

Socially Responsive Organizations and the Challenge of Poverty



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Fighting poverty through practical, integrated and multidisciplinary education

The Case of Master Programs in Development Practice¹

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Abstract

This is a review of the Master in Development Practice (MDP) as an academic program example promoting poverty reduction and sustainable development. The authors analyze the MDP curriculum's multidisciplinary values in relation to their adequacy for building capacity in the sustainable development leaders of tomorrow. The paper argues that socially responsible academic institutions can make a difference in global poverty by integrating this program into a political and systemic approach for development practices.

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The Emergence of Socially Responsible Education

In the last decade or so various attempts at recognizing management education with global social responsibility have emerged. Numerous universities have made important strides to advance ethics and socially responsible values into their curricula for Master in Business Administration (MBA), Master in Public Administration (MPA) and other professional master degree programs (Swanson & Fisher, 2008). Beyond narrow notions of business ethics and social responsibility, developing future leaders for development requires an integrated multidisciplinary approach capable of understanding and engaging world problems for sustainable solutions and poverty reduction (Moldoveanu & Martin, 2008; Ritter, 2006). It would require educating capable, collaborative and innovative sustainable development managers and leaders (Parkin, 2010). In spite of numerous promising advancements in international service learning, civic engagement and other socially responsible academic initiatives, higher education still has to recognize its academic social responsibility toward global poverty. While the advancements in sustainability curricula in higher education continues (Blewitt & Cullingford, 2004), most academic institutions still have to consider the urgency of implementing integrated curricula and programs to adequately respond to global poverty and sustainable development (Tavanti & Mousin, 2008).

On the occasion of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro (June 20-22, 2012) chancellors, presidents, rectors, deans and leaders of higher education institutions acknowledged the responsibility that they bear in the international pursuit of sustainable development. They made a promise to “Teach sustainable development concepts, ensuring that they form a part of the core curriculum across all disciplines so that future higher education graduates develop skills necessary to enter sustainable development workforces and have an explicit understanding of how to achieve a society that values people, the planet and profits in a manner that respects the finite resource boundaries of the earth” (HEI, 2012). They also committed to providing sustainability training to professionals and practitioners in the promise of making the knowledge, awareness and skills of sustainable development accessed by both current managers and future leaders. This initiative exemplifies both the needs and opportunities to align higher education with sustainable development, social responsibility, and anti-poverty programs. The Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) and the United Nations Academic Impact (UNAI) were among the promoting agencies.

In spite of the rapidly growing membership of academic institutions into the UN initiatives, the formulation of sustainable development management degree programs and other cross-disciplinary integrated curricula against global poverty are still scattered and marginal. The purpose of this study is to highlight the emerging trends in such integrations. Specifically, we will be reviewing the models behind innovative sustainable development programs such Master in Development Practice (MDP) attempting to integrate universities with global challenges such as human rights, poverty, sustainability and human security. First, we provide a framework analysis of the MDP in its methods and integrated competencies. Second, we suggest a general framework that enhances the MDP by integrating it with political and human rights aspects relevant to conflict and transitional contexts. Third, we suggest a few practical recommendations for improving the current MDP programs and for allowing other institutions to successfully incorporate and adapt it. We argue that the MDP is an innovative example that could serve as a

blueprint for developing adapted curricula for sustainable development managers and globally responsible leaders.

Global Masters in Development Practice

The MDP Global Association's provides guidelines, reviews and sharing of MDP models across 22 collaborating academic institutions who have an active MDP program, various associated institutions who are in the process of developing their own MDP program and more than 100 collaborating development organizations and worldwide partnering agencies (Global MDP Secretariat, 2013). Inspired by the work of Dr. Jeffrey Sachs at Columbia University's Earth Institute, the MDP is an interdisciplinary graduate degree program whose goal is to prepare students to better identify and address the challenges of sustainable development. The innovation of the program is connecting more than 20 universities in the global North and global South while providing educational capacity across the four intersecting disciplines—health, natural, social, and management sciences--combined with cross-sectoral field training (Global MDP Secretariat, 2013). The initial stage of the program was possible through the support of the McArthur Foundation and the Earth Institute at Columbia University.

Although in its initial stages, the long-term objective of the initiative is to implement the MDP program into every academic institution interested in global poverty alleviation and international sustainable development. Sustainable development itself is an integrated notion that bridges the responsibility to fulfill the needs of the present generation without compromising the future generations in fulfilling their own needs. In other words, the sustainable development paradigm extends the limited notion of economic poverty and attempts to break the cycle of poverty through an integrated approach of social, environmental, economic and institutional (systemic) elements (Pick & Sirkin, 2010).

The four pillars covered in the MDP are health, natural, social sciences, and management. This program, like others of its kind, is designed for generalist and specialist development practitioners, policy administrators and policy professionals, private-sector professionals and educators (Global MDP, 2013). The MDP at Columbia University, the first to be implemented, aims at providing an integrated education for sustainable development positions in international and national nongovernmental organizations and development agencies (Columbia University, 2013). Offering such courses throughout more universities in the world will encourage and produce intelligent and socially responsible leaders ready to address the world's most heartbreaking and complex problems. Currently the program is offered and adapted by other institutions and programs worldwide providing a sustainable development pragmatic education relevant to their context and linked to their international partners.

The innovation in the MDP curricula focuses on providing a multi-tiered education that considers the development of individual capacity along organizational management skills and systemic analysis competencies. The curriculum is created with a cross-disciplinary and cross-sector framework to help students consider the complexity of world poverty and the possible sustainable solutions. The two-year curriculum begins with intense sessions known as “boot camps” and is followed by courses in economics, policy analysis, tropical agriculture, sustainable development, global health, and managing multi-sector development interventions.

The intensive summer field study between the two years is an opportunity for a hands-on learning experience immersed in real life situations of global poverty and worldwide sustainable development challenges. The multidisciplinary aspect of the program is supplemented by a number of electives in courses such as geographic information systems, cost benefit analysis, microfinance, decision models, human ecology, and investing in emerging markets. The interesting aspect of the MDP electives is that it is mandatory for students to take the courses in a non-native language, unless the student demonstrates adequate proficiency (International commission, 2008). This significant difference highlights the intensity of the program and the intentional objectives of the educators.

The MDP programs have different characteristics across the diverse institutions. Yet they still have these elements in common:

1. **Multidisciplinary Core Competencies:** The MDP requires the completion of core courses in the health sciences, natural sciences, social sciences and management sciences in a two-year graduate level education.
2. **Web-based Cross-disciplinary Collaborations:** The ‘Global Classroom’ component of the program offers students the essential ‘Foundations of Sustainable Development Practice (FSDP)’ through online learning platforms in which students collaborate across institutions. This method fosters cross-border and cross-disciplinary collaborations.
3. **Foreign language proficiency:** This is demonstrated by taking a non-native language elective course in a foreign partnering institution. Alternatively, students can take additional credits in the core courses if they can demonstrate the foreign language proficiency.
4. **Field training experiences:** Although not carrying credit hours, this gives students hands-on experience with integrated development approaches in a real world context.
5. **Intensive Preparatory Courses:** The intensive pre-program preparatory courses are essential elements when students come from diverse educational and disciplinary backgrounds. MDP candidates may need to take additional courses if they have not fulfilled prerequisite requirements in areas such as chemistry, biology, economics, math or statistics (Global MDP Secretariat, 2013).

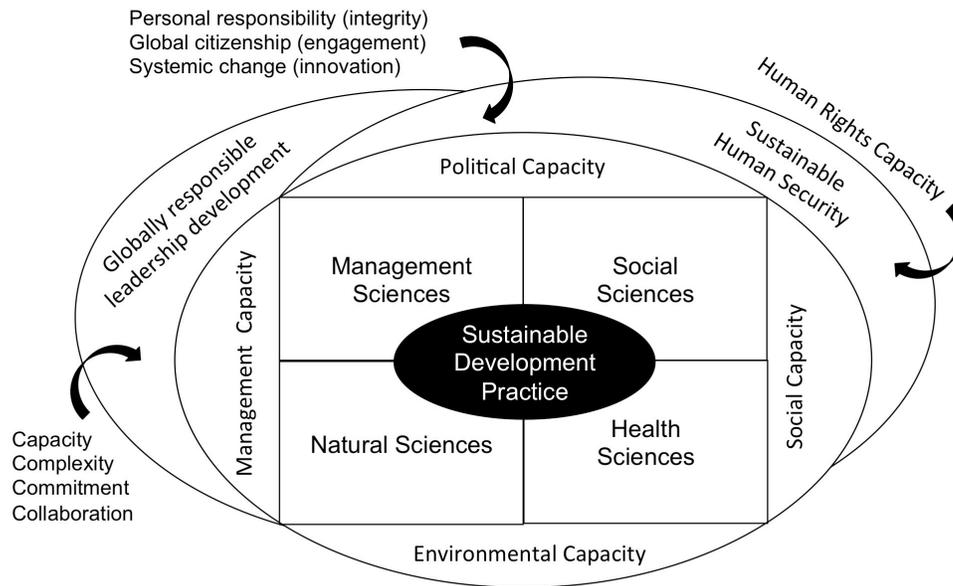
The important factors that set an MDP program apart from others extend beyond the embedded multi-disciplinary approach. These include the emphasis on building practical skills, fostering lifelong learning, and field training. Students who graduate with a MDP degree leave with the ability to integrate science and technology into sustainable development policy and implementation, develop and analyze a range of sustainable development interventions, and design a variety of data collection methods for planning, monitoring, and evaluation (Columbia University, 2013). The practical value of this program is visible in the core competencies balancing capacity development for problem analysis, program design, implementation and management, and monitoring and evaluation. This program cycle centered approach prepares students to enter the field of international sustainable development and capacity development equipped with essential managerial skills and intercultural competencies.

The Experiential and Multidisciplinary Values

The multidisciplinary approach in sustainable education and the centrality of experiential learning in management education have been highlighted by numerous studies and scholars (Bevan, 2012; Reynolds & Vince, 2007; Komiyama, 2011; Moran and Ostrom, 2005;). The MDP curriculum and requirements reflect both. Of all the essential outcomes and opportunities of the MDP program, intensive field training is one of the most important. Field training is designed to build practical skills and students are expected to do so during two separate assignments lasting a total of six months. Many of these field-training opportunities have students partnering with local universities and local development organizations to provide a holistic training experience and increase the opportunity to build lifelong international networks (International commission, 2008). While not all outcomes of field training create physical change, some develop knowledge and influence individuals both emotionally and intellectually. Most importantly, the field immersion helps students to establish collaborative partnerships with local organizations in the host country. The experiential learning component, strategically inserted between the two academic years of the multidisciplinary program, enhances the candidate's practical and development capacity while providing beneficial services along sustained international collaborations.

The importance of a multifaceted approach on education is considered unrivaled and exceptionally necessary but more can be done to prepare competent and globally responsible leaders. The MDP highlights and integrates four essential disciplines - health, natural, social, and management sciences (very interdependent dimensions but with different domains and interpretations in different locations), but lacks the understanding of political institutions, systems thinking and other comprehensive frameworks such as human rights and human security. The core competencies of a development practitioner, expected by educators and developers of the MDP program at Columbia University, are cultural and interpersonal skills, capacity building, and strong communication skills. While these skills are necessary to become a well-rounded competent leader they could be further enhanced by integrating other practical competencies for conflict management and sustainable human security. As international sustainable development issues are often embedded in complex conflicting contexts, the urgency of making curricula that adequately prepares practitioners for human security is pressing (WEI, 2013).

Integrated Multidisciplinary Educational Model for Sustainable Practices



Integrating sustainable development and practical management education with human security and human rights will expand practitioner's capacity to deal with conflicts and address human centered sustainable solutions. While integrating the four disciplines from the MDP program and an intense field study is important and necessary, we cannot leave out the influence of the greater security system within host countries. We expand the thoughts and experiences of young educators by looking directly at the larger systems at work. It is only by fully acknowledging whether a country provides a concrete system to engage in an integrated, multifaceted educational approach will we see a change.

The sustainable development paradigm implies an educational model that is integrated, practical and multidisciplinary. No matter if the curriculum is focused on development, policy or security, understanding and dealing with complexity of world poverty, systemic inequalities and human insecurity require this integrated approach. Educating the global leaders of tomorrow requires knowledge and skill sets for understanding contexts, their complexity and their connectedness (PRME et al. 2009).

The integrated approach in applied academic programs reflects the integrative trends in sustainable development studies and practices. In management and leadership studies the trends for companies building an integrated bottom line across the economic, environmental and social

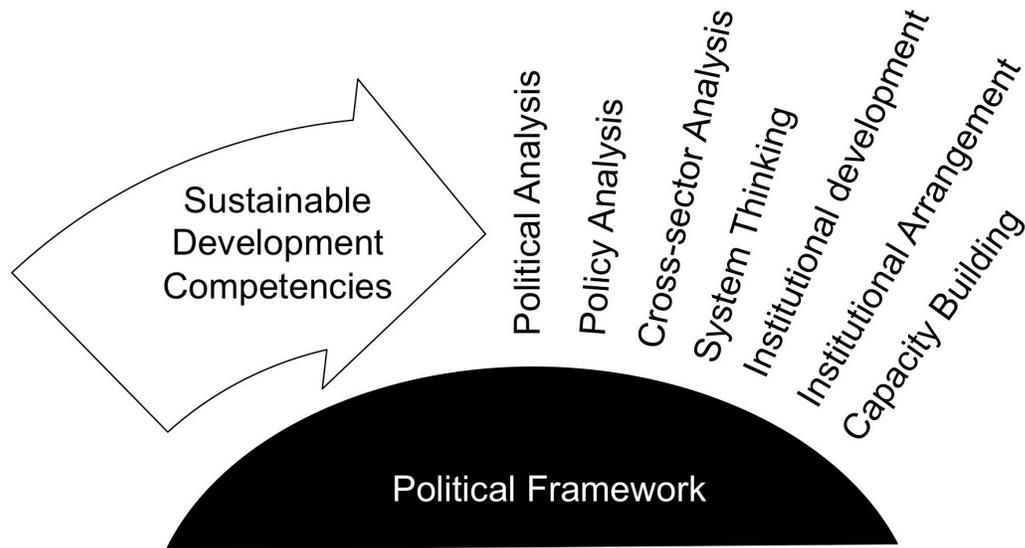
dimensions has been identified as essential in the creation of sustainable values (Laszlo, 2003; Savitz & Weber, 2006).

The Missing Framework and Competencies

In their seminal report titled “Our Common Future” published in 1987, The World Commission on Environment and Development recognized the centrality of the institutional framework: “The real world of interlocked economic and ecological systems will not change; the policies and institutions concerned must” (WCED, 1987: 9). In spite of the United Nations insistence on the centrality of the institutional capacity framework, non-experts on sustainable development often overlook these dimensions and competencies. Although argumentatively implicit, the institutional and political dimensions in the MDP curricula are also overlooked. Of the 23 current programs offering MDP degrees, only two are Masters in Public Administration (MPAs) and only one is accredited by NASPAA, the Global Standard in Public Service Education (that has recently released the new standards, opening to international programs too). The other degree programs are solely MDPs, Master of Science (M.S.) or other graduate degrees. All of the programs follow the expectations for integrating the core areas of the health, natural, social and (public) management sciences, but not necessarily political science, public administration, public policy analysis and system thinking. The NASPAA accreditation criteria assume that the program focuses its curriculum on public affairs, public administration, public management and public policy analysis. Other non-NASPAA accredited MDP programs do not necessarily reflect the competencies associated with the political and institutional framework.

The sustainable development model with its three mutually reinforcing economic, social and environmental pillars cannot be fully comprehended or implemented at the global, national and regional level without incorporating both institutional and political framework. Hence the MDP program, if it wants to effectively offer integrated and practical curricula embedded with essential competencies and skills associated with sustainable development, cannot undermine or vaguely imply the political and institutional framework.

The Political & Institutional Capacity Framework



Revaluing the political framework in the MDP model could be helpful in assisting practitioners to conduct and assess their actions in their systemic contexts. Along social, cultural, health, natural systems (the actual 4 pillars of MDP programs), the political, legal and institutional systems could be very helpful in understanding and assessing ‘practices’ in context. The revalued political framework could also be helpful in recognizing both the root and systemic causes of poverty and unsustainable development practices. Hence, when the management science component of the MDP is combined with a public, institutional and systemic levels of analysis, the ‘practitioner’ will most likely become agents of change and good governance (Wals & Corcoran, 2012).

Recommendations

A successful implementation of an MDP program in a university not of the level of Columbia University depends on the institutional capacity and support. It also depends on the academic awareness of its social and global responsibility. Fighting poverty through management education requires more than a generic commitment to ethical leadership and responsible management. It requires a strong, institutional and strategic commitment toward academic social responsibility (ASR), which goes beyond simply providing community services (Tavanti & Mousin, 2008). ASR implies a clear alignment of the academic institution’s mission with its teaching, research, governance and engagement with the local, national and international communities (Tavanti & Morales, 2011). This requires that curricula innovations be adequately

integrated and supported by systemic and institutional solutions. Hence, a multi-disciplinary integrated curricula development aligned with these purposes, would need an integrated approach with other necessary elements such as:

1. **Institutional Support:** Provision of clear, functional and valued cross-college and cross-department mechanisms for the development or enhancement of integrated multidisciplinary curricula.
2. **Financial Support:** Private and public funding, like the McArthur Foundation who contributed to the development of the MDP, is needed for the development of educational capacity for quality, sustainable and collaborative programs for poverty reduction, inclusive development and human security.
3. **Scholarship Support.** Through partnerships like the Global MDP, there should be a shared level of financial responsibility providing scholarships and other types of financial support to qualified and committed students from marginalized backgrounds and other specific socio economic groups.
4. **North-South and Multi-tier Partnership:** Programs like Higher Education for Development (HED) should be a model for establishing funding mechanisms for academic and capacity development. They should reward those programs promoting partnerships between top tier universities with lower ranking academic institutions in the Global South.
5. **Hire, promote and reward engaged faculty:** Create adequate mechanisms for promotion and tenure that puts value in faculty's teaching, research and service that makes an impact on sustainable development and poverty reduction.
6. **Promote cross-sector partnerships for sustainable development:** Beside the membership of universities initiatives and associations promoting these socially responsible principles and practices, universities have the responsibility to establish strong partnerships with community organizations and other institutional actors engaged in the promotion of sustainable development, poverty reduction, human rights and human security.
7. **Enhance accreditation standards:** Promote international standards and required expectations establishing academic excellence in line with the sustainability, poverty and human security responsibility of engaged higher education.

Although some academic institutions are still hesitant to comply with basic principles for global social responsibility, the main challenge remains aligning principles with practices. Several academic institutions have successfully integrated academic programs through multi-tier academic and community partnerships. Their examples and practices are shared across international academic networks such as PRME, UNAI and other initiatives for anti-poverty, social justice and sustainable development.

While some small colleges and universities may feel limited by their institutional capacity or local missions, getting involved with the international development associations and partnerships models presented here could offer an opportunity to engage more with international communities. Smaller institutions and programs could benefit from partnering with others and providing a small but coordinated support for poverty alleviation through academic engagement. The Impact Entrepreneurship programs provided by ALTIS at Catholic University (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore) in Milan, Italy represents an alternative graduate educational and

collaborative model. It builds on the collaborative partnerships with African universities for developing MBAs, global entrepreneurship education benefitting capacity development in the Global South (ALTIS, 2013). Small programs and academic institutions with less capacity can still participate by joining similar initiatives and creating partnerships of universities, institutions and organizations sharing the similar missions in global poverty reduction and social responsibility.

Conclusions

We have argued that higher education has the responsibility of developing integrated, practical and multidisciplinary programs for poverty alleviation and sustainable development. This requires that academic institutions do more than adhere in principles and practically support the development of sustainable development and socially responsible graduate programs. It requires the formation of integrated and practitioner based programs in the model of the MDP. The time is now for academic institutions to seriously engage and invest in the fight against poverty and the promotion of sustainable practices. The MDP is model that represents, in many aspects, these values of global engagement and social responsibility. By integrating collaborative models like the one proposed by the Global Association's MDP in higher education institutions, responsible leaders of development and change will be empowered to come forth and put their knowledge into action.

Academic institutions are essential in the process of transformation for many reasons. First, higher education institutions are seen as relatively impartial or neutral mediators and facilitators that can relate well to other private, public, and civil society entities. This institutional strength is helpful when searching to connect with programs like the Higher Education for Development (HED) program, and for gaining support from organizations like the McArthur Foundation. Second, academic institutions promote partnerships with key academic, civil society and international institutions that promote human rights, sustainable development, and women's empowerment. The promotion of sustainable partnerships is essential in creating transformational leaders that focus on alleviating poverty and improving humanity. Third, the institution's ability to invest in international capacity strengthens partnerships and fosters support, innovation, and developmental capacity to other organizations and educational institutions. Higher education institutions have "the responsibility to adequately prepare students for a more integrated and interdependent world" (Tavanti, 2012).

The end of global poverty begins with educating globally responsible leaders, competent managers and innovative professionals engaged in the creation of prosperous, healthy, inclusive and sustainable societies. The education for integration and engagement is not only an intellectual journey. At the individual level, it requires people with integrity and a balanced maturity toward also emotional, moral, and cultural intelligence. At the organizational level, it requires capacity to collaborate with a diverse spectrum and levels of public, private and civil society organizations. At the institutional level, it requires establishing accreditation standards, laws, policies, and systemic thinking aimed at the provision of appropriate mechanisms supporting sustainable development education. Sustainable is no longer an optional adjective in the global responsibility to development, security and dignity. Sustainability is and can be

integrated as the paradigm for assessing educational initiatives aimed at making the world a better place.

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