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# Preserving biodiversity of the Amazon: Pedagogical implications for harmonious coexistence, sustainability and global citizenship

## Abstract

This paper contributes to the discourse on education for sustainability and global citizenship, and Soka studies in education through a study of the Instituto Soka Amazônia (Soka Amazon Institute), a non-governmental organization located in Manaus, Brazil. It examines the educational activities within the Institute as a non-formal space of learning for global citizenship and engages with its manifold contributions to sustainability: to preserve biodiversity in the Amazon region; as a Sustainable Development Goals hub; the relevance of the founder's vision for the harmonious coexistence of all life; and the use of the Earth Charter as an ethical framework. This paper draws relevance for Soka studies in education in non-formal learning spaces, as well as the broader implications for education for sustainability and global citizenship

**Keywords:** *Global Citizenship Education, planetary citizenship, sustainability education, soka education, Education for Sustainable Development*

## Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel leistet einen Beitrag zum Diskurs über Bildung für Nachhaltigkeit und globale Bürgerschaft sowie zu Soka-Studien im Bildungsbereich durch eine Untersuchung des Instituto Soka Amazônia (Soka Amazon Institute), einer Nichtregierungsorganisation in Manaus, Brasilien. Er untersucht die Bildungsaktivitäten des Instituts als nicht formalen Lernort für globale Bürgerschaft und befasst sich mit seinen vielfältigen Beiträgen zur Nachhaltigkeit: zum Erhalt der biologischen Vielfalt im Amazonasgebiet, als Drehscheibe für die Ziele für nachhaltige Entwicklung, zur Relevanz der Vision des Gründers für eine harmonische Koexistenz allen Lebens und zur Verwendung der Erd-Charta als ethischer Rahmen. Dieser Beitrag zeigt die Relevanz der Soka-Studien für die Bildung in nicht formalen Lernräumen sowie die breiteren Implikationen für die Bildung für Nachhaltigkeit und globale Bürgerschaft.

**Schlüsselworte:** *Global Citizenship Education, Planetary Citizenship, Nachhaltigkeitserziehung, Soka-Erziehung, Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung*

## Introduction

Education for sustainability and global citizenship has received a wide-ranging response as approaches to education. For example, through the discourse and practice of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and Global Citizenship Education (GCE) led by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Although there is a growing body of research on ESD and GCE in formal education, scholarly work on the relevance of this approach to non-formal education is lacking (Tarozzi, 2020). This paper is based on a study of the Instituto Soka Amazônia or Soka Amazon Institute (literal translation) a non-governmental organization (NGO) located in Manaus, Brazil. The study examines the educational activities within the Institute as a non-formal space of learning for global citizenship and engages with its manifold contributions to sustainability, including its mandate to preserve biodiversity in the Amazon region.

The Amazon rainforest, spanning nine South American countries, harbors unparalleled biodiversity and plays a vital role in regulating the global climate. However, the Amazon faces grave threats from deforestation, climate change, and unsustainable human activities. Preserving the biodiversity of this natural treasure demands harmonious coexistence between humans and Nature. This paper explores the challenges of preserving Amazonian biodiversity, the concept of “harmonious coexistence” through the lens of Soka perspectives, and the role of the Soka Amazon Institute and Soka education in fostering a sustainable relationship with the environment.

Soka or value-creating education is an approach to curriculum developed in twentieth century Japan. As described by the Soka progenitor, Daisaku Ikeda (1928-2023), Soka or value creation is “the capacity to find meaning, to enhance one's own existence and contribute to the well-being of others, under any circumstance” (Ikeda, 2021, p. 6). Soka or value-creating education is a learner-centered approach focused on the health, well-being, and happiness of each student. The concept of happiness is described as the ability to lead a contributive life, for the welfare of self and others. Soka approaches undergird 16 Soka kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, women's colleges, and universities in seven countries across Asia and

America. They inform public and private schools, universities, educators and school leaders in various countries worldwide. In recent years there has been a surge of scholarly work on the relevance of value-creating approaches to formal education. This paper brings into focus the educational activities within the Soka Amazon Institute as a non-formal learning space for the practice of value-creating education. It is the first scholarly contribution to engage with the wide-ranging activities, history, and ethos of the Institute with relevance for global and sustainability education.

### **Soka Amazon Institute – Values, Mission, Vision**

Located in Manaus, the capital city of the state of Amazonas – in the heart of the Amazon rainforest in Brazil, the Soka Amazon Institute was founded in 2014. The Institute oversees managing the Reserva Particular do Patrimônio Natural (RPPN) Dr. Daisaku Ikeda, or Private Reserve of Natural Heritage Dr. Daisaku Ikeda (literal translation). The RPPN covers a total area of 52 hectares of tracks, archeological, and historical sites.

The Institute's projects are divided into three main focal areas: (1) *Nature conservation* – which includes the development of a seed bank, and sowing programs to preserve the genetic diversity of trees and plants. (2) *Social and environmental education* – working with public and private school students and educators through the Environmental Academy program; companies and businesses through lectures and workshops; and representatives of communities, civil society, and the general public through exhibitions and social awareness events. (3) *Support for academic research* – to study and preserve the Amazon biodiversity through partnerships with public and private universities in Brazil and abroad (Soka Amazon Institute, 2022).

### **Promoting Education for Sustainability and Global Citizenship at the Institute**

The contribution of this paper draws from a literature review of existing scholarly work on the Soka Amazon Institute, and qualitative data collected through semi-structured, open-ended interviews online and in-person with key staff of the Institute in April and December 2023 conducted by both authors and aided by translation from Portuguese to English by Kobashikawa.<sup>1</sup> The key questions explored in the interviews and underlying the overall study are as follows: (a) What are the various initiatives carried out at the Institute to preserve biodiversity, and promote education for sustainability and global citizenship, including the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)? (b) How do the Institute's activities align with the founder Ikeda's (1999) vision of "harmonious coexistence" as expressed in his message to the Institute? (c) What is the cultural context within which these projects and activities are taking place? (d) Are there elements of Earth and social justice being explored through the Institute's actions for sustainability? For example, one of the co-author's previous works finds there to be a general fascination for "white culture" and cities; and lack of appreciation for local geography, the forest, Indigenous community and *Ribeirinhos* (riverside people); and a lack of understanding of the role of the Amazon by the local people on their lives

(Kobashikawa, 2022). Finally, this study aims to explore how the principles of the Earth Charter are being used within the various activities of the Soka Amazon Institute.

Initial key findings from the data collected are discussed in this section under the following themes. *Preserving biodiversity in the RPPN*: The Institute contributes to the preservation of biodiversity through 30 years of biodiversity recovery of the Private Reserve or RPPN and in tandem with SDG 15 – Life on Land. According to the coordinator of the Institute's Division of Environmental Protection, the sowing initiatives focus not only on conservation, but also on giving opportunities to create connections between each individual and Nature (interview, Rodrigo Izumi, April 2023). *Impact of the Institute's ethos: Elements of social and Earth justice*: The primary aim of the Institute is to preserve the biodiversity of the Amazon and contribute to the vision of "harmonious coexistence" or *kyōsei* (Japanese) between humans and Nature (Ikeda, 1999). The ethos of the Institute of harmonious coexistence based on the interdependence of human beings and Nature can be traced to the philosophy of "dependent origination" or *pratitya-samutpada* (Sanskrit) which is a concept key to Ikeda's vision of global citizenship (Sharma, 2020, p. 30). As he explains, it is the view that "all beings and phenomena exist or occur in relation to other beings or phenomena. Everything is linked to an intricate web of causation and connection – and nothing – whether in the realm of human affairs or of natural phenomena – can exist or occur solely of its own accord" (Ikeda, 1991, p. 4). In our interviews, the Institute's President-Director and Vice-President-Director also stressed the importance the Institute placed on creating an environment that can nurture bonds of friendship between the Institute and local-national stakeholders, including Indigenous peoples, government, enterprises, scholars, and NGOs (interview, Luciano Nascimento and Milton Fujiyoshi, December 2023). In particular, a key emphasis is being placed on the need to work with the local community, including *Quilombolas* (African-Brazilian who live in settlements) and *Ribeirinhos* as fundamental stakeholders for the preservation of biodiversity, as also echoed in Ikeda's message to the Institute as its founder (Ikeda, 1999, p. 2). *Institutional commitment to the Earth Charter and the SDGs as ethical frameworks*: On 5<sup>th</sup> June 2023, the Institute developed formal collaborations with the Earth Charter International (ECI) located at the University for Peace in Costa Rica. Existing research studies examine the use of the Earth Charter principles at the Soka Amazon Institute, including the relevance of the Earth Charter as an ethical framework; as a core feature of the Institute's environmental education program; and the Seeds of Hope and Action exhibition organized with the ECI promoting the Earth Charter, SDGs, and environmental education, that has been shared by the Institute with its partners and showed to more than ten thousand people in the Amazon regions between 2021 to 2023 (Soka Gakkai, 2020). The Institute also organizes lectures and workshops around the four Earth Charter pillars. Further, joining the ODS (Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável) Hub Amazonas (or SDGs hub), launched by the UN Global Compact Network Brazil is another effort for the Institute to accelerate the SDGs. To provide some context, the UN Global Compact (2023) is the largest corporate sustainability initiative in the world, and in Brazil it has a program named ODS Hub across

seven states whose main purpose is to encourage local and regional enterprises to commit to the SDGs 2030 Agenda. The Soka Amazon Institute has been the anchor organization leading the initiative in the state of Amazonas for the period between 2022 to 2023, strategically supporting the implementation of the SDGs while working with a diverse range of stakeholders in its role as an NGO and an important actor in the space for promoting sustainability and global citizenship (interview, coordinator of the Institute's Division of Communication, Dulce de Moraes, April 2023; Soka Amazon Institute 2023a). At the time this paper was being authored at the end of 2023, the Brazilian Amazon faced a severe drought, and with a lack of river transport, communities were isolated, especially the Indigenous communities (G1, 2023). In this scenario, the Institute took action in its capacity as an NGO with other enterprises and members of the SDGs Hub, and local communities who are based around the Soka Amazon Institute (2023c). *Non-formal space for the practice of Soka studies in education*: In our study, we were interested in examining the educational activities within the Institute as a non-formal space of learning for value-creating education and sustainability (Sharma, 2020). The Soka Amazon Institute's main socio-environmental education program is the Environmental Academy, which introduces ecological knowledge while walking through the trails of the RPPN for students and educators of public and private schools in the city of Manaus. The program is set up using Ikeda's (2002; 2012) framework of raising awareness of the environmental crises – to learn, to reflect, to empower, to lead and take action. The Earth Charter pillar, *Ecological Integrity* is also central to the program. More than 7.000 students attend the project every year, and even during the coronavirus pandemic in 2021 around 30.000 students joined the Academy online. Previous research introduces the outcomes of this project, including an emphasis within the Academy to promote a deeper understanding of the local community based on value-creating perspectives (Kobashikawa, 2022; Tokusato & den Hartog, 2020). As discussed by the Soka progenitor and Japanese educator, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871–1944), the importance of connecting the students and school to the local community is to understand the systems where they live (Makiguchi [1930–1934] 1981–1988). Ikeda (2012, p. 11) elaborates on this and offers three qualities of education centered on the local community that can be summarized as – affection, appreciation, and protection for the surrounding environment and community. Value-creating education aims to foster global citizens who can reflect on their beliefs, values, and attitudes, and how their actions can influence their local community (Sharma, 2020), and this is a central focus of the Institute's Academy. Further, as suggested earlier, as an NGO the Institute offers opportunities for non-formal education for learners across different age groups to engage in environmental education, the Earth Charter, and SDGs through various lectures, workshops, and exhibitions (interview coordinator of the Division of Socio-Environmental Education, Jean Dinelly Leão; and former coordinator, Tais Tiyoko Tokusato, April 2023).

## Conclusion

The authors of this paper were interested in examining the value dimension of learning for global citizenship and sustainability, taking the example of the Soka Amazon Institute. The data col-

lected needs to be elaborated through more detailed studies examining broader outcomes that have relevance for education across formal and non-formal learning settings, for example: (1) The role of NGOs as an important actor in the field of promoting the SDGs, in particular, education for sustainability and global citizenship. As also suggested by other studies that consider the importance of non-formal agencies – NGOs and grassroots social movements, that can help bring critical voices of the people into the global political arena (Tarozzi, 2020). Future research studies can also examine in more detail how the Soka Amazon Institute works as an NGO within a complex setting with a range of diverse stakeholders tackling head-on existing and new social and ecological challenges, such as, the recent drought brought on by climatic conditions and the disproportionate impact of ecological destruction and the global climate crises on the Global South, in particular, on Indigenous, Black and other marginalized groups. (2) Future scholarly work can also examine the use of the Earth Charter as an ethical framework by the Institute through its ongoing activities and future initiatives as part of the newly developed formal collaborations with ECI that are aimed at promoting education for sustainability in the region. (3) This paper also develops the relevance of the Institute's educational programs for Soka studies in education that merits consideration through future research. For example, revisiting Makiguchi's concept of "community" in the context of the Amazon. It can be argued that the notion of planetary citizenship might be an appropriate lens to examine the Institute's activities in promoting biodiversity in the Latin American region. For example, Moraes and Freire (2020) find that the phrase "planetary citizenship" could be used as an inclusive term that reflects Indigenous voices (see Sharma 2020, p. 42). This term also includes the vast repository of human wisdom, from different cultures and traditions, such as considered during the drafting process of the Earth Charter (ibid.) and the vision of harmonious coexistence.

## Notes

- 1 Some outcomes were shared at the 4th Academic Network for Global Education and Learning (ANGEL) biennial conference held at UNESCO, Paris (Soka Amazon Institute, 2023b).

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