

The Role of Adult Learning and Education (ale) in the Context of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has become a key element of the United Nation's 2030 Agenda and its sustainable development goals. Furthermore, the increasing need for and attention to the broad field of sustainability requires a more comprehensive elaboration on the role and contributions that adult learning and education can make in this context.

Based on its activities at the interface of adult education and development, the following paper outlines DVV International's ESD understanding from a global perspective based on its participation and regular follow-up of global process and its engagement in partner countries around the world. The text starts with an outline of the evolution and global policy process related to ESD, followed by a thematic classification, main target groups, key educational approaches and key competences required by teachers and learners in order to become agents of change for sustainable development.

I Evolution and global policy processes related to ESD

Historically, ESD development goes back to the report on the "The Limits to Growth. A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind" published in 1972, which called for a way of life that preserves livelihood and ensures the basic living needs of all people. The Brundtland Report of 1987 made clear the need for a global approach to development that meets the needs of the present and those of future generations. In 1992, at the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, the United Nations adopted Agenda 21, which set out guidelines for sustainable development in the 21st century and identified education as one of the key areas for action. Ten years later, at the Rio+10 World Summit in Johannesburg, this central importance of education was reaffirmed. For the years 2005 to 2014, the UN adopted the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, in which national governments were to introduce the approach of sustainability into their respective education systems and strategies.

In 2015, the UNESCO Global Action Program (GAP) on "Education for Sustainable Development" was launched to further drive the change of education systems towards more sustainability and to bring ESD even more from theory to practice. To this end, five priority fields of action have been defined to strengthen sustainable thinking and action in all areas of education. In short, these fields cover increased political support, the holistic transformation of teaching and learning environments, competence development among teachers and multipliers, the empowerment and mobilization of youth, and the promotion of sustainable development at the local level.

UNESCO Global Action Programme (GAP) on Education for Sustainable Development

PRIORITY ACTION AREA 1 Advancing Policy: Integration of the ESD concept into education and sustainable development policies to create an enabling environment for ESD and bring about systemic change

PRIORITY ACTION AREA 2 Transforming learning and training environments: Integration of sustainability principles into education and training contexts

PRIORITY ACTION AREA 3 Building capacities of educators and trainers: Strengthening the competencies of educators and multipliers for more effective ESD outcomes

PRIORITY ACTION AREA 4 Empowering and mobilizing youth: Introduction of more ESD measures for youth

PRIORITY ACTION AREA 5 Accelerating sustainable solutions at local level: Expansion of ESD programs and networks at the city, community and regional levels.

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is a central element of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the UNESCO Education Agenda 2030 (SDG 4), which covers the period 2015-2030. ESD can be located in SDG sub-goal 4.7, which is also referred to as the "brand essence of the education agenda":

SDG 4.7

"By 2030 ensure 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."

SDG 4.7 makes a clear reference to knowledge and skills for all learners and is a sub-goal of the education goal (SDG 4), which also underpins this in its overarching framework and additionally emphasizes aspects of inclusion and equity:

United Nations Education Agenda (SDG-4 of the 2030 Agenda)

"Ensure inclusive, equitable and quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all."

Overall, the 2030 Agenda, the education goal (SDG 4) and the ESD-related sub-goal 4.7 thus open up new scope and fields of action for adult education in the current sustainability debate. SDG 4.7 can be understood as a key goal for the entirety of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals due to its cross-cutting nature. SDG 4.7 is not only important for the communication and acceptance of the 2030 Agenda. It is also elementary for promoting competencies for the concrete implementation of the goals. This is further illustrated by the following thematic classification of ESD and the further explanations in this paper.

II. Thematic Classification of Education for Sustainable Development

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is explicitly addressed by SDG 4.7 in the Education Agenda 2030, but also works as a cross-cutting issue in relation to the achievement of all Sustainable Development Goals. ESD covers a broad range of topics. It not only includes ecological responsibility, environmental protection and climate change, but also addresses the promotion of sustainable social, economic and political development. Thus, ESD makes concrete contributions to climate and environmental education, responsible consumption and the strengthening of solidary and socially acceptable living conditions. ESD is closely linked to the concept of global citizenship education (GCED) and contributes through its measures to peacekeeping, tolerance, respect for human rights and active citizenship as well as the strengthening of democracy. ESD thus addresses issues related to current challenges facing the global community in local, national and global contexts.



The broad range of ESD topics is **cross-generational** and, in the sense of **lifelong learning**, relevant for all people. In this context, adult education is of particular importance, because it not only imparts knowledge, but also sensitizes learners to act on their own responsibility and to question critically in the sense of transformative education. People are enabled to better understand the connections and effects of their lifestyle on climate and environment and to draw conclusions for their future (political) actions and consumption. In the context of **professional qualifications and further education** measures, adult educators impart knowledge, competences and approaches for sustainable production and local economic practices and promote sustainable management of the immediate environment, private and professional.

Civic education as a central pillar of adult education promotes the participation and emancipation of critical citizens, as well as a confrontation with social power relations with the aim of making society more open and just. ESD informs people about their own rights and freedoms and encourages them to reflect on related interactions with their fellow human beings. Adult education can be applied specifically in contexts where inequality exists. It strengthens disadvantaged groups in their participation, promotes a critical examination of gender roles and power relations, and raises awareness of discrimination and racism.

Adult education plays a central role in the provision of skills and abilities that promote social responsibility and encourage civic engagement. The education of adults is of high importance, as they are not only role models for children and young people, but also the political decision-makers of the present. Moreover, due to its non-formal approaches, its interdisciplinarity and its activating variety of methods, adult education is better able than any other educational sector to convey interrelationships across topics, to provide orientation for action and to promote sustainable development.

III. Target groups

SDG 4.7 sets the goal that by 2030 "all learners acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to promote sustainable development [...]". This makes clear that the transfer of ESD knowledge, skills and abilities is not only a task of formal education, but also of non-formal and adult education and its broad set of actors and institutions.

In the sense of a systemic and transformative promotion of ESD, the target group includes learners of all ages, teachers and administrative/managerial staff at teaching and learning institutions, civil society organisations, networks and associations, and government structures.

Target groups

- Governmental actors and political decision makers
 - Civil society organizations, networks and adult education associations
 - Community Learning Centers and supporting structures of adult education
 - Multipliers, teachers and administrative/management staff working in Community Learning Centers
 - Learners, learning groups, local communities

ESD must be promoted at various levels. Through political advisory services, awareness-raising and lobbying to shape governmental framework conditions, organizational advisory and qualification measures at learning centres and other supporting structures, and the implementation of concrete program and project approaches that directly benefit the immediate target group of learners, their immediate local environment, and promote community development.

IV. Educational approaches

In order to achieve sustainable global change, a transformation of educational organizations, systems and content is also necessary - in formal as well as in non-formal education. On the path of transformation to a more sustainable and just world, adult education has a crucial role to play because of its interdisciplinary orientation, diversity of content and methods, its focus on the interests and needs of the target group, and its openness to all. It is particularly important that not only children and young people are reached with ESD measures, but also adults -

because they are in decision-making positions, are role models and can drive the transformation of society today.

The approach of transformative education goes beyond the classical concept of education and aims at a changed culture of teaching and learning, which makes it possible to develop new patterns in politics and economy and in the private sphere. This comprises also a new understanding of development and progress, new forms of living together and doing business and a changed relationship between humans and nature. In terms of the Whole Institution Approach, transformative education is not only about implementing ESD at the programme level, but about the holistic redesign of teaching and learning environments, a changed understanding of teaching and learning, and the promotion of competence development of teachers and learners with the aim of building a more sustainable world.

The following guiding questions are central to transformative education:

- What is our vision of a more sustainable and just world? What transformation do we need and want in order to achieve it?
- What role does education play in changing (and sustaining) social conditions?
- What kind of education does it take for people to be open to change? How do people learn in a transformative sense?
- How can education create spaces for transformative learning? What kind of pedagogical attitude, educational concepts and didactic methodology is needed for this?

Multi-perspective view of the world

ESD focuses on a holistic and global view of our complex world with its interdependent ecological, economic, social and political dimensions. Every individual has a different idea of sustainable development and is guided by his or her own life and experience. Therefore, a social process of understanding and negotiation is needed on what the path to a sustainable society can look like. ESD learning processes should motivate people to look at a topic from a variety of perspectives. These can be different ways of thinking, technical approaches and narratives, reference areas - from local to global -, temporal perspectives and interests.

ESD does not aim to dictate values, but rather to engage in a discourse on values that makes visible the diversity of knowledge, views, ideas, and beliefs that exist simultaneously. In relation to the teaching and learning context, this also means not overwhelming learners morally, and making transparent and reflecting one's own point of view and experiences as a teacher.

Participatory education as a key pillar of ESD

The participatory education approach, based on the work of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, is a core element of non-formal learning processes in various countries around the world. The pedagogical attitude underlying the participatory education approach consists in the principle of learning that activates the abilities and potentials of learners with the aim that they move from a passive to an active perception and participation in the learning process. Learners are at the centre of the learning process as competent, active, self-directing and respected individuals and are empowered to change their reality and participate in decisions that affect their lives.

Thus, participatory education offers the space to test one's own ideas, visions and options for action on sustainable development and to stimulate social action by strengthening participation and self-efficacy.

Methodological-didactical diversity in the implementation of ESD approaches

In order to enable participatory educational offers and to provide a space for reflection on one's own actions and values, as well as to open up a space for experimenting with ideas for alternative options for action, a participant-oriented didactic approach is required. Methodologically, this process can be supported by using diverse, interactive methods that are oriented towards the experiences and lived realities of the participants and which, based on this, open up new perspectives.

ESD promotes learning on three levels: Cognitive learning ("head") enables a better understanding of complex global contexts. Through a change of perspective ("heart"), the interests and needs of other actors are clarified and this enables the participants to re-evaluate the situation and develop their own point of view. The *action* orientation ("hand") creates spaces for ideas and experimentation in which participants can not only think about transformative action but can also implement it in their own environment. The self-efficacy of both teachers and learners can thus be experienced and the commitment to the transformation of our society strengthened.

V. What competencies do teachers and learners need in order to become agents of change for sustainable development?

In the course of the process of negotiation and understanding towards a sustainable society, it is important to involve and activate people of all ages in the sense of lifelong learning. To this end, children and young people, as well as adults, must possess certain key competencies that enable them to critically reflect on their own roles and actions, to act sustainably in complex situations, and to actively and cooperatively help shape the future.

The following competencies comprise cognitive, affective, volitional and motivational elements and are thus an interplay of knowledge, skills and abilities. Building competencies goes far beyond imparting knowledge. They must be developed by the learners themselves on the basis

of their experiences and lived realities, and then applied in concrete situations in order to learn to assess the effects of their own actions.

The following competencies are relevant for understanding all SDGs and for bringing about a necessary societal transformation. They represent a link between individual and societal well-being.

UNESCO Key competencies for sustainability (UNESCO, 2017):

- **Systems thinking competency:** the abilities to recognize and understand relationships; to analyse complex systems; to think of how systems are embedded within different domains and different scales; and to deal with uncertainty.
- **Anticipatory competency:** the abilities to understand and evaluate multiple futures – possible, probable and desirable; to create one's own visions for the future; to apply the precautionary principle; to assess the consequences of actions; and to deal with risks and changes
- **Normative competency:** the abilities to understand and reflect on the norms and values that underlie one's actions; and to negotiate sustainability values, principles, goals, and targets, in a context of conflicts of interests and trade-offs, uncertain knowledge and contradictions.
- **Strategic competency:** the abilities to collectively develop and implement innovative actions that further sustainability at the local level and further afield.
- **Collaboration competency:** the abilities to learn from others; to understand and respect the needs, perspectives and actions of others (empathy); to understand, relate to and be sensitive to others (empathic leadership); to deal with conflicts in a group; and to facilitate collaborative and participatory problem solving.
- **Critical thinking competency:** the ability to question norms, practices and opinions; to reflect on one's own values, perceptions and actions; and to take a position in the sustainability discourse.
- **Self-awareness competency:** the ability to reflect on one's own role in the local community and (global) society; to continually evaluate and further motivate one's actions; and to deal with one's feelings and desires.
- **Integrated problem-solving competency:** the overarching ability to apply different problem-solving frameworks to complex sustainability problems and develop viable, inclusive and equitable solution options that promote sustainable development, integrating the abovementioned competences.

In conclusion, the goal of ESD is to open up possibilities for understanding oneself as an acting subject in a complex global web through a better understanding of the world and one's own attitude. Transformative education creates spaces and perspectives that encourage reflection on one's own attitudes, foster a change of perspective and promote sustainable action on the basis of self-efficacy experiences.

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