



Skills for sustainable development: Transforming vocational education and training beyond 2015



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ABSTRACT

There have been recent calls to transform VET and to transform development. This double call leads us to ask how can skills development best support development that is sustainable for individuals, communities and the planet, and which promotes social justice and poverty reduction. In considering this question, we critique the idea of green skills for the green economy as being inadequate for achieving a transformed and transformative VET that shifts the target from economic growth to the wellbeing of individuals and that enables vocational education to play a role in challenging and transforming society and work. Rather, we argue that we must see human development and sustainable development as inseparable, and plan and evaluate VET for its contribution to these. Such an approach must be grounded in a view of work, and hence skills for work, that is decent, life-enhancing, solidaristic, environmentally-sensitive and intergenerationally-aware. It must confront the reality that much current VET is complicit in preparing people for work that lacks some or all of these characteristics. It must be concerned with poverty, inequality and injustice and contribute to their eradication. It must be supportive of individuals' agency, whilst also reflecting a careful reading of the structures that too often constrain them. In doing all this it must minimise the costs and risks of any transformation for the poor and seek to lock them into better individual and communal lives, not out of them. Finally, it must transform skills, work and the world in ways that are truly sustainable of the people of today but also of those who are to inhabit the earth tomorrow.

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1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), launched in 2015 in the United Nation's publication *Transforming our World* (UN, 2015), are intended to provide an "ambitious and transformational vision" (UN, 2015: 3) designed to free "the human race from the tyranny of poverty and to heal and secure our planet" (UN, 2015: 1). In contrast to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which did not have a goal targeted specifically towards vocational education and training (VET), VET is a central aspect of Goal 4 of the SDGs which seeks to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UN, 2015: 17). This is the second important international call in recent years for the transformation of VET so as to better support

development. In 2012, the Third International Congress on Technical and Vocational Education and Training offered a vision of "transformative VET" that meant both that "the target of VET [changes] from economics to individuals", and that VET "does not adapt to current work and societal change, but aims to challenge and transform those" (UNESCO, 2012). This included an emphasis on human development and the need to think more seriously about skills for life as well as for work.

In response to the 2012 call for a "transformative VET", one of us posed the question of "what is skills development for?" (McGrath, 2012). That article explored the challenge of updating debates about VET to address recent thinking about human development. In response to the SDGs' call for transformation, we revisit that earlier question about VET's purpose by seeking to revitalise the debate about vocational education and sustainable development. We do this by exploring further the intrinsic links between human development and sustainable development, which were only touched lightly upon in the earlier article. The key question we want to pose here is:

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- how can skills development best support development that is sustainable for individuals, communities and the planet, whilst promoting social justice and poverty reduction?

Skills development can only play a small role within the wider systemic and cultural transformations that are necessary for sustainable development to be achieved, yet that role is not insignificant given the crucial place that skills are allocated both in articulating between education and active citizenship, and between schooling and work. VET has made a rapid return as an international policy priority since 2010 but much of the approach remains locked into old ways of thinking about skills, work and development that are still narrowly focused on economic rationales, formal wage employment and industrial modernisation that are little changed from the 1960s. For VET to contribute to addressing sustainable development we need nothing less than a “reimagining [of] the role of vocational education and training” (Powell, 2014).

In development terms, transformation is urgently required as we face a triple crisis that combines environmental degradation that pushes beyond the limits of what the Earth and its environmental systems can sustain (Rockström et al., 2009); continued and increasing chronic levels of poverty and inequality in poorer countries; and a new emergency caused by the effects of austerity in richer countries that sees the poor becoming poorer in absolute as well as relative terms, whilst the rich continue to revel in unsustainable consumption.

However, the “reimagining” required for a transformation of VET has not yet been well developed and the green skills approach, discussed below, does not go far enough to support an agenda of “transforming our world”. Therefore, this article offers a new way of thinking how the transformative agendas for VET and sustainable development might be advanced together. Our intention is to be provocative and to open up a new debate, rather than provide an authoritative account. Fundamentally, we take an epistemological and ethical stance that the questions we raise can only be answered in specific contexts and through participatory processes.

Before proceeding, we need to be clear as to what we are talking about in terms of skills development for sustainable development. We are focused here on what might be broadly considered as vocational skills: to be learned in vocationally-oriented provider institutions (public and private) and enterprises (formal and informal). That is not to argue that life skills for sustainable development, taught within the school system, are not important (cf. Fien et al., 2009b); but to clarify that they are not our focus.

We will begin to identify and examine some elements of an approach to answering the question of how VET can best support development that is sustainable for individuals, communities and the planet, and which promotes social justice and poverty reduction. In doing so, we will build on our previous arguments about skills development for human development to stress the crucial link between human and sustainable development through emphasising the sustainable development aspect more (cf. McGrath, 2012; Powell, 2012, 2014; Powell and McGrath, 2014; McGrath and Powell, 2015).

We do this by exploring in the next section the ambiguity and tension that exists in the term “sustainable development”. This is followed by a discussion of the dominance in initial responses to VET for sustainable development of the idea of “green skills for the green economy”. Thereafter we critique the notions of “green skills” and the “green economy” by arguing that it is unlikely that the approach that is being taken will achieve either the environmental sustainability that it has targeted or the social justice goals which have been set. In this section we also critique the notion of green skills as being inadequate for achieving a

transformed and transformative VET that shifts the target from economic growth to the wellbeing of individuals and that enables vocational education to play a role in challenging and transforming society and work, and hence “our world”. In our penultimate section we begin the discussion of a more radical account of skills for sustainability, before concluding with a summary of our argument and its significance.

2. What is sustainable development?

We need to unpack what is meant by the term “sustainable development” for, as Rist (2008) notes, “‘sustainable development’ has become part of the language of every ‘developer’ . . . [with] no project taken seriously . . . unless it has an ‘environmental aspect’ (Rist (2008): 192). A growing awareness of environmental issues became visible in the 1960s and early 1970s (e.g., Carson, 1962; Boulding, 1966; Meadows et al., 1972) but the term ‘sustainable development’ was popularised in 1987 by the Brundtland Commission report, *Our Common Future*. The Brundtland Report defined sustainable development as “meet[ing] the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1988: 8).

Rist (2008) usefully explains that the term is used in a manner that binds together two ambiguous and potentially contradictory terms: environmental sustainability and economic development. For Brundtland, it was possible to find a happy medium that generated enough economic growth and enough environmental protection:

Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable—to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The concept of sustainable development does imply limits—not absolute limits but limitations imposed by the present state of technology and social organization on environmental resources and by the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities. But technology and social organization can be both managed and improved to make way for a new era of economic growth. . . . Poverty is not only an evil in itself, but sustainable development requires meeting the basic needs of all . . . A world in which poverty is endemic will always be prone to ecological and other catastrophes (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1988: 8).

However, Rist argues that the power of sustainable development as a concept is that it allows for a masking of the tensions between growth and environment. He suggests that it permits environmental activists and ecologists to be supportive of the ecological maintenance aspect implied by the term, whilst also enabling governments and NGOs that are committed to economic growth as the developmental solution to poverty and unemployment to describe this as sustainable. Simultaneously, it facilitates corporations driving towards accelerated profit to commit to increased awareness of the impact of production on the environment, despite making very few changes to production processes and being under no legislative requirement to do so. The result is that the term sustainable development allows for many different and contradictory images to be held by those who support and participate in advancing the endeavour and for the notion, thereby, “to play on different registers” (Rist, 2008: 212).

A number of authors reject the elision of growth and environment and question whether sustainable development can be constructed out of a greening of capitalism (sometimes described as weak sustainability—cf. Pelenc et al., 2013). They instead point to a fundamental conflict as environmental

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