

Geography and sustainable development

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Geography is surely at the core of understanding and achieving sustainable development, as it requires a deep understanding of the issues and challenges facing people and the Earth at all levels. So many of the world's problems can only be resolved through making connections and working across the normal grain of knowledge boundaries and cultural barriers. That's geography.

Thirty years ago, the Secretary of State for Scotland, Malcolm Rifkind, gave a speech at the annual forum organised by the Scottish Council (Development and Industry) in Aviemore. He set out his thinking on sustainable development, much to the surprise of all those listening. It was two geographers, Roger Levitt and me, who crafted Rifkind's speech and discussed with him the concepts which he readily understood and accepted as valid. We were able to obtain his and ultimately the UK Parliament's approval for the first-ever sustainability duty in UK legislation: "SNH shall have regard to the desirability of securing that anything done, whether by SNH or any other person, in relation to the natural heritage of Scotland is undertaken in a manner which is sustainable." Rather tortuous language maybe, but it set Scotland on a course of implementing sustainable development.

Fast forward to the commitment by the First Minister in 2015 for Scotland to embrace and implement the UN's Sustainable Development Goals for 2030. And, this summer was the launch of the Scottish Government's Learning for Sustainability Action Plan.

What are, and should be, geographers and geography contributing?

First, in contributing to the Action Plan, RSGS and the Scottish Association of Geography Teachers (SAGT) should request a seat on the Learning for Sustainability Policy and Stakeholder Network so that we can play an influential role in developing the programme solutions for 2030.

Second, we should jointly take up with Education Scotland and the SQA the remodelling of the secondary courses to ensure that the geography curriculum and assessment at secondary level are redesigned so that integrated, holistic and cross-boundary approaches are at the heart of teaching and learning. We should work with the Curriculum and Assessment Board of the Scottish Government to ensure that geography plays a fundamental role in this redesign. Currently, for example, Higher Geography contains all of the necessary elements, but the curriculum and assessment, set by the SQA, failed to take any account of the proposals from RSGS for the integration across the elements that is necessary to achieve the aspirations of the Learning for Sustainability programme.

Third, SAGT should develop its CPD programme to embrace Learning for Sustainability with the help of experts in university departments that are teaching sustainability, as at St Andrews.

Fourth, given the recognition of the importance of geographers as a profession in the civil service alongside economists and statisticians in Whitehall, RSGS should argue the case for this approach to be extended to the Scottish Government. There are many geographers working there, but their professional expertise and what they can contribute,

given their training, to sustainable development needs much greater recognition.

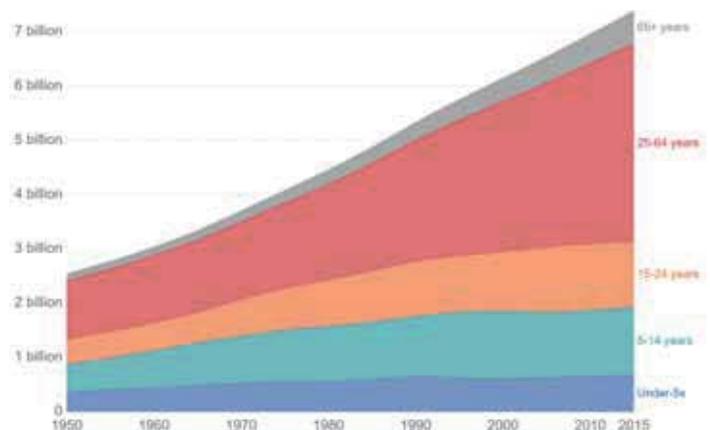
Fifth, we should argue the case of the geographers' approach. Geography is the one discipline which makes connections, for example between the natural and human worlds, and between resource availability and resource use. Take, for example, the effects of climate change on semi-arid areas. Here, desertification due to a combination of climate change and poor land stewardship leads to out-migration, poverty amongst those remaining, water wars about river management. These are routinely taught in geography at secondary and tertiary levels and are the subject of research in Scottish universities.

Sixth, geographers should exemplify and promote what we have learnt, and are researching and teaching, in addressing each of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals.

But more than these individual Goals is how all of the Goals are interrelated, and work on one cannot be effective without connecting with others. Geographers have learnt some simple principles that aid the achievement of sustainable development:

- 1) think for the future and learn from the past;
- 2) remember all things are connected;
- 3) see the whole as more than the sum of the parts;
- 4) mimic nature to provide the best results;
- 5) learn from local communities on best nature and society interaction;
- 6) consider expected and unexpected consequences before making decisions.

After so many reports and working parties since the Earth Summit declaration on sustainable development 27 years ago, there is still a long way to go to achieve truly sustainable development. It has to be a connected blend of achieving social equity and justice, environmental literacy and protection of natural processes and functions, and using modern economic tools to achieve them. Geographers and geography have a great role to play.



World population by broad age group. Map prepared by Our World in Data, using data from UN Population Division (2017 Revision).

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