

Keynote address:

The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development: Environmental Education Challenges in a Complex World

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This paper starts with an analysis of the current context in which Environmental Education¹ operates, suggesting that the real autonomous spaces in which civil society functions are under threat. The second part of this paper draws on the author's research regarding participative processes in the province of Modena (Italy) and summarises some of the more salient points of this case study. Finally, reflecting on the current context and drawing on various experiences, including the Modena Local Agenda 21 processes, the author explicates the various challenges the Environmental Education sector is facing and puts forward some pointers for dealing with these challenges, not least in the formation of Environmental Education stakeholders that have to deal with increasingly complex realities.

Part 1 – the Current Context

In the first part of this paper I would like to put forward what I consider to be two main characteristics of the context in which Environmental Education and Environmental Education actors operate.

These characteristics are:

1. Diminishing spaces for autonomous and independent civil society initiatives and activities.
2. A failure of a number of important political processes.

¹ The main focus of this paper is on Adult Environmental Education, where adult is interpreted in the wide sense of adult, youth and community. It is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into an academic debate regarding the uses of the terminology Environmental Education vs. Education for Sustainable Development. For the purposes of this paper the contemporary forms of Environmental Education are seen as Education for Sustainable Development.

Unless we fully understand these two characteristics and their implications, it will be very hard to attain the goals of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD)². Furthermore it will be essential to look also specifically at the educational challenges of the 21st century.

1. Diminishing spaces for autonomous and independent civil society initiatives and activities

Various definitions and understandings of civil society exist and there is considerable research going on to understand strategies employed by civil society organisations in various political contexts, with the aim of influencing and strengthening the performance and responsiveness of the state, in this case regarding the environment. From a Gramscian perspective, civil society differentiates itself from both business and government.

When referring to civil society, an understanding of the socio-political context - is very important. One has to look at aspects such as the distribution of power, the range of organisations involved and their interests, and the formal and informal rules that govern the interactions among different players (Nash, R., Hudson, A and Luttrell, C., 2006). This paper takes a European perspective and tries to understand and assess our role as Europeans in attaining the objectives of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. Here again we recall Gramsci, who points out that western governments require the tacit consent of civil society to govern.

"In Western Europe... the ruling class rested mainly on consent and was able to rely on a variety of institutions within civil society which organised and reinforced this." (Bambery, 2008, p.43)

Many analysts and civil society actors would agree that the dominant economic model is not sustainable and would consider the major cause of environmental degradation to be linked with economic systems that exploit and misuse nature and people. However, from a Gramscian perspective, those promoting this model of development – that is not compatible with the principles of the DESD – can only continue to do so with the tacit consent of civil society.

While environmental educators have won the Decade and managed to get ESD recognised at the highest levels of governance, those that stand to gain from the dominant (economic) model have concurrently also won broad civil society consent. This situation is untenable, as these two stances are logically not compatible. I will illustrate this point by having a look at 5 situations in Malta (the names of the organisations have been modified to protect their identity).

Situation 1

An email message announced that *"the Environment Committee of the Gender Council will be holding the popular ECO CAFÉ ... The programme will include a demonstration on floral arrangements by an Environment Committee member and a HSBC representative will give a presentation in Maltese on their pro-environment incentive"*

In this situation, a popular "eco-café" gathering of a Civil Society Organisation (CSO) depended on a corporate sponsorship in order to occur, a corporate sponsorship which some would argue is not necessarily compatible with an environmental agenda and the objectives of the DESD. Anthea Lawson (campaigner at Global Witness), quoted by Odoi, A. in the Guardian of August 15th 2007, highlights this dichotomy:

"... it's all very well that banks are undergoing green makeovers, but they need to look at all aspects of their business. She says HSBC is a joint arranger in helping the Malaysian timber company Samling sell a 23.3% stake in its business on the Hong Kong stock exchange, which, in her view, is an example of green practice failing to filter through. According to Global Witness, Samling is "notorious for destroying tropical forests and abusing local communities. So HSBC is helping a logging company to increase its war chest," she says. "While the bank is planting trees to reward its retail customers for requesting online statements, Samling is cutting them down."

² The goal of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014, DESD), for which UNESCO is the lead agency, is to integrate the principles, values and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning.

Situation 2

A *Notte Bianca* was held in Valletta on the 4th of October 2008. Since this activity draws numerous crowds into Valletta, the mayor thought it useful to present Valletta in the best way possible by inviting citizens to decorate the facades of their houses. To motivate citizens to do so, he set up a competition entitled *Insebbhu l-Belt Valletta* (Embellishing Valletta) in collaboration with McDonald's. The competition simply involved presenting a photo of the facade of your house to the Local Council once the *Notte Bianca* was over.

Once again this was an environmental activity linked to a corporate sponsorship. Conservationists have often focussed on McDonald's as an industry leader promoting business practices detrimental to the environment (McSpotlight, Undated). Furthermore, less than two weeks after this event, various activists worldwide observed the Anti-McDonald's Day – a protest against the promotion of junk food, the unethical targeting of children in their promotion campaigns, exploitation of workers, animal cruelty, damage to the environment and the global domination of corporations over the personal lives of citizens.

Situation 3

An organisation called *KuAp* launched in September 2008 an award scheme in September 2008, in affiliation with a French Federation, to recognise the important work carried out by volunteers in all spheres of Maltese society. This pan-European competition is held under the high patronage of the French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

In this case an award scheme aiming to promote voluntary work – a very important sector for environmental NGOs – was held under the patronage of a president who during his election campaign was given a paltry 8.5/20 score by green NGOs for his proposals on environmental policy.

Situation 4

The shadow minister responsible, among other things for International Development, asked the following question³:

“Could the Vice Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs tell us the reason why the Maltese Government is still holding back from publishing the official figures regarding its Overseas Development Aid, so that we will have a detailed breakdown and confirmation, or otherwise, whether government is including the money spent on detention centres and repatriation of illegal immigrants?”

The reply was:

“The only obligation of the Maltese Government on this issue is that of informing the European Union about the global amount of ODA and how this compares with the Gross National Income (GNI). This obligation has always been honoured by the Maltese Government since Malta became a member of the European Union.”

NGOs working for International Development and Solidarity, organised under their umbrella organisation SKOP, considered such a reply to be scandalous. Such a reply denies organised civil society the right to know how government is spending tax payers' money. Without basic access to information, NGO advocacy and policy work becomes very hard to carry out professionally. It is yet another denial of the rightful spaces for civil society to act as watchdogs on government spending.

Situation 5

The NGO *Koperazzjoni Globali* felt aggrieved because a governmental funding agency did not respect the norms of selection and rejected a project application on dubious grounds that objectively merited being challenged. Consequently, some members wanted to send a formal protest in writing in order to seek redress. The president of the organisation was very hesitant because he felt that making a clear point and official protest could endanger the chances of future project applications, of the same NGO, being funded. This is another illustration of how a free voice asking for transparency could be stifled because of funding related issues.

³ Republic of Malta, 11th Parliament. Sitting Number 12, 3rd June 2008. Question number 611

Through these examples we can see the difficulties that civil society faces if it has to reconsider its nature and independent role. Furthermore, **Situation 5** is reminiscent of a grant system, used by various governments at various levels, which I call the *contentini system*. Under such a system, all applicant civil society organisations would benefit from a grant, each with very small amounts, but enough to keep everyone somehow happy that at least they got a piece of the cake. The current grant system presents great challenges – and reflects the difficulty Gramsci had of freeing civil society from being an instrument of State politics or, as is more relevant for our times, corporation politics. How state politics and corporation politics win civil society's tacit consent is quite complex, but it would be pertinent to refer to an important distinction made by Gramsci between "common sense" and "good sense":

Gramsci made an important distinction between ideas that referred to common sense – in reality the ideas of the ruling class, and good sense, ideas that begin to express the real experience and interest of workers, even if initially it's just a sense of them and us. (Bambery, 2008)

By making bad sense look as common sense and good sense as marginal, state politics and corporation politics win our tacit consent. Applying this to the environmental reality: a fossil fuel based, car-centred and energy inefficient model is portrayed as common sense and where this model creates some problems the nuclear option would be the common sense response.

We might right now be caught somewhere between the two worldviews of bad sense as common sense and good sense. In fact Gramsci did recognise that it is possible for conflicting views of the world to co-exist together:

One might say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which really unites him with his fellow workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed. (Gramsci, 1971, p.333)

However, the current contexts of food insecurity and climate change do provide a new opportunity for good sense to become common sense if we do take upon ourselves the Gramscian challenge of "renovating and making critical an already existing activity" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 330).

2. A failure of various political processes

Even a cursory analysis of the current state of affairs tends to suggest that we live in an era that has seen the failure of various political processes.

One such process is the Barcelona Process⁴, which most Southern Mediterranean civil society organisations would consider as being too Euro-Centric, based on a one-way donor-recipient relationship and not taking sufficiently into account the plight of Palestine and Europe's role in it. In spite of this, the new Union for the Mediterranean⁵ has not tried to understand the failures of the Barcelona Process and consequently rebuild a Union on different principles, but rather it has proposed more of the same relationships.

Another such process is related to the broken promises since the 1970s regarding Overseas Development Aid and poverty eradication. For example at a major international conference on financing for development in Monterrey, Mexico in March 2002, more than 100 world leaders pledged, among other things to help eradicate poverty and to promote sustainable development⁶. But most of the promises, pledging significant increases in development aid to the world's poorest nations, have remained unfulfilled. "No Time to Waste, published in 22 May 2008 by CONCORD, the European NGO confederation for relief and development, reveals that based on current trends, the EU will have given €75 billion less in aid by 2010 than it promised, threatening progress on the UN Millennium Development Goals set for 2015 (CONCORD, 2008, p. 2). Furthermore the CONCORD report indicates that European governments continue to "inflate" their aid statistics with debt relief and refugee costs. Furthermore, the final Agenda agreed in Accra during the 4th

⁴ The Barcelona Process was launched by Euro-Mediterranean Foreign Ministers in November 1995 and aimed to form an alliance based on the principles of joint ownership, dialogue and co-operation. The Barcelona Declaration outlines the main objective of the partnership: to build together an area of peace, security and shared prosperity.

⁵ The Union for the Mediterranean was established on the 13 July 2008 as a development of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, uniting all EU members with several non-EU countries that border the Mediterranean Sea.

⁶ The Monterrey Consensus was the outcome of the 2002 Monterrey Conference and was adopted by Heads of State and Government on 22 March 2002. The Consensus included new development aid commitments and agreements on other issues including debt relief and policy coherence.

September 2008 meeting on Aid Effectiveness failed to progress on issues such as tied aid and conditionality.

The Euro-barometer poll published in December 2007 shows that trust of EU citizens in the EU institutions is declining (European Commission, 2007). The failures of various political processes could be one reason for this, while there is also a widespread perception that in times of growing social problems the European agenda is too narrowly focussed on economic matters and neglects social concerns. Such failures create a "reform fatigue" which provides new challenges for environmental educators. These challenges are both linked to the educational reforms necessary to attain the goals of DESD, in particular in actively engaging the relevant stakeholders in formulating and implementing the necessary policy responses, and to the nature of Environmental Education itself, whose practice is focused on empowerment and participation.

The Educational Challenge

During the years 2007-2008, participants from Spain, Malta, Portugal and Italy taking part in the global citizenship education project *Conectando Mundos* identified various challenges in education, summarised in an international manifesto published in July 2008 (*Conectando Mundos*, 2008). In this manifesto participants considered it necessary to question various tendencies in education, that:

- FAVOUR a scholastic organisation that is disciplinary and isolated from a social and cultural context.
- PRIVILEGE the accumulation of fragmented and partial knowledges.
- DO NOT VALUE the social and relational dimensions of learning.
- OVERESTIMATE the use of textbooks, frequently delegating in these the responsibility of the teaching and learning process.
- UNDERESTIMATE the importance of audio-visual and computer languages.
- OVERESTIMATE the rigid hierarchic relations based on the traditional functions of the teacher (that pass on the knowledge) and of the student (who receives and demonstrates the acquisition of this knowledge).
- INCREASINGLY FAVOUR the commercialization of education that, instead of being perceived as a right of all the people, is beginning to be perceived by the political and economic powers as a service (of payment) to provide to citizens.

Again the situation as pictured above puts forward new challenges for environmental educators and the attainment of the objectives of the DESD, since the tendencies identified are diametrically opposite to the holistic and interdisciplinary nature of environmental education.

Part 2 – Participatory Processes in Modena Italy

The second part of this paper draws on ongoing research regarding Agenda 21⁷ and other participatory processes, such as the participatory budget⁸. Salient points from the ongoing research in the province of Modena (Italy) will be presented. My interest in this area stems from the fact that local processes have a major impact on the lives of citizens.

⁷ Agenda 21 is a comprehensive plan of action to be taken globally, nationally and locally by organizations of the United Nations System, Governments and Major Groups in every area in which human impacts on the environment. Agenda 21 was adopted by more than 178 Governments at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 3 to 14 June 1992. The full implementation of Agenda 21, the Programme for Further Implementation of Agenda 21 and the Commitments to the Rio principles, were strongly reaffirmed at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) held in Johannesburg, South Africa from 26 August to 4 September 2002.

⁸ Participatory budgeting directly involves local people in making decisions on the spending and priorities for a defined public budget.

“For the majority of people living in Europe it is local development initiatives and projects and the role of local authorities that have the most significant influence on changes to local environments, and people's access to state resources, legislation and infrastructure. Local authorities have an extraordinary capacity to affect changes for millions of citizens, and in an increasingly globalised and multi-cultural world their role as mediators and interlocutors becomes increasingly possible”. (CONCORD DEF, 2008 p.1)

Furthermore initiatives like Local Agenda 21 and in particular the participatory budget are about direct participation, as opposed to participatory democracy and this is of particular interest in today's context, since as hypothesised above we live in a time of diminishing autonomous spaces for civil society.

Short Outline of Local Agenda 21 in Modena

Modena Province and Modena Commune were the first local authorities in Italy to adhere to the principles and objectives of Aalborg Charter⁹ for sustainable development.

Modena Province came to the decision of establishing a programme of Agenda 21 in its territory (with the signing of the Aalborg Charter in 1996) after developing tools for improving environmental policies such as environmental monitoring, planning and management of water resources and waste, and the support to social, economical actors and institutions. Modena Province Agenda 21 is the natural consequence of a commitment, and an occasion to re-launch environmental policies that start from the expectations of territories, in order to foster sustainable development. The process of Agenda 21 has resulted in the institution of The Environment and Sustainable Development Forum and has defined a framework of objectives, strategies and actions towards sustainable development through the Action Plan.” (Modena Province, 2003, p.3)

Successively the Local Agenda 21 Forum of Modena was activated structured around 5 thematic working groups and 3 focus groups. The thematic working groups were Sustainable Mobility, Resources and Local Territory, Social and Environmental Quality, Urban Environment, Production and Environment. The Focus Groups were one for farmers, one for organised distribution and consumers and one for the producers of goods and services. The Action Plan was published during March 2003 and became operational in December 2003.

Interesting Initiatives within the broad participatory framework in Modena

In this section I will outline some initiatives I have encountered as part of my research on participatory processes in Modena. Use was made of the various documentation available, both hard copies and in electronic format, as well as a number of semi-structured interviews conducted with different stakeholders during the month of October 2008. These initiatives broadly fall within the plans of action of the province or municipality, some of which have actively participated in the Local Agenda 21 Forum and which are very relevant to the challenges posed in Part 1 of this paper.

Initiative 1 – Rinatura

Rinatura is a social cooperative with various projects. Under Italian law, to qualify as a social cooperative you need to include a percentage of people at risk of marginalisation as members. One project, the *Bosco-Fattoria* was a collaboration between the municipality of Modena and the Cooperativa Sociale Rinatura - ONLUS. Through the *Bosco-Fattoria*, Rinatura is creating an open educational space and biological farm, developed through various sub-projects, including an environmental education workshop, outdoor pedagogic activities, organic farming, reforestation and organic agro-tourism. The project Centofiori Agritourism organically cultivates 110 hectares, of which 45 are within the neighbourhood of agritourism, producing vegetables, heirloom cereals, herbs, green manures and heirloom fruit varieties. The *Parco della Resistenza* (Park of the Resistance) is a “countryside park” of around 20 hectares that raises awareness of the countryside of bygone times, just cultivating half of it while leaving the other half as a natural green area.

One strength of this initiative lies in the educational opportunities themselves, which go against the tendencies identified in Part 1 and move towards holism, interdisciplinarity and sustainability, while valorising the culture and traditions of the region. This initiative also has the strength of involving people at risk of marginalisation through the social cooperative, as well as involving citizens, not only through the learning

⁹ The Charter of European Cities & Towns Towards Sustainability, as approved by the participants at the European Conference on Sustainable Cities & Towns in Aalborg, Denmark on 27 May 1994.

opportunities created, but also through the agriculture related activities themselves, in which any citizen can participate. In fact this form of “Community Supported Agriculture” is slowly becoming more widespread, among the growers and consumers providing mutual support and sharing in the risks and benefits of food production.

Initiative 2 - Fair Trade “OltreMare”

Fair Trade¹⁰ has been present in the territory of Modena since the 80s, eventually giving birth in 1991 to the Cooperativa Sociale OltreMare. Since its beginning, OltreMare sought to link Fair Trade with Ethical Finance. Eventually, in 1995, it was instrumental in the setting up of the *Banca Etica*, thus enabling the ethical finance system to support fair trade.

OltreMare has been an active participant in the Local Agenda 21 processes, in particular in the field of sustainable consumption and lifestyles and in the *Festa dell’Altra Economia*¹¹. In 2005, the Coordination Body of Local Agenda 21, together with Fair Trade TransFair Italy and the Local Authorities for Peace and Human Rights National Coordination Body, promoted the campaign Fairsolidarity Cities. The campaign, directed at Local Authorities, was intended to raise the awareness of public administrations with respect to the purchase of sustainable products, either under the environmental profile or under one of the working conditions (fair retribution of workers, absence of exploitation of juvenile work). It also planned to make use of the experience of Green Public Procurement and proposed to connect it to an idea of Social Public Procurement, where the commitment to environmental sustainability and social sustainability are mutually recognised to complement one another.

Such initiatives give citizens new opportunities to purchase foodstuffs and crafts that are friendly to people and the environment, thus opening up new spaces that are free from the domination of big corporate interests. Furthermore, through such initiatives, such as the Local Fair Solidarity Cities, new trust is built in political processes. In fact the municipality of Modena, whenever possible, uses fair trade foodstuffs in its official functions.

Initiative 3 - Fusi Orari

Fusi Orari took shape in 2006 with the publication of a call for proposals linked to the valorisation of the Historical Centre of Modena in the areas known as *San Francesco* and *Porta Saragozza* and the allocation of a prize for the quality and innovativeness of the best proposals. The role of the public authorities in catalysing such an initiative was acknowledged.

A meeting place linking good food with travel, *Fusi Orari* is an enterprise somewhere at the crossroads between trade (through the restaurant) and culture (through the restaurant and the various *responsible tourism* trips abroad). *Fusi Orari* is linked both with the Slow Food Presidia¹² and with the migrant communities in Modena, which often supply new recipes for the restaurant, as well as cultural notes about the food and linked customs. The theme of the menu changes weekly, starting with a demonstration and lecture on the food and cultures linked to the chosen theme.

Fusi Orari creates new spaces for intercultural opportunities, through the intercultural food served at the restaurant, through the learning opportunities at the restaurant and through the active involvement of migrant communities. Furthermore, through responsible tourism, *Fusi Orari* creates a space for “people who arrive” and “people who welcome”, where exchanges and new meeting opportunities are at the centre of a cultural experience that seeks to create “communication bridges”.

10 Fair Trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect, that seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers - especially in the South. Fair Trade organisations (backed by consumers) are engaged actively in supporting producers, awareness raising and in campaigning for changes in the rules and practice of conventional international trade.

11 A fair with exhibits, points of sale for fair trade goods, and information points regarding Local Agenda 21.

12 The Slow Food Presidia sustain quality production at risk of extinction, protect unique regions and ecosystems, recover traditional processing methods and safeguard native breeds and local plant varieties. They directly involve producers, offer technical assistance to improve production quality, organize exchanges among different countries and provide new market for local and international outlets.

Initiative 4 - Memo

Memo, standing for “Multicentro Educativo Modena “Sergio Neri”” (Educational Multi Centre Modena “Sergio Neri”) is an educational centre that groups together and re-proposes the legacy of years of work and experiences through Educational Documentation Centres, Documentation Centres specialising in Disability issues, Outdoors Education and Intercultural Centres. The multi centre groups under one physical building what used to be separate and disparate centres, seeking to create synergies among the different specialisations. *Memo* seeks to support schools in project proposals, while encouraging and valorising research and innovation.

“*L’Olmo*” is the Environmental Education Centre, also housed within the multi centre, that was created within the framework of Local Agenda 21 and offers:

- **Training and in-service training** within the fields of Environmental Education, urban sustainability and Local Agenda 21.
- **Pedagogical support for Modenese schools**, including projects within the framework of “Local Agenda 21 Schools”.
- **Consultancy and Methodological support** in the elaboration of environmental education projects and in the organisation of courses, seminars, guided visits, exhibits and other initiatives linked to the environment.
- **Promotion of educational initiatives** with the objective of promoting positive environmental behaviours among youth and adults.
- **Awareness-raising initiatives** on local environmental problems and promotion of green and people friendly lifestyles among consumers.
- **Dissemination of the processes and methodologies used in Agenda 21.** CD, DVDs, Books and magazines on environmental issues are available for browsing or loan. Furthermore, all available material is included in the *Memo* database and other local lending libraries.

Schools often ask *Memo* for back up services which individual teachers are not able to integrate in their work due to day-to-day pressures. For example, schools were interested in the “walk-to-school” initiative that Local Agenda 21 identified as a goal, but since they had no adequate street maps to map out the best itineraries, they contacted *Memo* for this service.

The *Memo* experiment is a possible solution for the educational challenges identified earlier in Part 1. Physically housing different specialisations under one building is one concrete and seemingly effective way of counteracting the fragmentation often existing in the educational arena.

Another key question posed by *Memo* staff is that regarding in-service training for teachers. Teachers have had different initial teacher training sessions, sometimes differing to such an extent that in-service course were found very hard to conduct due to the heterogeneity of the participants. To increase relevance and effectiveness, *Memo* set up a new service of one-to-one support.

Initiative 5 – the Participative Budget

Modena started experimenting with the Participatory Budget (PB) in 2005 and at the time of writing it will be re-launching its new PB, with the aim of identifying together with citizens, themes and projects on which to work in the future. The PB is on a steep learning curve and the processes being currently launched will attempt to use more flexible methodologies and take into account the differences among the various quarters of the city. Similar processes are also used to enable citizens to give guidelines to the administration about other non-financial issues. For example, at the time of writing, citizens are being invited to express their thoughts and ideas on the disused steel foundries (*ex-fonderie*) - how they currently use these spaces and what they would like them to become.

Such processes have the potential to give new meaning to political processes and in raising the expectations of citizens in their active role in influencing the decision making process. Once these processes are kick-started and citizens have their say on improving the urban environment, citizens expect the administration to keep up these levels of dialogue even in other matters.

DESD

The Decade's goals are reflected in four key objectives:

- Facilitating networking and collaboration among stakeholders in ESD;
- Fostering greater quality of teaching and learning of environmental topics;
- Supporting countries in achieving their millennium development goals through ESD efforts; and
- Providing countries with new opportunities and tools to reform education.

It is clear that in one way or another broad Local Agenda 21 processes at Modena are supporting each of these four objectives. They have created new spaces for networking, bringing together actors who would not have naturally worked together. Through centres such as *Memo*, the quality of teaching on the environment has been enhanced, while providing an opportunity to reform education. Through initiatives such as the fair trade towns and cities, real contributions towards the MDGs through ESD efforts are carried out. The DESD process claims to break down the traditional educational scheme and promote interdisciplinary and holistic learning (rather than subject based learning), value based learning, critical thinking (rather than memorisation), multi method approaches, participatory decision-making and locally (rather than national) relevant information. It is clear that *Memo* is contributing to the achievement of such objectives.

If implemented well Local Agenda 21 and other participatory processes can contribute meaningfully to the objectives of the DESD, while taking into consideration the identified challenges. They have been able to create new spaces for civil society, rather than limit them. They have created new political processes and renewed forms of direct participatory democracy that were able to define new social contacts at the municipal level. Centres such as *Memo* are rising to the educational challenge.

Of course these processes also need to be continuously monitored and evaluated. For example, one of the most common critiques that emerged from an inquiry on Agenda 21 in Italy was the low attendance at the meetings. This is a source of concern as the major strength of Agenda 21 lies in its potential to serve as an active participative tool for citizens. Although in practice the political and administrative responsibilities of Local Agenda 21 often lie with the authorities responsible for the Environment, the idea of Local Agenda 21 as a project that deals with social and economic concerns, besides environmental ones, is increasing.

“... Agendas 21 working groups are increasingly gaining a social character or are succeeding in integrating the environmental spheres with the economic and social ones. An example is constituted by the increasing interest towards the lifestyle and consumption fields, the solidarity economy networks, etc.” (Teglio, 2006, p.10)

The double interrelated challenge of the eradication of poverty and the preservation of the environment is becoming increasingly more visible.

Part 3 – Environmental Education in a Complex Era

The goal of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development is to integrate the principles, values and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning. This third part of the paper will present some reflections on the current context and try to highlight the various challenges the DESD is facing in attaining its goals. It will also put forward some pointers for dealing with these challenges, not least in the formation of Environmental Education stakeholders that have to deal with increasingly complex realities linked to environmental integrity, economic visibility and a just society for present and future generations.

a) Creating Partnerships and Alliances

The often disparate nature of Environmental Education does not lend itself well for proactive coordination, let alone creating practical synergies with other sectoral and inter-sectoral approaches that are concerned for instance with development, culture, migration, fair trade, agriculture, issues that although related and relevant to our work are largely dealt with separately. This is surely an area which environmental educators need to deal with head on, if they hope to achieve the ambitious targets of the decade.

Creating alliances is one strong strategic approach to meet the challenges of the decade, taking into

consideration the current context and the environment-development nexus. There are different models to consider as well as different key points to keep in mind.

One interesting approach has been that adopted by the various stakeholders involved in the process of “*The European Consensus on Development: the contribution of Development Education & Awareness Raising*”. Representatives from both government and civil society participated in a joint process, with each sector having a co-chair and culminating in the publication of a joint paper delineating the contribution of Development Education in eradicating poverty and a Europe that is a responsible global player. The theme of alliances was both a *modus operandi*, as well as an aim to continue working for, as explicated below:

“Extensive and often well-established structures and processes exist in Europe that are relevant to our work ... Development Education and Awareness Raising aim to work with and through these structures and processes to strengthen and support their capacity to implement awareness raising and educational efforts for development. Similarly, attempts are made to develop common agendas with other educational approaches in Europe and beyond including, for example, active citizenship education, anti-racist education, environmental and sustainable development education, gender education, global education, human rights education, intercultural and multicultural education, participatory learning and action, and peace education.

Part 2 proposed the example of *Memo* in Modena, that took the strategic decision to put the environmental education centre under the same roof as various other adjectival educations¹³ in order to improve linkages and coordination.

Furthermore, DEEEP, a project in association with the CONCORD Development Education Forum issued a statement specifically dealing with Local Authorities as potential strategic allies. The vision presented by DEEEP was for local authorities to create partnerships that go beyond technical cooperation and to include meaningful partnership and exchange of various actors at a local level (e.g. schools, associations, cultural groups, unions, churches, women’s movements). Such alliances can make a substantial contribution to development education, intercultural dialogue and the DESD. Once again, the role of intercultural dialogue was recognised:

“Intercultural dialogue and competences are essential for fostering societies which are aware of globalisation, which understand causes and consequences of global challenges and in which citizens assume the role of a responsible actor of globalisation.” (CONCORD DEF, 2008, p.1)

As in so many other situations, environmental educators do not need to re-invent the wheel. There are numerous examples on which environmental educators can draw on. The DEF statement on local councils reminds us of one:

“The European Union has considerable experience in promoting local exchange and mutual understanding, one of the best examples probably being the French-German Treaty of Friendship, which created the basis for a multitude of town partnerships and thus helped to overcome historical hostility between the countries.” A future “European-African Youth Office” (following the example of the French-German Youth Office) could help to promote intercultural dialogue, development education and ESD in European and developing countries on a local level. Municipalities and local civil society (NGOs) as the source and host of such an exchange should play a crucial part in this dialogue.” (CONCORD DEF, 2008, p.2)

There is also a need to redefine Environmental Education stakeholders. A broadening of understanding and a dialectic process is necessary. Environmental Education is not the sole prerogative of those traditionally branded environmental educators, but all those Civil Society actors that are taking an educative role as part and parcel of their ethical business, their advocacy, their campaigning and their innovative work within governance processes such as Agenda 21. One first step would be to dedicate more resources into the systemization of experiences. A possible starter would be to look at alternatives such as Fair Trade, the Slow Food and Terra Madre movement, experiments in the social economy, permaculture¹⁴ and so on.

We need to in particular look strategically at alliances with those involved in consumer education. Consider grape farmers who are very vulnerable because they grow one crop per year and erratic weather can ruin

13 An umbrella term used to encompass postmodern tradition in education such as development, environmental, multi-cultural, anti-racist, human rights, peace, global and futures education.

14 Permaculture is system of perennial agriculture emphasizing the use of renewable natural resources and the enrichment of local ecosystems.

their whole investments. Consequently they are often reluctant to convert to organic farming. However, the situation for such farmers would be different situation if education programmes help citizens understand the complex interrelations between food production, health, environmental degradation, food prices and poverty and so on. Consumer education and a demand driven clean production has the potential to convince the grape farmer that it is possible and worthwhile to convert to organic farming.

Another potentially crucial alliance is that between Environmental Education and (Active) Global Citizenship Education. In Malta, through the EC supported project *Conectando Mundos*, NGOs are working closely with the active citizenship department to educate about traditionally environmental issues such as water and climate change. The rationale behind such a strategic alliance has perhaps been best expressed by Desmond Tutu (2006, p.1):

“Linking communities over the world offers the opportunity to understand the impact of global decisions within a local context. How do our actions affect those in other nations who may live half a world away? The fostering of relationships through linking can alter for the better the way the world works and how people view others, so that together we can achieve a different and better world”

Furthermore, in authorities Modena and Emilia Romagna often attribute the success of Local Agenda 21 on a generally active citizenship in the region and because “citizens and the municipality reflect each other”.

Finally, there is a big danger in dealing with issues from a single issue perspective. For example, speaking at Terra Madre in Firenze May 2008, Vandana Shiva mentioned “environmental NGOs” working against emissions that were willing to embrace nuclear energy. The bio-fuel issue is another case in point. For years the environmental lobby had promoted bio-fuel as a possible response to climate change and air pollution, without any real consideration of the potential negative social effects such as on food security, something paramount for the development lobby. One notes that since summer 2008, the Climate Action Network in Europe and CONCORD have met strategically together in recognition that a stronger coordinated environmental and development perspective is needed if we are to rise up meaningfully to the challenge of climate change.

b) What concept do we have on development?

While varying from organisation to organisation, beyond the relatively well understood definition of sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, little open spaces exist for debating paradigms of development. This is of crucial importance if the strategic alliances referred to above are to be taken seriously. One recent breakthrough in this regard has been the conference “Are we on the right track? Paradigm review by civil society organisations (CSOs) as development actors” which took place in Prague from May 14-16, 2008 and was organised by TRIALOG and CONCORD in cooperation with the Ecumenical Academy Prague and the Czech NGDO platform FoRS. Questions asked included: Do we follow the logic of economic growth or the logic of development? Do we want to have more or do we want to live happier? Is democracy a pre-condition for development? Are the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) a shame? What role do China, India, Brazil play globally? Do we fight the causes or symptoms of poverty?” The conference offered the possibility for an open dialogue between CSOs from “West”, “East” and “South” and for reflecting together upon the principles, which underlie the development work of civil society.

Many of the 140 participants, coming from more than 50 different countries, stated that it was for the first time that CSO representatives from Africa, Asia, Latin America had the chance to talk in depth with their colleagues from the new EU member states and to get to know more about these relatively new donor countries. (Trialog, 2008)

One seminal piece of work that environmental educators often overlook is that of Amarty Sen and the Capability Approach, which emerged as a leading alternative to standard economic frameworks for thinking about poverty, inequality and human development generally.

“Sen's Capability Approach has ... been praised for broadening the informational base of evaluation, refocusing on people as ends in themselves (rather than treating them merely as means to economic activity), recognising human heterogeneity and diversity (through differences in personal conversion functions), drawing attention to group disparities (such as those based on gender, race, class, case or age), embracing human agency and participation (by emphasising the role, of practical reason, deliberative democracy and public action in forging goals, making choices and influencing policy), and acknowledging that different people, cultures and societies may have different values and aspirations.” (Clark, 2006, p.5)

The Capability Approach has been criticised from various angles, including concerns related to how far this

approach is operational. In spite of the various criticisms, many innovative attempts have been made to measure well being in the functioning and capability space. Its major strength, in suggesting that the overriding objective of development is the expansion of human capabilities rather than economic growth, remains a guiding basic tenet with various implications for many, including educators.

c) Supporting the transition from “common sense” to “good sense”

In a Gramscian version of a threefold society (economy, state and civil society), culture plays an important role in providing societal cohesion and continuity in the event of societal chaos triggered by the failure of both an undemocratic state and a totalitarian economy. The current environmental and poverty crises require engagement in the cultural work referred to by Gramsci and work on alternative lifestyles. In such a context, the role of environmental educators involves preparing the culture so that communities and societies are more prepared when historic circumstances change.

In the UK, various educators had been involved in consumer education about organic produce and the living soil, often with limited success, but the historical changes brought about by BSE and foot and mouth disease made their issues much more acceptable, with the situation currently being that the demand for organic produce overshadows the local supply. Similarly promoters of ethical banking and educators working on issues linked with the social economy have often faced uphill battles, but situations such as the current financial crises offer new credibility to their issues. It is a question of grasping the historic moment. Perhaps the main question environmental educators ought to be asking is about the implications today's historic moment of peak oil, climate change, food crisis and crisis in the financial system bring to their work. It is an opportunity to do the necessary transition from niche to mainstream and to make positive alternatives more known. This challenge has been recognised at least since the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, with a call to valorise local experiences and solutions and promote them on a regional, national and global scale. This challenge is coupled with another one: ensuring that what occupies a niche does not “lose its soul” on its way to becoming more mainstream. Again there are signs of hope here. Fair Trade in Europe has been increasing at an average rate of 20% annually and the role of education and awareness raising as well as working through partnerships and alliances has been crucial. In the meantime Fair Trade has remained faithful to its roots and is constantly under review in order to rise up to new challenges and contexts.

d) Understanding the political nature of our work

In the run up to the Johannesburg 2002 Rio +10 Earth Summit, a group of 16 activists, intellectuals and managers, brought together by the Heinrich Boell Foundation, produced an agenda for equity and ecology, titled The Jo'Burg Memo, a comprehensive policy statement from a civil society perspective. The Memo makes the case against the misconception that poverty eradication is at odds with environmental care and argues that unless access to land, seeds, forests, grasslands, fishing grounds and water is secured, livelihoods cannot be safeguarded. Writing about the Memo for Yes! Magazine, Wolfgang Sachs (2002) added:

Moreover, pollution of air, soils, water, and food chronically undermines the physical health of the poor, in particular in cities. Environmental protection, therefore, is not a contradiction to poverty elimination, but its condition. With regard to the poor, there will be no equity without ecology. But also the reverse is true, given that resource conservation is best guaranteed by stronger community rights: there will be no ecology without equity.

The fact that Environmental Protection is not at odds with Poverty Eradication requires environmental educators to position themselves within the environment-development nexus and recognise the “commonality of our struggle”, whether the starting point is developmental or environmental or social. We have witnessed in Malta the tendency for environmental NGOs to see migration as a threat, rather than part of their same struggle. This commonality can be seen in the prediction of various scholars that 50 million people worldwide will be displaced by 2010 because of rising sea levels, desertification, dried up aquifers, weather-induced flooding and other serious environmental changes.

Part 2 provided some examples that demonstrate the political nature of positive alternatives and how the participatory budget increases citizen expectations, to an extent that even in non-participatory budget meetings, citizens expected not just to be informed but to debate together. However, it is important to recognise the limits of Local Agenda 21. Interviews conducted by the author during 2008 show that there are mixed evaluations regarding to what extent can Local Agenda 21 bring about transformative societal changes as opposed to reforming dialogue and democratic processes. For example, while it is acknowledged that Local Agenda 21 in Modena did contribute significantly to lifestyles change among citizens, it lacked the clout to stop destructive speculation that involved big money.

In Malta we are witnessing a similar issue right now. Government has promised to distribute free energy saving bulbs to all families in a bid to encourage all citizens to switch bulbs, but has simultaneously failed to impose any conditions for big foreign investment (e.g. Smart City) to produce a percentage of their electricity from renewable sources. It is here that environmental educators need reflect on the political nature of their work. One big speculative project can instantly wipe out any benefits gained from lifestyle changes in thousands of citizens. This points to the need to work more on advocacy and lobby and empowering citizens in influencing policy making.

Furthermore, environmental educators need to realise the political dimension in what might not be obviously political. Part 2 referred to Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) as practiced by Rinatura. Through CSA, participants are challenging the dominant food distribution system and recreating new and fairer relationships between producers and consumers and between people and the environment.

Furthermore being political means understanding and analysing power as it manifests itself at various levels. Modalities of developments in the participatory budget depend on multiple factors. According to Rocke (2008, p. 12), referring to the situation in the UK:

“Generally speaking, the modalities of the future development will depend on the willingness of central government to pursue its policy of less centralism and “empowerment”, on the selection of “best practice” models within the Government which will spread throughout the country, on the existence of local policy-makers and residents who are convinced of the process and try to set up new and innovative practices. In any case, there exists a lot of scope for local experimentation and people interested in Participatory Budget should keep an eye on the further developments in the UK as it promises to be interesting.”

e) Our European Vocation

One other essential point for environmental educators whose target audience is mainly European citizens is to pose crucial questions such as: “What vision do we have of Europe?” “What vision do we have of Europe as a responsible global player?”

It is widely recognised within circles working on advocacy issues that policies, taken at European level, or at an international level (WTO, IMF, etc) where Europe has a big say, impact on the lives of citizens globally. It is also widely recognised that citizens and in particular citizens organised in movements, NGOs and CSOs do influence how European governments vote. Furthermore citizens are more likely to impact on government positions if there has been significant investment in education, since citizens would understand the issues get involved better. It was Julius Nyerere, the president of Tanzania between 1961-85 who had asked the UK government to “*take every penny you have set aside in aid for Tanzania and spend it in the UK explaining to people the facts and causes of poverty*” (DEA, 2008 p. 30). During the Prague Conference that was held in May 2008, the need for common advocacy work between CSOs in the “South” and “North” was stressed several times, as well as the need for global education promoting well-being and active citizenship. There was actually a call to shift from work in the South to more policy and advocacy in the North.

Understanding our European vocation is also understanding that we have to listen more to others, in particular to the South. The participatory budget was invented at the end of the 1980s in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre and has now spread to many European countries. According to Rocke (2008, p.2), “*it introduced a vivid process of “idea exportation” of this first democratic innovation coming from a Latin-American country to the western world (from “south” to “north”)*”.

Conclusion

This paper started by having a look at the complex realities of today, highlighting the diminishing spaces for autonomous and independent civil society, the failure of important political processes and the educational challenge. Following that, it focused on one case study in the region of Modena, highlighting some important political processes that enhance participation, open up new spaces for civil society, build new governance relationships and address the educational challenge through such services as *Memo*. The third part focused on five key challenges that environmental educators face in today’s complex reality. These challenges have implications for the curricula of training courses available for those engaging or intending to engage in environmental education and other adjectival educations. In particular, traditional Environmental Education training courses lack strong components in advocacy skills and in how to go about influencing policies, in elements of a good campaign and in networking and creating alliances. This is not to suggest that the work of environmental educators ought to become fossilised into static managerial models (where

for example a campaign lacks any passion or anger and is mainly stage-managed), but on the contrary, to ensure one can reflect on the opportunities that historical contexts can provide and act accordingly.

Finally while the starting point of this paper was the diminishing opportunities for autonomous and independent civil society, one has to also acknowledge the relatively new positive realities where civil society is gaining new spaces, such as *Terra Futura* in Italy, *Terra Madre*, and *Via Campesina* and now the well established Social Fora, an “open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and inter-linking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neo-liberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a society centred on the human person” (World Social Forum, 2001). It is such initiatives that would be at the centre of a systematisation of experiences that would help guide environmental educators in their endeavours in a complex world.

This paper is an invitation to reflect on how and where we position ourselves as educators.

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