

**Session 1.2: Strategic Discussion Part I:**  
**RCEs' Reflections on Transformation and Change Through Education**  
9:50-10:40, Wednesday, 23 November 2016

Moderator: Zinaida Fadeeva (UNU-IAS)

Panellists:

Daniel Babikwa (RCE Greater Eastern Uganda)  
Carolina Lopez (Candidate RCE Borderlands Mexico-USA)  
Rob O'Donoghue (RCE Makana and Rural Eastern Cape)  
Akpezi Ogbuigwe (Regional Advisor to the RCE Community Africa)

This session highlighted the role of education for transformation at different levels:

- (1) policy level
- (2) institutional level and
- (3) personal development (relevant competences).

The panellists were asked to reflect on the role of RCEs in facilitating the interplay of these levels and other elements of the system that encourage transformation, and comment on their position in relation to this.

*"It is through co-engaged learning of RCEs addressing a host of problems of particular regions, that competences become capabilities. In other words, the RCEs give competences an opportunity to be re-enacted towards transformation while addressing the regional challenges in a holistic manner. Focus on these competences, if taken in the context of learning and with a clarified philosophy of change behind it, might help to avoid compartmentalization resulting from a focus on narrowly defined topics and bring forward synergies in the areas of SD."*<sup>1</sup>

The Panellists were also asked to reflect on the meaning of transformation keeping the following definitions as a starting points:

*"Transformation is a change that is profound, radical, and sustainable; a change that fundamentally and indelibly alters the very nature of something. Not all change is or should be transformational."*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Building Resilient Future through Multistakholder Learning and Action: Ten Years of Regional Centres of Expertise for Sustainable Development, 2014

<sup>2</sup> R. Gass What is transformation? Social transformation project, [www.stproject.org](http://www.stproject.org)

*"Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and irreversibly alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender; our body awareness, our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy" - Edmund O'Sullivan*

Panellists shared their thoughts about transformation through education, transformation of education and, most importantly, the role of RCEs in all these processes.

Rob O'Donoghue: For a small city like Yogyakarta transformation and change is very difficult and challenging. Two aspects are particularly important, first transformation is an uncomfortable change process and second education is crucial. RCEs are the basis of learning together but they need to be transformative. It is essential to work towards core central ideas that can be defined together and can lead to transformation. Problems don't produce transformation instead they produce challenges that can be tackled if RCEs can be seen as learners together. We provoke transformations using freedoms, but freedoms from what? Freedoms like civic freedom or freedom from disease.

Akpezi Ogbuigwe: I feel the compelling urge as I cast my eyes to the future that higher education must transform itself if it must remain relevant. I also see these complex times as both challenging and exciting. Exciting, because we were built for times like this. That was why we were not born in the Stone Age. This generation, our generation must deliver the tools for resilience, innovation and adaptation to the next generation. Tomorrow's campus must not only be cutting edge in design and greening but must be able to produce tough graduates living in vulnerable societies but equipped to ride the storm. A number of universities are already on this pathway. According to Peter Corcoran and Wals "the final DESD assessment report hailed HEI's as having made significant gains towards supporting sustainable development." So what is the role of the SDGs in advancing this movement in higher education?

The first step is to understand what they are and catch the spirit within the goals. This is not easy, as we have had so many global aspirations since 1972 with a name change as new leaders emerge. Every world leader/UN Agency wants to put its own mark on the global agenda. Within a relatively short time, we have had environmental education, education for sustainable development, sustainability education, global citizenship education, climate change education etc. What could we be running from? Could we be running from the truth that humans have to first of all learn self-discipline and respect for each other? Yet if we fail at the simplicity of environmental education - learning from nature, how do we hope to infuse the more complex dimensions of sustainability, climate change, global citizenship into the way we learn? According to the UN, the SDGs seek to end poverty, protect the planet, foster peace, and ensure prosperity through renewed partnerships and that's enough reason for me to jump on board! People, dignity, planetary health, partnerships, justice are essential pillars needed to foster the resilience and reconstruction needed for tomorrow's Campus.

In January 2014 at the African Union Summit in Addis - Ethiopia, African leaders adopted the Common African Position (CAP) to the post 2015 Development Agenda which highlights the following key objectives as overarching for Africa:

- Poverty eradication
- The need for a structural transformation of Africa
- The development of productive capacities in Africa.

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2015/10/13/an-african-take-on-the-sustainable-development-goals/>

Goal 4 of the SDG's is specific to the advancement of quality education, with target 4.7 placing more emphasis on education for sustainable development (ESD). So as an African teacher in one of Africa's emerging campuses, I see in the SDGs a comprehensive platform to finally transform higher education in Africa to deal with fundamental issues that have held us down, such as poverty, hunger (inability to feed our people), environmental degradation, an excessive consumption of unproductive education and goods, debt burden, market inaccessibility, technology dearth, governance challenges and health maladies like HIV/AIDS, malaria, measles and malnutrition.

In this context, the SDGs provide an ethos for higher education to reinvent itself. To rethink teaching and research and community engagement. To promote a high quality, diverse yet integrated curriculum with programs that are professionally strong, academically rigorous, morally sound and relevant to society. To build educational institutions that speak, that breed and demonstrate innovations and knowledge for the challenges faced by society and adequately prepare the population to cope with challenges brought on by globalization. Empowering students to become ethical, critical/reflective citizens with the ability to evaluate situations and make informed decisions.

The SDGs further advance sustainability in higher education by creating environments where institutions can access additional funding towards research and facilitation for academics and stakeholders in higher education to build clear vision that guide teaching and research in sustainability; enabling institutions to participate in networks, collaborate and coordinate activities that advance sustainability; promoting the dissemination of more knowledge on alternative paths towards sustainable development and laying a universal basis for recognizing and following excellent case studies and adopt good practices in sustainability.

SDG's provide for a broader understanding of sustainability for institutions of higher education, governments, and businesses. This, in turn, promotes multi-sector collaborations, which push the boundaries of sustainable development and motivate businesses and the broader society to change their operations and reflect alignment with the sustainability agenda. Such collaborations, partnerships, and networks tend to shift thinking, motivate, and hasten the achievement of sustainability. On the other hand, Higher Education is essential in popularizing the SDGs. To ignore the higher education sector in these efforts would be to ignore the power of knowledge residing in the universities and the power of the youth (half the world's population

is under 20 years old) in contributing to responsible, critical and effective decision making for the future we want.

Can you imagine what will happen if this knowledge force and manpower reorients all learning and research 'for' sustainable development? For people, dignity, planet, partnership, prosperity, and Justice? It is said that inspirational learning only happens when you have truly inspirational teachers. So the mission of SDGs in Higher education is not just about new courses or buildings or about pushing the barriers of light and recycling etc. but also about inspirational teachers, students and campuses. About learners who are willing to learn, unlearn and relearn.

Undoubtedly the 'new' sustainable development agenda and subsequently the 17 SDGs that link sustainability to development play an important role in advancing sustainability in higher education by:

- Creating opportunities to realize more funding to support research and development of new programs that advance sustainability concept.
- Facilitating for a better, more focused view of sustainability. That is, sustainability is not just about environmental conservation but is more holistic in terms of environment, economic and social development.
- Opening up a wider base to form new partnerships and collaborations on the sustainability agenda.
- Providing a better platform for reporting sustainability, benchmarking and recognition of and following excellent case studies and adopting best practices.
- Challenging universities to disseminate more relevant information and training programs that address the specific goals of sustainable development.

Universities can practically entrench the SDGs by including sustainability training for all courses offered; exploring opportunities that engage communities and institutions in the advancement of the SDGs, and showcasing instances and models of sustainable development programs and activities.

As higher education practitioners, if we ignore the SDGs, we may lose relevance eventually. If we choose to ignore the SDGs, ... "Higher education will become the dinosaurs of tomorrow." One of the great lessons I have learnt at this conference is the role of my right and left hemispheres in grasping sustainability. According to Prof. Christopher A. Haines we need to understand our thinking to identify threat and avoid dead ends. The SDGs reinforce the notion that sustainability is a critical concept in higher education. This is evidenced by all the case studies that have been presented in this conference and the posters. Very impressive indeed.

Daniel Babikaw: One cannot separate education from its context. The living context plays a large role. At home when one is trying to transform the world through education, much of it is dependent on the challenges on the ground. Creating wealth and thereby improving the country in short time, may create a certain definition for regulators, and academics but may be different in terms of Sustainable Development and transformation compared to for example the context for policy makers. They may work in a 5-year term and in order to be re-elected they look at other

indicators, that create wealth, such as jobs for the community, and the question is at what expense? Trying to use ESD in order to create jobs, we as regulators and educators have a problem: How do we benefit from what matters to those that make a decision? What makes sense? There is much need for dialogue. Usually educators respond rather than the being the ones that speak fast and early so that policy makers are in a position to respond.

Carolina Lopez: The wealth of RCE work is impressive. RCEs are very unique in their transformative position. We can come together with best practices although we sit in different localities. Our Living lab centre for transformation, human development, education and environment in different areas, including the economy. There is Infinite transformative potential of each RCE when returning home after this conference. Transformation starts here at this conference between all of us.

#### **Questions and Comments from the floor:**

RCE North Sweden: Getting to the policy makers in a structured way it is very important. In Sweden, the national delegation on agenda 2030 is working in dialogue with counties and municipalities. Nine out of twelve of all representatives are invited to hear topics on how to enhance current education. If we don't get in contact with leaders, we will not get any results. RCEs should use the network as a platform for legitimacy.

RCE Waikato: One may spend a lot of time engaging with policy with several setbacks. At RCE Waikato we work with 'Generation 0 Project' where we are also learning how to write climate policy not just criticise it. It all comes down to accountability of other countries towards the Pacific countries. Here is an opportunity to become more proactive rather than reactive for strong climate policies, the key being education in the process.

UNEP (Monika MacDevette): There are several entry points into the UN system. This may be another way how to tackle difficulties when working with governments. Education does not target only youth or has to be seen in the university context. We should also be looking at lifelong learning. How can we engage policy makers to make people change? Ideally there should be continuous learning at every level of society.

Zinaida Fadeeva summarised: There were different notions of engagement with different areas and towards different goals. What are the strategies for engagement? The whole community, the whole person, the whole institution, it seems a holistic strand is required. First we may wish to think a little more philosophical and inspirationally about what we are doing. Secondly we should ask ourselves: are we doing enough to fulfil the SDG ambitions?