

# Educating and Acting for a Sustainable Future

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*Today's utopia is tomorrow's reality.*

**Victor Hugo**

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## **From Utopia to Reality**

Education for a sustainable future is a project, in some respects even a dream. It invites us to take a hard look at the world, to try to understand it, to imagine it as we would like it to be, and to act individually and collectively to bring it closer to our aspirations. Is this better world a dream, a chimera, or a utopia? At the Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ), we believe that the dream can be realized and that education is the key to a sustainable future.

That is why in 1999 the CSQ adopted an Education for a Sustainable Future (ESF) platform that sets out its commitments in this field and provides direction to the activities that it intends to undertake to contribute to the economic, environmental and socio-political sustainability of Quebec society in full solidarity with the other peoples of the Earth.

Our Education for a Sustainable Future platform reflects, in the first place, the work and the pedagogical interventions undertaken over the last 25 years or so by the members of the CSQ in education in the fields of environment, peace, solidarity, co-operation and rights, all of which are components that ESF integrates. It is also a response to the environmental, socio-political and economic crises affecting the inhabitants of the planet, as well as a flat rejection of fatalism and

disengagement. It is, finally, an invitation to act without delay to build a world on the basis of the principles of ecology, peace, solidarity and democracy.

ESF is meant to be an integrating concept that gives meaning to our activities and our pedagogy. The platform ensures that the CSQ's public stands on issues related to sustainability are consistent, and it provides a conceptual framework to orientate and influence the development of education in Québec. This document provides a synthesis and an update of the CSQ's Education for a Sustainable Future (ESF) platform.

## **Why an ESF Platform?**

### ***Because we have to rethink our conception of development***

The CSQ has decided to become involved in education for a sustainable future<sup>1</sup> because it firmly believes that education can contribute to improving, indeed transforming, the world in which we live. Although we in the North saw a tremendous improvement in our living conditions and health during the last century, at least for some people, we have to take a hard look at the economic, social and environmental heritage that we are getting ready to bequeath to our children and future generations. An analysis of the current situation leaves us little choice.

- **In economic terms**, we have never produced so much wealth or satisfied so many material needs (or desires). However, especially since the 1980s and the emergence of economic globalization, the gap between the rich and poor has been growing. The same is true for the gulf that separates the countries of the North and those of the South. In addition, the short-sighted economic policies that are currently being applied around the world are making it difficult for three-quarters of the world's inhabitants to meet their basic needs for drinking water, food, housing, jobs, energy, education and health. The public interest is too often being sacrificed on the altar of private interests.

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<sup>1</sup> Sustainable, according to the *Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, means "capable of being maintained at a certain rate or level." The notion of a sustainable future is understood here to involve development that seeks to improve the living conditions of the world's peoples in harmony with the environment.

- **In socio-political terms**, it is clear that the last century was the most violent and murderous in history. It nevertheless saw the spread of democracy, the creation of charters and organizations dedicated to the defence of peace and human rights and the introduction of measures to redistribute wealth. However, these advances are threatened today by the recent concentration of corporate power that exercises a stranglehold over the traditional power of nation-states, leaving their citizens with less and less influence over the decisions that affect them. In this context, where individualism and competition hold sway, social policies to redistribute wealth and ties of solidarity are eroding, thereby increasing poverty and the consequences that flow from it: violence, fatalism, illiteracy, malnutrition, exclusion, sickness, etc.
- **In environmental terms**, the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed mankind's final victory over nature, from which it profits greatly. However, we now realize that human activities are damaging the major cycles of nature and are affecting the lives of a growing number of people. The population explosion and the unbridled growth of production and consumption are putting serious pressures on the environment: climate change, degradation of the air, water and soil, resource depletion, genetic manipulation, a decline in species diversity and natural habitats, deforestation, desertification, and so on.

In order to be able to act, we first have to try to understand what has led us to this state of affairs. We have to realize that the source of all of these problems lies chiefly in our patterns of thinking as well as in the values and practices that have set the world down an unsustainable road. "Humanity is experiencing an ecological crisis and a social crisis that are two aspects of one and the same malaise: that of development."<sup>2</sup> This reality invites us to think globally and act locally, to consider the consequences of our lifestyles, and to adopt measures that will make our future sustainable. The challenge is therefore clear: to learn to live together on a planet that has limited resources and space.

***Because contemporary globalization is heightening disparities***

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<sup>2</sup> André Beauchamp, *Introduction à l'éthique de l'environnement* (Montreal: Éditions Pauline, 1993), p. 28. Our translation.

However, the challenge of learning to live together will be difficult to meet in the current context of economic globalization. The proponents of globalization portray it as an engine of development that will guarantee economic prosperity and as a means of re-establishing a balance in world forces. In contrast, we believe that the current economic logic, in which human beings are nothing more than consumers, is engendering an unsustainable future, not only from a social and economic point of view, but also from the perspective of the environment. Globalization is heightening disparities **between the North and South, between rich and poor, between men and women, and between humans and nature.**

- Since the 1980s, despite international development aid and the emergence of new technologies, the economic policies that have been followed have actually widened the existing gap between rich and poor countries. Even though several countries are now on the road to industrialization, this process has too often been achieved by a squandering of natural resources and by running roughshod over the rights of the majority of citizens.
- The same type of gap is widening between the rich and the poor because globalization is profiting a minority, evidence of which can be seen in the record profits of banks and the astronomical salaries of the heads of large corporations. Indeed, the wealth of the 300 richest people on the planet is currently equivalent to the annual earnings of more than 2.5 billion people. Governments, in the name of globalization and competitiveness, are being forced to reduce corporate taxes and to cut social services, education, health, and environmental protection. To all this must be added an upsurge in unemployment and social exclusion.

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*To refrain from acting is often unjust.*

Marcus Aurelius

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- Women and children are among those most affected by the poverty that is being heightened by globalization. According to UNICEF, the number of rural women living in absolute poverty increased by 50% over the last twenty years. In Canada, more than half of single mothers live in poverty with their children. Despite undeniable gains, women remain excluded from the corridors of power. In many countries in the South, women and girls are excluded from any kind of school attendance and from programs to combat illiteracy and are restricted to performing domestic tasks.
- Lastly, in the current context of globalization, nature is only valued as a potentially profitable resource. Environmental concerns even appear as an obstacle to development, leading governments to reduce environmental regulation and consultations over the environment in order to encourage investment.

***Because it is urgent to act***

These disparities have a major impact on the development of sustainable societies. It is becoming essential to put our all into harmonizing the relationships between human beings and between them and their environment. One of the means of attaining this goal is to strengthen a number of the fundamental principles of our society: citizenship, democracy, justice and solidarity. All of this underscores the urgent need to act:

- action to foster a better understanding of the nature and origin of the challenges that have to be met;
- action to combat fatalism and give back to people the real power to shape their own destiny;
- action to ensure the durability of the ecological processes that maintain life on the Earth;
- action to conserve and promote our natural and cultural heritage;
- action to elevate natural resources and public services to the status of “public goods”;

- action to foster a pattern of economic and social development that is fair to all, both here and elsewhere on the planet;
- action to promote a globalization of solidarity.

Change will be possible if there is a genuine political will to act and a firm commitment on the part of civil society, particularly those who work in the field of education. As a consequence, each of us has to change our way of thinking and to adopt a collective strategy, the cornerstone of which is the present platform.

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**A single finger cannot lift a stone. It is by working together that we can achieve something.**

African proverb

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### **Why is the CSQ Involved in ESF?**

The CSQ's socio-professional involvement dates back to the 1975 publication and adoption of the *Manuel du 1er mai* and, more particularly, to the 1980 adoption of a *Proposition d'école*.

Through the pedagogical initiatives that it has made for more than 25 years, the CSQ has mobilized thousands of its members and has taken up most of the issues facing society.

Consistently inspired by a pedagogy of consciousness-raising, these initiatives have helped to widen the traditional vision of the school and to open the school to the community and the world.

Over the years, the CSQ has tackled a variety of issues that are at the core of ESF, like illiteracy, recycling, gender relations, human rights, peace, violence, solidarity, co-operation, poverty, and child labour.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the CSQ, drawing inspiration from, for example, the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Report) and the

expertise of partners and NGOs involved in operation “Ensemble, récupérons notre planète” (Together, we can reclaim the planet), has added an important pedagogical tool by initiating a movement concerned with the environment and sustainable development: the *Établissements verts Brundtland* movement (EVB, or Brundtland Green Establishments Movement). The experience acquired over the years by thousands of young people and adults in the EVB movement, especially through the promotion of the 6 R’s,<sup>3</sup> was the most important precursor to the adoption of the present platform.

For the CSQ, Education for a Sustainable Future provides an integrating theme that lends strength and consistency to the activities that it intends to launch, both in schools and in the wider society. The adoption of the ESF platform will allow us to intervene at all levels in the interests of our members and the public that we serve every day. The platform allows us to supplement our 1996 *Déclaration de principes sur l’éducation*, to enrich our social project adopted by the 1997 conference, to build on the accomplishments of the Brundtland Green Establishments Movement, to ensure a follow-up to the *Déclaration de Montréal* and the *Appel des jeunes* adopted at the Forum Planète’ERE in 1997, and to mandate the CSQ to intervene and act on any issue affecting the future of the planet. **In short, the platform enriches a process and series of activities undertaken by CSQ members for a number of years.** As an influential member of civil society, the CSQ will thereby continue to make a contribution to humanity’s long struggle to meet its present needs, while at the same time making sure that coming generations, here and elsewhere, will continue to be able to meet their needs.

### **What is Education for a Sustainable Future?**

Education for a sustainable future represents neither a new pedagogical approach nor the specific content of a new course or program. Instead, it is an educational approach that draws on thinking about these issues that has been ongoing for some thirty years at the international level. Indeed, all of the major international conferences, whether on the environment (from Stockholm to Rio), population (Cairo), social development (Copenhagen), women (Beijing) or human settlements

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<sup>3</sup> Reduce consumption, Reuse goods, Recycle goods, Re-evaluate our value systems, Restructure our economic systems, Redistribute wealth.

(Istanbul), that have considered the future of the world have recognized the key role that education should play. They have also recognized that none of the issues discussed can be understood or treated in isolation. It was partly to overcome this problem that UNESCO recently created a program that integrates these various concerns: the “Educating for a Sustainable Future” program.

The CSQ’s thinking converges with international thinking about these issues. Exposed to the same major debates, the members of the EVB movement as well as the members of the CSQ’s Conseil général debated the issue and eventually decided to adopt this concept, which embraces both their concerns and their achievements. Inspired chiefly by the grassroots work that has been carried out by the CSQ’s members, the ESF platform recognizes the urgency to act, in concert with other societies, to strive for a sustainable future that will be better for all.

According to UNESCO, “the concept of sustainability encompasses not only environment, but also poverty, population, health, food security, democracy, human rights and peace. Sustainability is, in the final analysis, a moral and ethical imperative in which cultural diversity and traditional knowledge need to be respected.”<sup>4</sup>

UNESCO also stressed that education for a sustainable future is an emerging vision. It invited the members of the international community, without forsaking their cultural specificity, to make a contribution to the definition of the concept and the design of the messages to be communicated and the pedagogical approaches to be fostered.

Discussions among members of the CSQ have led to the adoption of the following definition of education for a sustainable future (ESF):

ESF puts the human being at the centre of its concerns. It seeks to harmonize relationships between individuals, peoples and their environment. It explores the economic, social and environmental implications of our patterns of thought and behaviour. It seeks to train citizens capable of becoming involved in individual and collective activities that contribute to the building of democratic, fair, equitable and

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<sup>4</sup> UNESCO, *Declaration of Thessaloniki*, International Conference on Environment and Society: Education and Public Awareness for Sustainability, Thessaloniki, Greece, 8-12 December 1997.

sustainable societies, from an economic, a socio-political and an environmental point of view.<sup>5</sup>

Education for a sustainable future can therefore be seen as “*a concept that is wider than the environment. It rejects durable development, which is considered to be too vague. It also rejects the original concept of environmental education, which is seen as too narrowly linked to the natural environment. Education for a sustainable future seeks to integrate these two concepts into other, wider concepts: non-violence, peace, co-operation, human rights, democracy [...]. Whereas environmental education, as originally defined, remains committed to maintaining its close links with the environment, education for a sustainable future seeks, in contrast, to become a horizon for integrating other educational currents. This is clearly not a particular subject that should take a place alongside other subjects. Instead, it seems to fit into the field of transversal skills discussed in the education policy statement of the Ministère de l'Éducation (1997), while at the same time being open to a wide variety of educational subjects.*”<sup>6</sup>

### **What Values do We Intend to Propagate?**

Education is a key ingredient in ensuring the development of a sustainable future because it can bring about far-reaching changes in attitudes and behaviour among the younger generations.

ESF calls into question the dominant model of development. It raises questions about the contemporary world and about the lifestyles and activities that are prejudicial to it. It invites us to redefine the relationships that individuals have with their fellows and with their environment, and to do everything possible to improve everyone's future, here and elsewhere on the planet.

ESF proposes to build a world founded on the principles of ecology, peace, solidarity and democracy. It seeks in the first place to foster hope among the young generation, which is essential in order that young people become aware that they have the power to act on reality and

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<sup>5</sup> *Orienter l'école pour un monde écologique, pacifique, solidaire et démocratique*. CSQ, ERE Éducation, forthcoming. Our translation.

<sup>6</sup> André Beauchamp, ENVIRO-SAGE, *Vers un politique d'information, de sensibilisation et d'éducation à la gestion durable des matières résiduelles*. Document de réflexion soumis à la société RECYC-Québec, January 1999, p. 21.

that they hold the seeds of change. ESF seeks to get young people and adults to see themselves as active and responsible citizens and to take concrete steps, however small, that will contribute to sustainability. It puts the emphasis on becoming aware of ties of solidarity and interdependence. It makes youth and adults responsible and encourages them to act to improve society. It promotes co-operative learning and involvement in projects focused on solidarity, actions that allow each person to become aware that their contribution is valuable to the collectivity. All of these elements help to make the school a genuine instrument of social transformation.

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The future of humanity is created through choices. It must not be left to chance.

*Human Development Report*

United Nations Development Programme

(translation)

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ESF goes beyond knowledge acquisition and skill development by adding the key dimension of values, the capacity for critical thought and the sense of ethics implied by the fact of sharing a single planet and a common destiny with all of the peoples of the Earth. This set of values has a direct influence on the vision of the world that we hold. It incites us to innovate and to reinvent new ways of living and behaving.

ESF is also rooted in the development of a sense of wonder about and reverence for nature and the major balances necessary to sustain life. It develops a consciousness of the bonds that link us to the environment and it fosters the will to conserve and protect the environment for the benefit of existing and future generations. It also seeks to promote the values associated with sustainable

patterns of consumption and production that permit the satisfaction of basic needs and an equitable distribution of wealth, here and elsewhere on the planet. It urges us to reorient our lifestyles, that is, to learn to reduce our consumption at the source, to reuse goods in an optimal way, and to recycle them systematically. From a socio-political point of view, it seeks to foster a culture of solidarity, sharing, equity, justice and peace based on the recognition of equal rights and equal opportunity.

However, ESF has to go beyond the strictly educational setting and seek to promote public awareness. The media play a key role in this respect. We have to get the media, which are concentrated and constrained by **corporate / economic** power, to recognize the engagement of our youth, to ensure that there is genuine debate over social issues, to provide accurate information, and to allow young people and adults to make their voices heard.

### **What Commitments is the CSQ Making?**

The novelty of the CSQ's activities over the past 25 years lies in its openness to external collaboration and to the wide range of expertise of numerous NGOs specialized in the field of education for sustainability. The CSQ will stress in the first place that the education system integrate and take into account education for a sustainable future, particularly in the current context of educational reform. It intends to join forces with all of the organizations that share the same objectives and that work with young people and the population in general. It also intends to pressure all levels of government to inject the necessary resources and to adopt relevant policies to support the development of ESF.

The CSQ therefore sees ESF as providing what is needed to inspire its commitment. Henceforth, union practice should be conceived from the perspective of a sustainable future and should be conducted consistently with the values that are associated with this perspective.

As a result:

1. The Conseil général endorses the *Educate and Act for a Sustainable Future* platform.

2. The CSQ proclaims that a sustainable future necessitates a world characterized by ecology, peace, solidarity and democracy.
3. The CSQ is committed to mobilizing the dynamism of society to build a sustainable future.
4. The CSQ is committed to making a specific contribution to the building of a world characterized by a healthy environment, peace, solidarity and democracy through the promotion of ESF and its values.
5. The CSQ applies values and practices favouring a sustainable future in its internal affairs.
6. The CSQ makes it a priority to intervene in the field of education, in tandem with its federations, its association and its unions, to contribute to the construction of a sustainable future.
7. The CSQ puts special emphasis on its Brundtland Green Establishments network as a critical strategic base to attain its ESF objectives.
8. The CSQ considers that activities in favour of a sustainable future should be undertaken within coalitions and partnerships at the local, national and international levels.
9. The CSQ continues to promote a national educational project that mobilizes youth and the wider society in the construction of a sustainable future.
10. The CSQ pursues its efforts to offer young people an environment that is concerned with resource conservation, the promotion of non-violence, peace, human rights, solidarity and co-operation.
11. The CSQ continues to base its interventions on social and political issues on the values of ESF.
12. The CSQ demands that the government respect the rights of citizens to a healthy environment and to sustainable development, as well as their right to have a say on development projects.

13. The CSQ opposes any attempt to reduce existing environmental protection regulation.
14. The CSQ denounces the government's drastic cutbacks and demands that it reinvest in environmental protection.
15. The CSQ is committed to ensuring that there is a follow-up to the commitments made in the Déclaration de Montréal, particularly those affecting educational programs, instructional material, teacher training, etc.
16. The CSQ is especially vigilant with regard to the use of natural resources for purely economic aims.