

# Education as a Tool for Sustainable Development

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## Introduction

*“Let us resolve that we will not leave our children in a world where the oceans rise and famines spread and terrible storms devastate our lands”, once said Barack Obama, the President of America*

The answer to the above is just one. It is sustainable development through education. The concept of sustainable development emerged as a growing concern about human society's impact on the natural environment. The term 'sustainable development' was popularized by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in its 1987 report entitled *Our Common Future*, also known as the Brundtland Report, named after the Chair of the Commission and former Prime Minister of Norway, Gro Harlem Brundtland. The commission defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” There are two key concepts-‘The concept of needs’ which is: The essential needs of all are to be met but the world's poor deserve priority’ and –‘the concept of limitations’.

Sustainable development requires simultaneous and balanced progress in three dimensions that are totally interdependent: Social, Economic, Ecological, because the well-being of these three areas is intertwined, not separate. For example, a healthy, prosperous society relies on a healthy environment to provide food and resources, clean drinking water, and clean air for its citizens. If we consider the three components to be overlapping circles of the same size, the area of overlap in the centre is human well-being. As the environment, society, and economy become more aligned, the area of overlap increases, and so does human well-being.

Social, economic and environmental developmental challenges demand that people must assume responsibility and take actions for creating a sustainable future. This demand for sustainable future guided the emergence of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) that aims to

enable people of all ages and from all walks of life to pursue and benefit from a sustainable future. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) allows every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to shape a sustainable future. ESD is about engaging people in sustainable development issues through education and learning, developing their capacities to give meaning to sustainable development and to contribute to its development and utilizing the diversity represented by all people-including those who have been or feel marginalized- in generating innovative solutions to sustainable development problems and crisis.

In fact, the purpose of ESD is to reorient education in order to contribute to a sustainable future for the common good of present and future generations. The Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD-2002-14) aimed to integrate the principles, values and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning. The idea being, that such an input will encourage changes in behavior that will create a more sustainable future in terms of environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society for present and future generations.

### **Direct Effects of Education on sustainability Plans**

In the following three areas Education affects directly:

**(i) Implementation:** An educated citizen is vital to implementing informed and sustainable development. In fact, a national sustainability plan can be enhanced or limited by the level of education attained by the nation's citizens. Nations with high illiteracy rates and unskilled workforces have fewer development options. For the most part, these nations are forced to buy energy and manufactured goods on the international market with hard currency. To acquire hard currency, these countries need international trade; usually this leads to exploitation of natural resources or conversion of lands from self-sufficient family based farming to cash-crop agriculture. An educated workforce is the key to moving beyond an extractive and agricultural economy.

**(ii) Decision Making:** Good community-based decisions-which will affect social, economic, and environmental well-being, usually depend on educated citizens. Development options, especially “green” development options, expand as education increases. For example, a community with an abundance of skilled labour and technically trained people, can persuade a corporation to locate a new information-technology and software-development facility nearby. Citizens can also act to protect their communities by analysing reports and data that address community issues and helping shape a community response. For example, citizens who were concerned about water

pollution reported in a nearby watershed started monitoring the water quality of local streams. Based on their data and information found on the World Wide Web, they fought against the development of a new golf-course, which would have used large amounts of fertilizer and herbicide in maintenance of the grounds.

**(iii) Quality of life:** Education is also central to improving quality of life. Education raises the economic status of families; it improves life conditions, lowers infant mortality, and improves the educational attainment of the next generation, thereby raising the next generation's chances for economic and social well-being. Improved education holds both individual and national implications

### **How Can Educational System Contribute to Sustainable Development in India?**

Improving Basic Education is the first requirement. Generally, research shows that basic education is a key to a nation's ability to develop and achieve sustainability targets. Education can improve agricultural productivity, enhance the status of women, reduce population growth rates, enhance environmental protection, and generally raise the standard of living. But the relationship is not linear. For example, four to six years of education is the minimum threshold for increasing agricultural productivity. Literacy and numeracy allow farmers to adapt to new agricultural methods, cope with risk, and respond to market signals. Literacy also helps farmers mix and apply chemicals (e.g., fertilizers and pesticides) according to manufacturers' directions, thereby reducing the risks to the environment and human health. Basic education also helps farmers gain title to their land and apply for credit at banks and other lending institutions.

While it is evident that it is difficult to teach environmental literacy, economics literacy, or civics without basic literacy, it is also evident that simply increasing basic literacy, as it is currently taught in most countries, will not support a sustainable society. Education programmes must be oriented to support ESD. Institutional reform, curriculum reform and development of locale specific resource material need incorporating ESD priorities. Education for sustainable development requires, including key sustainable development issues, teaching and learning that may bring climate change, disaster risk reduction, poverty reduction, bio diversity 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 like conservation of energy, water, tree plantation, use of natural energy etc.

A paradigm shift for education is required in moving towards ESD. Children have to become ‘seeker’ oriented rather than what they learn being decided by the society. Teaching therefore needs to be focused on making the student a better learner. ESD is not about only learning individuals, but learning institutions and societies. Conventional education dictates what and how learners should learn. In an increasingly complex world, people will decide what they need to learn and how best, and when, they need to learn. ESD needs to empower and enable learners to learn when, where, what and how they choose, as opposed to one directional teacher to passive learner. As Mahatma Gandhi said, “Education for life, education through life, education throughout life”. So opportunities for education must exist everywhere and it is continuing process of learning. The school and textbook no longer have the monopoly on the child’s mind. Internet access and various other information sources are available to the child. Teachers are challenged to keep up with the continuously increasing information levels in children. Education today needs to give people the global perspectives and connections, at the same time enable them to interpret generic learning in their local context, and not only to act locally, but see the wider impact of their actions. ESD needs not only to be sensitive, but also to support and enhance the celebration of diversity of cultures, languages, societies and diversity in the natural world. Sensitivity to gender, equity and other issues needs to be an integral part of ESD, and it needs to be inclusive of, as against discriminatory on gender, caste and other factors.

### **Conclusion**

Though Education is an essential tool for sustainable development, it is not a magic bullet in approaching sustainability. There is need of integrating Education for sustainable development into current educational practices by enhancing curriculum development and supporting knowledge sharing among all sections of the society. Promoting sustainable development must be an important aspect of the educational agenda at all levels. If the goals of sustainable development are to be realized, the attitudes of all the stakeholders of education at all levels with regard to our current life styles and impact they have on the environment, need to change.

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