

Humanistic Education for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Sustainable development paradigm involves a shift of attitude and, therefore, Education for Sustainable Development, supposed to have a transformative role, must aim this purpose: to help human being to overcome his selfish condition, to think and to act responsibly, motivated by sympathy, as Adam Smith wrote in "The Theory of Moral Sentiments", and solidarity with present and future generations. This is not an easy task, as the neo-classical paradigm works mainly under the principles of competition and profit seeking. Economic development is important and professional skills are needed, but the current higher educational system, based on specialisation and employability, must be rethought taking into account humanistic values and principles.

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JEL classification: I20, I21, I25, I3

Framework of economic development

People, as promoters, creators and beneficiaries of a healthy development, need human potential/capital to accomplish sustainability goals. Education represents the way for improving and increasing this human potential. In order to understand the complexity and magnitude of the phenomena that threaten the natural, social, and economic balance on the planet and to act accordingly, university graduates from all countries, as future leaders, need *a shift of attitude* in comparison with the current generation. They have to understand what went wrong and what changes must be done.

A change of attitude and habits as a *consumer* in a consumerist society is very difficult to attain, for everyone and especially for younger people. Advertising campaigns, fueled and stimulated by the corporate need to produce and sell worldwide, with the one and only purpose of obtaining profit, generates global consumption and hedonistic behavior patterns, and the pressure and temptations for consumers get bigger and bigger every day.

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In the position of a *producer, seller, tenderer of services*, economic university graduates must be prepared to contribute, as corporate executives, managers or other kinds of employees, to socially responsible corporate activities that take into account factors other than profit, namely environmental protection and respect for stakeholders and consumers, in order to pursue the objectives of sustainable development (Pirnea, 2014). It is possible for them, in some cases, to be in a situation to make a choice: to stay or to leave a company that does not respect the principles of sustainable development (for example, does not have a just/equitable policy towards employees, or deliberately pollutes the environment). Sometimes it is possible to be quite difficult to decide one way or the other, to act in favor of moral principles, despite material loss: to quit a well-paid job because the corporation does not respect the rights of workers or pollute the environment. Motivation to resign may be fear of consequences (breach of legal provisions may have direct consequences on decision makers in the company), desire to meet/respect moral principles that are important on the scale of values of that individual – his moral consciousness does not permit him to work in a company that violates these moral principles, or a form of protest against those practices.

As a *citizen*, an individual must be active, informed and responsible, he must respect his obligations and exercise his rights, for his safety and well-being and for the good of the society he lives in. Respect for democratic principles and human rights, social justice, eradication of discrimination, these are rules that must be respected, and, if/when they are broken, citizens have to take action to straighten or eliminate the undesirable practices. On the other hand, the democratic game of politics, consisting of demands, needs and hopes of the *demos* versus political marketing – promises in the electoral campaigns of the politicians to supply public goods, in exchange of precious votes –, in some scholars' opinion, also works and can be interpreted by the rules of a market (according to *public choice theory* developed by James M. Buchanan and Gordon Tullock). The approach of organizations to integrate themselves into complex systems of innovation in order to achieve their strategic goals converges with the strategic axes that the Governments run at regional and national level (Roja, Nastase, Valimareanu, 2014). Failures of the political market frequently appear, this mechanism, however, involves multiple risks, especially for uneducated, uninformed individuals, and consequently, for the whole society: manipulation, populism, false electoral promises and deceiving the expectations of the electorate (Buşoi, 2012).

If we refer to the pyramid of human needs of Abraham Maslow, a society must first assure the possibilities, the proper conditions for a human being to lead a decent life, primarily to fulfill his basic needs, including access to educational services, and only afterwards to claim he will grow to become a valuable citizen, able and willing to contribute to a sustainable development. But here appears a vicious circle: such a society is not a priori given, it must be built. And this goal can be achieved only through education – an education that aims to form a human being developed beyond the stage "*homo homini lupus*".

A complex and demanding description on what education should become is included in a recent UNESCO document regarding principles on education for sustainable development beyond 2015: “Beyond narrower utilitarian economic approaches, it is important to reaffirm a humanistic and integrated vision of education, with this latter playing a fundamental role in personal, social and cultural development. In addition to the acquisition of effective basic learning skills, we must ensure the relevance of the content of learning, both in terms of the ethical principles being promoted (such as respect for life, human dignity, and cultural diversity) and in terms of the way in which education leads to positive contributions to citizenship at both local and global levels. The purpose of learning must be envisaged in a broad perspective, moving beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge and traditional cognitive skills to include an emphasis on such ‘soft skills’ as communication, critical thinking, social and emotional skills, creative problem-solving, and conflict resolution.” (UNESCO, 2013)

As “the educational system has been given the very challenging task of saving the world” through “innovation, creativity and unwavering commitment to transform the basics of society” (Raphaely, Marinova, 2013, p. 6), debates and discussions regarding changes in higher education must be considered. As realities, traditions and cultural features differ from one country to another, educational policies and universities’ strategies must be developed taking into account these considerations, but also global and local challenges. Passing through several stages of searching for better ways of education that respond to the global crisis issues – *human education, environmental education, ecopedagogy* et al. (Raphaely, Marinova, 2013, pp. 9-12) – an Education for Sustainable Development must avoid narrow approaches, and consider economic, social and environmental aspects of sustainable development, in order to offer people the ability to understand “the big picture” of the reality, but also its depth, and to act accordingly. The truly state of facts cannot be understood piece by piece, but it should be viewed from several angles, in a holistic manner. If we think that development is a complex construction that is intended to last, “site masters”, or in our case higher education graduates, must be in good faith, having in mind a construction meant from the beginning for future generations too, and they must be properly prepared/instructed for this difficult task. So they need moral values and principles, or, more precisely, a solid moral conscience, specialized knowledge, but also broad knowledge regarding the human being, the society and environment.

Humanism and higher business education

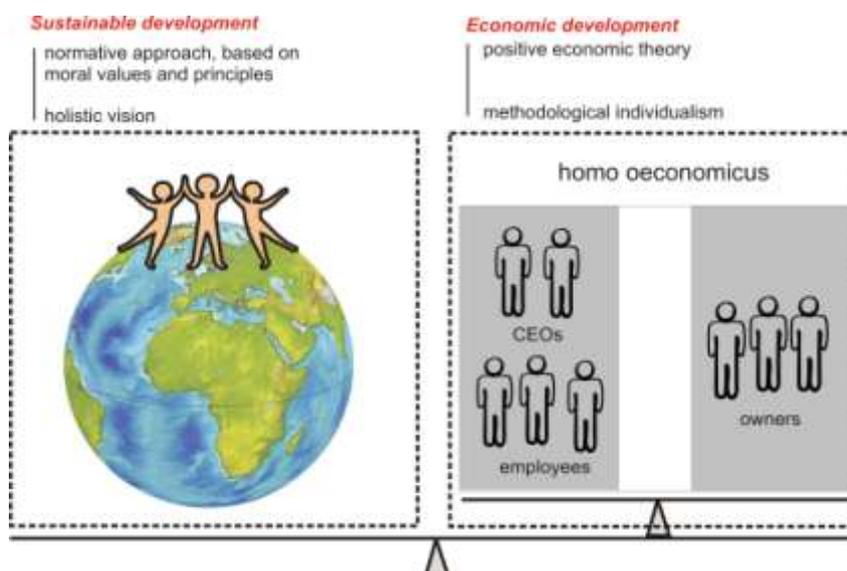
The general theory of free market, applied in different fields of human activity, including noneconomic ones, as an example political market, was initiated in the Enlightenment period: human being is analyzed as an economic actor using a simplified model: “homo oeconomicus”. According to this model, people are

motivated by their economic rationality, they make calculations and act with the purpose of obtaining the maximum utility they can in the present circumstances. In the Enlightenment period, humanity chose a new way of thinking – liberated from traditional comforts and certainties regarding a theistic design, they had to construct their own future “based on the purely rational principles of democracy, morality, science, and economy”, so the free market was initially conceived in a moral framework (McDonald, 2000, pp. 385-386). The “homo oeconomicus” model was just a part of the explanation.

As Amartya Sen noticed, there seemed to be a misunderstanding regarding Adam Smith’s two books, *The Wealth of Nations* and his previous writing, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*: “Given the pervasive interdependence of these two books, it is amazing that many Smith commentators have been inclined to see a huge dichotomy between the two. Indeed, there is quite a voluminous literature on what has been called the *Adam Smith problem*, the common element of which is the fanciful belief that there is an inconsistency between Smith’s arguments presented in the *Moral Sentiments*, which ‘attributed conduct to sympathy’, and in *The Wealth of Nations*, which allegedly saw behavior as ‘being based on selfishness’. A recurrent asked question has been: Why did Smith abandon his earlier approach when he came to write *The Wealth of Nations*?” Amartya Sen explains that Smith never abandoned moral sentiments in his theory, that he presents a variety of human motivations, including sympathy and self-love, and that “the role of self-love in explaining particular economic phenomena does nothing to reduce the relevance of different motivations in the understanding of other economic regularities”. (Smith, with an Introduction by Amartya Sen, 2009, pp. viii-ix) So Adam Smith, the creator of the concept of “invisible hand”, considered the initiator of explaining economic phenomena and efficiency based on selfishness of people, does not exclude, but emphasizes compassion and empathy as important features of the individual he describes, he has in fact a holistic view on human being’s character and behavior.

Also in a holistic manner, sustainable development paradigm is built on ethical principles, objectives and courses of action in the economic, social and environmental field. Man should no longer be centered only on himself, he should return to a more selfless behavior, a balance between his interest and the interest of others must be kept, he must consider the good of his generation and of future generations, too.

As UNESCO documents has shown, sustainable development is not a reality/fact, it’s still a continuously perfectible target, and Education for Sustainable Development is meant to contribute to this purpose. How would be the design of higher education, mainly of business higher education according to the paradigm of sustainable development?



Higher education is currently designed with the specific goal of creating graduates who meet the needs of the economic system/agents/employers, graduates capable to offer precious human capital on the labor market, as specialists, in exchange of high wages. This goal involves in many situations highly specialized curriculum. Beyond the practical reasons for choosing such a strategy for a university, a path that corresponds to the needs of the society for specialists in fields that make the economy work, and also justified by the difficulties regarding unemployment of the graduates of the tertiary education, still some issues must be mentioned. This kind of approach is based on a market philosophy: the university provides educational services to the students that are their customers. But education must be much more than that, it must function and create principles. Education for Sustainable Development, which is trying to make its way into educational philosophy and practice, aims to have a transformative role at the conscious level, to educate young people morally, to internalize values, to help them become responsible, compassionate, concerned of social justice, of present and future generations' wellbeing, to develop transversal abilities of critical thinking and creativity, to make them capable to understand and respect the complexity of the world they are living in and to find solutions. As Adam Smith, we should also trust in human goodness and create conditions within higher education for young generations to rediscover the true values of humanism and humanity.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, a “break-up” between the theory of economic development and culture appeared, the first being understood and measured in money and business, and the latter being considered “guilty” of customs, morals and other “soft” domains. Thus were “cut the sociological roots of the economics, weakened its intrinsic and mutual links with sociology, politics, history and anthropology, and eventually culminated in the science’s alienation” (Pyrkosz, 2009, pp. 48-49). Still, we must not forget that economics is a social

science, different from natural sciences, that people act as complex human beings, under many motivations, and, in these circumstances, de-socialized economics hardly explains and solves the problems of reality. Still, in the 20th century, several crucial theories regarding economic development gave explanations based on interconnections between culture/customs/morals/religion and economics (Pyrkosz, 2009, pp. 50-54).

Additionally, “the recognition of the cultural element in economic development of countries in the last decade of the 20th century coincided with the rise of the idea of sustainable development” (Pyrkosz, 2009, p. 54) and it becomes more and more obvious that social and cultural aspects of life are equally important in economic development.

The concept of humanistic education has a long tradition, with roots in ancient Greek philosophy, and taking a modern shape in the 19th century, finally finding a complex elaborated expression in “*Bildung*” – the non-utilitarian development of inner-self/the mind through education and culture – the educational model created by Wilhelm von Humboldt. “Against conceiving of higher learning as a mere means to worldly success and thus reducing its value to its function for achieving material goals, the German philosophers [*the author refers to several German philosophers who were preoccupied of the role, principles and methods of higher education at the beginning of the 19th century – Humboldt, Kant, Schleiermacher, Schlegel, Steffens, Schiller, Fichte, Savigny et al.*] located the true value of education in expressing human dignity, perfecting understanding, fostering empathy for and participation in the lives of others.” (Schiller, 1790, apud Dierksmeier, 2011, p. 21) This humanistic perspective matches, from our point of view, in a considerable proportion with the purposes of Education for Sustainable Development, as Humboldtian educational model features include three unities (the unity of teachers and learners – they are equal pursuing knowledge, the unity of research and teaching, and the unit of knowledge – all branches of knowledge are bounded together in a whole, philosophy being the integrative discipline), and two freedoms (of teaching and of learning) (Pritchard, 2004, pp. 510-511). The Humboldtian model also emphasized the “the primacy of ‘pure’ science over specialized professional training” (Ash, 2006).

As it aims to widen the horizon of young graduates of higher education, to build their potential to understand economic and social phenomena in a holistic way, to develop their capacity to think and to find solutions in a dynamic environment, in continuing changing, higher education must double specialized knowledge with general knowledge so “white collars” would become more than financial specialists that make money, but to think and to act in a sustainable manner. In the conditions of globalization and of generalized market/neo-liberal model for universities, without denying by no means the goal of employability and of efficiency of higher educational systems, still some changes must be made. Moral and humanistic education starts, without any doubt, in early years of education, but it must continue on primary, secondary and tertiary educational stages, as young people are progressively developing their personality. Highly

specialized curriculum, with narrow fields of learning and research, eliminating more and more humanistic objects, won't be able to help young generations to develop a holistic, moral view over the world, in order to act as responsible, informed, active consumers, producers, sellers, citizens. A neo-humanistic form of business higher education, partially integrating/adapting Humboldtian values, would be an expression of pursuing sustainability goals through its capacity of building the inner-self in a complex manner, as, in our opinion, 'soft skills' necessary for a truly sustainable development are complex and highly demanding.

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