Progress in education for Sustainable Development

A new report commissioned by UNESCO has reviewed several case studies of national progress in learning and education for sustainable development (ESD). There are a wide range of approaches but, at the heart of all initiatives, are multi-stakeholder and collaborative partnerships which aim to instigate social change towards a more sustainable future.

ESD consists of initiatives that incorporate sustainability principles into education programmes and develop strategies to steer learning on sustainable development. It involves education for all ages, from formal learning in schools and universities, through to more ‘informal learning’ in NGO and community settings.

The UN announced a Decade for Education and Sustainable Development (DESD) from 2005 to 2014, with UNESCO as the lead-agency. This report was commissioned within that context and used case studies from five countries: Chile, Indonesia, Kenya, the Netherlands and Oman. These countries took diverse approaches to promoting ESD, from which the researchers made several key observations that can inform future ESD initiatives around the world:

Framing and coordinating ESD. Strategies and policies for implementing ESD are underpinned by a common ethos and mission according to the DESD principles, but the processes of coordination vary between countries. For example, the Netherlands promotes social learning among ESD stakeholders, civil servants, project leaders, whilst in Chile the ESD framework is implemented through national and regional action plans. From the case studies it is clear that a successful ESD strategy should involve a wide range of stakeholders, be embedded in government decision-making and promote coordination across government departments. The report also concludes that ESD policies should be created through participation of all stakeholders as well as involving citizen consultation.

Implementing ESD. Many of the ESD initiatives are organised in primary and secondary education and highlight different theme projects. In higher education the approach tends to be more piecemeal and few initiatives are directed towards early childhood education. Any non-formal education initiatives tend to be organised by civil society organisations and NGOs but these do not tend to be showcased. The country studies indicate a requirement for greater encouragement of non-formal learning opportunities (outside the school or university environment) and action plans that ideally should involve the business sector, indigenous communities and the media. Countries should aim to challenge the existing education structure using systems thinking that explores links and synergies, innovation and participative learning.

Capacity, Resources, Innovation and Research. In all cases it is acknowledged that more capacity-building is needed in order to provide the tools and competencies for teachers, educators and curriculum developers to embed ESD into their education programmes. There is a need to make ESD teaching resources available to educators and learners and create specific targeted funding opportunities to support ESD innovation and research activities.

Partnerships for ESD. The cases indicate a need to advance from simple cooperation mechanisms to creating true long-term multi-sectoral partnerships between a diverse range of groups, including governments, education, business and NGOs. Countries should identify the actions needed to support these partnerships.

Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Kenya and the Netherlands were the only countries with monitoring and evaluation systems to review the progress of ESD initiatives. Both countries suggest that their systems need further improving. The monitoring and evaluation of ESD is a new and complex area, which needs further development. These monitoring processes should aim to be participatory and involve multiple stakeholders and should also assess the quality of ESD learning processes and experiences.

1. See: www.unesco.org


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