

Engaging Youth in Education for Sustainable Development: Strategies and Interventions

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Abstract

Although youth are often thought of as targets for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) programmes, they are also active partners in creating a more sustainable world and effective ESD programmes. Today, more than ever, young women and men are change-makers, building new realities for themselves and their communities. All over the world, youth are driving social change and innovation, claiming respect for their fundamental human rights and freedoms, and seeking new opportunities to learn and work together for a better future. The education sector is generally seen as the most appropriate forum for involving children and youth in sustainable development, and initiatives to this end have been adopted in many countries. The present paper puts forth such initiatives, interventions and strategies that can be undertaken to engage youth in education for sustainable development at the global as well as the local level.

Keywords: Sustainability Education, Youth, ESD Interventions, ESD Strategies, ESD

INTRODUCTION

Young people are often the subjects of special concern in major sustainability initiatives and declarations, be it the principles of Agenda 21, World Development Report by the World Bank (2006/7), or most recently, the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). World Commission on Environment and Development (1987), popularly known as the Brundtland Report, entitled *Our Common Future*, gave one of the original description of sustainable development, wherein the focus clearly remains on the youth, as “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Young people between 15 and 24 make up nearly 20 percent of the world’s population

and are eager to take part in decisions and actions for sustainable development; the future of the world is, after all, their future. Although youth are often thought of as targets for education for sustainable development (ESD) programmes, they are also active partners in creating a more sustainable world and effective ESD programmes. Keeping this in mind, the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) (2005-2014) thus offered opportunities to: (i) enhance the active participation of young people in community actions leading to sustainable development; (ii) promote among young people a healthy lifestyle, social tolerance and non-violence; (iii) promote gender-sensitive socialization and education and empower young people, particularly girls, to participate in society and national development.

National Commission on Population (2006) anticipated that the youth population in the age- group 15-24 years is expected to increase from 195 million in 2001 to 240 million in 2011 and then continue to decrease to 224 million in 2026. Its proportion to total population is expected to fall from 19 percent in 2001 to 16 percent in 2026. The combined proportion of 0-14 year and 15-24 year age-groups is expected to fall from 54 percent in 2001 to 39 percent in 2026. The average Indian will be expected to be of 31 years old in 2026 as compared to 23 years old in 2001. In its latest report, the United Nations Population Fund (2014) has estimated that the global population of young people between the ages of 10 and 24 has hit 1.8 billion, a historic high. The challenges are most acute for less developed countries, where nearly 9 out of 10 of the world’s young people reside. India alone has a youth population of 356 million.

Youth participation in civil society and political life is increasingly being recognized as an important development objective towards global citizenship. The opportunities for

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participation that young people experience in their communities may influence their development and the kind of transition they make to adulthood. For example, evidence (largely from developed countries) indicates that youth who participate in community activities or are connected to their communities are less likely than others to engage in risk-taking behaviours. Behaviours and attitudes relating to community participation adopted by individuals in their youth predict their lifelong civic affiliations and perspectives (International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and Population Council, 2010). Even though young people have been an asset to achieving sustainable development in their individual countries; for a long time, governments, policy makers, political and business leaders, and international organizations have been lacking in addressing issues that affect the youth with urgency. Young people with specific focus on young women and girls have to be at the center of the sustainable development agenda. We have to make sure that we address the consistent lack of access to quality education, unemployment, lack of sexual reproductive health resources, and lack of strategic engagement in politics and governance (Onano, 2015).

STRATEGIES AND INTERVENTIONS FOR ENGAGING YOUTH IN ESD:

UNESCO and Operational Strategy on Youth (2014-2021)

Today, more than ever, young women and men are change-makers, building new realities for themselves and their communities. All over the world, youth are driving social change and innovation, claiming respect for their fundamental human rights and freedoms, and seeking new opportunities to learn and work together for a better future. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognizes this reality, and therefore prioritizes its work with and for youth across all its programmes. The organization is guided in this by an Operational Strategy on Youth (2014-2021), which is the result of a long process of review and consultation, engaging both young people and Member States. This serves both to consolidate and innovate UNESCO's action for youth. The strategy covers a period of eight years, from 2014 to 2021, and provides the framework for constructive partnerships to be developed with and between youth organizations and youth-related stakeholders. It is built on the premise that

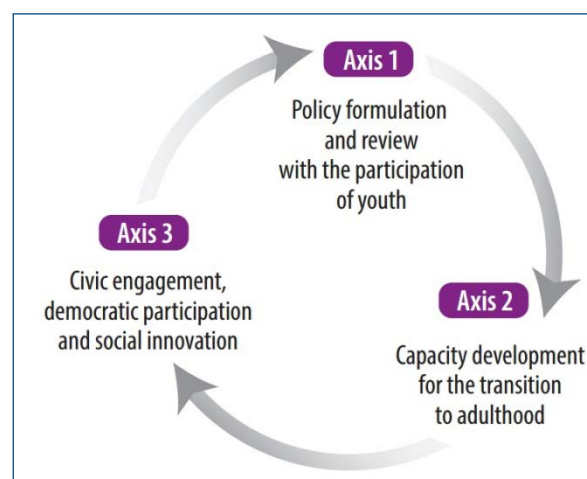
youth are key partners and actors for development and peace. The strategy puts forward three multidisciplinary and complementary axes of work which incorporate the full range of UNESCO's expertise in education, culture, natural, social and human sciences, and communication and information (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2014a):

Axis 1. Policy formulation and review with the participation of youth.

Axis 2. Capacity development for the transition to adulthood.

Axis 3. Civic engagement and democratic participation and social innovation.

Figure 1: UNESCO's Axes of Operational Strategy on Youth 2014-2021 (Source: UNESCO, 2014a).



Empowering and Mobilizing Youth: Global Action Programme (GAP) on ESD

In November 2014, UNESCO World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development in Nagoya, Japan marked the end of the UN Decade of ESD (2005-2014) and saw the launch of the Global Action Programme (GAP) on ESD where emphasis was laid on recognizing youth as an essential agent of change. Youth was acknowledged as the stakeholder of the future and their key role and capacity as change agents towards a better world. It was suggested that all stakeholders should ensure to (UNESCO, 2014b);

- (a) Integrate the perspective of youth and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and ensure children's and youth's role and capacity as change

- agents in all action areas of GAP, informed by relevant knowledge and research in respective areas;
- (b) Create opportunities for and remove barriers to co-created, learner-led educational processes, built on questions, concerns and visions of the younger generation.
 - (c) Acknowledge and utilize the innovative capacity and momentum of youth movements in the renewal and transformation of institutions and societies.
 - (d) Allocate time, resources and create structures for intergenerational and cross sectorial dialogue, collaboration and learning towards sustainable futures.
 - (e) Empower, inspire and create structures to enable young people to question norms, understand the value of diversity and develop behavior that is a contributing force and resource in creating more resilient, inclusive, collaborative societies, communities and organizations.
 - (f) Implement co-created or youth-led ESD-related projects (involving students, youth clubs, youth associations and youth sections of political parties) that stimulate green and social entrepreneurship, social innovation, action competence, value-based leadership, participation in decision making, engagement in public debates and other important areas identified by youths.

Besides these major strategies by UNESCO to engage youth in sustainable development practices, subsequent recommendations have been laid down in the Indian as well as the global context; also highlighting the existing status of the respective initiatives being undertaken by the Government of India:

Access to Education

With the evolving concept of sustainable development, role of education as the key to sow the seeds of sustainability among youth became apparent with UNESCO (1992) first recognizing and describing its significance in Agenda 21, Chapter 36 - Promoting Education, Public Awareness and Training. In the light of the global challenges facing us, lifelong learning has emerged as one of the keys to improving the quality of life in the 21st century. It is no longer sufficient to have a sound initial education: one must continue to acquire new knowledge and skills to benefit from the new opportunities that advances in science

and technology bring, and to cope with the difficulties of life in world of change (Power and Maclean, 2013). It is imperative to incorporate education as an indispensable constituent of the sustainable development framework, as education supports so many other sustainable development goals, including gender equality, social inclusion and environmental sustainability (Rose, 2013).

In this regard, India's contribution at the global level is noteworthy. Since 2000, when countries committed themselves to the global education goals, India has reduced its out of school children by over 90% and Universal Primary Education has been achieved. This year India is predicted to be the only country in South and West Asia to have an equal ratio of girls to boys in both primary and secondary education. "India has successfully moved towards reaching the EFA goals, especially in ensuring near Universal Elementary Education and enrolment of girls. India's efforts have been backed by the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 and the national Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan programme. To ensure continued participation of girls in education, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (Save the Girl, Educate the Girl) initiative has recently been launched in India" (Smriti Zubin Irani as cited in UNESCO, 2015).

Lifelong Learning

On average, only about 5-10% of a person's life-long learning process takes place in the formal learning environment. For life-long learning, informal and non-formal learning and interactions are much more important. Learning for sustainable development could therefore be described as a search for an effective context that embeds learning in the quest to realize a sustainable balance between the capacity of "System Earth's" economic development and the individual well being of people in their own environment (Dam-Mieras, 2005). Many education and development policies are based on the assumption that literacy and primary education play a key role in poverty reduction, while higher education is crucial for economic development in the global knowledge society. While both are true, the evidence is also mounting that all levels of education and types of training (formal and non-formal) can contribute to both, that is, learning throughout life is the "master key" to sustainable development and poverty alleviation. For example, recent analyses of Indian and cross-national

data indicate that higher education not only contributes to economic development in India, but it also makes a significant contribution to the reduction in absolute as well as relative poverty (Tilak, 2007).

The Education for All agenda set an international target of achieving a 50 percent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015. India set a national target of reaching 80.5 percent adult literacy rate by 2015. Despite such national and international targets and continuous efforts towards the same, there are still an alarming number of adult illiterates (Iftekhar and Jihye, 2015). The global adult illiteracy rate fell from 24 percent in 1990 to 18 percent in 2000 and further to 16% in 2011. However, the number of illiterate adults remains stubbornly high at 774 million, a fall of 12% since 1990 but just 1% since 2000. India's current literacy trend shows only 71.4 percent adults and about 60 percent female adults will be literate by 2015 (UNESCO, 2014c). The National Literacy Mission (NLM) launched in 1988, launch of a dedicated satellite EDUSAT in 2004, proposed use of ICTs in education in its Eleventh five year plan (2007-2012) and setting up of a National Mission in Education (NME) through ICT are the landmark initiatives taken by Government of India in this respect. A number of ICT related projects that have been implemented by NME-ICT for development of e-learning education environment are eGyanKosh, Flexilearn, NPTEL, CEC, Institute of Lifelong Learning (ILLL), e-PG Pathshala (Gupta, 2014).

Experiential Learning for Youth

With formal education traditionally emphasising teaching more than learning, education systems have focused on the transfer of information and knowledge from the teacher to the learner. Such a teacher-dependent education system is also "time-dependent, location dependent and situation-dependent" (Frey, 2007). With the multiplication of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and digital media, sources of information, knowledge and values are becoming more diversified and accessible beyond the confines of formal education systems. Recognizing that learning is increasingly happening individually beyond formal educational settings, the role of teachers will have to evolve from dispensers of information and knowledge to facilitators and enablers of learning (UNESCO, 2012). This is evident from the experimental research studies conducted in India,

where experiential learning, instruction packages and intervention programmes have been found to be effective in enhancing the environmental awareness dimension of education for sustainable development among learners (Tomar, 1998; Singh, 1999, Ramkumar, 2004; Sharma, 2005).

Active Involvement of Youth in Policy Planning

ESD also has a key role to play in developing and enhancing participatory democracy, particularly among young people. This can be achieved by promoting greater involvement by learners and young people in the issues and policies that affect them (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2009). Of late, there has been some gradual changes in youth engagement in policy issues but that is not sufficient-young people have to be part of the implementation team (Onano, 2015). The opportunities for participation that young people experience in their communities are likely to influence their development and the kind of transitions they make to adulthood. India's demographic profile and population projections show that it may possess the largest youth workforce in the world by 2020. The effective engagement of youth populations (in civil society and as global citizens) is therefore a key development imperative, and building an appropriately skilled youth workforce is a key challenge. The Government of India has initiated a wide range of policy and implementation measures to address these concerns. The Draft National Youth Policy, 2012 and the National Skill Development Council (NSDC) are among manifold initiatives of the government (British Council, 2013). In this regard, the objective of Government of India's engagement with the youth must be two-fold. First, it must engage with youth in order to provide them with information and enable holistic youth development. Second, it must engage with youth in order to get inputs on issues, policies and specific programmes, especially those that directly impact youth. Government should engage with a representative cross-section of youth to get inputs on specific policy issues. This can be done by conducting thematic workshops, putting out calls for policy notes through ICT based channels, etc. Based on the issue, the government can identify representative educational institutions, youth groups and other partners to create a channel to engage with the youth (Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, 2014, p. 62).

CONCLUSION

Given that the concept of sustainable development is rooted in the idea of intergenerational equity, it is unsurprising that the international community has emphasised the role of children and youth in relation to achieving sustainability. The education sector is generally seen as the most appropriate forum for involving children and youth in sustainable development, and initiatives to this end have been adopted in many countries (Ansell, 2006). Around the world, young men and women are driving change and claiming respect for fundamental freedom and rights; improved conditions for them and their communities; opportunities to learn, work and participate in decisions that affect them. At the same time, due to persistent crises, they are faced with acute challenges affecting important aspects of their lives. More than ever, it is now time to improve investment in research, policies and programmes to create an enabling and rights based environment where youth prosper, exercise rights, regain hope and a sense of community, and engage as responsible social actors and innovators for bringing about sustainable development (UNESCO, 2014a). It is critical for the Indian government to create a structured platform for engagement with the youth across the country. There are different objectives for engagement, and therefore, different engagement models must be piloted and implemented (Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, 2014, p.64).

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