

## **ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION AND SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION. THE CASE OF MÉXICO<sup>1</sup>**

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Environmental education for sustainable consumption (EESC) is one of the most recent challenges in the field of education. In the terms of Chapter 36 of Agenda 21 and the priorities of the schedule of work of the Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD), UNESCO itself recognises that this field is “in its infancy”. Independently of the large number of sustainability definitions available, I understand sustainability to be a process that links social equity, economical growth and environmental protection. Therefore sustainable consumption is a mode of consumption congruent with the meaning of sustainability used above. It is a complex challenge for all of us for it alludes to complexities of modern life which go beyond the very limits of formal and informal educational processes.

The emerging field of EESC has at least two serious, interrelated problems which have to be tackled by educators. The first is the polemic surrounding the relationships between consumption patterns and income distribution. More specifically, this problem is grounded in issues of equity in the distribution of wealth and the shift towards sustainability, and the ramifications with respect to the responsibility for environmental deterioration. Connections can be made with different patterns of consumption not only between nations which compete under unequal economic conditions, but also between the economic elite and the population masses within the countries themselves. The second problem facing educators interested in promoting EESC find us in the area of pedagogical strategies. We need to find ways, for example, of addressing questions such as the following: How can we bring about awareness and practice of sustainable consumption in people, despite its opacity, through environmental education (EE)? Which indicators will be able to give us more meaningful results than those economic instruments used to induce or deter social behaviours, aware as we are of the difficulties experienced by almost every country in measuring qualitative progress, and above all progress in education? How can we control the participation of the media in a world where commercial globalisation has its own rules? What role can schools play if environmental, and even educational, programmes seem further and further removed from the reality of many girls and boys?

The objective of this paper is to outline key issues in the discussion of the development perspectives of EESC in the case of Mexico.

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1. This paper is only a part of the national report presented at the Workshop on Education and Sustainable Consumption, held by the OECD from September 14th to 15th, 1998 in Paris. In such a report participated Elisa Bonilla and Armando Sánchez of the Secretariat of Public Education, but their contribution is not included in this version. This paper was published in: *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*. Yukon College. 1999 (4) 176-191.

## 1. Consumption patterns and income distribution

In 1987, when the World Commission on Environment and Development defined the concept of sustainable development as a condition in which present generations may satisfy their needs without affecting the ability of future generations to satisfy theirs, it provoked much controversy over the emphasis placed on equity between different generations as opposed to equity within one given generation. However, the debate has also had positive repercussions by rekindling interest in analysing the importance of modifying the model of economic growth as a pre-condition of a shift towards sustainability. Thus, recently more attention has been paid to income distribution as a crucial factor in the struggle to alleviate poverty. For example, the OECD observed in 1997, "Current consumption patterns and trends also raise important questions of equity, both between developed and developing countries and between rich and poor societies" (OECD 1997, 5). This should not be read as a desire to match consumption levels and patterns of developing countries with those of the industrialised ones.

Other factors have played an important role in these discussions. **The relationships between overpopulation, poverty and environmental deterioration has always been factored into the analysis from different viewpoints.** At one extreme, poverty has been considered both cause and effect of the deterioration; at the other, it has been seen as only the cause. **Population has been viewed as an independent variable with no connection to economic structure (Club de Roma) or as one of the consequences of poverty and under-development (Bariloche Foundation).** So the increase in consumption levels, the distribution and size of population and the rational use of natural resources have had different forms of conceptual and political expression in **avange** of developed and developing countries. Thus, the sustainability debate has revolved around the demographic explosion, economic growth, quality of the environment and social equity<sup>2</sup>.

Although international concern about environmental deterioration was originally caused by the negative effects of industrialisation and the dominant style of development of developed countries, at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (1972) the prevalent feeling was that environmental deterioration and, more specifically, pollution and its effects on health were consequences of underdevelopment. **This meant that the solution was not a reduction in the rate of economic growth, although a continued effort should be made to harmonize such growth with environmental protection. However, at the end of the Conference it was concluded that too much attention had been paid to pollution and not enough to environmental problems brought about by asymmetric international relations.**

**At a Seminar organised by UNEP and UNESCO in Cocoyoc on Models of Natural Resources Management, Environment and Strategies of Development, the dominant development style was under attack once again and work strategies were proposed to continue the search for an alternative model to combat the inequalities brought about by this style with its inherent forms of neo-colonial exploitation. In Cocoyoc it was affirmed that development objectives were humanistic and not material; for this reason, overconsumption as a means of satisfying needs was severely questioned (Angel Maya, 1992).**

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2. A current discussion about poverty and consumption can be read at PNUD (1998). I have written elsewhere about the complex interrelationships between population size and the consumption levels of developed and developing countries (see González-Gaudiano, 1997).

In the wake of the Nairobi Declaration ten years later, a more balanced development-underdevelopment relationship became apparent, especially with regard to the causes of environmental degradation, and the blame was placed on both poverty and wasteful consumption. At the Rio Conference (1992) this duality, highly contradictory in nature, was one of the main reasons for the demand for financing and for technological transfer in favour of global development with environmental protection<sup>3</sup>.

In this setting, Provencio (n.d.) states that world-wide consumption patterns form a complete panorama. The same products show different consumption patterns in countries with the same income level and within each country there are different consumer patterns and trends, as well as radical differences between the major international blocks, including within the OECD itself.

For its part, eco-development strengthened the relationship between consumption patterns and the production and distribution structure in a particular kind of development (Sachs, 1973) which helped to explain the inadmissibility of putting environmental degradation down to just two variables: the demographic growth index and the product growth index. When the pattern of consumption was adjusted to include the alleviation of poverty, eco-development established the importance of bringing the production and distribution structure caused by market forces into line with the goods and services demanded by the satisfaction of basic needs. It also suggested a change in the consumption structure of the high-income sectors and the concept of product quality. Current styles of development styles coincide to a large extent with these formulations on the need to alter the pattern of consumption to overcome poverty.

Thus, Provencio defines consumption as the mediation between income and its distribution on the one hand and living conditions and poverty on the other and accepts the existence of cultural factors which make this over-determination more complex: the level of consumption depends on income, and the pattern of consumption depends on income distribution. In the Mexican case, Lustig and Székely (1997) found that

overall poverty and inequality rose during the adjustment years and it practically remained unchanged during the incipient and frustrated recovery of the early 1990s. However, these aggregate trends hide important differences. While aggregate poverty and inequality remained almost unaltered between 1989 and 1994, a significant proportion of the poorest of the poor were worse off. In particular, poverty (extreme and moderate) increased in the primary sector, among rural workers, and in the backward areas of the southern and south-eastern regions in Mexico. Also, while inequality among non-wage income sources declined, wage inequality showed a significant increase.

They say that the extreme poverty line was calculated as the cost of the basic food basket using the poor population's spending patterns and the prices they had to pay.

Due to the above, although income distribution and the pattern of consumption show a clear relationship between each other, it cannot be claimed that it is one-way but that it is mediated by socio-economic and cultural factors. In other words, "It is likely that a sustainable world cannot be achieved without a greater degree of equity. But a more equitable world would not necessarily be more sustainable." (OECD, 1997: A8). Therefore, the possibilities of influencing the values and attitudes implicit in consumption by means of educational

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<sup>3</sup> Another argument was the so-called 'ecological debt' which the industrialised world owed to the developing countries.

processes are rife with operative uncertainties, especially when swimming against the current of advertising.

## 2. Consumption patterns and the subject of education

In 1972, Consumers International recognised why “collective action to protect the environment can only be achieved when there is widespread individual awareness of the environmental consequences of consumption” (DSD, 1998) In 1985, the UN Guidelines for Consumer Protection constituted a broad framework for promoting action not only on issues of product safety and economic efficiency, but also to promote social justice and economic development.

The relationship between consumption, production patterns and development was included in Chapter 4 of Agenda 21 at the Earth Summit in 1992. In 1995, the CSD recommended the incorporation of sustainable consumption as one of its goals. Although the majority of OECD countries have regulatory, economic and social policy instruments dealing with consumption, consumerism is increasing almost everywhere; furthermore, consumer movements in Europe and North America are very different. In Mexico the consumer movement is just starting and has a weak link with EE.

EESC is mainly concerned with promoting supply information (i.e. product information concerning mode of production, possible environmental impacts, advertising costs, etc.) on products and with empowering the consumers’ critical capacity regarding their available options, taking advantage of growing public concern about the relationship between consumption and environmental deterioration. The UN’ proposal says: “Governments should educate, or support the education of, consumers on the environmental impacts of lifestyles; the options for improvement, including extending the useful life of products, even if they are out of fashion; and the benefits of more sustainable consumption. Special attention should be paid to incorporating environmental curricula at every level of the formal education system. Citizens’ organisations should be involved in these educational efforts”. However, nothing is said about economic differences, poverty, income distribution and possibilities of basic needs satisfaction.

The UN agenda statements, and those of the OECD itself, recognise the relationship between consumption and production, and the necessity of improving the efficiency of natural resource management among other important aspects<sup>4</sup>. This highlights the link with economic policy which contributes to easing the pressure on the environment, and if the assumption is made that consumption in developing countries must be increased, nowhere is it specifically mentioned that income must be increased as an essential pre-condition to obtaining radical progress. Nevertheless, western lifestyles are criticised: “there is also considerable inertia against effective change within politics, markets and society, for the conventional economic growth model and its vision of prosperity has played a central role in the economic, political and psycho-social foundation of western society, and has become a basis for political consensus and stability” (DSD 1998, 7). **The truth is that the proposal for each country to**

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<sup>4</sup> However, it is recognised that there has been more progress in production than consumption. The policies dealing with clean production and eco-efficiency, for example, have better prospects in the short term. As far as consumption is concerned, the most definite agreements are leading towards establishing policies on purchases made by government offices and their management of waste, which has been called ‘greening the government’.

**stablish its own limits and to modify current consumption patterns has not generated much enthusiasm from any of the parts involved.**

Paragraph 28 of the Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21 adopted by the UN General Assembly Special Session on Sustainable Development in New York in June 1997 recommends courses of action required for a shift towards sustainable consumption. Regarding education it only advocates, “Encouraging the development and strengthening of educational programmes to promote sustainable consumption and production patterns.” A similar comment is made regarding the role of the media and publicity: “Encouraging the media, advertising and marketing sectors to help shape sustainable consumption patterns.” Very little for such a great responsibility. **However, at the sixth meeting of the CSD, held from April 20 to May 1, 1998, it was agreed to include improving education as a cross-sectorial issue in its multi-annual workplan and to report progress made at the seventh meeting to the CSD.**

**This requires specific pedagogical strategies for each group and segment of the population; for example, for those popular sectors which are very vulnerable** because their lack of competencies combines with their lack of competencies (e.g. literacy, accessing information and services, etc.) combines with their lower purchasing power to deny them an efficient participation in the goods and services market. Overcoming legal and economic vulnerability therefore becomes impossible without suitable educational processes for each social sector which would directly influence the “elimination of poverty and consolidation of democracy through wide-ranging processes of public participation and cultural development” (CI/CEAAL, 1996).

Nevertheless, EESC cannot be set aside from those current social processes which are derived from globalisation. Social identities are tied in with consumerism in a series of products (food, clothing, music, etc.). Nowadays, business practices generate a set of conditions which make it ill-advised to insult young people who, for example, identify more with rock music than traditional songs. Their identities have been reconfigured; starting out from a different notion of self and others, which must be taken into account when considering education processes. Identity is no longer restricted to national territories or culture since both the material and symbolic dimensions of modern life have been affected.

García Canclini (1995, 18) says that the heart of the matter is for people to exercise their rights as citizens and that for them to participate as consumers it is necessary to “deconstruct those conceptions which see consumers’ behaviour as predominantly irrational and those which only see people acting as a function of the rationality of ideological principles”...but to conceive of consumerism as a way of thinking and to recognise that its relationship with the public may give rise to a political strategy, according to García Canclini, may help combat the new socio-cultural scene. This scene can be synthesised in five processes:

- a) Redefinition of public institutions and circuits of public agency: less clout for local and national organisms in benefit of transnational business conglomerates.
- b) Reformulation of patterns of urban settlement and cohabitation: from the neighbourhood to the condominium, from intimate interaction to the polycentric dissemination of the urban sprawl, especially in major cities, where basic activities (working, studying, consuming) are often carried out far from the place of residence and where the times spent travelling through unfamiliar parts of the city reduces the time available to be spent in one’s own space.
- c) A reworking of the ‘very subjectivities’ due to the predomination of goods and messages from a globalised economy and culture over those generated in the city and country we live in.

- d) The resulting redefinition of the feeling of belonging and identity, governed less and less by local or national loyalty and more by participation in transnational or deterritorialised consumer communities (youngsters buying rock products, television viewers who watch CNN programmes, MTV and other chains using satellite broadcasts).
- e) The transformation of the citizen as a representative of public opinion into the citizen as a consumer interested in enjoying a certain quality of life. One of the manifestations of this change is that discursive, critical forms of participation give way to the enjoyment of shows in the electronic media in which the narration or simple accumulation of anecdotes prevails over the rationalisation of problems, and a brief visual display of events over a structured, prolonged analysis.” (Free translation).

### 3. Environmental educators’ regional networks and NGOs

As commented at the IUCN (1997) on a Latin-American perspective in relation to education for sustainability: “The educational actions of the last 20 years were mostly voluntary efforts and show the need for profound change. They have arisen from scientific fields, bringing research patterns and disciplinary traditions that influence analysis and the educational approach. Education is generally based on cognitive knowledge, on damage, solving problems, and scientific knowledge and concentrates on recycling paper, classifying residues and protected endangered species. These approaches are not sufficient to change social behaviour, and the economic, cultural and political reality reproduces the most negative aspects of the consuming culture and of poverty”.

In Mexico this is expressed through disjointed initiatives and measures which need to be integrated into co-ordinated strategies from which success indices may be derived, taking into account the inherent complications of evaluating pedagogical results over the short-term. Despite all of this, the last five years have seen exponential growth in the number of environmental educators, in their organisational and empowerment processes, in their penetration into different kinds of institutions and organisations, and in environmental educational and recreational centres or the incorporation of EE into their workplans. At the moment there are five regional networks of environmental educators covering the whole country, although some are better organised and others are only just starting up operations. Similarly, networks of EE centres are beginning to appear along with academic programmes for environmental educators in the form of master’s degrees (4), specialisation courses (2) and diplomas (9). There also exist directories of organisms and institutions which foment learning and academic exchange.

However, we are also faced with several problems which are still being worked out. Recognition of the legal character of the regional networks (except the central region), strengthening of the legal framework for EE, how to provide environmental educators with professional formation, and the inclusion of issues beyond conservation in their repertoire are some of the most important. It is with respect to this last point, that we will focus our attention on EESC.

As previously mentioned, EESC is an incipient area in Mexico. Even though some of the issues are dealt with in the field of EE, they have not had a specific focus on consumption, but rather on protecting the environment. Only the central region’s network of environmental educators have started to consider this area in the way it appears in the publicity for the *Second Forum on Values, Consumption and Environmental Deterioration: Practical Considerations of Environmental Educators*, held in October 1998. In addition, the Mexican Association of Studies for the Defence of the Consumer (Asociación Mexicana de Estudios para la Defensa

del Consumidor: Amedeco), founded in 1971 and already the largest of its kind in Latin America and the Caribbean, was one of the first to promote greater sensitivity on the consumption issues. This association employees the basic strategy of publicly denouncing companies violating the norms and of fomenting campaigns against the consumption of certain products, which means that it is not specifically or directly concerned with educational objectives.

There exist reports (Trímboli & Iturra 1997, 11) that consumer education practices began in Latin America and the Caribbean during the seventies and Mexico belongs to a group of countries from the region who have included this area into their formal education systems, especially as of the educational reform implemented in 1993. Nevertheless, the consumer's relationship with the market has been regulated very little and the available information does not reach all sectors or social groups so that they may claim their rights and develop the capacity to critically analyse commercial advertising. This would enable them to distinguish between their true needs and those induced by growing market complexity caused by globalisation phenomena and, in the case of Mexico, more particularly by the trading treaties it has signed, which have modified traditional product supply qualitatively and quantitatively in a short span of time.

Some groups of environmentalists and educators have placed importance upon some of the most pernicious effects of advertising, especially when it is aimed at young children, regarding the treatment of issues not only related to consumption and the environment (food of scant nutritional value, energy and water saving, waste management, trafficking in wildlife, etc.) but also others such as violence, human rights, the physically handicapped, etc. Anyway, the most frequent criticism is levelled at those advertisements aimed at high-income sectors of the population (cars, designer clothes, luxury items, trips abroad, etc.) which are considered offensive to the majority of the population, who are in a precarious economic situation.

It is important to strengthen the sustainable dimension of consumption in EE projects because the globalisation of communications and economic processes generate high social tensions over the marked differences in people's consumption, which is being expressed in the form of higher incidences of violence and delinquency, especially in urban zones. In the short term this will bring about the need for legislation on commercial advertising to avoid exacerbating the consumerism of the few while faced with the economic and socio-cultural realities of the great many who do even have access to the most basic needs satisfaction.

Certainly, consumer education flies right into the teeth of the gale of the corporate interests of the big producers and distributors, who have in many cases acted with unrestrained impunity. But true citizenship will never exist without better informed social participation acting in defence of people's interests and aspirations and which "is repaid with consumer rights protection and promotion policies and strategies, which go far beyond the defence of the value of money to encompass what is known as the defence of the *value of the person*" (Trímboli-Iturra, 1997) Small yet valuable local experiences may generate synergic effects. For example, the Prosumo project in Aguascalientes has encouraged the organisation of families of very low purchasing power who were provided with technical assistance for the repair of used electrical devices which were later sold at a low cost. In addition to the economic benefits resulting from the activity, there is an educational component rewarded by points for voluntary work done which can later be exchanged for products purchased by the organisation.

It has already been mentioned that it is the most economically deprived sectors which are most vulnerable to the lack of EESC "because to their defencelessness is added the lack of

competency to establish an efficient relationship with the goods and services market” (CI/CEAAL, 1996) On the other side of the coin, it is the economically healthier sectors which cause the greatest environmental impacts as a result of unsuitable consumption practices and a market which produces goods and services to satisfy the extravagant demands of a reduced sector of the population with purchasing power. Similarly, consumers’ organisations become socio-economic, political and cultural strategies which makes it possible to return a decisive role to those who had lost their right to have exercise market influence.

It can be inferred that these results are unreachable unless environmental educators’ networks and civil society organisations in general start including EESC in their workplans. While we are all consumers in one way or another, consumption as a generalised social phenomenon reveals different levels of participation, from the most individual to political activity.

#### **4. The national programme for the organisation of consumers**

The national programme for the organisation of consumers is promoted by the Federal Consumers’ Procurator’s Office (Profeco) This programme constitutes an institutional response to public demand for alternatives likely to create a consuming culture. In this proposal, educating the people as to how to choose a suitable form of behaviour with respect to consumption is an essential component. The programme comprises four sub-programmes:

- a) Promotion of the consumer organisation.
- b) Legal collaboration.
- c) Improvement of the family economy.
- d) Consuming culture.

As part of this programme, in 1996 the Profeco in co-ordination with the Secretary of Environment, Natural Resources and Fisheries (Semarnap) organised a workshop on “Education, Consumption and Sustainability” to provide a space for both discussion and analysis of environmental and consumption issues to develop inter-institutional projects which would lay the foundations for an educational strategy for sustainable consumption. The workshop consisted of eight integrated sessions of exhibitions and group work. The Profeco presented the national programme for the organisation of consumers and the Semarnap presented its national non-formal EE strategy. Others made contributions ranging from anthropology, pedagogy and economics to psychology. A planning exercise was also carried out to define joint courses of action for both organisms. The conclusions of the workshops were organised in four main topic areas:

- a) Links between consumption and the environment.
- b) Factors which determine consumption derive from consumerism.
- c) The impact of consumerism on the environment and the quality of life.
- d) Actions taken by the Profeco and Semarnap to attend problems caused by the consumption-environment relationship.

A synthesis of the conclusions suggests that the relationship between consumption and the environment is overdetermined and that a consuming culture is a necessary component of education<sup>5</sup>. The current problem posed by this relationship is linked to the western civilising model and its lifestyles as advocated by the mass media and other cultural apparatuses, bringing about the irrational exploitation of natural resources with impacts which in many cases are irreversible. Furthermore, this process has accelerated in recent decades as a consequence of global economic processes, globalising environmental problems and widening the inequity gap as regards the distribution of resources between northern and southern countries. In November, 1997, as a result of this workshop, a collaboration agreement was signed by the Semarnap and the Profeco to promote courses of action of mutual interest in EE, training, communication and research for sustainable consumption.

Under this agreement, the Semarnap and Profeco organised a *Forum on EECS*. This event boasted the participation of representatives of consumers' organisations, of environmental educators' networks, and of non-government and academic organisations interested in the issue. The final outcome of this forum was an inter-institutional strategy to strengthen education, in environmental educators' networks and consumers' organisations, and a plan of action with short-term goals.

## 5. Looking to the future

- a) If it is admitted that consumption patterns can be changed by means of regulatory processes, economic instruments and social instruments, such as education, it would be a good idea to try to find a better way to put these three components together. For example, environmental regulation, measures to fight poverty and institutionalised educational processes must be promoted or they will not gel. For the moment they work independently from each other, which reduces their margins of effectiveness.
- b) EECS must be strengthened in parallel with improvements in income distribution so that increased consumption does not in turn increase environmental impacts. There is no possibility of encouraging sustainable consumption through educational processes if the basic needs have not been satisfied.
- c) There is a material dimension and a symbolic dimension associated with consumption. No educational process can avoid both dimensions, which makes it necessary to develop different teaching techniques, especially to attend the most vulnerable social segments such as children and young people from poor families with different cultural backgrounds from those lifestyles advocated by the mass media which have been established as dominant models.
- d) For these reasons, pedagogical proposals aimed at promoting sustainable consumption must be specific and designed for each particular situation. Successful experiences in other countries or in different national contexts will be ineffective if they mean to impose themselves on other unrelated realities. Examples of success can be useful, so long as they are analysed as references defined by the boundaries of their own characteristics.

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<sup>5</sup> I understand the notion of overdetermination in the sense of Laclau and Mouffe (1987) like a key concept proposed by Althusser to refer the complexity of society. From Psychoanalysis and Linguistics it alludes to two notions: to the multiplicity of determinations and to the process of fusion in which happen the resignifications and the plurality of senses. Nothing exists in the social field that is not overdetermined.

- e) The organisation of consumers is a necessary pre-condition to obtaining clearer results in the modification of social consumption patterns, in addition to the effort which must be made in the organisation of formal educational systems.
- f) EECS must be strengthened as one aspect of EE, since a movement has arisen to push independent educational programmes in the context of the range of treaties and agreements promoted by different international agencies and organisms. Thus, we encounter education for the protection of bio-diversity, for the fight against desertification, etc. If this situation continues, it will not only provoke disjointed efforts which divide issues that should be dealt with together, but will also set off a struggle to obtain financial resources for each of the programmes, which will further reduce the already insufficient funds earmarked for education in developing countries.
- g) From Mexico's incipient experience in this issue it can be inferred that the country's particular composition and social distribution demands that policies on EECS must vary in accordance with the target population group (rural, urban, indigenous, etc.) and with the producers.
- h) As one aspect of EE, EECS bridges the gap to reach other spheres of public education, such as population studies, sexual education, education for human rights and for democracy, among others. By means of consumption, we Mexicans can reintegrate ourselves as citizens of an increasingly globalised world with our own distinctive, albeit plural, characteristics. It is not a case of defending essential "Mexican" identities because that would be absurd in a world of complex transitions which produces plural, provisional and nomadic subjectivities. It is a question of recognising existing social and cultural diversity and collectively constructing civilised proposals to achieve the right to equity in a world of differences.

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