Education for Sustainable Development for 2030: Why it matters to us all

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When the general public hears the word “education”, images of formal education may come to mind for many people. Formal education could be symbolized with images of a qualified teacher, formal students as the target audience, a school or building facility, curriculum guidelines, and textbooks. Those images are associated with education as a planned activity, being implemented in a formal, structured, top-down way, in alignment with a national development strategy. All of these underpin the modern education concept.

However, education is, of course, more than that. In particular, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is the field that emphasizes a reorientation of modern education, by challenging the knowledge, way of thinking and behaviors that have led to an unsustainable society, and by empowering people to act for individual and social transformation through lifelong processes. Theoretical and political discourses for ESD have developed in response to global sustainable development policies and processes, for over 40 years. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2020), ESD emphasizes that education lies at the core of any human action, formally, non-formally and informally, across all aspects of our everyday life, including at home, at school, the workplace, and during any social occasions.

“Education for Sustainable Development: Towards achieving the SDGs” (or “ESD for 2030”) is the most recent policy document for the promotion of ESD, which was resolved at the Seventy-fourth session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on 19 December 2019 (UNGA, 2019). “ESD for 2030” was developed in response to the UN’s Sustainable Development
Goal (SDG) 4.7, which addresses the role of education in achieving sustainable development (UNGA, 2015). The “ESD for 2030” document reaffirms ESD as a critical key to sustainable development and achievement of all SDGs (UNESCO, 2017). “ESD for 2030” is based on the outcomes from 15 years of a global ESD initiative, conducted during the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD: 2005-2014) and through the Global Action Programme (GAP) on ESD (2015-2019). In these multi-year efforts and programs, UNESCO served as the leading agency for ESD promotion. “ESD for 2030” will be a key document for the next ten years as it will provide the conceptual and policy grounds for anyone pursuing sustainability through stakeholder empowerment.

For the last twenty years, I have served as a practitioner and a researcher in the private sector, NGOs, and international organizations, including the United Nations University (UNU) where I conduct my current work on ESD (UNU, 2020). I have committed to link theory, global and/or national policies, and local community development practices in the Asia-Pacific region, using concepts from ESD and considering perspectives of marginalized communities. Through work focused on the Asia-Pacific region, I have repeatedly encountered the same challenge. Whenever I attempted to apply the ESD framework to my practice and research outside of the education field, I always struggled to extract practical guidance from most ESD-related theories and policies. Most of the ESD theories and practices are intended for either formal education or application of schooling to non-education fields (UNESCO, 2014). In reality, ESD is still caught up with modern education thinking, despite its definition and emphasis on reorientation of modern education. Yes, formal education is an integral part of the ESD debate. Yet, it is also highly important to consider areas of everyday life where we should or should not apply modern education thinking. Many causes and impacts of unsustainability are related to challenges in application of ESD to everyday life.

Even with COVID-19 and the uncertainty that the pandemic brings, we are already considering ways in which we can adapt and build “new normals” within the current pandemic situation and, subsequently, in post-COVID-19 times. Many of us are considering the question of “Should we rebuild a pre-COVID-19 society ‘for better’ (Carr, 2020), or should we transform our society, with emphasis on ways in which we can be more resilient and sustainable than before?”. 
Consideration of this question is the process of informal ESD, applied outside formal education realms, where we are unlearning and re-learning for sustainability. In this process, we are attempting to step beyond the major premises that underpin our thoughts, knowledge, and way understanding a problem. By expanding our experiences through consideration of and action with diverse stakeholders, we can shape new knowledge that integrates diverse experiences, including traditional, indigenous and local experiences and knowledge.

Currently, the UNESCO and member states are preparing an action plan for ESD for 2030, which will be officially launched at the UNESCO World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development in Berlin on 17-19 May 2021. In order to make ESD more relevant to the sustainability challenges, participation of diverse stakeholders, in particular those of non-education fields, is indispensable; the geoscience fields are no exception. The field of ESD should go beyond
popularized education thought to achieve SDGs by 2030. The success of SDGs very much depends on how much we can identify and strengthen explicit elements for learning and empowerment that are dynamically embedded in every aspect of our lives.

References


