

Title

Sustainable Contraction: An Alternative to Sustainable Development

Abstract

This paper provides an overview of David Selby's innovative idea of sustainable contraction, developed to counter the longstanding focus on sustainable development.

Country

CANADA

Author Details

| AUTHOR | |
|---|---|
| Title of author | Dr. Professor |
| Surname | MCGREGOR |
| First Name | Sue L. T. |
| Name of Institution | Mount Saint Vincent University |
| Address of Institution | 166 Bedford Highway, Halifax NS Canada B3M2J6 |
| E-mail address of author | Sue.mcgregor@msvu.ca |
| Author biography (50 words maximum) A Canadian home economist (40 years), Sue has a keen interest in transdisciplinarity, integral studies, moral leadership and transformative practice, especially as they relate to home economics and consumer studies. She is Docent in Home Economics at the University of Helsinki and Marjorie M. Brown Distinguished Professor, 2011. http://www.consultmcgregor.com | |

CATEGORY

Consumer
Education
Home Economics
Sustainable Development

THEMES

Sustainable Development
UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development

TYPE

Discussion Paper

Introduction

Wals (2010, p.6) referred to “the urgency, systemic nature, magnitude, uncertainty, ambiguity, complexity as well as the moral and ethical underpinnings of the sustainability challenge.” In response to this challenge, we are in the midst of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) (2005-2014). The assumption of the UN decade is that current rates of development are unsustainable and that education is a powerful tool by which to mediate this situation. Another assumption is that development should continue, just in a sustainable way (UNESCO, 2005). This paper challenges that assumption. After defining development, sustainability and unsustainability, the discussion turns to an alternative approach, David Selby’s (2007a, 2010) notion of sustainable contraction. It is an example of a strong model of sustainable development required to cope with looming crises facing human kind and the planet.

Development

Sustainable development comprises two concepts, development and sustainable. Development refers to unfolding and advancing through progressive stages. When things or people develop, they progress or move from a simpler or lower to a more advanced, mature or complex form or stage. Through this process, it is possible for latent possibilities (not presently active) to emerge (Harper, 2010). Construed most broadly, development refers to the goal of improving the general conditions in which human beings lead their lives (e.g., eliminating poverty, reducing illness, improving infrastructure), thereby promoting human well-being (Mikkelsen, 1995).

McGregor (2002) further clarified that development pertains to each of economic, human and social development. While social development is concerned with promoting social progress relative to economic progress, human development is concerned with the empowerment of individuals and family units that make up society and are the backbone of the economy. In order to have social development, we must have human development and vice versa. They operate in tandem, are hard to distinguish and both are intricately intertwined with the economy.

Sustainable

Sustainability is the second major concept shaping the UN ESD Decade. If something *is* sustainable, the activity can be continued without depleting unrenowable

resources and compromising future generations. When this balance occurs, economic growth is said to be reconciled with human and social development and with environmental protection and integrity (UNESCO, 2005). Indeed, Hawken (1993) defined sustainability as an economic state wherein the demands placed upon the environment by people and commerce can be met without reducing the capacity of the environment to provide for future generations. Comprehensive development initiatives strive *for* sustainability and environmental protection in addition to institutional capacity and capability, poverty reduction, empowerment, gender relations, feasibility, good governance, dialogue and participation (Mikkelsen, 1995).

Unsustainable

To recap, to be sustainable, development must improve economic efficiency, protect and restore ecological systems, and enhance the well-being of all peoples and societies (International Institute for Sustainable Development as cited in McGregor, 2002). Unfortunately, the end goal of sustainability has not been achieved. We live in a world deeply entrenched in unsustainability (Wals, 2010). If something is unsustainable, it cannot be maintained at the current rate or level of activity. If the activity continues indefinitely, harm will result, whether intended or not. The intent of the UN decade is to enable citizens to face the challenges of the present and the future so as to make relevant decisions for a viable world, a world currently under threat due to *unsustainability* (UNESCO, 2005). Because the UN decade is concerned with unsustainable *development*, it behoves us to pay attention to humanity's inability to maintain current rates and levels of development, especially economic development.

Although the term development means both growth and increased potential, people often privilege the growth principle in conjunction with the economy, eschewing the increased potential of humans and societies. Consequently, the term sustainable development often is equated with economic growth instead of human and social progress, thereby separating the economy from society and the environment (Giddings, Hopwood and O'Brien, 2002). When economies grow at unsustainable rates, in ways that harm human and societal potential as well as environmental integrity, the culprit is now labelled *unsustainable development*, with the word *economic* invisible but deeply implied. In actuality, it should be labelled unsustainable *economic* development.

Alternatives to Sustainable Development

Ever since the *Brundtland Report* was asked to formulate a global agenda for change to address the unsustainable development paths of powerful global economies (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), people have been grappling with how to operationalize the concept of sustainable development. Interestingly, and most compellingly, others have been striving to conceptualize other approaches that eschew, or at least modify, the concept of sustainable development. Their main counterpoint is that, up to now, sustainable development initiatives have been lacking in vision and fruition because they are grounded in weak models of sustainability (e.g., Giddings, Hopwood and O'Brien, 2002; Jickling and Wals, 2008; Kelly, 2007; Selby, 2006; Wals, 2010).

Weak Models of Sustainable Development

To illustrate, Giddings, Hopwood and O'Brien (2002) argued that weak models of sustainable development focus too much on the *development* part of sustainable development, placing the economy at the core, separated from social and environment. Weak models of sustainability embrace anthropocentric, technocentric, instrumental, managerial, neo-liberal and capitalistic notions of development that view nature as a means to an end to increase economic growth (Kelly, 2007). Selby (2006) characterized this approach to sustainable development as being on *shaky grounds* because, with its inordinate focus on the economy, it ignores the human condition crises, assumes that humans can actually hold things together, and it reinforces predictability, permanence, orderliness and constancy - insured via control mechanisms executed by humans. Wals (2010) critiqued the weak approach because it assumes humanity is running out of time (scarcity mentality instead of abundance) and must act now to achieve measurable results.

Strong Models of Sustainable Development

Those pushing back against the bulwark of weak approaches to sustainable development advocate, not surprisingly, for strong approaches, strong because they move away from perceiving sustainable development as a static state of affairs towards seeing it as a frame of mind underpinned by values that support the development of both human and non-human nature (Huckle, 2006). A state of affairs approach will not suffice "in a 'systemic world' characterized by multiple causation, interactions, complex feedback loops and the inevitable uncertainty, and

unpredictability” (Wals, 2010, p.11). A frame of mind approach encourages ways of relating to nature that allow the continuing co-evolution and complexity of human and non-human nature (Huckle, 2006).

Jickling and Wals (2008) took another approach in their stand against conventional approaches to sustainable development. They eschewed an ESD framework and created an ESD heuristic. Heuristic is Greek, to find or to discover (Harper, 2010). A heuristic is a tool people can use to learn something by themselves. Jickling and Wals intended their ESD heuristic to be a strong approach to sustainability. It is designed to help people engage with the tensions related to the education *for* sustainable development idea. They wanted to challenge people to frame and then reframe their own perspectives and questions about sustainability rather than accepting those pre-determined and prescribed by others (education *for* something).

Also advocating for strong models of sustainability, Wals (2010) lobbied for approaches to sustainable development that respect connectivity, chaos and complexity. Likewise, Selby (2006) called for people to embrace uncertainty, turbulence and instability. He asked people to respect dynamics, flux, flow, unpredictability, disarray, dislocation, impermanence, networks and diversity. He also questioned the UN’s approach on education *for* sustainable development (see Jickling and Wals, 2008), advocating instead for education *against* sustainable development. He proposed the idea of *sustainable contraction* and education *for* moderation, *for* restitution and *for* restoration (Selby, 2007a, 2010). These ideas now become the focus of this discussion.

Sustainable Contraction

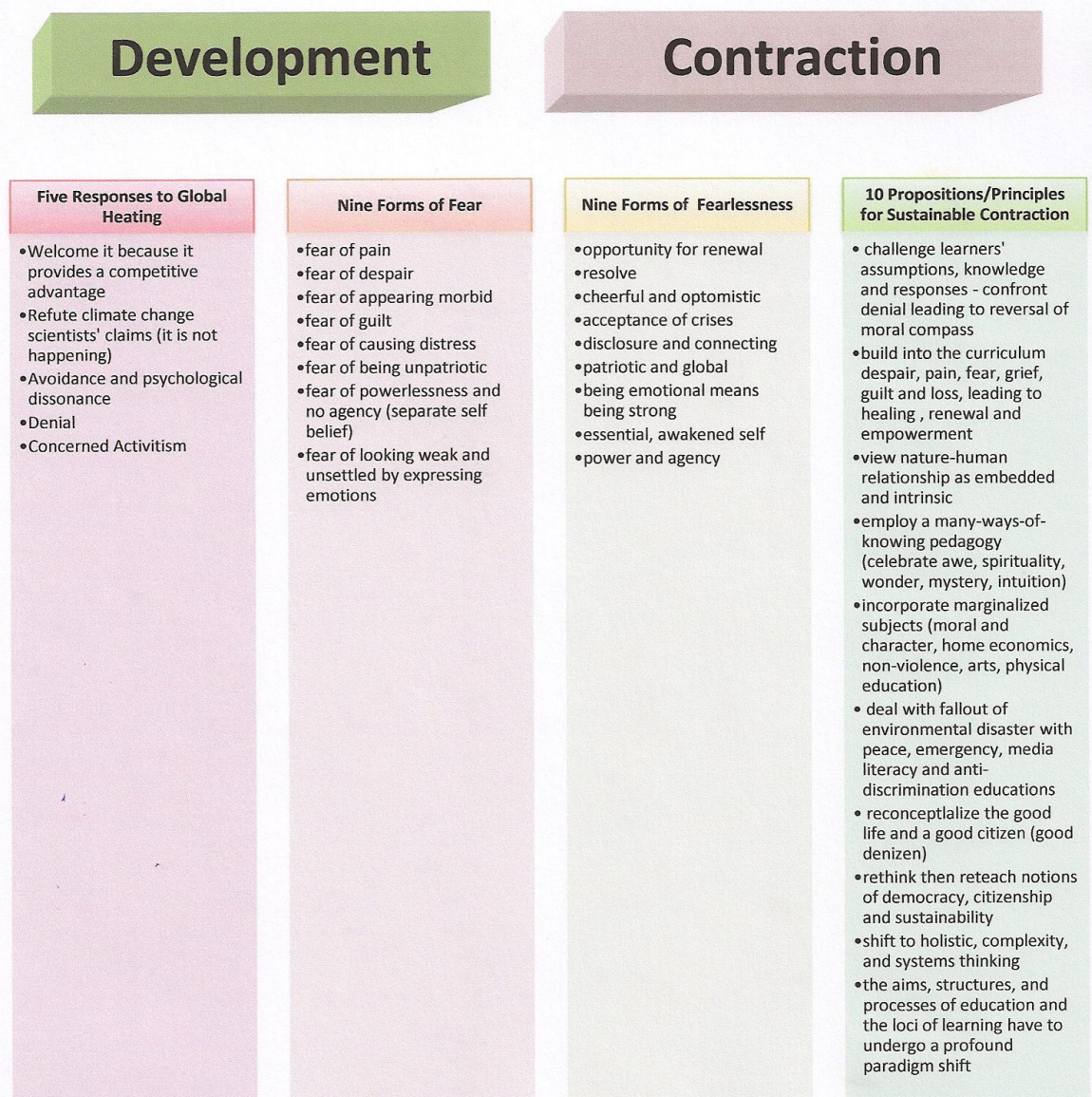
Selby (2007a) pioneered the idea of *sustainable contraction*, believing this is a more realistic educational response to the global crisis manifested through unsustainable development, most glaringly evident through the phenomenon of global heating (his alternative term for global warming). The word *contraction* has two meanings. It can mean to become narrower or it can mean to draw together, to come to an agreement (Harper, 2010). Presuming both, Selby (2007a) viewed sustainable contraction as a softer and more ecological concept than development. He envisioned the sustainable contraction approach as a “sustainable retreat” (Selby, 2010, p. 41) leading to a future state of “sustainable moderation” (p. 41). In effect, a retreat would

lead to contraction, which would lead to moderation and, ultimately, to restitution and restoration.

Selby (2007a) credited the concept of sustainable retreat to James Lovelock (2006) who called for “an orderly and sustainable withdrawal to a world where we try to live in harmony with Gaia” (p. 150). This idea represents a withdrawal from our current world where we most assuredly do not live in harmony with Gaia, the primordial Earth Goddess of ancient Greek religion. Her name evokes the belief in a nurturing Earth Mother. Lovelock formulated the Gaia Hypothesis, which proposes that all organisms and their inorganic surroundings on Earth are closely integrated to form a single and self-regulating complex system, maintaining the conditions for life on the planet (Lovelock, 2009). The recent movie *Avatar* (Directed by James Cameron) exemplifies this hypothesis. Selby (2010) agreed with Charlton (2008, p. 161), who believed if we can learn to “move towards reverential relationship with the systemic and material world... we will cease to be a pathology, [a disease], within the systems of the living Earth [Gaia].” Otherwise, people will fall back on the familiar illusion of disconnection and immunity from, hence superiority over, other-than-human thinking (Selby, 2010).

In order to develop his argument for movement through retreat-contraction-moderation-restitution-restoration, Selby (2010) drew on several other ideas that warrant further discussion. First, arguing that people can respond to unsustainable development coming from nine types of fear (Selby, 2007a, see Figure 1), he advocated for, what I call, *fearlessness*, gained by intentionally disruptive transformative learning experiences designed to disorient learners and make them face their hidden assumptions and beliefs. People can be afraid to feel the pain the world is experiencing. They can fear feeling despair and guilt and can fear being accused of not being patriotic. People can fear looking weak or of causing others distress by making them aware of the world’s angst and their complicity. They can fear feeling powerless and ineffectual and can even fear others viewing them as morbid. Conversely, education for contraction fosters fearlessness and places people in a position of power and agency, leading to renewal, resolve and awakened consciousness.

Figure 1 Sustainable Contraction Concept (extrapolated from Selby, 2007a)



Second, he balanced the notion of citizen with that of denizen, someone who occupies or dwells in a particular *place* or *locale*. He defined denizenship as “learning for conscious occupancy and participation in a place” (Selby, 2010, p. 49). Related to this idea, Selby called for both localization, a connection to a place, and for place attachment, an approach that assumes learning can be rooted in what is local. Connecting to a place and learning to live and learn within that locale are inherent in sustainable contraction (see next paragraph).

Third, Selby (2010) poignantly recognized that humans may not be able to flourish in the event of climate change so adverse that zones of inhabitable earth are created, forcing people to split apart and gravitate to southern or northern liveable zones. In response to the real possibility of the human civilization retracting to Northern and Southern “zones of habitability” (p. 51), replete with “intergenerational alienation... and the demise of what was familiar to earlier generations” (p. 50), Selby proposed a long-term educational project of restitution and restoration, totally dependent upon the pedagogy of contraction (a term coined by McGregor, in press).

In more detail, he called for both *earth* restitution and restoration and *soul* restitution and restoration if humanity hopes to survive. Reconciliation of earth and soul is required if humanity is to heal against a very plausible dystopian backdrop. Dystopia is a real or imagined society where the conditions of life and everything else are very bad. Those concerned with dystopian scenarios strive to explore the concept of humans individually and collectively coping, or not, with life conditions that have progressed in a downward spiral far more rapidly than they were prepared to handle (Selby, 2010).

Selby’s (2007a, 2010) aforementioned pedagogy of contraction comprises six dimensions that educators can use when teaching sustainable contraction: (a) alternative conceptions of the good life, (b) intimacy with self and nature in order to wean off of consumerism, (c) non-violence and peace education, (d) living and learning as a denizen (not just a citizen), (e) nine kinds of fear and fearlessness, and (f) education for restoration and restitution.

Furthermore, his pedagogy comprises 10 principles or propositions (many noted above), including a profound paradigm shift to holistic, complexity and systems thinking (see Figure 1). It also entails viewing the nature-human relationship as embedded and intrinsic, understood through a curriculum grounded in many ways of knowing (celebrating awe, mystery, spirituality, wonder and intuition). Currently marginalized school subjects would be incorporated into this pedagogy: music, art, drama, physical education, and moral and character education (Selby, 2007a), and I would add home economics and consumer education.

Discussion

Home economics has a lot to learn from alternative approaches to sustainable development, with sustainable contraction serving as a powerful example. One

important lesson is that many people will resist accepting that humanity is facing many crises associated with unsustainability (Glasser, 2007; Selby, 2007a). Because this resistance may thwart people's acceptance of the idea of contracting their activities so as to ensure restitution and restoration of humanity and earth, home economists need to remain aware of, and plan for, this phenomenon. Glasser identified several dispositions that people may hold towards unsustainability. These are inherent character qualities that home economics can recognize and accommodate as they embrace the sustainable contraction concept. People may have no idea that a potentially serious problem actually exists. They may honestly believe that a problem does not exist. People may deny the existence of a problem simply by wishing it away or by ignoring relevant information. They may accept there is a problem and erroneously assume it is easily surmountable. Some may accept unsustainability as a problem but assign other problems higher priority. Selby took a very similar approach, referring to five plausible responses to global heating (see Figure 1).

Home economists can embrace my assertion that David Selby truly pushed the conceptual boundaries of the notion of sustainable development when he developed and tendered the idea of sustainable contraction. Breaching existing intellectual and perceptual boundaries of what constitutes sustainability also involves the recognition of other kinds of development, especially spiritual, personal and cultural (Selby, 2006). He favoured self-reliance, community resilience, quality of life and mindful decision making. He called for an ethics of sustainability as well as for ethics related to other aspects of living: humility, respectfulness and precautions. He further advocated for another ethic, one which respects that life is unfathomable, unquantifiable, indefinable and short-lived. Home economists can draw upon this rich conceptualization of development and ethics when teaching sustainable contraction.

Most compelling, couched within the notion of sustainable contraction, Selby (2006) urges us to educate *for* ephemerality (lasting for a short time), *for* elusiveness (escaping notice) and *for* ineffability (too great to be described in words). Educating for these aspects of living in a consumer society mitigates people's propensity to consume in unsustainable ways. They would appreciate that things do not last forever, and that many of the power nuances of the current global context do escape their notice and never appear on their radar. Because of the absence of these layers of consuming, people remain unable to clearly articulate their roles and accountability to themselves, others and the Earth... the import of not acting responsibly is simply too

great to put into words. Sustainable contraction requires that home economists teach people to deal with ephemerality, elusiveness and ineffability.

Conclusion

With its commitment to sustainability, home economics has a responsibility to create an appropriate milieu for cultivating the quality of Earth-mindfulness necessary for sustainable living (see Selby, 2007b). Part of this responsibility involves remaining open to alternative ways to view sustainability other than its longstanding association with development, especially with economic development. David Selby's conceptual innovation of *sustainable contraction* merits inclusion in any future home economics' initiatives around sustainability within and beyond the UN Decade for ESD. Indeed, any initiative that advances the idea of strong models of sustainability should be on our collective radar, ideally with us taking the lead.

References

- Charlton, N. G. 2008. *Understanding Gregory Bateson*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Giddings, B. Hopwood, B. and O'Brien, G. 2002. Environment, economy and society: fitting them into sustainable development. *Sustainable Development*, 10(4), pp. 187-196.
- Glasser, H. 2007. Minding the gap. In: Wals, A. E. J. ed. 2007. *Social learning towards a sustainable world*. Wageningen, the Netherlands: Wageningen Academic Publishers, pp.35–62.
- Harper, D. 2010. *Online etymology dictionary*. Lancaster, PA: Self-Published.
Available at: <http://www.etymonline.com/>
- Hawken, P. 1993. *The ecology of commerce: a declaration of sustainability*. New York: HarperBusiness.
- Huckle, J. 2006. *Education for sustainable development. a briefing paper for the Training and Development Agency for Schools*. Bedford, England: John Huckle Consultancy. Available at:
<http://john.huckle.org.uk/download/2708/Education%20for%20Sustainable%20Development,%20a%20briefing%20paper%20for%20the%20Teacher%20Training%20Agency.doc>

Sue McGregor sue.mcgregor@msvu.ca

- Jickling, B. And Wals, A. 2008. Globalization and environmental education: looking beyond sustainable development. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 40(1), pp. 1-21.
- Kelly, T. 2007. Worldviews and sustainable development. In M. Smith, ed. 2007. *Obihiro Asia and Pacific seminar on education for rural development*. Obihiro, Japan 6-10 August 2007. Obihiro University of Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine, pp. 71-78. Available at:
<http://www.obihiro.ac.jp/project/intcollabo/oaserd/oaserd2007.pdf>
- Lovelock, J. 2006. *The revenge of Gaia*. London: Allen Lane.
- Lovelock, J. 2009. *The vanishing face of Gaia*. New York: Basic Books.
- McGregor, S. L. T. 2002. Consumer citizenship: a pathway to sustainable development? *Keynote, international conference on developing consumer citizenship* [pdf]. Hamar, Norway: University of Hedmark. Available at:
http://www.consultmcgregor.com/documents/keynotes/norway_keynote.p
- McGregor, S. L. T. (in press). Transdisciplinary consumer education. In: D. Selby and F. Kagawa, eds. in press. *Sustainability frontiers: essays from the edges of sustainability education* Framington Hills, MI: Barbara Budrich Publishers, (pages forthcoming).
- Mikkelsen, B. 1995. *Methods of development work and research*. Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage.
- Selby, D. 2006. The firm and shaky ground of education for sustainable development. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 30(2), pp. 351-365.
- Selby, D. 2007a. As the heating happens. *International Journal of Innovation and Sustainable Development*, 2(3/4), pp. 249-267.
- Selby, D. 2007b. The need for climate change in education. *BNE Journal*, May [online]. Available at: http://www.bne-portal.de/coremedia/generator/pm/en/Issue_001/Downloads/01_Contributions/Selby.pdf [Accessed 05 October 2011].
- Selby, D. 2010. "Go, go, go, said the bird." Sustainability-related education in interesting times. In: F. Kagawa and D. Selby, eds. 2010. *Education and climate change*. New York: Routledge, pp. 35-54.
- UNESCO. 2005. *The DESD at a glance* [pdf]. Paris, France: UNESCO. Available at:
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001416/141629e.pdf>

Sue McGregor sue.mcgregor@msvu.ca

Wals, A. 2010. Message in a bottle: learning our way out of unsustainability.

Inaugural lecture as UNESCO ESD Chair at Wageningen University [pdf].

Wageningen, the Netherlands. Available at:

<http://groundswellinternational.files.wordpress.com/2010/12/learning-our-way-out-of-unsustainability.pdf>

World Commission on Environment and Development. 1987. *Our common future*

[The Brundtland Report]. Paris, France: United Nations. Available at:

<http://www.un-documents.net/wced-ocf.htm>