SEL for SDGs: Why Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is necessary to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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Editor's Notes

-The article builds a case for how the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be achieved through social and emotional learning
-The authors begin the article describing the conflicting goals of the SDGs and how the attainment of these goals may necessitate a balancing act
-Further, the authors discuss 'dissonance and the SDGs' at the level of individual and social collectives because of the conflicting nature of the SDGs
-The authors then posit two specific avenues, emotional resilience and prosocial behavior, for managing dissonance and attainment of the SDGs. They describe the need for social and emotional learning as fundamental skills in our education systems to achieve the SDGs

Key Words

Sustainable Development Goals,
Dissonance,
Emotional resilience,
Prosocial behavior,
Social and Emotional Learning,
Neurosciences,
Whole brain approach to education.

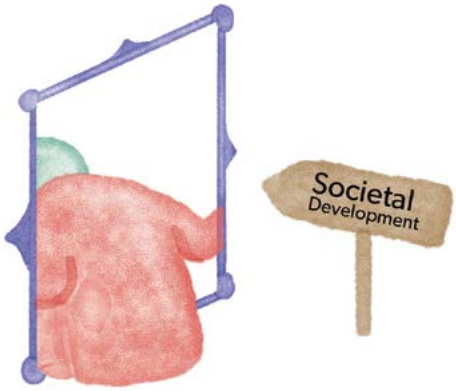
The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are not necessarily a set of consistent objectives but rather a series of potentially conflicting goals[1]. From the perspective of the development agent, these conflicting objectives entail inconsistencies in actions—and antecedents--needed to attain the SDGs. For example, eradicating poverty—a societal objective—might entail (at least in the short term) working the self to the point of compromising personal well-being, another SDG. Another clear example of such conflicts is the slow progress or even resistance to climate change policies because of the relationship across work choice, economic growth and climate change. Thus, **attainment of these goals may necessitate a balancing act—development agents may consider multiple options and make tradeoffs.**

Dissonance and the SDGs

At the level of the individual and social collectives, these tradeoffs in SDGs will be quite taxing because the conflicting goals are, in effect, inconsistent cognitions[2], generally referred to as cognitive dissonance or dissonance[3]. According to dissonance theory[4]—one of the most tried and tested theories in the behavioral sciences—inconsistent cognitions evokes aversive arousal state that leads to attitudes and behaviors aimed at reducing the arousal[5]. Dissonance is constituted by two important social psychological processes: inconsistency among cognitions, a more rational phenomenon referred to as cognitive discrepancy, and the unpleasant emotional and motivational state that arises from holding two contradictory cognitions, referred to as dissonance[6].

Dissonance is unpleasant—the aversive arousal state is because inconsistent cognitions impede effective and unconflicted actions. The unpleasant emotive state of dissonance motivates attitude changes or engagements in other dissonance-reduction processes. Hence, encounters with dissonance trigger a variety of dissonance reducing cognitions—attitudes and behaviors that align cognitions with behavioral commitments to facilitate the execution of effective unconflicting actions[7]. For example, it has been widely demonstrated that following a dissonance-triggered decision, people alter their attitudes to be more consistent with their choices[8]. This is the case because following a dissonance-triggered decision, psychological processes are deployed to assist with the execution of the decision. This process involves post decision views of the chosen alternative in a more favorable light and the rejected option in a more negative light so as to help the individual follow through and act on the decision in a more effective manner[9].

Dissonance has important implications for the attainment of the SDGs—it strains development



agents' rational (cognitive discrepancy) and emotional (aversive arousal) capabilities to reflect, self-regulate and act in pursuit of the attainment of those goals. These strains may undermine attainment of those goals. For example, if development agents view an otherwise prioritized development goal in a more negative light because it conflicts with an otherwise less prioritized goal but that they favor at that moment, the former may be jeopardized. Additionally, because dissonance challenges both cognitive and emotional capabilities, it might be self-defeating, leading to inaction—discouraging actions in pursuit of SDGs. In contrast, because dissonance prompts development agents to reflect on their values and other behavioral antecedents, and to self-regulate the unpleasant emotive state, it is a necessary aspect of measured deliberative sustainable development actions because it obligates the development agent to weigh options and make decisions. Thus, dissonance has considerable implications for how we understand and manage individual and social actions that enable attainment of the SDGs.

Prosocial behavior promotes human flourishing which we believe is critical for attainment of the SDGs

The dual potential of dissonance to undermine development goals by enabling compromise and inactions, and by fostering measured deliberative development-oriented actions, necessitates appropriate dissonance management for the attainment of development goals. **We posit two specific avenues, emotional resilience and prosocial behavior, for managing dissonance and attainment of the SDGs.** While dissonance is a core motivation for maintaining coherent thinking[10], subsequent actions to achieving the SDGs necessarily depend on the cultivation of both emotional resilience and prosocial skills.

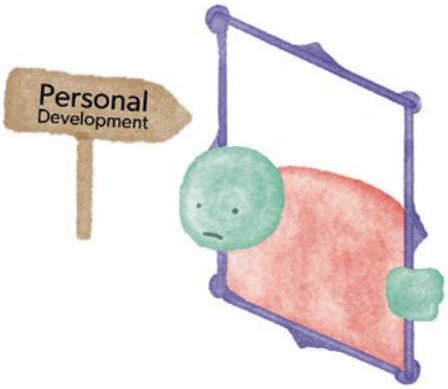
Emotional resilience is the capacity to draw upon positive emotions to cope with negative and stressful experiences[11]. This requires regulation of emotional response. In order to demonstrate emotional regulation, individuals need to be mindful, recognize emotional information, identify positive and negative emotion, mindfully self-regulate emotion to maintain positive affect. This malleability in an emotional state to ensure positive affect has been shown to have several positive outcomes[12] because of it adaptive value.

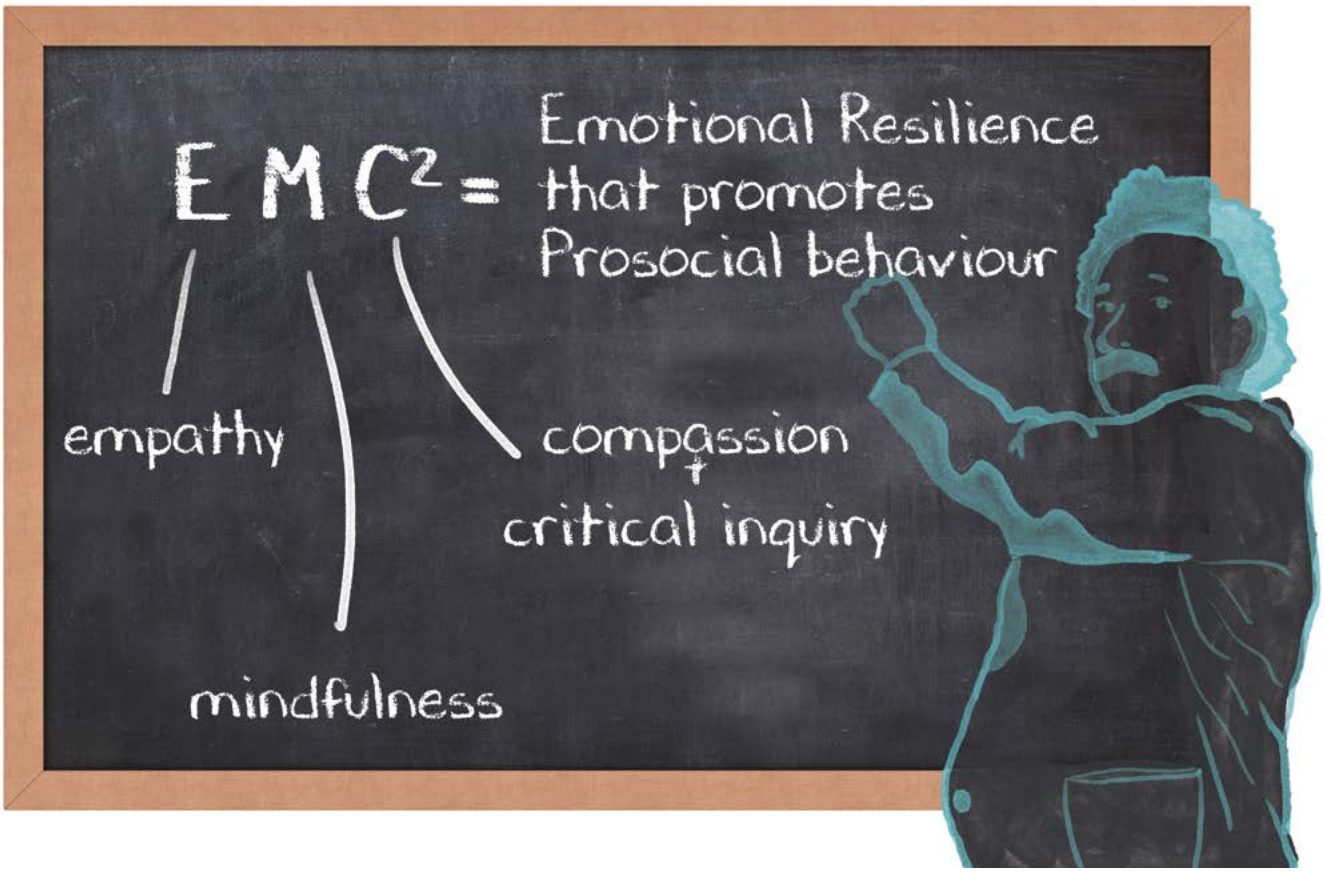
On the other hand, prosocial behaviour is voluntary social behavior that represents a broad category of actions that are generally beneficial to other people and to the ongoing political system[13]. Thus, prosocial behavior promotes human flourishing which we believe is critical for attainment of the SDGs. Prosocial behavior has been shown to be altruistic and motivational since it seeks to improve another person's welfare, in contrast to egoistically motivated action[14] and is hence sustainable as a behavior. Consequently, the specific cultivation of prosocial behavior serves as a necessity to achieve the SDGs.

Social and Emotional Learning as fundamental skills

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has emerged as competencies through which individuals recognize and regulate emotions, identify positive purpose, demonstrate empathy for others, take constructive action, and promote human flourishing. With origins in emotional intelligence[15], SEL skills are powerful competencies since they have been shown to (a) facilitate learning (b) build emotional resilience (c) promote prosocial behavior and (d) instill pluralistic thinking.

Recent research from the neurosciences shows that the emotional centres of the brain are closely intertwined with the cognitive centres of learning in the brain.[16] As a consequence, when the brain encounters situations of dissonance, cognition and attention are hampered and emotional response is explosive or distraught. Thus explicit training in SEL build competencies that might empower and enable individuals to regulate emotional response. One such framework entitled EMC2[17] seeks to provide explicit training in four competencies namely empathy (E), mindfulness (M), compassion (C) and critical inquiry (C) to build emotional resilience and promote prosocial behavior.





EMC² Framework

The EMC² framework is designed to develop and nourish the 'whole brain'. Recent advances in the cognitive neurosciences have established that the human brain comprises of two primary cortices, namely the neocortex (also called the logical or rational brain) and the limbic cortex (or the social and emotional brain[18]). The EMC² framework is designed to specifically build four competencies, the underlying neural circuits of which nurture the limbic and the neo-cortex (whole brain).

Empathy is the general capacity to recognise emotion and also resonate with others' emotional states such as happiness, excitement, sorrow, or fear. Empathy is naturally embedded in the human brain in the 'mirror neuron network'[19] and forms the basis of societal structure.

Mindfulness is self - regulation and the building of conscious awareness that arises from paying attention to the experience of right now[20]. It is designed to cultivate conscious awareness of a) where attention resides, b) how emotions and feelings are experienced in the body, and c) how thought, beliefs, values, and emotions may influence one's ability to pay attention and regulate emotion.

Compassion is the ability to take positive action to alleviate suffering in the other. Compassion requires behavioural action motivated by the need and desire to improve the other's wellbeing and is the fundamental basis to promote prosocial behaviour[21].

Critical Inquiry is the continued ability to question and evaluate decisions, actions and behavioural change through observation, experience, thinking, reasoning and judgement.

Dissonance and EMC²

Since dissonance is an unpleasant emotive state, subjects of dissonance require emotion-regulatory capabilities (emotional resilience) to navigate the behaviors and prerequisite antecedents to attain SDGs. Dissonance can be caused by beliefs, attitudes, values, and feelings about oneself, others, or the environment. Thus, interventions to reduce dissonance are required to address the cognitive antecedents of emotion, the intensity of emotional response, and the cognitive regulation of this emotional response. These can be achieved by combined training of empathy and mindfulness to build skills for emotional resilience or regulation.

According to the Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory[22] positive and negative emotions have distinct and complementary adaptive functions and cognitive and physiological effects. While negative emotions narrow one's momentary thought–action repertoire by preparing one to behave in a specific way (e.g., attack when angry, escape when afraid), positive emotions (e.g., joy, contentment, interest) broaden one's thought–action repertoire, expanding the range of cognitions and behaviors that come to mind. These broadened mindsets, in turn, build an individual's physical, intellectual, and social resources which in turn could encourage expanded perspective and facilitate dialogue towards resolution of the dissonance.

SEL, Education and the SDGs

The question we ask ourselves is how can we develop these competencies? One such avenue could be our formal education system. Recent experiences with SEL in schools show promise in improving pro-social behavior and inculcate actions that go beyond just the self but towards the collective good[23]. This however suggests a radical change in our education systems. We are advocating here for a whole brain approach to our education systems whereby the focus shifts from purely building intellectual intelligence to one where there is a balance of both intellectual and emotional intelligence.

The objective is therefore towards building emotionally resilient individuals who are able to navigate the complex landscape of conflicting goals and dissonance to one of prosocial behavior that promotes human flourishing and the attainment of the SDGs.

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