

Welcome to Turning Conscience Into Action, the Earth Charter podcast. Join Mirian Vilela, Earth Charter International Executive Director, in her fascinating conversations with great thinkers, scholars and activists from around the world who are working in the fields of sustainability, ethics, education and social transformation. Our purpose is to generate new insights on how to face current global challenges and inspire informed action.

So Charles, you are the UNESCO Chair in Reorienting Education Towards Sustainability at York University.

I am, yes. We are very privileged to have you here and to share with us your journey and how you have seen this whole thing about reorienting education towards sustainability evolving. Can you share with us a little bit of how you started, how you got engaged in this? Yeah, well, it's a long story, so I hope this podcast is four days. We can summarize it. Yeah, I will try to briefly summarize it. I guess the story goes back to when the concept of sustainable development was first emerging and the Brentland Commission was formed because up to that point I was heavily involved in environmental education.

I was the head of the Canadian delegation when we were inventing environmental education in the meetings in Helsinki and so on, leading up to 1977. Back then, between 1977 and 1987, we realized that environmental education on its own was not going to succeed. The 20% of the world really wanted environmental protection, 80% of the world wanted development. The former colonies were now countries on their own, which we call developing countries. Many of them had been abandoned and were in dire straits and then they were hit by the whole pack oil embargo and were going in debt.

They wanted development. They could see the way the other 20% of the world in the north was living. We had to come up with a way of how could we blend environmental protection with development and the concept that came out eventually in 1987 was sustainable development. I presented a paper, I co-wrote a paper with a gentleman from the nuclear industry in the 1980s on how we could go about doing that. So this is really bringing together very different worlds. Exactly. We thought what we have to do is to bring together the IUCN had come out with the World Conservation Strategy and so we thought, okay, to balance we need to come out with the World Development Strategy and maybe then negotiate and bring the two of them together and move forward.

That was the thinking at the time. And so when in 1987 the United Nations endorsed the overarching concept of development that was sustainable. For generations to come. So the concept of sustainable development came out and they gave themselves in the country five years to come up with an implementation plan. It's nice to say, okay, we're for sustainable development. How do you make that happen? So it was the parallel of what is happening now with Agenda 2030, which is the implementation plan of the sustainable development goals.

So leading up to that, then I was, because of my work in environmental education and so on, and I was invited by UNESCO to be one of the 10 authors of the chapter within Agenda 21, which was the sustainable development implementation scheme was called Agenda for the 21st Century. Agenda 21. Agenda 21. Agenda 36. 36. And you were right

there when you were thinking of... There were 10 of us. Then 10 of you were thinking together how to articulate chapter on education inside the Agenda 21 process. Right.

92. Yeah. Well, we were doing that in 89, 90, 91. So we would meet for a week or so each year and put our thoughts together. I could tell you a very neat story because one of the... From North America, I have the writer said, what we really need is better recycling. This is an important story because he said, we just need much better recycling. And the Dean of the Faculty of Education in the University of Cairo in Egypt said, I have several hundred thousand children who are very, very good at recycling.

Different contexts. They live in the dumps of Cairo. They need an education. Very different perspectives, right? Because of different contexts. Exactly. So that's what changed everything. We realized that education itself for sustainable development wasn't just a subset. It was access and retention in quality education that needed to be the first of the four areas of education for sustainable development. And to this day, that part is often ignored or overlooked. The second part though was understanding it was our most educated countries that were leaving the deepest ecological footprints.

So the second part then had to be to reorient the purpose of education. So from development to sustainable development. Now the other thing to understand is that the chapter isn't just education for sustainable development. It's education, public awareness, and training. Because you can't change the education systems without the parents and without understanding. And you're not going to get sustainability brought into the culture without public awareness and understanding. So right there. Can't just legislate.

At that process in 1992, you looked at education from the lens of non-formal and informal education. Totally. A broad perspective of what education means. Not only inside schools and universities, but actually much of it happens outside the realm of universities and schools. And then the third aspect was training programs where we do know how to do better forestry, sewage treatment plants, designing aircraft, you know, all of these training programs. So in essence what we looked at was how could we engage and work with the world's education systems?

How could we work with the world's public awareness systems? Whether that's all non-formal and so on. And how could we work with training programs around the world, especially private sector training and the training of public sector employees and so on. So it was a much bigger idea. And it was during our discussions that a former, and we realized that there were several of us who had worked on environmental education and the Tbilisi Declaration and so on. And so we said the mistake was that we had invented another what we call Agitival education.

You know, where you say peace education, development education, driver education, anti-drug education, etc. Global citizenship education. Education. Where you have to use the word education afterwards and we thought, we don't want to invent sustainability education. Maybe in some countries that's all they can do. But if you do that, then you're just adding to this long list of things. An extra kind of education. That's right. What's the difference then, like that education forces sustainability with regards to this many other special kinds of education?

We envisioned it as a purpose of education. So you don't invent new disciplines. You look at what is the contribution that, say, the core disciplines, mathematics, language, history, geography. You ask the different disciplines, are they relevant or are they not relevant in creating a more sustainable future? Very relevant, right? And they all then identify their part of what they could contribute. And the same is true with the adjectival educations. Environmental education is core, but it's not the whole thing.

Nobody is the whole thing. So that means that we need the education systems and the training systems and so on and government systems to look at how do we bring these together in a coherent and concerted effort? If you bring it down to the small scale, how do you take a whole school approach under the principle? But don't you think it's very hard for people to really envision that this is not just an extra kind of education with a new terminology, a new title to be sold, to be promoted? Yes. That is one of the key challenges.

That was the challenge in the 90s because immediately after 92, we went into a recession and sustainable development was given to ministries of environment. And that was one of the problems, right? The huge problem, the huge problem, the perception of sustainability is that it's environment. In only one country, and I believe it was either Finland or India, I think it was Finland, that upon the role of sustainable development was in the office of the president and not the ministry of environment.

And so we were set back. We are all educated to look at things in compartmentalization. That's right. In disciplines. So it's easy for people to understand this belongs to these worlds, it belongs to the other worlds. Whether it's at the government level or right down to the school level where they say, oh, that's Miss So-and-So, she looks after recycling. So it doesn't help to, of course, to incorporate this as a cross-cutting theme throughout the school, university or even government institutions.

That was hard. But things have changed. So we are nearly 30 years after the Earth Summit, nearly three decades. What is the main change you have seen? The big change is sustainable development goals. Because if you look at that, you will see that education is linked, a sustainable development goal for. And when they outline, what are the essence of sustainable development in the realm of education? Access and retention, you know, everyone graduate from secondary school. That's the first part of education for sustainable development as we envisioned it, right?

Access and retention in quality education. So the people are seeing the relationship between quality education and sustainability. Can you have a quality education if it doesn't address the future? Is that a quality education? So then we go back and start looking. Because in the perception of most people, quality education is measured in your piece of score in math, language and science. Is that quality education? There are aspects, but it's not the purpose. So what we are doing now is we're separating out what is the purpose of education?

And that's how we're trying to promote what is education for sustainable development? It is one, not the purpose, but it's one of the purposes of quality education. So we say math, language, science, etc. These are tools. And they should be as sharp and as modern and

as up to date as they possibly can be. What do you do with the tools? What kind of a civilization do you construct? What kind of a future do you construct? So we're looking at the purpose. So there's nothing against pieces, scores, and the, you know, the Timbs and the different ones.

Those are simply improving the quality and efficiency of one's tools. What we're talking about in things like the Earth Charter, in things like education for sustainable development and so on. Those are instruments in trying to build a more sustainable future. So education really is becoming, do you think education is really becoming a driver or should become more and more a driver for the implementation of the 2030 agenda? Yes, it's a means of implementation. It's seen that way in the same way as Agenda 21 had a group of chapters at the end on means of implementation.

One was sound science, another was technology transfer, right? Those ones from chapter 33 to 40 were means of implementation. And so we look then at four, chapter four now in Agenda 21, in the SDGs, we look at four as education itself, right? It is a human right and it is a way of building a more sustainable, equitable future for all. But it is also recognized by the United Nations General Assembly as a means of implementing the other 16. Yeah. So it's not just any kind of education because we could have more and more education and continue towards the unsustainability path of our society.

If we do not think and repurpose education, because right now the purpose is development, right? People are educated with the purpose to continue or to perpetuate the unsustainable development. That's right. They are looking at their own well-being as opposed to the collective well-being for all and where all isn't limited to humans. So do you really think we can really reorient education to shift away the experience of education from a self-interested purpose to a collective purpose of education?

I think that it can work in a balance. We will always, I think, well into the foreseeable future. We're tribal people. Yes, you start with our own family and then our tribe or our religious group or our nationality or whatever. But as the world becomes more global, and that's why we need to reinvent sustainable development itself. It was the best we could do in the 1980s to get all world leaders. So it is emerging, it's evolving. It's so human-centered. Sustainable development has many flaws. And part of education for sustainable development is being critical of sustainable development itself, of trying to improve what can we do.

So I love the concept of well-being for all, forever, as sort of a definition. Where well-being looks after more than just being well-off. But it looks at meaningfulness, the comprehensibility of one's life. And that for all is not limited to humans, but for all life. And forever, sort of that intergenerational responsibility. So we could envision that we are entering into a new phase, or we should be entering into a new phase of sustainability, kind of a higher advanced level of sustainability that is moving from a human-centric sustainability to a more collective earth-centric or life-centric sustainability.

Yes. And that's why I'm fascinated with my work with Indigenous people, who are part of their worldview. So part of many of the things that we need to do is to re-examine our ethics, our values, and that's why I love working with the Earth Charter. It's such a

wonderful entry point into these kinds of discussions. So in your UNESCO chair, you have a project, a program project that is involving Indigenous education research. So how do you see the Indigenous worldview contributing to this shift of perception, maybe a new phase of human civilization?

How can we make the Indigenous people's worldview contribute to this process? What are the challenges that we are facing? We're doing through our chair is, it came out of work that I did previously. We were often told by ministries of education, we would love to do education for sustainable development, but right now we're focusing on our PISA score, so we don't want to divert our intention. That's what happens everywhere. Everything we're about quality. Quality. So improving the quality of education is at the core of many ministries of education.

Exactly. That's the one thing. And that's why now I focus on quality education because now they want to listen to it. So I did research in 18 of the high scoring PISA countries where we went into school systems that had really reoriented. We're doing whole school or whole school system approach and so on and talk to them about their quality of education. And what came forward was that embedding education for sustainable development in their programs enhanced the quality. It broadened the quality.

It brought different perspectives. It gave them research skills. It gave them, you know, so then I thought, okay, how could sort of the gift of education for sustainable development already high scoring schools? Could that help the least well served by our education systems? And the least well served are our indigenous. And there are a focus of goal four, 4.5 is about marginalized and it outlines indigenous. So in 2016 we started trying to pull a program together. But what we're doing is trying to align what we do with what the wants are of the indigenous community.

So the first thing is what kind of an education do you really want? And then what we're doing is what education for sustainable development, because it's simply a purpose of education. It doesn't have its own content or its own pedagogies in particular. It's using the appropriate existing disciplines and using existing pedagogies of place based learning, learning from the land, you know, okay, what works in an indigenous education setting. So working with that. But what we're also trying to do is to slowly engage and learn the worldviews and find appropriate ways of bringing these worldviews into the discussions of quality education.

So because most people, if the moment you start talking about the indigenous people will say, well, I'm not going to go and live it by myself in the bush. I'm not going to sit in a hut and hunt for my food and so on if you live in a big city. But there's tremendous experience and knowledge and ways of looking at things. What really is important? What is wealth? If you think of the difference between the most treasured thing of an Aboriginal person and a true Aboriginal person in Australia, it's their family story.

Of who they are. They don't share it. It's passed on within. They can share bits and pieces with people, but that is what is precious. Now what is the ecological footprint of a story? So we have to start thinking about a new economy. So if we go into the macro level, the big picture, and we say, what are the real threats to the future of the planet? Well they're

outlined in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The economy of the future is embedded in addressing the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

And so then what is the role of different forms of education? By having this conversation around different world views and learning from the Indigenous peoples' world views, it's interesting because we can take the time to question ourselves or question our assumptions to what quality education really means. Because it can mean different things for different people depending on our context and views. So it's also time to rethink what quality education means. If we could envision that a good education is not only about helping kids master mathematics, but helping kids to become better human beings.

It can be both. Exactly. As I say, the difference between purpose and the big picture and sharpening our tools. Whether it's music or mathematics, it can be philosophy.

But these are tools. In the same way, in 92, it was almost impossible to envision how we could get the world's education systems to reorient. And all we could think about coming out of that was, okay, we'll add sustainability education like we've added all the others. But no, we said we have to change the purpose of education. Today, it's possible. What do you think is the purpose of education? Well, one of the purposes certainly is addressing a more sustainable future. That has to be one of our purposes.

To help learners to contribute towards sustainability, to figure out a way how their education of bringing can help them enhance their capacity to contribute to sustainability. It's learning our way future. Right now, we're around.

Let me finish one thought and I'll come back to that. So in 92, we're thinking about what is the contribution of the world's education systems, et cetera, but thinking we don't want to just add sustainability education. Now, though, we see with agenda SDG-4 that all education should be in a context of education for sustainable development and global citizenship. So it's a context that we put all education into. So now we have entry into higher education, which is so important. See, it's very hard to bring environmental education into medicine or to bring it into learning. So what we're doing is now, if sustainable development, education for sustainable development and global citizenship is a context, we bring that into medicine, philosophy, law.

Now, you can embed the whole thing. And so finally, it is possible, but it has taken a long time. So the other question you were asking was about learning our way forward.

How students can prepare and so on. What's the purpose? The purpose of education, really what could be or should be the purpose of education? Yeah. Well, I think there are many purposes. And education is owned by countries, it's owned by groups of people. So you will, and there shouldn't just be one education, be where one education. We need education. Different kinds. Yes, that are applicable for different people and different things. Part of it is continuing. It's knowing our past. It's an awareness of our current reality.

It is about how to learn. It is about where to find things. And it's about envisioning the future. Education for the future. If we look at quality education, education for sustainability.

Like, what would be your own vision of where and how education for sustainability should take place?

And what's the role of value clarification? How could people make use of something like their child? Yeah. Well, I think there are many issues that educators need to address. First of all, the first goal is to have within SDG4, is to have everyone graduate from secondary school. No country can do that right now.

So it means that what we have to do is to have everyone graduate from secondary school. What we have to do is to rethink education not only the purpose, but how we deliver it. And how we address those students who are really hard to serve and so on. How do we deliver? Because most school systems, you know, we deliver an education in the way in which we receive the education. It doesn't change. So we need to really look at the content.

Is it really relevant?

And then we look at the pedagogy. But then we have to look at how we value our education systems. Do we even pay teachers reasonably well?

And I think that once we align education with a better future, as opposed to just passing on the culture of the past, but how can we redesign? And I'm very excited about the new undertaking by UNESCO on the futures of education. Where are we going? How are we dealing with new technology? What is the purpose? And inherent in that is the whole thing about the values. Why are we educating people?

And what kind of person should, you know, what are the attributes that person has when they graduate from our system?

Maybe what are the values that should underline the future civilization?

Because we think it separates humans from many of the other animals. Our, first of all, the intricacy in which we can communicate with one another. But there's also the values and ethics that are there that operate within our society. That once those values and ethics break down, civilization breaks down. So any school system that doesn't address the values and ethics and so on. Now some school systems try to associate values, ethics, etc., with one particular religion and see it all as one. And I think what we need to do in education is learn how we separate.

And we actually openly and knowingly, and even who knows, assess and monitor values, ethics, the kinds of things. And not just leave it as well.

We teach values and ethics by not cheating on exams.

But where does it enter into the whole culture of home and school? But if you could just envision engineers, lawyers, business people coming out of their training, just with a very strong ethical training. Sure.

And now many of the... An ethical engineer that is really thinking about contributing to the common good.

And I think what we need to do to move that forward is again linking to the sustainable development goals. If that is going to be the economy of the future, or at least a good part of the economy of the future, then our training... But addressing that also means addressing the values and ethics and contribution to future generations. Even that, an allegiance to future generations where governments eventually come up with a minister of those to come.

You know, that kind of a concept, minister of the future. Thinking about the voice of the future today.

That's wonderful. Well, Charles, thank you so much for taking your time to share with us your knowledge, experience. You have seen how this whole concept of education for sustainability has evolved over the past more than two, three decades, I would say. And I wish you luck for the work of the Unischool Chair that you're leading from the York University. Well, thank you very, very much. And I wish you luck as well, because bringing forward the role of values, ethics, and the mission and the intent of the Earth Charter is such a core element in our common journey.

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