



Environmental Education, Ethics and Action in Southern Africa

Many environmentalists regard the 2002 United Nations World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) with ambivalence. The fact that thousands come together from all continents to focus on poverty, prosperity and the ecological basis of life is a magnificent reflection of global consciousness. The questionable contribution of previous UN conferences to actual socio-economic and political change is the not-so-shiny side of the coin.

Hosting the World Summit in Johannesburg presents the southern African region with a unique opportunity to reflect on and share its particular environmental challenges and responses. This monograph makes use of that opportunity, as it opens up for your consideration some of the issues Africa's environmental practitioners have been grappling with since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) of 1992.

Environmental Education, Ethics and Action in Southern Africa is a window onto environmental challenges in diverse African contexts. These contexts include those of Malawian officials and community leaders, new to multi-level governance, taking up the challenge of environmental management in villages and districts; of Ugandan small-scale farmers in partnership with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) trying to produce sustainably for household and export markets; and of government-civil society partnerships in South Africa, where the political transformation of the education system introduced a focus on environment and human rights in the national school curriculum. Other contributions from South Africa, Angola, Lesotho, Zambia and Zimbabwe further discuss contexts of environmental practice: industry reportage, environmental management, research, philosophy, ethics, the media, conservation, and seeking out indigenous knowledge.

What is there to expect from this collection of papers, besides diversity and African perspectives? The framework for the monograph is deliberately open-ended. Contributors have simply been asked to review developments in their fields of practice, in relation to the ten years between UNCED and WSSD, and to highlight and comment on progress and challenges. We were hoping for perspectives that would sharpen our understanding of the issues as we respond – in our respective professions – to the environmental degradation and socio-economic injustices that are so poignantly present throughout Africa.

Authors have responded by providing empirical reviews (such as the review of the development of materials mobilising indigenous knowledge for environmental learning in schools, by O'Donoghue and Neluvhalani), conceptual reviews (such as

Hattingh's analysis of the concept of sustainable development) and case studies (such as Lupele's case study of global influences on his practice as an environmental educator in Zambia). The case studies were written from within the authors' own practices, as educators, government officials, researchers, development workers, journalists, conservationists and industry consultants. The authority of their contributions is in the personal experience from which they write. The benefit to the scholars, researchers, students and educators who read and use these case studies and reviews is not only that they document important trends and issues in a decade of environmental practice in Africa. They also provide considerable substance for analysis and critical deliberation, for these interlocking contexts of environmental practice should be at the core of our endeavours to understand and respond to the challenge of sustainable development, both practically and conceptually.

As editors we identified in these papers inter-related themes which seem particularly significant in relation to the discourses surrounding WSSD. These themes relate to what Thomas Popkewitz calls a social epistemology – an understanding which places knowledge (of, say, environmental issues and risks), knowledge production (research, education, communications) and acting on knowledge (environmental management and policy-making, for example) within webs of strategic social relations, woven through *power* and situated in *history* and *context*. In such webs, relations between and within individuals (the district environmental officer or the writer of company environmental reports) and institutions (governments, industry, donors, NGOs) shape and constrain, and are in turn shaped and constrained by discursive practices, that is, more or less evident rules for what can be said and done, what can be changed, and what remains as is. This point is perhaps most explicitly made by Price, who argues that authors of company reports are constrained in what they can and cannot portray in the annual environmental report, in ways which make the public “disclosure” of such reports – one of the key environmental responses in industry – particularly ambivalent. The point is also illustrated by Babikwa, who portrays extension work in a Ugandan NGO being shaped by successive discourses of social amelioration and welfare, food security, ecologically sustainable development in an emerging market economy, and, most recently, financial sustainability as the NGO becomes a business in a donor-driven economy. In another context (South Africa's national conservation agency), a similar trend with associated tensions is evident in organisational shifts from conservation *sans* people to social upliftment, to partnerships for socio-economic development, to a corporate enterprise that has to achieve a public mandate within an increasingly privatised business framework (described by Moore and Masuku van Damme).

The relational dynamics that make up the social epistemology of “sustainable development” draw the *boundaries* or horizons of the *change* towards which many, in one way or another, advocate, make policies, form partnerships, implement projects, donate funds, communicate and educate. In relation to desired changes towards social justice and ecological sustainability, every contribution in this monograph reflects tensions, contestations and contradictions. The contexts they portray, while

complex and diverse, are all characterised by uncertainty and ambivalence. Environmental education, sustainable agriculture, environmental reporting, implementing environmental policy, working with donor funding, designing waste management plans – all are sites of struggle.

Babikwa illustrates how the clash of contradictory agendas within organisations (NGOs, donor agencies and in fact “communities”) can frustrate good intentions. Mkandawire’s contribution illustrates the same, and adds the insight that reform initiatives are often ambivalent: Malawi’s central government leads that country’s process of decentralising environmental governance to local authorities, but also fails to fully accept, endorse and support the process. Russo’s case study of the conceptual and practical challenges facing an Angolan NGO engaged in environmental reporting argues that Agenda 21’s call for the mass media to promote public participation in sustainable development may be made – and interpreted – from within questionable assumptions about targeted messages and social marketing for behaviour change, which can but fail to achieve desired ends. Hattingh reviews the contradictory interpretations of the concept of sustainable development across ideologically diverse socio-historical contexts. He argues that while some interpretations constitute an ideology critique aiming to foster change, others do not. Writing from Lesotho, Mokuku argues that development processes in African countries often contribute to what he terms the “de-development” that followed colonisation and industrialisation on the continent. His paper, like that of O’Donoghue and Neluvhalani, further illustrates ambiguities associated with the historical appropriation, marginalisation and current re-appropriation (through, for example, critical research) of indigenous knowledge. Even the eThekweni Unicity’s success story of sustainable development in the recycling industry (by Freeman and Mgingqizana) reveals paradoxes as street-dwelling cardboard collectors are being brought into the institutional fold.

Ward argues that our efforts to deal with the uncertainties of environmental risks, through scientifically derived environmental management models and tools, has the paradoxical result of preventing us from reducing the manufacture of risk. Lotz-Sisitka, reviewing the challenges of advocating environmental learning in schools within the ambiguously transforming institutional framework of South Africa’s education system, suggests that we need to re-think our very understanding of how social change comes about – a point implicit in several of the case reviews of policy implementation. Drawing on social theorists Bauman and Beck, she notes that in an ambivalent world, society has ways of dealing with contradictions and tensions which simply absorb critique, rendering it “toothless”, unable to shift life politics. Price’s discourse analysis of ESKOM’s *Environmental Report 2000* reveals contradictory discourses on sustainability simply “cancelling each other out” within a set of discursive practices (disclosure from a reputable energy company and contributor to development on the sub-continent) which leaves no room for challenge and little doubt that the global power company of 2001 is doing the best it can under the circumstances.

And it probably is, if one recognises ESKOM as a player in a historical, contextual and strategic relational network which determines its possibilities of agency. As the notion of social epistemology suggests, it is these relations and not individual agents or ideologies which shape the production, dissemination and reception of knowledge and thus the possibilities of such social practice as sustainable development.

It is for this reason that we draw attention to the way in which the contributions to this monograph bring to the fore some of the often unacknowledged rules, power plays and other social processes through which knowledge and meaning are produced, circulated and received in society. These largely unwritten rules, the often silent social processes and taken-for-granted institutionalised mechanisms of truth production, are constantly at work in the very language and models that we use to conceptualise environmental problems and what we regard as suitable responses. The contributions collected here provide a vantage point on such processes, from which one can probe, empirically, conceptually and ethically, the consequent social distribution of benefit and of environmental degradation and risk. From such a vantage point we may start to re-interpret and re-appropriate knowledge and knowledge production processes, including education, action and critique towards socio-ecological change.

As narratives of social affairs which foreground people and the practice of policy-making and implementation on the very uneven terrain of struggle for social change, the contributions to this monograph seek to deepen our insight into the multi-directional interplay between donors and receivers, policies and projects, experts and clients, colonisers and colonised, and between individual members of rural communities who, as Babikwa puts it, “may look similar in their poverty”, but have diverse needs and aspirations as unique nodes in complex historical, socio-cultural webs.