



Education for Sustainable Development

Education at all levels can shape the world of tomorrow, equipping individuals and societies with the skills, perspectives, knowledge and values to live and work in a sustainable manner. Education for sustainable development (ESD) is a vision of education that seeks to balance human and economic well-being with cultural traditions and respect for the earth's natural resources. ESD applies transdisciplinary educational methods and approaches to develop an ethic for lifelong learning; fosters respect for human needs that are compatible with sustainable use of natural resources and the needs of the planet; and nurtures a sense of global solidarity.

A New Vision of Education

Education for sustainable development is a "dynamic concept that encompasses a new vision of education that seeks to empower people of all ages to assume responsibility for creating and enjoying a sustainable future."¹ The overall aim of ESD is to empower citizens to act for positive environmental and social change, implying a participatory and action-oriented approach.

ESD integrates concepts and analytical tools from a variety of disciplines to help people better understand the world in which they live. Pursuing sustainable development through education requires educators and learners to reflect critically on their own communities; identify non-viable elements in their lives; and explore tensions among conflicting values and goals. ESD brings a new motivation to learning as pupils become empowered to develop and evaluate alternative visions of a sustainable future and to work to collectively fulfil these visions.²

Education for Sustainable Development: an Evolving Concept

From the time sustainable development was first endorsed at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in 1987, the concept of education for sustainable development has also been explored. The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro brought together representatives of Governments, international and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and civil society to discuss the challenges of the next century and to adopt a global plan of action to meet these challenges. The action plan, known as Agenda 21, provided a comprehensive set of principles to assist Governments and other institutions in implementing sustainable development policies and programmes. Chapter 36 of Agenda 21 affirmed education as essential for making progress toward sustainable development.

Following UNCED, the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) appointed UNESCO to be the Task Manager for Chapter 36, responsible for accelerating education reforms and coordinating stakeholder activities. UNESCO was also charged with providing professional and technical support to Member States; developing sample curriculum and training materials; and disseminating innovative ESD policies, programmes, and practices.

What is Education for Sustainable Development?

Chapter 36 identified four major thrusts of Education for Sustainable Development:

- **Promotion and Improvement of Basic Education:** Access to basic education remains a problem for many - especially girl children and illiterate adults. Simply increasing basic literacy and numeracy, as currently taught, will not significantly advance sustainable societies. Instead, basic education must focus on imparting knowledge, skills, values, and perspectives that encourage and support citizens to lead sustainable lives.
- **Reorienting Existing Education at all Levels to Address Sustainable Development:** Rethinking and revising education from nursery school through university to include more principles, skills, perspectives, and values related to sustainability in each of the three realms - social, environmental, and economic - is important to our current and future societies.

¹ UNESCO, Education for Sustainability—from Rio to Johannesburg: Lessons Learnt from a Decade of Commitment, 2002.

² These elements have been abstracted from the draft document, *Education for Sustainable Development: the Education Sector Paper, a report prepared by ESD for an inter-sectoral meeting, March 5, 2003.*

- **Developing Public Understanding and Awareness of Sustainability:** Making progress toward more sustainable societies requires a population that is aware of the goals of sustainable societies and has the knowledge and skills to contribute toward those objectives. Informed voting citizenry and knowledgeable consumers can help communities and governments enact sustainability measures and move toward more sustainable societies.
- **Training:** All sectors of the workforce can contribute to local, regional, and national, sustainability. The development of specialized training programmes to ensure that all sectors of the workforce have the knowledge and skills necessary to perform their work in a sustainable manner has been identified as a critical component of ESD.

Education for Sustainable Development in Action

For over a decade, many higher education institutions, NGOs, and Government agencies worldwide have made significant efforts to incorporate sustainable development into academic programmes, operations and community outreach. From these experiences, it is clear that while there may be agreement on the overall goals of ESD, its creation and implementation at local, regional, and national levels differ to meet diverse social, economic, and environmental conditions in relevant and culturally appropriate ways. Moreover, educational approaches must also take into account the experiences of indigenous cultures and minorities and both acknowledge and facilitate their original and important contributions to the process of sustainable development.

Reorienting education to support sustainable development must be supported by broad cooperation at all levels and by multiple stakeholders. Each educator and discipline has an aspect that can contribute to the content and pedagogy of ESD. Communities can contribute to the development of ESD curricula to ensure that curricula reflect the knowledge, skills, perspectives, and priorities of the local people. Government leaders should make steps to reorient national education policies and systems toward ESD and set targets to meet international commitments. Finally, networks and partnerships between Governments, institutions and organisations, civil society, the private sector and the media can assist in translating concepts into goals and actions.

International Commitments

Heads of states, NGOs, businesses and other major groups reaffirmed their commitment to education at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg. The centrality of education, defined broadly, to the creation of a sustainable future is evident through several references in almost every chapter of the Plan of Implementation and in Paragraph 18 of the Political Declaration. The WSSD Plan of Implementation recognises education as critical for sustainable development in its own right, but also sees education as a key agent for change and a tool for addressing such questions as gender equality, rural development, health care, HIV/AIDS, and consumption patterns, as these intersect with the sustainable development agenda.³

UNESCO's Role: Education for Sustainable Development

On December 20, 2002 the UN General Assembly adopted, by consensus, a resolution establishing a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. The resolution designates the ten-year period as 2005-2014, and declares UNESCO as the lead agency to promote the Decade. UNESCO will have a dual role to play: first as the lead agency in the promotion of the Decade, and second as a substantive implementer of ESD.

Improving the quality and coverage of education and reorienting its goals to recognise the importance of sustainable development must be one of UNESCO's and the world's highest priorities in the upcoming Decade. Education for Sustainable Development must also be attentive to developments and reforms in education, particularly the Dakar Framework for Action on Education for All (EFA), the UN Literacy Decade (UNLD), and Millennium Development Goals.

The challenge of applying Education for Sustainable Development requires partnerships among Governments, academic and scientific communities, teachers, NGOs, local communities and the media. The Decade offers an opportunity for UNESCO and its partners to reorient education toward the awareness that we share a common destiny and a commitment to a better future for both people and the planet.

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³ Address by the Director General, UNESCO, to the Permanent Delegations following the WSSD, 30/09/02.
