

Education for Sustainable Development - a driving force behind the SDGs



The *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, including the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, has been adopted by all United Nations members in 2015. The overarching goal of this initiative is to provide a robust framework increasing the effectiveness of the common strivings towards achieving “peace and prosperity for people and the planet” (UN, 2025). The foundational factor necessary for taking any action for that goal, regardless of the actor, is the awareness of the problem and the knowledge of the steps that can be undertaken to address it. This condition determines the significance of the awareness-raising and educational activities undertaken globally, with the sole purpose of communicating the issue and its solutions to various actors with the potential to contribute to the cause.

In order to achieve the success requirements of the Sustainable Development Goals, it is necessary that not only governments, institutions, and industries undertake actions aimed at improving the current situation, but also that possible large group of citizens is aware of the existing problems, is in the correct mindset, and, importantly, possesses the necessary knowledge and skills to contribute in a meaningful way. The dissemination of values and meeting prerequisites described above by a possibly large group of people are the main strivings and goals of the *Education for Sustainable Development* approach. The ESD has been recognized as both a component of the Target 4.7, and, at the same time, the tool enabling its achievement as well as the achievement of the other SDGs. The Second Committee of the UN General Assembly in its 7th Session described the ESD as “an integral

element of the SDG on quality education and a key enabler of all other sustainable development goals”, which additionally strengthens its significance. To provide a shorter version for easier understanding, UNESCO defines ESD as the didactic approach that *“empowers learners to take informed decisions and responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society for present and future generations (UNESCO, 2018)”*.

Historically, the first document officially recognizing the important role of education in global strivings towards sustainable development was the Agenda 21. It was the action plan developed by the United Nations and adopted by 178 national governments at the "Earth Summit" in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 (ICLEI, 2012). Twenty-five years later, UNESCO has provided clear and structured guidelines supporting the implementation of the ESD approach in various scenarios and environments.

The learning objectives of the Education for Sustainable Development

As Wals and Lenglet argue, the complexity and interconnectedness of the modern world create the specific, demanding requirements for its inhabitants willing to drive the change and shape the future. Due to various novel and complex challenges that can't be addressed by simply following the plan, these individuals are required to develop a set of competencies enabling them to understand, effectively navigate, and exert an impact on their reality. These abilities go beyond just adapting to the current situation, but rather recognizing the underlying frameworks and systems that resulted in the creation of that situation and actively searching for methods enabling a lasting change. Through equipping individuals with such a capacity, ESD aims to provide them with tools to address the root of the problem, rather than just to cope with its symptoms. The definition of such persons proposed by Wals and Lenglet is “sustainability citizens”. The competencies listed below have been recognized by UNESCO as the crucial cross-cutting abilities necessary to be possessed by sustainability citizens (UNESCO, 2017; Wals & Lenglet, 2016).

Self-awareness competency - the ability to understand the individual's role in the global system and local community, and to conduct such assessments continually. It also includes the skill of evaluation and dealing with one's emotions,

Systems thinking competency - the skill related to recognition and understanding the operating principle of complex, correlated systems, and how they are implemented in various environments and domains. This ability also relies on handling some degree of uncertainty,

Anticipatory competency - the ability to anticipate and understand various futures, outcomes, or consequences and evaluate whether they are positive or negative. It includes the understanding of their probability and being able to implement actions to prevent the negative futures. It also enables the individual to create their own visions of the future,

Critical thinking competency - the ability to analyse and reflect on the currently implemented practices, norms, and commonly accepted opinions, and to evaluate them based on one's own beliefs and world-view, as well as assess one's own actions,

Strategic competency - the ability to cooperate, focused on the development of novel plans and frameworks aimed at the improvement of the society's sustainability on both local and global levels,

Collaboration competency - the skill of interacting with others focused on various values: learning; recognizing and respecting others' needs, actions, and beliefs; being able to relate; understanding and expressing sensitivity; handling problems in a group; fostering the collaborative approach and solving problems in a participatory manner,

Normative competency - the skill of understanding norms, values, and beliefs that drive one's actions, and to negotiate sustainability values, targets, and goals, especially in situations of uncertainty, conflicts of interests, and incomplete data,

Integrated problem-solving competency - the overarching ability to implement various problem-solving approaches to challenging, complex situations in order to develop inclusive, equitable solutions fostering sustainability through the inclusion of the skills listed above.

Besides these cross-cutting abilities, the objectives provided by UNESCO encompass specific skills useful for purposes related to improving the indicators of each SDG separately (UNESCO, 2017).

The road ahead

In recent years, the main framework governing the implementation of the ESD approach on global and national levels has been provided by UNESCO - *Education for Sustainable Development: A Roadmap*. The roadmap identifies key areas and challenges that should be focused on and structures them into several priority action areas:

- **Advancing policy** - education policy-makers should focus their efforts on integrating ESD and its principles in various areas of educational policies, especially in terms of frameworks directly connected to the achievement of SDGs,
- **Transforming learning environments** - it is necessary to enhance the alignment of the learning systems with the ESD approach, both through the adjustments of learning content and the principles, values, and operation of educational facilities themselves. Moreover, creating an environment enabling the integration of ESD within the entire facility and engaging the local community are important factors as well,
- **Building capacities of educators** - the role of the teachers in ESD implementation is vital, and they should undergo training on expanding their capacity in that area, they should have the ability to participate in peer-to-peer learning opportunities, and should become the facilitators of the good change,
- **Empowering and mobilizing youth** - youth is the crucial part of the puzzle, as their generation will be the one to face the consequences of unsustainable development. It is important for young people to become advocates of integrating ESD into their educational environments, especially through social networks.
- **Accelerating local level actions** - participation of the local actors is necessary to enhance the effectiveness of the ESD-related efforts. Local efforts should be both coordinated, and become an ESD “laboratory”, so the community itself can become a driver of change (UNESCO, 2020).

Education is a powerful tool shaping our present day as well as the future. It is a critical requirement of the current times to utilize this tool in a correct way - to develop the awareness and understanding of systemic complexities taking place around us, and to equip everyone with the knowledge and skills necessary for us to become the force driving the good change.

It is only through cooperation and common effort that we can achieve the objectives of SDGs, and the implementation of the ESD approach around the globe, is the first, foundational step increasing the effectiveness of all the related SDG actions. The step that we all should take.

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