UNESCO

United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Education Sector Technical Notes

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

MESSAGE BY

Dear colleagues,

The Education Sector is called to implement a significant and broad mandate, covering many challenging issues in education in a diverse and fast-changing world. More than ever, we need to better focus and ensure greater cohesion in implementing this mandate. This document is part of a series of Technical Notes that have been developed by colleagues in the Education Sector in order to facilitate programme delivery in thematic areas related to the work of the Sector. The Technical Notes are meant to serve as a quick reference tool for UNESCO staff, providing a brief overview including basic knowledge, key priorities for UNESCO and future directions as well as practical information on each topic. They will be available both in print and electronic versions, and they will be updated regularly.

I hope that the Technical Notes will be useful in your daily work.

Qian Tang,
Assistant Director-General for Education

At a glance

In a world of 7 billion people, with limited natural resources, individuals and societies must learn to live together and act more sustainably.

◗ Education for Sustainable Development means integrating key sustainable development issues such as climate change, disaster risk reduction and biodiversity into teaching and learning.

◗ Education for Sustainable Development means applying participatory teaching and learning methods to empower learners to take action for sustainable development.

◗ UNESCO, as the lead agency for the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014), supports Member States in building the capacity of policy-makers and educators to equip learners with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values they need to address the social, environmental and economic challenges of the 21st century.

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Defining the issue

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) aims at providing every girl and boy, woman and man with the opportunity to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to shape a sustainable future.

ESD means integrating key sustainable development issues into teaching and learning; for example, climate change, disaster risk reduction, biodiversity, poverty reduction and sustainable consumption. It also requires participatory teaching and learning methods that motivate and empower learners to change their behaviour and take action for sustainable development. ESD consequently promotes competencies like critical thinking, imagining future scenarios and making decisions in a collaborative way.

Education for Sustainable Development requires far-reaching changes to the way education is often practiced today.

Context and trends

Poverty, climate change and dramatic social inequities are but a few of an unprecedented set of challenges the global community faces today. Sustainable development – development that meets the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs – cannot be achieved through technological solutions, political regulations or financial instruments alone. It requires a fundamental change in the way individuals and societies think and act and, consequently, a transition to sustainable lifestyles. Without education, this change cannot be brought about. Education is key for addressing social, environmental and economic issues at local and global levels. ESD helps to develop the capacities of individuals, communities and countries to deal with current challenges and future threats to their well-being. This also means reaching out to disadvantaged groups – including out-of-school children and young people, girls and women, and coastal and rural communities.

In December 2002, the United Nations General Assembly, through its Resolution 57/254, proclaimed the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD, 2005-2014) and designated UNESCO as the lead agency. UNESCO is coordinating global efforts to make education relevant for addressing present and future challenges and to help build a better and fairer world for the 21st century through education. It has developed an International Implementation Scheme for the DESD that was approved by the UNESCO Executive Board in September 2005.

The monitoring and evaluation reports on the DESD published by UNESCO in 2009 and 2012 showed that ESD is increasingly present in national and international education policies, that ESD pedagogical practices are steadily advancing, and that a large amount of high-quality work is being undertaken by practitioners on the ground. Many stakeholders, moreover, look to UNESCO for guidance and global agenda setting.

Impressive numbers of governments, civil society organizations, businesses, education institutions, and individual educators are putting ESD into practice. There are many success stories from around the world to highlight this: China has designated a large number of experimental schools for ESD; Sweden has made mandatory the teaching and learning of sustainable development at various levels of the education system; Japan has integrated ESD into national curriculum guidelines; the Canadian province of Manitoba is reorienting its schools to address sustainable development; Chile is promoting ESD through the National System of Certified Schools; with more than 1,000 schools certified. Twenty-two UN agencies work together in the UN Interagency Committee for the DESD, convened by UNESCO. The UNESCO World Conference on ESD in 2009 (Bonn, Germany) brought together 900 participants from around 150 countries, including close to 50 ministers and vice-ministers who, in the Bonn Declaration, emphasized ESD as a crucial element of quality education.

Support for ESD is clearly increasing. For example, 68 Member States explicitly supported ESD in their statements at the 36th session of the General Conference of UNESCO in 2011. The recent report of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Global Sustainability emphasizes the importance of ESD. The most recent evidence of ESD gaining momentum is the outcome document of the Rio+20 Conference, *The Future We Want*, which contains significant passages on ESD.

At the same time, implementation of the DESD has been uneven across regions and greater efforts are needed to scale up good individual projects and integrate sustainable development more fully across the education sector. Moreover, as the end of the DESD approaches in 2014 and the Millennium Development Goals and Education for All objectives reach their target date in 2015, it is increasingly important that ESD be connected more strategically to the overall global development and education agendas. Further continued commitment to ESD beyond the end of the DESD in 2014 is necessary to foster sustainable development through education. The outcome document of the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in 2012 agreed to 'promote Education for Sustainable Development and to integrate sustainable development more actively into education beyond the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development'.

UNESCO key priorities and future directions

UNESCO's priorities in ESD

Based on its Strategy for the Second Half of the UN Decade of ESD and the 2009 Bonn Declaration, UNESCO's support to Member States and stakeholders for addressing sustainable development challenges through education is currently centred on the following areas:

◗ climate change education;

◗ disaster risk reduction and education;

◗ biodiversity education; and

◗ leading and reporting on the DESD.

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Regarding modalities of intervention, UNESCO focuses on:

▶ strategic advocacy to integrate ESD into the global education and sustainable development agendas. To this end, strengthening the evidence base regarding ESD's contribution to quality education and to achieving sustainable development objectives is an important concern; and

▶ policy advice and technical assistance to Member States for integrating ESD into education policies, plans and curricula. This includes collecting and disseminating good practice in ESD.

Recent UNESCO activities on ESD include running pilot country programmes to assist education policy-makers and teacher educators to take action on climate change in the priority region of Africa and Small Island Developing States. UNESCO has developed an online database to provide easy access to hundreds of resources on climate change education. Moreover, the World Conference on ESD, which will be held in Japan in 2014 to mark the end of the DESD, is being prepared together with the Government of Japan.

Future directions

During the DESD, many positive steps have been taken and ESD is gaining momentum. However, much remains to be accomplished. ESD is far from being integrated into all areas of education and learning.

UNESCO will continue to support Member States in their efforts to integrate ESD into education plans and curricula. It will continue to promote ESD with decision-makers, teachers and students, and identify and communicate good ESD practice in all areas of education. When implementing programmes, particular attention will be paid to producing content in a gender-sensitive way.

UNESCO is currently developing the follow-up framework to the DESD. A Global Action Programme on ESD is expected to be launched at the World Conference on ESD in 2014 (10-12 November, Aichi-Nagoya, Japan). The Programme will focus on scaling up and generating ESD action in relevant areas of education and sustainable development. The Global Action Programme is also intended as a concrete contribution to the post-2015 agenda.

Target groups and key partners

While ESD is a multi-stakeholder endeavour, as lead agency of the UN Decade of ESD, UNESCO focuses its work on supporting policy-makers and teacher educators in Member States in their efforts to integrate ESD at all levels and into all areas of education.

UNESCO is working with 22 UN agencies in the UN Interagency Committee for the DESD, which is convened by UNESCO. Key partners within this Committee are UNEP, UNICEF and UNU.

Member States that have particularly supported UNESCO's ESD work through extra-budgetary funds include Japan, Sweden, Germany and Denmark, among others.

UNESCO has set up groups of experts who advise the Organization on the preparation of the UNESCO World Conference on ESD in 2014, on the monitoring and evaluation of the DESD, and on DESD implementation generally. Through these groups and other outreach mechanisms, UNESCO is in touch with a large number and wide spectrum of stakeholders.

Key resources

UNESCO. 2012. *Education for Sustainable Development: Sourcebook.* Paris, UNESCO.
http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002163/216383e.pdf

UNESCO. 2012. *Shaping the Education of Tomorrow: 2012 Report on the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development*, [Abridged]. Paris, UNESCO.
http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002166/216606e.pdf

UNESCO (Ed.). 2011. *Education for Sustainable Development: An Expert Review of Processes and Learning.* Paris, UNESCO.
http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001914/191442e.pdf

UNESCO. 2010. *Education for Sustainable Development Lens: A Policy and Practice Review Tool.* Paris, UNESCO.
http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001908/190898e.pdf

UNESCO (Ed.). 2010. *Tomorrow Today. Leiceste*r (UK), Tudor Rose.
http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001898/189880e.pdf

Wals, A.E. J. and Kieft, G. 2010. *Education for Sustainable Development: Research Overview.* Sida Review 2010: 13. Stockholm, Sida.
http://edepot.wur.nl/161396

For further academic articles, see the various issues of the *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development*:
http://jsd.sagepub.com/

Website: www.unesco.org/education/desd

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Advocacy messages

▸ **ESD is education for the future**: It helps to build a better, fairer world for the 21st century.

▸ **ESD makes education relevant**: It equips learners with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values they need to address social, environmental and economic challenges of the 21st century.

▸ **ESD transforms education**: It uses innovative, learner-centred approaches to teaching and learning. It empowers learners and makes them agents in the educational process, from early childhood to old age. It promotes learning beyond the boundaries of educational institutions.

▸ **ESD promotes equity and respect**: It helps learners to understand the different situations, outlook and needs of people, for example of those who live in other parts of the world, or belong to another generation.

▸ **ESD helps address climate change**: In the next decade, 175 million children are likely to be affected by disasters related to climate change. Education for Sustainable Development prepares learners, in particular rural populations, coastal communities, girls and women, to adapt to the impact of climate change and empowers them to address its causes.

▸ **ESD builds green societies**: It equips students with skills for green jobs that help preserve or restore the quality of the environment, and improve human well-being and social equity. It motivates learners to choose sustainable lifestyles.

TECHNICAL NOTES