really going to mean that the direction of environmental education in northern countries (and in consequence the obtaining of financial support) would undergo a modification of current policies and approaches which currently provide more support, for example, for education programs for the preservation of migratory birds than for basic health care for children living in extreme poverty.

This brief synthesis of the complex Latin-American process confirms the frequently expressed need to open a debate on this issue which would take into account the different circumstances prevalent in environmental education. In this sense, the proposal from Colombians Eloísa Trellez and Gustavo Wilches-Chaux at the meeting of ministers of education organized by the Organization of American States (OAS) in July, 1998, reinforces the ideas in this paper. Recognizing the pioneering character of current developments in environmental education, they point out that “participation for action and environmental education for sustainable development are two processes which must always go hand in hand” and they make five recommendations:

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<sup>2</sup> This proposal was not considered at the CSD Sixth Session held in New York City in May 1998.

- 1 Make advances in the construction and communication of clear concepts on the subject of sustainable development for environmental education.
- 2 Redesign national education policy, in particular environmental education programs to redirect them towards sustainable development.
- 3 Incorporate education into national strategies and plans for sustainable development.
- 4 Increase investments in education and research to attain sustainable development.
- 5 Identify and systematize innovative educational experiences.
- 6 Build up public awareness regarding sustainable development.

It would be worthwhile to encourage discussion in terms which include different regional realities.

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