Progress, climate crisis and sustainability



By María Sandra Ontiveros Melgar

Over the past five hundred years, humanity has made surprising advances in technology and improved quality and life expectancy. However, this progress has been accompanied by inequality, exploitation and environmental deterioration. Climate change is one of the greatest challenges of our time, endangering both natural systems and life on Earth. Industrial development and environmental manipulation with a utilitarian vision have exhausted resources and degraded ecosystems, prioritizing economic growth and wealth accumulation over collective well-being and respect for the environment.

Despite international efforts to mitigate the effects of climate change, these have been insufficient. Global temperatures have risen alarmingly, intensifying phenomena such as forest fires, floods and heat waves. At the 2023 Climate Ambition Summit, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned of the urgency of taking action against what he called "the opening of the gates of hell", in reference to the devastating effects of climate change already observed around the world.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2023) confirmed that human activity is responsible for global warming. If global temperatures exceed 1.5°C in the coming decades, the risks to natural and human systems will be catastrophic. Floods, rising temperature-related diseases, and massive migration caused by natural disasters are direct consequences of this crisis. In addition, these phenomena are expected to increase in frequency and intensity, underlining the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adopt clean energy.

One of the most contradictory aspects of human progress is inequality in the distribution of its benefits. Although global food production is sufficient to feed the entire population, 11 per cent of people suffer from malnutrition, while malnutrition-related diseases and obesity account for 20 per cent of premature deaths. This imbalance, compounded by the enormous waste of food, is a structural problem linked to the current economic model. This model, based on over-exploitation of resources and the maximization of production, has created a profound imbalance that affects both people and the environment.

The "culture of excess", promoted by industrial capitalism, has driven a constant search for more products, disrupting the balance between society and nature. The report of the Intergovernmental Scientific-Normative Platform on Biological Diversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) in 2019 stressed that prioritizing a contribution of nature, such as food production, can degrade other ecosystem functions, affecting the most vulnerable.

It is essential to rethink public policies from a cross-cutting and cross-cutting approach to address climate change comprehensively. Sectoral and atomized policies prevent a complete understanding of the connections between the various factors involved. Cross-sectorality allows sectors such as education, culture and the environment to work in a coordinated manner to address the root problems, recognizing their complexity.

Education plays a crucial role in creating a critical and conscious citizenry, capable of making informed decisions and acting to curb environmental deterioration. As Skliar (2017) suggests, it is crucial that education foster ethical relationships and respect for each other, promoting a sense of community and collective responsibility. Education has the potential to transform our relationship with the environment, promoting a greater understanding of environmental problems and stimulating critical thinking that challenges unsustainable practices.

Historically, cultural policies have had a limited role in mitigating climate change, focusing on superficial activities rather than creating a deep awareness of the interconnection between environmental and social problems. Cultural policies must cease to be merely a vehicle for generating statistics on activities carried out and focusing on qualitative transformation of societies. An approach linking culture, education and the environment is needed, promoting a holistic view of sustainability.

Educational and cultural policies must address the climate crisis from a memory and denunciation approach, recalling past mistakes to avoid repetition and creating collective awareness of the urgency of changing our practices. This also implies that private and public actors play an active role in promoting sustainable development and the protection of human rights.

The challenge facing humanity in the face of the climate crisis is enormous, and requires multi-level action involving multiple actors. Cross-sectorality and cross-sectorality are key approaches to addressing this problem effectively, as they enable coordination of efforts and promote coherent action. However, it also poses challenges, as policies are often implemented in a fragmented and disconnected manner, making it difficult to create comprehensive solutions.

In order to overcome these challenges, it is essential to build real collaboration between government sectors, civil society and the private sector, based on dialogue, flexibility and trust. This involves redesigning public policies not only to respond to immediate demands, but also to anticipate and prevent future crises.

Climate change forces us to rethink our development model and our priorities as a society. The current approach, based on resource exploitation and maximization of economic growth, has proved unsustainable. The climate emergency invites us to reconsider our policies from a perspective focused on sustainability, equity and respect for life.

Education, culture and the environment must work together to foster a paradigm shift in our public policies. Education must be an engine for social transformation, promoting critical thinking that challenges unsustainable practices and fosters greater awareness of the need to care for our planet. Culture must be a space for reflection and the creation of new narratives that enable us to imagine a more sustainable and equitable future.

The climate crisis is the most urgent challenge of our time and its solution requires a profound change in our policies, our way of producing and consuming, and in our relationship with nature. To achieve this change, a cross-cutting approach linking education, culture and the environment is needed, promoting critical awareness and coordinated action among all sectors of society. Public policies should focus on promoting sustainable development that guarantees the well-being of present and future generations, working together to build a world of educated, collective and science-backed people capable of reconfiguring their relationship with nature in the present.

References consulted:

Ceceñaa, Anna Esther (2016). The ecology and geography of capitalism in Wallerstein, Immanuel (coord.), The world is out of joint. Historical-world interpretations of the continuous polarizations 1500-2000. (pp. 15-34). Mexico: 21st Century publishers.
Draibe, S.A. Risk, M. (2009). The State of Social Welfare in Latin America. A new development strategy. Madrid: Carolina Foundation.
Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC] (2023). Synthesis report. Climate change 2023. https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_SYR_SPM.pdf
United Nations (2000). Millennium Declaration https://www.un.org/spanish/milenio/ares552.pdf
United Nations (2023) Humanity has opened the gates of hell but the future is not decided. https://news.un.org/es/story/2023/09/1524272
Intergovernmental Scientific-Regulatory Platform on Biological Diversity and Ecosystem Services [IPBES]. (2019) Global Assessment on Biological Diversity and Ecosystem Services. Summary for policy makers. https://www.ipbes.net/sites/default/files/2020-02/ipbes_global_assessment_report_summary_for_policymakers_es.pdf Skliar, Carlos (2017). The other one's care. Argentina: Ministry of Education, Science and Technology.
Sousa Santos, Boaventura De (2019). Education for another possible world. Autonomous City of Buenos Aires: CLACSO. CEDALC.

Photography:

This is LeBoutillier, C. (2021). White clouds over city buildings. [Photography]. Unsplash. https://unsplash.com/es/fotos/nubes-blancas-sobre-los-edificios-de-la-ciudad-durante-el-dia-c7RWVGL8lPA

Profile:

Maria Sandra Ontiveros Melgar
National and international consultant in Cultural Management, Artistic, Cultural and Social Enterprises, with more than twenty years of experience. She has collaborated with prestigious agencies to improve cultural practices and has advised a variety of artists, institutions and civil organizations on projects, administrative tools, cultural marketing and fundraising. He has participated as a jury in various competitions and invitations. It trains government officials in culture. As rapporteur, he has participated in events on cultural policies, financing and cultural economy. She is currently a PhD student at the INBA and a research professor at the University of the Cloister of Sister Joan, focusing on cultural policies and creative industries.