Education and the Search for a Sustainable Future

Since the start of human existence people have lived with each other (society), used and shared goods and services (economy), have been supported by natural resources and life support systems (environment) and have shared ways of life, beliefs, values and symbols (culture). With industrial and technological development in the last three centuries, lifestyles, communications, production systems and consumption patterns have changed rapidly. The challenge for humanity today is to transform its development path. This involves addressing interrelated issues such as poverty (economy), social inequality, peace and health risks (society), natural resource depletion, biodiversity loss and global climate change (environment) and culture.

Sustainable Development has gained credence in international policy making as a strategy to re-orient development thinking and practice towards a sustainable future, with benefits for present and future generations. It requires governments and people everywhere to maintain viable economies that benefit the whole society while ensuring adequate protection of the environment. The aim is a sustainable future for all.

Education has been identified as an important social strategy for the realisation of a sustainable future. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) recognises that it is impossible to achieve sustainable development without appropriate education, training and public awareness for all sectors of society. In December 2002, the United Nations General Assembly declared 2005-2014 a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD), signalling global commitment to ESD (UNGA Resolution 57/245).

ESD is fundamentally about values, with respect at the centre: respect for others, including those of present and future generations, for difference and diversity, for the environment, for the resources of the planet we inhabit. It 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. It emphasises aspects of learning that enhance the transition towards sustainability including citizenship education; education for a culture of peace; gender equality and respect for human rights; health education; population education; education for protecting and managing natural resources; and education for sustainable consumption. Thus, ESD has come to be seen as a multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral process of learning how to make decisions that consider the long-term future of the economy, ecology and equity of all communities. Building the capacity for such futures-oriented thinking is a key task of education.

How ESD contributes to a sustainable future

Through its focus on society, economy, environment and culture, ESD seeks to enable people to develop the knowledge, skills and action competence needed to create and sustain a viable and equitable future for humans and all forms of life on the planet.

◈ ESD re-orients the aims and purpose of education and training;
◈ ESD brings a new values focus to education, training and public awareness; and
◈ ESD improves the quality of education and learning.

To reach all sectors of society, ESD needs to be integrated into the entire education, training and public awareness system at national, regional and local levels.

ESD re-orients the purpose and aims of education

Understanding and addressing global sustainability issues that affect nations and communities lies at the heart of ESD. Every nation is affected by:

◈ **Environmental issues** such as pollution, water, waste, natural resources depletion etc.

◈ **Social issues** such as human rights, social justice, gender equity, peace and security etc.

◈ **Economic issues** such as employment, poverty reduction, income inequality, corporate responsibility etc.

These and other issues such as urbanisation, global climate change the relationship between wealth and poverty, and diseases such as HIV & AIDS are extremely complex. They involve all dimensions of sustainability and provide challenges for all disciplines and sectors of society.

These issues have substantial implications for education, and cannot simply be treated as 'add-on issues' to be fitted into an already crowded curriculum. There is no purpose in offering learners a Social Science lesson where sustainable development principles are promoted, if the lesson is contradicted by a Technology lesson that promotes unsustainable technologies that damage or pollute the environment.

There is also no purpose in teaching knowledge if learners are unable to use it to debate and resolve social, environmental and economic issues that face their societies. Similarly, there is no purpose in teaching young people to aspire to a lifestyle that the planet cannot support, that entrenches poverty-wealth gaps, and that produces life-threatening and climate changing waste and pollution.

ESD focuses on the underlying principles and values conveyed through education. It is concerned with the content and purpose of education, and of learning of all kinds.

Broad and well articulated educational strategies are needed to find solutions to these issues. National education systems everywhere need to re-orient the purpose and aims of education. The change in the purpose and aims of education will need to be *comprehensive, coherent and systemic*, and should permeate the entire lifelong learning system.

Changing the purpose and aims of education is possible

South Africa has a history of racial inequality and exploitation of resources for the benefit of few. After political change in 1994, the Ministry of Education introduced a National Curriculum Statement guided by a principle that emphasises the relations between human rights, social justice, inclusivity and a healthy environment. This principle has shaped the knowledge, skills and values in the curriculum. Today 12 million learners are learning about ecological sustainability, human rights and social justice issues in their Science, Social Science, Technology, Mathematics and other lessons. Teachers are introducing new inclusive teaching practices for learners of different races, genders, cultures and learning abilities. With this principle statement, the purpose of education was changed from fostering discrimination, exploitation and inequality, to an education system that aims to foster equity and sustainability principles and practice. Now the challenge is to support implementation of these new ideals in all schools and learning centres across the country.

Can education encourage people everywhere to learn that there is enough for everyone's need, but not for everyone's greed, and to ensure that there is 'enough for all, forever'?

Such education will be oriented towards sustainability.

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ESD brings values into focus in education and training

Sustainable development is primarily a matter of culture. It is concerned with values and with relationships with others and the natural world. ESD engages directly with the values that shape human development and people-environment relations.

ESD encourages learners everywhere to understand, deliberate and critique values influencing practices in society, and to develop new values for a more sustainable, equitable future. The Earth Charter provides a framework for deliberating new values to guide a sustainable future.

Earth Charter values can help re-orient education systems towards sustainability

The Earth Charter emphasises:

- *Respect and care for the community of life;*
- *Ecological integrity;*
- *Social and economic justice; and*
- *Democracy, non-violence and peace.*

In 2001 the Tartastan Parliament embraced the principles of the Earth Charter. Their education system is now geared towards responsible and active citizenship, environmental problem solving, promoting responsible natural resource management and a culture of peace and tolerance.

## ESD improves the quality of education and training

The main focus of ESD is on how education can contribute to sustainable development and a sustainable future. Without close attention to the acquisition of literacy and numeracy of sufficient quality, societies are unlikely to achieve sustainability in a modernising and globalising world. ESD provides a real-life context for the learning of literacy and numeracy skills. With its focus on culture, ESD also emphasises education-community links, use of local and indigenous knowledge in learning and connections with local cultures and languages in the learning process.

ESD enhances the quality of education and training by:

◈ Linking the social, cultural, ecological and economic context to concepts in the formal curriculum;

◈ Enhancing the relevance of education through its focus on issues that affect the country, its people, environment and future;

◈ Developing problem solving, critical and creative thinking skills needed to address major national priorities and problems; and

◈ Improving resource management and the well-being of learners through practical health, well-being and sustainability initiatives in learning institutions and communities.

ESD encourages investigations into real-life issues, linking concepts and contexts
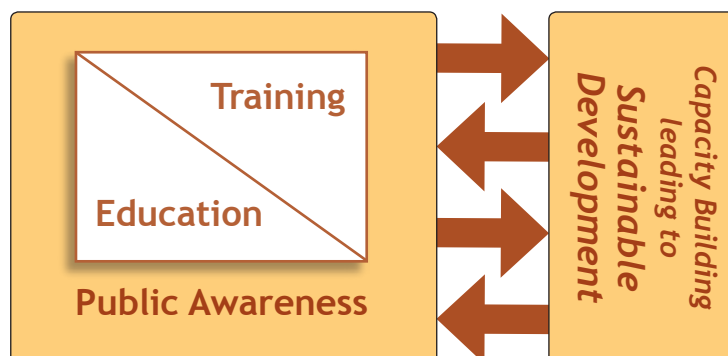
ESD needs to be integrated into a lifelong learning system

Training

Education

Public Awareness

Capacity Building leading to Sustainable Development

ESD is multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral. Learning for sustainability needs to take place in all sectors of society and all walks of life. ESD is a lifelong learning process and needs to be integrated into the entire education, training and public awareness system to build capacity for sustainable development.

Policy Dialogue Questions

Use these questions to review education and development policies

What is the main purpose of the education system? Does it support principles and practices of sustainability? Does it adequately prepare learners for the future?

What are the aims of the education system? Do they include:

- Learning to live together;
- Learning to know;
- Learning to do;
- Learning to be;
  and
- Learning to transform oneself and society?

What values inform the education, training and public awareness system? Are any of these values prominent?

- Respect and care for the community of life;
- Ecological integrity;
- Social and economic justice; and
- Democracy, non-violence and peace.

Which of these values are less prominent? Can they be included, and if so, how can this be done?

Can ESD practices be monitored in the education and training system to document their contribution to educational quality?

To what extent is ESD integrated into the entire education, training and public awareness system?

How can ESD become integral to the lifelong learning process?

The Delores report *'Learning: The Treasure Within'* proposes these aims for education in the 21st Century:

Learning to live together
Social cohesion, inter-cultural and international co-operation and peace

Learning to know
Respecting and searching for knowledge and wisdom

Learning to do
Engagement in productive work and recreation

Learning to be
Personal and family well-being

ESD suggests inclusion of:

Learning to transform oneself and society:
Active citizenship, futures thinking, responsible lifestyles, sharing of resources and adaptability

References and Resources
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