

CONVERSATIONS: Practising Sustainability Science: Challenges in Teaching and Research

Sustainability Education: The Importance of Diversity

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We live in extraordinary times. The vast global crisis of sustainability manifests itself on multiple frontiers. For the first time in human history, we are at risk of crossing multiple planetary boundaries related to Earth system processes critical to our future survival. The recent global assessment of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services estimates that more than 1 million species are at risk of extinction, threatening the safety nets that protect the livelihoods and food security of millions of people across the world. Effects of global warming by more than 1°C are increasingly making their consequences felt in a wide range of natural disasters. The severity of these impacts is bound to accelerate in the coming years.

Academic understanding of sustainability have failed to keep pace with the growing need. First, as Hassan (this issue) stresses, there is a clear global north-south divide. Our paradigms of understanding and action are dominantly driven by the global north, whereas the “ground zero” of climate change impacts is squarely in the global south. Second, as Hassan as well as Rai and Lele (this issue) point out, there is a disciplinary imbalance. Insights from sustainability science and economics tend to have a greater impact in shaping global discourse as compared to insights from the social sciences, and from practice.

The three papers in this special section provide diverse, yet complementary perspectives on how to address some of the challenges of the sustainability crisis through interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary education, drawing on

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educational experiences within the global south. Hassan provides a global overview of sustainability science and education, and stresses the importance of learning from southern educational experiences such as that of the Southern African Development Community Regional Environmental Education Program (SADC-REEP). Purushothaman (this issue) describes the learnings from sustainability education within a Masters' programme at Azim Premji University (in which this author is also closely involved). She highlights the importance of keeping the complexity and normative aspects of sustainability alive in the classroom without descending into vagueness. Rai and Lélé describe their experiences with teaching early career researchers in a PhD programme in Conservation Science and Sustainability Studies at Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment. They stress the need to train students to question the value-laden biases that shape their own research from within, and to challenge existing unequal power structures from without, so that research-informed critique is linked to action.

It is also interesting that each of these essays uses a different term to explore sustainability. While all three articles stress the need to bridge disciplinary divides, Hassan approaches sustainability from the perspective of sustainability science, while Rai and Lélé focus on a normative goal of sustainable development, and Purushothaman deliberately sheds both suffixes to focus on sustainability. Each of these terms is carefully selected and has merit to its choice, reminding us that sustainability is a complex term, and sustainability education must not narrowly define and bound itself, if it has to have wider meaning.