

Introduction

1. The Sustainable Development Goals – an ambitious and universal agenda to transform our world

On 25 September 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015). This new global framework to redirect humanity towards a sustainable path was developed following the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in June 2012, in a three-year process involving UN Member States, national surveys engaging millions of people and thousands of actors from all over the world.

At the core of the 2030 Agenda are 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The universal, transformational and inclusive SDGs describe major development challenges for humanity. The aim of the 17 SDGs (see box 1.1) is to secure a sustainable, peaceful, prosperous and equitable life on earth for everyone now and in the future. The goals cover global challenges that are crucial for the survival of humanity. They set environmental limits and set critical thresholds for the use of natural resources. The goals recognize that ending poverty must go hand-in-hand with strategies that build economic development. They address a range of social needs including education, health, social protection and job opportunities while tackling climate change and environmental protection. The SDGs address key systemic barriers to sustainable development such as inequality, unsustainable consumption patterns, weak institutional capacity and environmental degradation.

For the goals to be reached, everyone needs to do their part: governments, the private sector, civil society and every human being across the world. Governments are expected to take ownership and establish national frameworks, policies and measures for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

A key feature of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is its universality and indivisibility. It addresses all countries – from the Global South and the Global North – as target countries. All countries subscribing to the 2030 Agenda are to align their own development efforts with the aim of promoting prosperity while protecting the planet in order to achieve sustainable development. Thus, with respect to the SDGs, all countries can be considered as developing and all countries need to take urgent action.

Box 1. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

1. No Poverty – End poverty in all its forms everywhere
2. Zero Hunger – End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
3. Good Health and Well-Being – Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
4. Quality Education – Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
5. Gender Equality – Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
6. Clean Water and Sanitation – Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
7. Affordable and Clean Energy – Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and clean energy for all
8. Decent Work and Economic Growth – Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
9. Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure – Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
10. Reduced Inequalities – Reduce inequality within and among countries
11. Sustainable Cities and Communities – Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
12. Responsible Consumption and Production – Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
13. Climate Action – Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
14. Life below Water – Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
15. Life on Land – Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
16. Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions – Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
17. Partnerships for the Goals – Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

Source: <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals>

2 Education for Sustainable Development – a key instrument to achieve the SDGs

“A fundamental change is needed in the way we think about education’s role in global development, because it has a catalytic impact on the well-being of individuals and the future of our planet. ... Now, more than ever, education has a responsibility to be in gear with 21st century challenges and aspirations, and foster the right types of values and skills that will lead to sustainable and inclusive growth, and peaceful living together.”

Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO

“Education can, and must, contribute to a new vision of sustainable global development.”

(UNESCO, 2015)

Embarking on the path of sustainable development will require a profound transformation of how we think and act. To create a more sustainable world and to engage with sustainability-related issues as described in the SDGs, individuals must become sustainability change-makers. They require the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that empower them to contribute to sustainable development. Education, therefore, is crucial for the achievement of sustainable development. However, not all kinds of education support sustainable development. Education that promotes economic growth alone may well also lead to an increase in unsustainable consumption patterns. The now well-established approach of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) empowers learners to take informed decisions and responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society for present and future generations.

ESD aims at developing competencies that empower individuals to reflect on their own actions, taking into account their current and future social, cultural, economic and environmental impacts, from a local and a global perspective. Individuals should also be empowered to act in complex situations in a sustainable manner, which may require them to strike out in new directions; and to participate in socio-political processes, moving their societies towards sustainable development.

ESD has to be understood as an integral part of quality education, inherent in the concept of lifelong learning: All educational institutions – from preschool to tertiary

education and in non-formal and informal education – can and should consider it their responsibility to deal intensively with matters of sustainable development and to foster the development of sustainability competencies. ESD provides an education that matters and is truly relevant to every learner in the light of today’s challenges.

ESD is holistic and transformational education that addresses learning content and outcomes, pedagogy and the learning environment. Thus, ESD does not only integrate contents such as climate change, poverty and sustainable consumption into the curriculum; it also creates interactive, learner-centred teaching and learning settings. What ESD requires is a shift from teaching to learning. It asks for an action-oriented, transformative pedagogy, which supports self-directed learning, participation and collaboration, problem-orientation, inter- and transdisciplinarity and the linking of formal and informal learning. Only such pedagogical approaches make possible the development of the key competencies needed for promoting sustainable development.

International recognition of ESD as a key enabler for sustainable development has been growing steadily. ESD was acknowledged as such at the three seminal global sustainable development summits: the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro; the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, South Africa; and the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD), also in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. ESD is also recognized in other key global agreements, such as the Paris Agreement (Article 12).

The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014) (DESD) aimed at integrating the principles and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning. It also aimed to encourage changes in knowledge, values and attitudes with the vision of enabling a more sustainable and just society for all. The Global Action Programme (GAP) on ESD, which was endorsed by UNESCO’s 37th General Conference (November 2013), acknowledged by UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/69/211 and launched on 12 November 2014 at the UNESCO World Conference on ESD in Aichi-Nagoya, Japan, strives to scale up ESD, building on the DESD.

Box 2. Target 4.7 of the SDGs

By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

Source: United Nations, 2015

ESD is explicitly recognized in the SDGs as part of Target 4.7 of the SDG on education, together with Global Citizenship Education (GCED), which UNESCO promotes as a complementary approach¹. At the same time, it is important to emphasize ESD's crucial importance for all the other 16 SDGs. With its overall aim to develop cross-cutting sustainability competencies in learners, ESD is an essential contribution to all efforts to achieve the SDGs, enabling individuals to contribute to sustainable development by promoting societal, economic and political change as well as by transforming their own behaviour. ESD can produce specific cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioural learning outcomes that enable individuals to deal with the particular challenges of each SDG, thus facilitating its achievement. In short, ESD enables all individuals to contribute to achieving the SDGs by equipping them with the knowledge and competencies they need, not only to understand what the SDGs are about, but to engage as informed citizens in bringing about the necessary transformation.

3. Who is this guidance for and how can it be used?

The publication intends to guide readers on how to use education, and in particular ESD, in achieving the SDGs. It identifies learning objectives, suggests topics and learning activities for each SDG, and describes implementation on different levels from course design to national strategies. The document aims to support policy-makers, curriculum developers and educators in designing strategies, curricula and courses to promote learning for the SDGs. The document is not prescriptive in any way, but provides guidance and offers suggestions for learning topics and objectives that educators can select and adapt to fit concrete learning contexts.

Educators can use this text as a resource when developing training, textbooks, massive open online course (MOOCs)

1. Global Citizenship Education: Topics and learning objectives UNESCO, 2015 <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002329/232993e.pdf>

and exhibitions. It can help teachers or curriculum designers in formal educational institutions, trainers in professional capacity-building programmes, or NGO staff designing non-formal educational offers. Policy-makers may find it helpful to consider core ideas about learning objectives for the SDGs when developing education policies or strategies. For some, this guidance may provide an introduction to the SDGs, ESD, and competency oriented teaching and learning approaches in ESD. For others, the guide and recommended additional resources may deepen their understanding of these concepts. It can also be used to build on existing work in ESD and related areas such as global citizenship education, human rights education, environmental education and others.

Because the target group is diverse and possible uses of this guidance are manifold, the learning objectives, topics and activities for each SDG are outlined on a general level. As general guidance, they are not tailored for any specific learner age groups, learning settings or national/socio-cultural context. They are designed to be relevant for all learners of all ages worldwide and to find their application in all sorts of learning settings, while in their concrete implementation they will, naturally, have to be adapted to the national or local context. For each learning objective, educators and curriculum developers must define the level to be achieved by their learners (e.g. from "basic" in primary education to "expertise" in tertiary education).

The learning objectives, topics and activities included in this guide should be viewed as general guidance; they are not exhaustive or definitive. While the learning objectives cover the necessary learning outcomes (including knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviour) to support the achievement of the SDGs and are intended to be generally applicable around the world, they convey core ideas only. They must therefore be complemented by appropriate locally-relevant topics, and updated regarding the new issues that constantly emerge in our rapidly changing world. Some of the content may already be covered in existing education programmes. In this case, this text can be used as a complementary resource, or as a reference when reviewing or seeking to strengthen existing programmes.

The core part of the document summarizes the key competencies for learners to develop in ESD and outlines indicative learning objectives, topics and pedagogical approaches for each of the 17 SDGs. Subsequently, a shorter section provides guidance on implementation at different educational levels and in various settings.