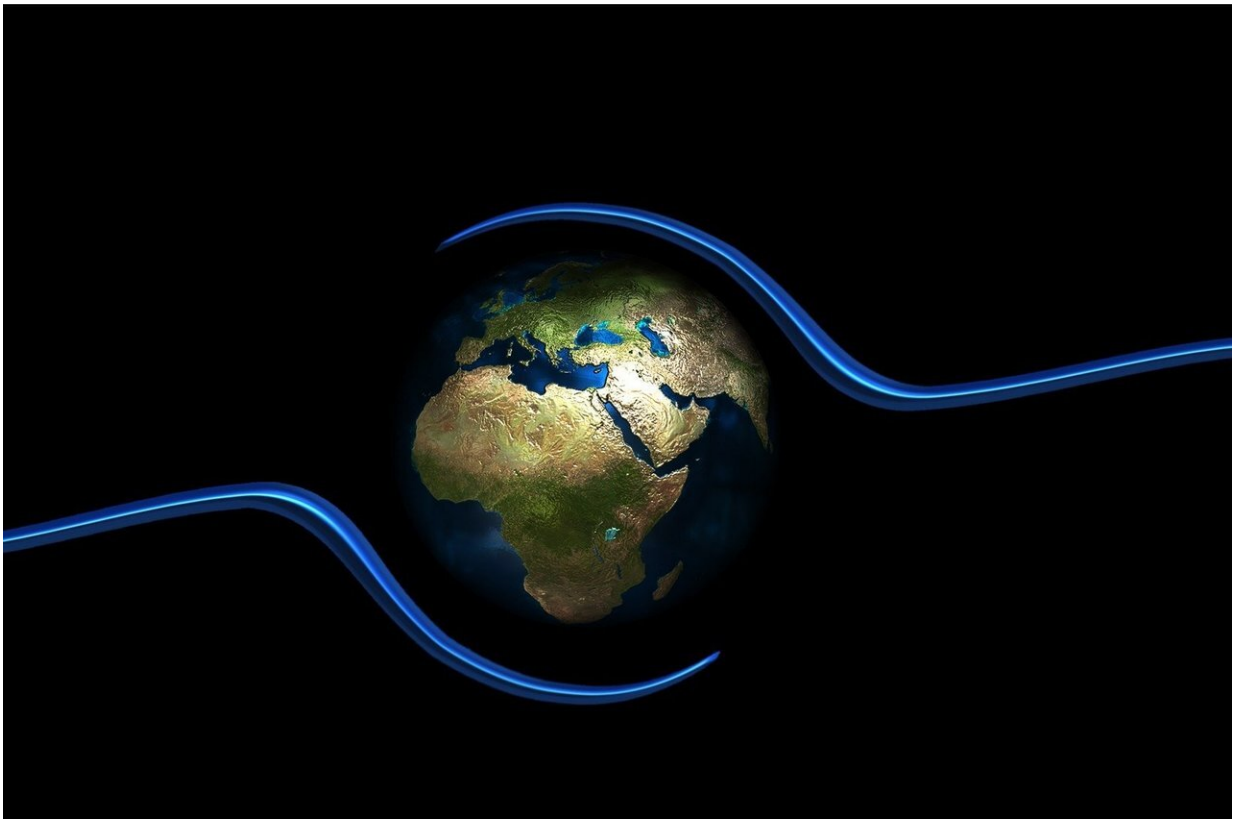


Debate: Mobilizing collective intelligence for the ecological transition

October 12 2018, by Gaëll Mainguy, François Taddei And Joel Chevrier



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Rapid and massive degradation of our environment is a major threat for the future. Surprisingly, education is not mobilised worldwide to empower children. Fortunately, many initiatives explore how to make

students actors of the ecological transition.

Life on earth as we know it, has started to disappear

Around the world on September 8, [Rise for Climate](#) brought together a few hundreds of thousands of people. It was both a lot and very little given what is at stake. At the same time, with almost general indifference, [Birdlife International](#) announced the official extinction of the Spix's Macaw, the beautiful blue hero of the *Rio* animated film. Reality has caught up with fiction.

"Our house is burning and we are looking elsewhere," was already saying former French President Jacques Chirac in 2002. Since then, the research has become stronger, more coherent and more worrying than ever. IPCC reports are becoming increasingly alarming, and more than [15,000 scientists](#) have issued an informed and uncompromising warning. Global warming, biodiversity collapse, natural resources depletion, the triple observation is irrefutable.

Without a massive reaction, the future looks dramatic for our children, if not for ourselves. So where's the bug? Why do we always look away? What have we missed? And most importantly, what can we do?

What about education in the ecological transition?

When Nicolas Hulot, the former French Minister of Ecological and Solidary Transition, announced his resignation, he drew up a long list of the various actors with whom he tried to interact in order to tackle the problems in time and on a scale, to get out of the small anecdotal steps. There is no reference to actors in national education, higher education and research, culture or continuing training. None. Yet, it is the young people of today who will be the actors of tomorrow, and they will have

to face the world we will leave them with what they have learned.

Moreover, it is teachers, widely convinced of the importance of these issues, who for more than 10 years have been expected to contribute to cultural change through education for [sustainable development](#). Why, in these last few days of intense debate, has this school action not been presented as a major point of our commitment to ecological transition? Perhaps because going far beyond what remains a welcome but limited awareness remains pedagogically difficult.

In fact, these questions are at the same time urgent, complex, diverse, they require the use of most disciplines: science and mathematics, history, geography, economics... and their complexity makes them hermetic to the usual disciplinary division that underlies our teaching. They require a systemic, cooperative and nationally organised approach to support front line, and sometimes distressed, exposed teachers.

"The World's Largest Lesson" for children, actors of the future

All this is difficult but not insurmountable. At the international level, this mobilisation of education is on the agenda. The United Nations adopted the programme of 17 [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) in 2015, which combine ecological, economic and social issues to provide a global and universal perspective and organise collective action. Recently, the French national education system has also shown its willingness to commit itself to this United Nations SDGs programme.

To involve and help teachers to work with the SDGs, to carry out projects with their students, the United Nations, Unicef and UNESCO are building for example ["The World's Largest Lesson"](#). These educational resources have already reached millions of children in more

than 130 countries since their launch in September 2015.

"Learning to act" and "acting to learn"

It is not just a matter of learning about the scope, importance, urgency and complexity of the issues. In fact, dealing with problems of this magnitude without feeling able to contribute is stressful, leading to inhibition or even denial. It is above all a question of seeing how to act, how to give a reading that allows everyone to get involved.

There are more than [200 million students](#) worldwide. At schools and universities, we should invite them to immediately work at a better future on earth. There are small steps that count, especially when you can invite others to walk!

Schools in motion

This requires that curricula and pedagogies evolve and the first seeds of this transformation are already there. Just a few examples:

- **Haiti:** [Guy Étienne](#)'s students – director of Catts Pressoir College in Port au Prince and winner of the Lego Foundation, which sought the best ways to prepare children for tomorrow's world – are learning to look for solutions by developing projects for waste recycling, integrated farming, reforestation, improving soil quality, etc.
- **India:** [Design for Change](#) appeared help children contribute to improving the life of their city: "We want to be this generation of teachers who contribute to change. What we want are student actors, fulfilled teachers and a caring school that is open to the world!". The program has spread to 500 000 schools in 60 countries.

- **France:** [*Les Savanturiers*](#), a research-based learning programme developed at the [CRI](#), encourages children to question themselves and develops their sense of cooperation in exploring the unknown.

It is not just a question of understanding the urgency and complexity of the issues. Learning to act, innovate, cooperate, create solutions each in his own life, on his own scale, and with others, are essential to changing our lifestyles.

Universities in motion

In [higher education](#), this pedagogy is emerging all over the world, from [Paris](#) to [Mumbai](#), [Boston](#), [Shenzhen](#), or [Geneva](#). Some universities such as [Arizona State University](#) or [Aalto University](#) have been able to apply it to all their programs. Geoff Mulgan, Director of NESTA in London, sees this as the beginning of a [profound transformation of the global university system](#). This pedagogy must now be deployed and become the norm to initiate a real change in culture.

How can we believe in ourselves to make a successful ecological transition?

"We must first believe in an alternative imagined order," writes Yuval Noah Harari in [*Sapiens, A Brief History of Humankind*](#).

We are a society, we only set out together and with strength if we have a common history to share, and if this history allows us to act on our individual level knowing that others also participate to do something coherent, great and promising.

Our society – its school, its universities – is built around this idea so that

we can engage in these great causes that unite us. There is no systemic and massive approach possible without the lever of education.

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