1. THE GLOBAL SCENE FOR GEOGRAPHICAL EDUCATION

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Four Scenarios

Picture the following scenarios in your mind concerning the World and its people. How can they be understood well in order to sustain Planet Earth for now and the future? What is it in these scenarios that promotes the need for different educative processes to enhance the sustainability argument? How can geographical education play a key role in the resolution of these scenarios?

SCENARIO 1: THE FLOOD OF REFUGEES

The human tide of refugees in the 2000s continues unabated. Families and individuals in regions of Africa, Europe and Asia which are under threat from warfare, terrorism, disease, civil strife, poverty and oppressive dictatorships, struggle to escape from these purges. In their hundreds and thousands, these people have sought refuge in neighbouring and distant countries. They do so by travelling on foot, by some form of transport including boats and aircraft, and on temporary structures such as rafts. A limited number of refugees are invited to host countries after being processed by immigration officials. Most of these refugees spend several years in detention camps in very limited conditions. Here, they struggle to maintain a modest lifestyle. More recently, people smugglers have entered the refugee flood, charging large amounts of money to transport these people to a safe haven. However, mostly these are fateful trips that end up in disaster at the worst and detention camp at best.

SCENARIO 2: MINING MISADVENTURE

A mining company has obtained a permit from the local government to retrieve large amounts of copper from an equatorial rainforest area. Initially, this project seems to be an excellent opportunity to enrich the host country and to make a handsome profit for the mining company. What results is somewhat different. The mining operations have involved the extensive disruption to the rainforests' human and animal inhabitants caused by the destruction of the rainforest to retrieve the copper ore. This has reduced the area of forest that local tribes have used for their livelihood. Animals that were hunted for food have disappeared. Residue from the processing operation has clogged the nearby river killing the local fish and virtually closing down the river transport. The local tribes protest to their government about the impact of the mining operation on their environment. The mining company justifies its actions as normal under the circumstances.

SCENARIO 3: THIRD-WORLD MANUFACTURING

A wide range of manufacturing now occurs in Third-world countries. This results from the very low labour costs that overseas companies exploit to manufacture leisure goods for consumption in First-world countries. In many of these manufacturing sites large groups of unskilled workers are paid a few dollars for a long working day. They have very limited working conditions and little capacity to improve their careers. They live in squalid conditions. Products from these factories are sold to overseas markets at comparatively high rates. Profits from these sales flow out of the country of the manufacturing to another country. Therefore, the local countries achieve few benefits from this large-scale manufacturing.

SCENARIO 4: LOCAL COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Local communities in different countries have each developed a strong bond to promote effective environmental and community education. Interest groups of citizens have been formed in each community to agree on projects that will build partnerships amongst the local business people, local and state government representatives, representatives from different community organizations, local schools and interested citizens. While the projects may differ from community to community, each one is intended to draw people to work together to strengthen their local interaction and make the community a more sustainable environment. This may involve community adults working with school children to implement conservation programs. It may involve these people working with older citizens on beautification projects. It may even involve business people supporting children acting as environmental educators for their own families. Then, it may involve representatives from these communities sharing the results of their projects with each other.

An initial reading of these scenarios could suggest to the readers that the World is full of powerful people who exercise control over powerless people. That is much too pessimistic an angle to think about, even though there is evidence of exploitation of human beings despite countries supporting the universal Declaration of Human Rights. These scenarios certainly contain a call for action by citizens around the World to minimise any abuses of human rights and dignity. They also contain by inference a need for people, and governments, around the World to think of humanity as the future for this planet and education as the medium for the securing the future of our planet. Education, especially geographical education, with its integrative powers for linking people with each other and with the environments in which they live should be the force for addressing each of the scenarios mentioned and for enhancing our effectiveness in using the resources of planet Earth. However, it is reasonable to ask just how effective is geographical education at the beginning of the twenty-first century for conveying this important role?
Factors that influence the status of Geographical Education around the World

Globally, education is being treated very seriously as the long term solution for the future quality of life on our planet. Nations in developing countries make comprehensive education as the only feasible solution for improved quality of life. Post-industrial Westernised countries believe that education is important, but they push for economic development as the main driver for the health of their nations. Sadly, economic development is not the main influence of having a sustainable, peaceful nation. It should never supplant education as the key impetus for the quality of its citizens’ livelihood. Economic development should be used as a major support for universal education so that nations can learn how to help themselves rather than rely on economic “handouts” for their survival.

A considerable number of key international statements or policies act as influential forces on the international orientation that geographical education must take if it is to become the vital plank of global education. Various Declarations from the United Nations, including the University Declaration of Human Rights and the Declaration on the Rights of the Child have been important for underpinning the international work of geographical educators. They have been supported by key reports from agencies such as UNESCO. The report of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century (Delors et al., 1996) drew our attention to the challenge of the two-sided process for educating people: firstly an individualised process and secondly a process of constructing social interaction. This was extended in a following report on holistic education (Sarkijarvi, 2000, 3) to emphasise that whatever education is planned for people its holistic nature should be promoted through: educating the complete person through recognising the multiple dimensions of human personality – physical, emotional, social ethical, aesthetic, spiritual and intellectual; understanding the broad awareness of the world and the interdependence of and interrelations between the world, people and phenomena; and taking into account all dimensions of learning that occur throughout our lives in different forms. Reports and Declarations such as these have promoted the development of important statements from key professional geographical organizations such as the International Geographic Union to advise geographical educators around the world on effective policy and action. The International Charter on Geographical Education (IGUCGE, 1992) and the Declaration on Geography and Cultural Diversity (IGU, 2000) represent two of these important statements.

National statements have played important roles in the formulation of policy for geographical education in different countries. In the USA, for example, the publication relating to the national standards in geography – Geography for Life (Bednarz, 1994) – unpacked the key elements of geographic education for educators in different levels of formal education. At a more general level, national reports such as An Agenda for the Knowledge Nation (Jones et al., 2001) offer geographical educators broad advice on directions that geographical education should be taking for the future benefit of our society.

The leadership of professional geographical organizations in different countries, eg., the Geographical Association in the United Kingdom, and different thinkers in geography,
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