

Development Education in the Era of Globalisation

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Final Assignment

HEADS UP or thumbs down? A postcolonial analysis of the UN decade on education for sustainable development

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0. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, education, more than ever, cannot be conceived as the transmission of a predefined corpus of knowledge. The knowledge of today, defined in a specific geographical or cultural setting, can be obsolete tomorrow, or even today when moving to another country (which is the reality for an ever increasing number of people¹). Thus, education has to empower the learner to learn by himself, to be open to differences, to communicate with people from various backgrounds, to understand the impact of global processes on people's lives and to play an active role in society (Bourn 2008). Such "global skills" shall help to play a positive role in the context of globalisation, regarding "connections between the local, national, and global, the relationship between the social and the environmental, and the recognition of cultural sensitivities" (Bourn 2008:4).

Going beyond an idea of purely individual competences, Andreotti (2006), emphasis in her concept of "critical global citizenship education" the highly political character of social relations, the need to deal with insecurity, self-reflectivity and to question assumptions and power. Such an approach to global citizenship education and related skills underlines complexities and aims to change systemic structures of injustice and inequality. This seems particular relevant for educational programmes dealing with planetary human challenges.

Therefore, I will attempt to analyse in this assignment a programme with a global scope: the United Nations (UN) Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). I will use a new analytical framework by Vanessa Andreotti (2012) called the HEADS UP checklist, which is based on post-colonial theory thinking. This checklist is still under development, so it's application on such a complex and big programme as the DESD is quite experimental.

The guiding question will be:

How addresses the DESD questions of complexity, plurality, inequality, uncertainty and power in a globalised world?

The objective of this essay is twofold:

¹ The number of international migrants continuously increased over the last 20 years (1990: 156 Mio, 2010: 214 Mio), United Nations Population Division <http://esa.un.org/migration/index.asp?panel=1>

- To critically analyse the DESD, based on the HEADS UP checklist.
- To test the applicability and epistemological value of the HEADS UP checklist on a concrete example.

Considering the complex undertaking of analysing a global, UN led process through a post-modern lens in the limits of this short essay, I will start with some reflections on the hermeneutics of both the DESD and the HEADS UP checklist. Then, I will introduce the DESD, including an outline of the underlying educational concepts, before presenting the analytical framework HEADS UP, which stands for Hegemony, Ethnocentrism, Ahistorism, Depolitisation, Salvationism, Uncomplicated solutions and Paternalism. The main part of this article is the analysis of the DESD according to these seven categories. In the conclusion, I will outline if the HEADS UP checklist proved to be a useful analytical tool and to which degree the DESD is impregnated by colonial thinking.

1. Limits and hermeneutics of this analysis

The DESD is a complex, multi layer undertaking, and an all-embracing analysis of the decade would go far beyond the limits of this exercise. In order to assess how the DESD relates to the elements of the HEADS UP checklist, I will base my analysis on two key documents: The International Implementation Scheme (UNESCO 2006), which sets the global framework for the decade, and its mid term review (UNESCO 2009), which had a particular focus on contexts and structures of the decade. From this global, conceptual perspective, the present analysis cannot consider practical examples of implementation or national case studies.

The analytical framework of this article, Vanessa Andreotti's HEADS UP checklist, is "an educational tool to help people engage critically with local and global initiatives created to address problems of injustice" (Andreotti 2012). As such, it aims to "support people in moving from naive hope towards sceptical optimism and ethical solidarities [...] to go through the difficulties and discomforts of confronting our past legacies and current inequalities in order to pluralize the possibilities for living together in the present and the future." At the centre of Andreotti's approach is the question, not the answer, the irritation, not the ready-made solution. It's approach is not institutional, but highly personal and reflective.

In contrast, the discourse of an UN led process such as the DESD is necessarily shaped by the institutional setting of the global intergovernmental structure of the United Nations: Its formulation is based on negotiations in the frame of a multilateral power play, leading to compromises which allow consensus and political approval in the concerned institutional bodies. Thus, a critical “wresting with concepts and contexts, choices and implications” (Andreotti 2012) which is at the centre of the HEADS UP approach, is necessarily incompatible with a politically agreed initiative as the DESD, which has to reinforce its own assumptions in a self affirming way in order to underline its own legitimacy.

In short, a UN approved long term and multi layered initiative such as the DESD and a short and still tentative post-modern checklist to stimulate doubt and questioning seem pretty much incompatible in their respective hermeneutics. Nevertheless, I hope that the experimental approach to bring the two together can provide some meaningful reflections and thoughts on the limits and potential, both of the DESD and the HEADS UP checklist.

2. The Decade for Education for Sustainable Development

The DESD has been put in place by decision of the UN General Assembly in 2002. According to the International Implementation Scheme for the DESD (UNESCO 2006:24), its vision is “a world where everyone has the opportunity to benefit from quality education and learn the values, behaviour and lifestyles required for a sustainable future and for positive societal transformation”. In order to understand the underlying concept of education, we will have a closer look on the concept of sustainable development, and the skills and competences promoted by the decade.

a. What is sustainable development?

The World Commission on Environment and Development, informally known as *Brundtland Commission* after its chairperson, defined sustainable development (SD) as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (UNESCO 2006:13). This shall be achieved through particular approaches regarding the three “pillars” of sustainable development: *Social relations* should be based on democracy and participation, the *environment* should be treated with respect and *economic*

development should consider “limits and potential of economic growth” (UNESCO 2006:14). A crosscutting aspect is *culture*, which involves “ways of being, relating, behaving, believing and acting”. The goals of sustainable development, such as eradication of poverty or preservation of natural resources, are ambitious, and few would disagree with these. Sustainable development entered in the mainstream, and 20 years after the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, where the international community broadly approved the concept, “sustainable development goals” became a hot candidate to replace the Millennium Development Goals, which expire in 2015.

However, sustainable development, and in particular its notion of “development” (rather than sustainability) has been a constant object of critique, not only, but in particular from Latin American thinkers. Following the post-development thinking of Arturo Escobar, Gudynas (2011) considers development as a western concept based on dreams of continuous progress, taming nature and material comfort for all, and proposes alternatively the Latin American notion of *Buen Vivir*. Also the European De-Growth movement around French economist Serge Latouche has a critical view on sustainable development, which is considered as a blurry and progressivist concept (Latouche 2002).

b. Skills and education in the decade

UNESCO (2006) puts education in a central role to affect positive change towards a sustainable global future. The *Earth Charter*, an international declaration created in the follow-up of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, outlines fundamental values and principles for a just, sustainable and peaceful global society, and presents empowerment, responsibility and intrinsic values as key elements of education. Education, and in particular education for sustainable development (ESD) would be the main transformative force to achieve sustainable development and a *sine-qua-non* condition for responsible future-oriented thinking.

Outcome of ESD, which is conceived of transformative (“learning as change”) rather than transmissive nature (UNESCO 2009:65) would be skills such as continuous learning, critical thinking, co-operation, application of knowledge, participation, managing change, handling complexity, interdependencies and risks and the ability to identify and clarify values (UNESCO 2006, UNESCO 2009).

However, the mid-term review of the DESD (UNESCO 2009) acknowledges that the interpretation and application of ESD varies according to regions: Some actors would emphasise the “E” in ESD, stressing the personal transformation which shall lead to empowered citizens and new social relations. Others would focus on the “SD” aspect, aiming to apply a specific set of values, knowledge and behaviour.

The skills concept related to ESD seems very much in line with the global skills, as discussed for example by Bourn (2008), who underlines as well aspects like participation, openness and interconnectedness between environment and social aspects – a key feature of the sustainable development concept.

However, questions of power, politics and justice play a rather implicit role in the outlined concept of ESD and related skills, in contrast to the “critical global citizenship” concept by Andreotti (2006), which leads to the assumption that ESD has elements of a accommodating concept that avoids potentially painful questions and can please a wide range of actors with potentially opposing visions of sustainability, from international companies to civil society. In the following, I will use Andreotti’s (2012) HEAD UP checklist to explore this aspect further.

3. The Analytical Framework

Vanessa Andreotti’s thinking on education is based on post-colonial theory, which argues that the “naturalisation of Western dominance and supremacy” (Andreotti 2007:69, referring to Spivak) would lead to a modernisation paradigm, which is disconnected from historical power relations and oppression. For the context of education, postcolonial thinking as argued by Spivak and Andreotti, puts the doubt – or the *deconstruction* - in a central position: “Deconstruction [...] is [...] a persistent critique of what one cannot not want.” (Spivak in Andreotti 2007:74). While we can see a similarity with certain skills inherent to ESD like “handling complexity”, it is noteworthy that, in ESD, doubt and awareness of complexity does not seem to touch on the concept of sustainable development as such. One can barely not want the benedictory interlocking of sustainable growth, social justice and preservation of nature promised by the sustainable development concept. Spivak and Andreotti would invite the learner, the citizen, to “persistently critique” exactly this moral hammer and ask where such a discourse comes from, who promotes it and to who’s

advantage it exists. The HEADS UP checklist (Andreotti 2012) is meant to provide a framework to ask these questions in a systematic way. Two questions are linked to each element, the first asking if the pattern is reproduced, the second exploring if the pattern is questioned or problematised.

a. HEGEMONY: justifying superiority and supporting domination

- 1) Does this initiative promote the idea that one group of people could design and implement solutions for everyone?
- 2) Does this initiative invite people to think about its own limitations and insufficiencies?

b. ETHNOCENTRISM: projecting one view as universal

- 1) Does this initiative imply that anyone who disagrees with what is proposed is immoral or ignorant?
- 2) Does this initiative acknowledge that there are other logical ways of looking at the same issue?

c. AHISTORICISM: forgetting historical legacies and complicities

- 1) Does this initiative introduce a problem in the present without reference to why it is like that and how 'we' are connected to that?
- 2) Does this initiative offer a complex historical analysis of the issue?

d. DEPOLITICIZATION: disregarding power inequalities and ideological roots of analyses and proposals

- 1) Does this initiative present the problem/solution as disconnected from power and ideology?
- 2) Does this initiative acknowledge its own ideological location and offer a robust analysis of power relations?

e. SALVATIONISM: framing help as the burden of the fittest

- 1) Does this initiative present people 'in need' as helpless victims of local violence or misfortunes and helpers or adopters as the

chosen 'global' people capable of leading humanity towards its destiny of order, progress and harmony?

2) Does this initiative acknowledge that the desire to be better than/superior to others and the imposition of aspirations for singular ideas of progress and development have historically been part of the problem?

f. UN-COMPLICATED SOLUTIONS: offering easy solutions that do not require systemic change

1) Does this initiative offer simplistic analyses and answers that do not invite people to engage with complexity or think more deeply?

2) Does this initiative offer a complex analysis of the problem acknowledging the possible adverse effects of proposed solutions?

g. PATERNALISM: seeking affirmation of superiority through the provision of help

1) Does this initiative portray people in need as people who lack education, resources, civilization and who would and should be very grateful for your help?

2) Does this initiative portray people in need as people who are entitled to disagree with their saviours and to legitimately want to implement different solutions to what their helpers have in mind?

4. Looking at the decade through the HEADS UP lens

a. HEGEMONY

This aspect looks at the question of superiority and hegemony, and indeed, there are indicators that the DESD follows the idea that "one group of people could design and implement solutions for everyone". Looking again at the already quoted "global vision" of the decade (UNESCO 2006:24), it states that everyone should "learn the

values, behaviour and lifestyles required for a sustainable future and for positive societal transformation.” While the framework acknowledges that there is not one master plan for this “societal transformation”, it implies that there would be a “required” and defined set of personal attributes to become a morally integer actor of positive change.

Furthermore, there seems to be a post-colonial bias in the discourse and implementation of the decade. For example, the review (UNESCO 2009) found out that richer countries or regions tend to focus on the environmental aspect of sustainable development, while poorer countries would emphasise more the socio-cultural dimension of ESD, such as ethics, equality or citizenship. This could be an indicator that aspects questioning the dominance of the richer countries are not systematically addresses.

Also, the chapter on Europe and North America (the “West”) in the mid-term review of the decade starts with the statement that the “region encompasses countries with a rich cultural diversity and with different socio-economic and political conditions.” (UNESCO 2009:21) This is certainly the case for any region of the world, but implies that “the West” is richer and more complex than other, supposedly “poor and simple” regions or continents. The general picture of decade implementation in Europe and North America is described in an overall very positive manner (while it is recognised that the region would have good preconditions, as SD and ESD are regarded as “western concepts”, UNESCO 2009:21), leaving aside the huge challenges of unsustainable consumption societies. Main problem in this region would be South-Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia – shortly, the “developing countries” within the region – because of their “poor quality of education” (UNESCO 2009:21).

In contrast, the description of the situation in sub-saharan Africa is kicks off with a long list of scourges, such as poverty, AIDS, live-expectancy, limited institutional capacity etc. Maybe most strikingly, the colonial past is barely mentioned in the whole review. In the Africa chapter, “colonial legacy” is listed as one of the causes for unsustainable development in Africa, in a long list together with “cultural beliefs and practices, [...] wealth accumulation for the benefit of the elite,[...] corruption” (UNESCO 2009:17). By doing so, the past and present colonial exploitation is reduced to one among many mostly cultural obstacles to “development”.

Considering these observations, it seems that the DESD, at least in the analysed documents, is not free from a thinking mode of hegemony and superiority.

b. ETHNOCENTRISM

To which extent allows the DESD a pluralism of views and approaches, or, on the contrary, does it impose one particular view as universal?

The objectives of sustainable development and the decade are not questioned or exposed to a critical review within the analysed documents, but a full chapter in the review of the decade is dedicated to “meanings of ESD” (UNESCO 2009:25ff.). The report finds out that there is a wide, sometimes conflicting range of interpretations of ESD. While many of these differences “are likely to remain and, from a diversity point of view, should remain” (UNESCO 2009:24), the paper calls for interregional learning. It is underlined that the “path to follow” to reach the DESD objectives should be defined on a country level, not following “models derived from the industrialised countries”, which are “neither appropriate nor desirable” from a sustainable development perspective (UNESCO 2006:24).

The recurrent reference to indigenous people and knowledge both in the DESD framework and review suggests that a multi-ethnic and multi-perspective approach to sustainable development is valued. However, it remains unclear what precisely indigenous groups are. The review (UNESCO 2009) acknowledges that the aspect of indigenous knowledge is addressed by only few countries in Europe and North America, with some notable exceptions as the case of Slovenia, where the Roma community is object of increased government efforts relating to inclusion, especially in the schooling system. However, it remains unclear to what extent such integrative measures contribute to self-determined development and emancipatory participation of a marginalised group. Also, considering Roma population in Slovenia as “indigenous”, it is not unveiled what defines an “indigenous group”, besides the implicit characteristics of an under-privileged, ethnically defined social group. Nevertheless, it’s noteworthy that indigenous knowledge and values are explicitly highlighted as barer of solutions to questions of sustainability in other regions, for example regarding “indigenous knowledge on navigation in the Pacific” (UNESCO 2009:45).

The mentioned aspects imply an appreciation and space for pluralism in approaches

towards the aims of the decade (though the aims as such are presented as universal and not negotiable). However, omitting the question of power between the various actors, in particular those outside the implementation framework of the decade, it remains unclear how such pluralism of approaches and the proposed questioning of the unsustainable “industrialised countries model” can blossom and carry fruits. The reality of the world suggests rather an exportation of an industrialised consumer society model than its questioning or replacement through more sustainable, possibly indigenously inspired ways of being.

c. AHISTORICISM

This aspect of the HEADS UP checklists asks if an initiative provides a “complex historical analysis” of the given issue. Regarding sustainable development, or more concretely ESD, it seems that the historical element, and in particular the post-colonial power relations, are not sufficiently present in the analysed documents: The word “history” is mentioned only four times in the framework document, and three times in the review, more in a rhetorical manner. Colonialism isn’t mentioned at all in the framework, and only once in the review, in relation to regional challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO 2009:17). In very general terms “history and tradition” are mentioned as part of the cross-cutting cultural dimension of SD (UNESCO 2006:14), but no explicit elaboration on this point regarding ESD follows, in contrast to other aspects such as diversity or values. The review recognised various interpretations of ESD in different countries focussing either on “a more pedagogical orientation towards ESD emphasizing (social) learning, democracy and participation or a more instrumental one emphasizing changing people’s behaviour in a predetermined or expert-led direction” (UNESCO 2009:24) based on different “traditions in governance”. Where these “traditions” come from historically and how the various actors are connected to these remains completely opaque in the analysed documents.

d. DEPOLITICIZATION

Similarly to the question of historical legacies, the DESD does not seem to pay particular attention to questions of power and ideology, both regarding the problem of sustainability and the proper ideological location of sustainable development as such.

In the context of the recent vague of protest, revolutions and democratisation in the Arab world, the chapter on the Arab region in the review of the decade is particularly striking in this regard: Written in 2009, when seemingly stone solid autocracies were still in place in most Arab countries, the review (UNESCO 2009:20) acknowledges “a number of governance challenges”. However, democracy and civic liberties are not mentioned at all among these.

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that human rights are presented as a *sine qua non* condition for sustainable development in the framework (UNESCO 2006:18), which pleads for a resolutely human rights based approach to development. This goes so far to include lobbying and advocacy by empowered citizens explicitly as part of the ESD concept. But beyond a short paragraph of five lines, not much more follows on these aspects in the further document or the review.

The institutional character of an UN run process, which has to accommodate a broad range of member states, might have led to a rather shy approach regarding power and ideology, and similarly regarding historical and colonial questions as discussed in the section before.

e. SALVATIONISM

The “ultimate goal [of sustainable development] is to achieve peaceful coexistence among peoples, with less suffering, less hunger, less poverty in a world where people will be able to practice their rights as human beings and citizens in a dignified way” (UNESCO 2006:15) – is this objective “towards a destiny of order, progress and harmony” (Andreotti 2012) framed as a “burden of the fittest”, victimising the ones to be empowered? The universal and global character of the DESD implies that “everyone is a stakeholder in ESD” (UNESCO 2006:25), and thus become actor and implementer of the decade. A particular and explicit reference is made to indigenous people, who are “stakeholders both in the active and passive sense”, meaning recipients (target group) and knowledge providers, especially regarding conservation of natural resources. However, the underlying thinking implies that “the people” are the ones to be educated, by the three main stakeholders: governments and intergovernmental bodies, civil society organisations and private sector.

In this context, it is interesting that the notion of poverty is not discussed as a question of inequalities or power, but as an unfortunate fact that has to be addressed

through providing empowering skills and competences to the poor, which would eventually contribute to lift them out of poverty (e.g. UNESCO 2009:17). On the other hand, “the rich, who have much higher levels of unsustainable production and consumption” than “the poor” are also explicit target group of ESD (UNESCO 2006:10).

Maybe most striking regarding the representation of DESD target groups as victims or objects is the use of photos in the review of the decade: An number of images shows coloured people in a situation of instruction, following silently and attentively the discourse of a teacher (e.g. UNESCO 2009:56, UNESCO 2009:59). Another picture, following the mentioning of “street children and working children” shows a group of (Asian?) children in a street (UNESCO 2009:18). These pictures, which come without any explanation who is pictured and how these people relate to the DESD, reinforce an image of “the poor” who have to be helped, ideally through education and the DESD, to progress out of their supposedly unsatisfactory current situation.

f. UN-COMPLICATED SOLUTIONS

The DESD acknowledges the complexity of sustainable development and ESD and the need to elaborate locally adapted answers (e.g. UNESCO 2009:27). Nevertheless, regarding particular aspects of SD, repeatedly “un-complicated solutions” are offered without a critical reflection. For example, the Millennium Development Goals and Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers are presented as the principal means for poverty reduction, suggesting that these actually deliver on the latter and without a systemic view on factors creating poverty, which could lead to more systemic challenges (UNESCO 2006:20). Also, cooperate responsibility (CR), and in particular the UN Global Compact initiative, are highlighted as answers to align the private sector to the sustainable development agenda, without considering the growing critique on CR and the Global Compact especially². Lastly, technological advancement and solutions are presented as “needed”, without considering side effects of such progressivist approaches. Of course all these issues are highly complex and cannot be discussed in detail in the documents in question, but there seems to be a discrepancy between the acknowledged multi-layered and highly

² See for example <http://www.globalcompactcritics.net/>

complex challenge of sustainable development and ESD, and a lack of systems thinking regarding some parts of the suggested approaches.

g. PATERNALISM

In addition to elements already mentioned in previous sections, namely “salvatorism” and “hegemony”, there is some evidence of portraying poor people as victims: “The poor, trapped in a cycle of deprivation and vulnerability, are unable to make [choices].” (UNESCO 2006:10). Also, in particular the section on Sub-Saharan Africa starts with a long list of lacks, for example in income, quality of life, knowledge, education, institutional and general capacity etc. (UNESCO 2009:17) Consequently, “ESD has untapped potential to offer solutions” to Africa. The question of which kind of solutions the Africans would like to employ is not discussed.

5. Conclusion

a. HEADS UP as a analytical tool

HEADS UP is a way to ask questions. These critical questions are useful to get to the essence of a given initiative, in particular relating to aspects of power, history and viewpoints, as we could observe in the present essay. However, some aspects of the checklist (such as “hegemony” and “paternalism” for example) seem to overlap in a certain way, and it might not be necessary to scrutinise a given initiative through the whole list of the seven aspects proposed in HEADS UP. In a possible revision or further development of the tool, it might be helpful to refine and maybe simplify the question catalogue in order to go more directly to the point.

Concerning the mentioned hermeneutic discrepancy between the post-modern reflection frame of HEADS UP and the DESD, a highly institutionalised long term and multi layered multi stakeholder global initiative, as object of this analysis we can retain that the two approaches might have radically different discursive backgrounds, but they are not incompatible regarding the epistemological value of bringing the two together. HEADS UP can offer an inspirational stimulation of reflection on various aspects of the decade, though, as a matter of fact, it does not provide answers. For example, the HEADS UP lens provides clear evidence of a lack in addressing questions of power, ideology and history in the DESD. However, the checklist merely serves as a starting point for reflection and does not unveil motivations, interests and

actors behind this deficit. It would require a deeper and more systematic analysis, beyond the HEADS UP question catalogue, to obtain more solid evidence on the mentioned aspects.

b. HEADS UP or thumbs down for the DESD?

The DESD as presented in the two documents reviewed in this article shows high appreciation for diversity and pluralism in approaches, and emphasises in particular the importance of indigenous knowledge and contributions to meeting the objectives of the DESD and sustainable development in general. It invites everyone to be a stakeholder and underlines the need of mutual, cross regional learning. Also, “the rich” are considered as particularly important target group in order to shift harmful economic models such as western consumer societies to a more sustainable mode. Unfortunately, the review does not elaborate on this in the regional analysis of Europe and North-America.

However, the questions of the HEADS UP checklist provide evidence that there is a general lack of systems thinking in the texts on the decade, omitting, in a almost systematic way, questions of power, ideology and history (colonialism). These are, however, key elements for understanding and eventually achieving sustainable development. It is questionable how the DESD should achieve its objectives and make a meaningful contribution towards a more just and sustainable world without addressing these questions in an open and ambitious way. One could even argue that the absence of these questions reinforces the current unsustainable system, and the evidence that today, in year eight of the decade, the world hasn't really become more sustainable, might support such an argument.

This aspect goes along with the finding that a critical self reflection of the decade, ESD and SD is not provided: We don't know, from reading the framework and the review, who promotes or opposes the SD and ESD concepts, and which are potential ideological and power-related implications of the decade.

It seems that the decade has provided a powerful framework for a broad range of states and actors to advance the ESD agenda, to put questions of education on the national negotiation tables and to mobilise resources around the topic. However, considering the dramatic situation of the world and the lack of progress in challenging the current, deeply unsustainable system, we have to ask if this is

enough, and if the DESD wouldn't channel energies of well-meaning actors to address sustainability and justice into an institutional setting were they don't question the system as such. A more detailed analysis of the decade, in particular regarding its implementation on a national level, would be needed in order to gather evidence if the DESD is promoting the "naive hope" to improve a system which seemingly cannot be improved, or to change the system through "sceptical optimism and ethical solidarities" (Andreotti 2012).

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