

SDGs and the Climate Change Agreement: Challenges and Opportunities for ESD

The year 2014 was critical, for it marked the end of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). It was as if ESD had reached its first milestone. In 2005, when the DESD was launched, ESD was relatively a new term. The decade saw several people engaged in ESD practices, the concept evolved further, new networks were formed and several initiatives were taken. These included the Regional Centres of Expertise (RCE) initiative of the United Nations University—Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability (UNU-IAS), the Global Universities Partnership on Environment and Sustainability (GUPES), the Copernicus Alliance (a network of institutions in Europe), Mainstreaming Environment and Sustainability in Africa (MESA), the Handprint movement and several others. The DESD initiatives also included this journal which was launched in 2007. By the end of the decade, it was obvious that ESD and its engaging methodology would be an important tool for the transformation of our planet to a more sustainable one.

The year 2015 saw, for the first time, nations across the world coming together at the UN and agreeing to prioritize sustainable development. The 17 goals and 169 targets are by no means exhaustive or all that is desired. However, they do represent something extremely powerful. The fact that 188 countries could agree to a concept of the complex form of sustainable development was a major landmark. Thus, while the end of 2014 saw the meaning of the letter ‘E’ in ESD being defined, 2015 saw the ‘SD’ in it being defined. With this, the challenge before the ESD community is to make this knowledge and skills to transform values and attitudes available to the wider community of practitioners, policy-makers, educators and society.

December 2015 saw another landmark in the form of the Paris Agreement, with 195 countries committing to their Intended Nationally Determined Commitments (INDCs). In Climate Change, perhaps, even more aspects of sustainable development are intricately connected for the first time. The need to change lifestyles has been finally integrated into the text of the Climate Change Agreement: ‘... recognizing that sustainable lifestyles and sustainable patterns of consumption and production, with developed country Parties taking the lead, play an important role in addressing climate change...’¹ Since lifestyle changes have a lot to do with and are sensitive to education, the Agreement also affirms ‘the importance of education, training,

public awareness, public participation, public access to information and cooperation at all levels on the matters addressed in this Agreement’.

Now, in 2016, when planning and making strategies for sustainable development goals (SDGs) have to be undertaken, and work on the INDCs begins, it is important that ESD gets recognized and built into their strategy documents. Centre for Environment Education (CEE), in Ahmedabad, India, commenced the year with the international conference on ‘education as a driver for sustainable development goals’, in cooperation with UNESCO, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, and Niti Aayog. Speaking on this occasion, Ms Irina Bokova, Director General of UNESCO, said: ‘...education must be our starting point to shape new values and behaviours for the century ahead’. Mr Ibrahim Thiaw, Deputy Executive Director, UNEP, said: ‘...environmental education as a cross cutting issue is instrumental to the implementation of all seventeen sustainable development goals’. Many speakers also appreciated the timeliness of the conference while recalling that CEE had held the first international workshop on DESD (Education for a Sustainable Future, 18–20 January 2005, Ahmedabad, India) when the decade was launched and was now holding the first international workshop on SDGs, almost as soon as they were adopted. The conference made an important beginning and was able to come up with recommendations for each of the SDGs. In its closing plenary comments, these words from the outcome document herald the way forward for the achievement of the SDGs: ‘A transformative learning model should engender inclusivity in the true sense of the word, consciousness raising, critical reflection, conviction, desire to change and contribute to the wellbeing of all.’²

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Notes

1. Retrieved 27 January 2016, from <https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2015/cop21/eng/109r01.pdf>
2. Retrieved 27 January 2016, from <http://www.ceeindia.org/esdg/PDF/Conference%20Final%20Action%20January%2013,%202016.pdf>