



Sustainability: education and commitment – reinforcing the role of education as a key to sustainable development

Position paper

Education for sustainable development is the key to a sustainable society. In universities, vocational colleges, training centres, enterprises, schools, day nurseries and communities as well as in numerous informal learning environments, there is growing awareness of the importance of social and environmental sustainability. It is not only school pupils who are protesting for more climate action; teachers and trainers at all levels are showing great interest in ideas and strategies for spreading the message of sustainability. It is all the more important, then, to cement these into education structures in the long term and so pave the way for responsible thinking and action.

Education for sustainable development is an interdisciplinary approach to teaching and learning that transcends individual components of the education system and is designed to enable people to apply knowledge of sustainable development and to recognise problems that arise when development processes are unsustainable. It should, for example, enable people to help shape the present and future in the light of social, economic and environmental imperatives so as to ensure that living conditions for coming generations are at least as good as those of the present global community. The transition to a socially just way of life that respects the planetary boundaries requires an education which enables people to transform our world in accordance with the spirit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Back in the period from 2005 to 2014, through the *UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development*, the United Nations undertook to embed the principles of sustainability in its education systems. In 2015, education for sustainable development (ESD) was defined as an area for specific action and enshrined as target 4.7 of the 2030 Agenda. The adoption of the 2030 Agenda was followed by the *Unesco Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development (GAP), 2015-2019*.

The new Unesco programme *Education for Sustainable Development: Towards achieving the SDGs (ESD for 2030)* highlights the role of education in the pursuit of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The ten-year programme is to be launched with a conference organised by Unesco and the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, which will take place in Berlin from 2 to 4 June 2020.

The Parliamentary Advisory Council on Sustainable Development welcomes the fact that the Federal Government, in the National Action Plan on Education for Sustainable Development which it adopted in 2017, set out specific proposals as to how sustainable action can best be learned and structurally perpetuated. One aim of the National ESD Action Plan, for example is to ensure that sustainability and the development of sustainability-based skills are taken into account in curricula, course programmes and training regulations as well as in non-formal and informal learning. A wide network of players are helping to implement the plan; the National



ESD Platform, specialised forums, networks of partner bodies and a youth forum are involved in the political process.

Initial analyses of the plan, conducted by the Futures Research Institute at the Free University of Berlin, have now been published.¹ The first findings indicate that progress has certainly been made in implanting ESD but that there is still a long way to go before ESD is deeply embedded in the education system.

In a survey of young people (school pupils, trainees and students), a slim majority of the trainees (51.3%) and of the students (51%) and about a third of the pupils (35.2%) reported that sustainability had zero visibility in their respective institutions. Young people report that ESD mainly emanates from motivated individuals on the teaching staff and is largely confined to classes in relevant subjects. In a survey of teaching staff, for instance, it emerged that teachers and lecturers do not feel sufficiently qualified to provide instruction in sustainability. Almost 70% of teachers had never received any instruction in ESD during their own studies. The obstacle to the spread of ESD that teachers most frequently cited was a lack of mainstreaming in the curriculum. On the other hand, many teachers regard education for sustainable development as highly relevant and would very much like to provide more of it. The Advisory Council subscribes to the researchers' conclusion that the importance attached to ESD in political and academic circles and by teachers themselves creates a sound basis for tackling the diagnosed implementation deficit.

Against this backdrop the Advisory Council recommends that the Federal Government engage in detailed examination of the recommendations from the National ESD Action Plan monitoring team; in the following paper, the Advisory Council will address some aspects of these recommendations.²

Ensuring that the goals of the German Sustainable Development Strategy are achieved

In every area of the education system, the basic principle of education for sustainable development must be underpinned by making educational establishments inclusive, so that all children, young people and adults, regardless of socio-economic background, gender or other factors, have inclusive access to education. The Advisory Council points out that statistical trends for the indicators *Early school leavers* and *Foreign school graduates* from the German Sustainable Development Strategy are moving in the wrong direction.³ Together with the *Länder*, civil society and the academic community, the Federal Government should maintain its efforts to ensure that the corresponding goals of the German Sustainable Development Strategy are achieved on time.

Early childhood education

The ESD monitoring team noted that the mainstreaming of education for sustainable development into curricula and institutional structures is slowly increasing. The existing role of ESD in early childhood education is partly due to the approach to education at that stage, which is highly value-based and focused on the development of democratic mindsets.

¹ <https://www.bne-portal.de/en/german-national-action-plan/monitoring>

² <https://www.bne-portal.de/en/german-national-action-plan/monitoring>

³ See Federal Statistical Office, *Sustainable Development in Germany: Indicator Report 2018*, pp. 30 and 70.



Environmental awareness, nature study and intercultural education, for example, have been established elements of pre-school education strategies for many years. This makes the pre-school stage particularly fertile ground for the growth of ESD.

The evaluation identified a continuing large deficit in the incorporation of ESD into the vocational training of nursery nurses, support assistants and child carers. The Advisory Council therefore endorses the recommendation of massive support for ESD mainstreaming in the future development of curricula for early childhood education, particularly with regard to the framework curriculum of the Standing Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the *Länder*, from which many of the *Länder* take their lead.

The bodies that run day nurseries can step up their efforts to find ways of fitting ESD into their operating models and develop it into a strategic aim. In this context the Advisory Council recommends that the Federal Government engage in more dialogue with the federal associations of nursery operators, for example through nationwide congresses for representatives of those bodies. The Advisory Council applauds the activities of the government-supported *Haus der kleinen Forscher* (Little Scientists' House) Foundation, whose updated educational strategy includes a sustainable-development dimension in its range of training courses for nursery nurses and primary school teachers in the fields of mathematics, computing, science and technology.

Schools

The school component of the education system is currently subject to constant curricular challenges, such as the promotion of language learning, inclusion, integration and new media, and structural innovations, such as the reduction of the duration of schooling from 13 to 12 years, the introduction of all-day schools, increasing administrative expenditure and the creation of school profiles. Against this backdrop, the experts interviewed in the monitoring framework portray the spread of ESD as slow and piecemeal and say that it differs widely between *Länder*.

In the monitoring process to date, the lack of uniform integration of ESD into curricula has been identified as a definite obstacle to the spread of ESD in schools. It emerges clearly from the findings of the monitoring team that teacher training is one of the most effective levers in the process of diffusing ESD. So far, however, mainstreaming of ESD in teacher training has been sporadic.

The Advisory Council recommends that the Federal Government seek more dialogue with the *Länder* on this matter and that it continue to press for ESD mainstreaming in course programmes. The Advisory Council still strongly advocates a requirement for all schools to have their own education plan in which the 2030 Agenda is a guiding principle that significantly influences lesson content. In addition, schools should appoint permanent sustainable development officers and arrange for them to receive appropriate training.

Vocational training

Although the authors of the ESD monitoring report observe high levels of commitment on the part of individual players and networks in the field of vocational training, they note that the aim of making ESD part and parcel of vocational training has not yet been achieved. It is also noted that vocational training remains closely tied to industry. Accordingly, decision-makers



in the field of vocational training attach great importance to equality of status for the three dimensions of sustainability, namely the economic, the environmental and the social dimension. It is therefore recommended that sustainability-related dilemmas and conflicts of aims be studied more closely, as they offer a context in which to reflect on occupational practice and personal conduct. The Advisory Council supports such an open and constructively critical approach to conflicting aims within the German Sustainable Development Strategy, an approach designed to achieve the sustainable development goals in their entirety in the best possible way. The Advisory Council proposes that the Federal Government should also continue to press hard for the development of sustainability-related skills to be built into the structure of the vocational training system. Given that the experts interviewed as part of the monitoring process identified training of multipliers as an important means of leverage in the field of vocational training, it is recommended that businesses be encouraged to enable their employees to attend continuing training courses and to release them from their duties for that purpose. The Advisory Council calls on the Federal Government to remove any legal obstacles to such enablement.

The Advisory Council recommends that the subject of ESD should also be taken into account by the Study Commission on Vocational Training in the Digital Work Environment.

Higher education

According to the ESD evaluation, institutions of higher education have been very slow to adapt to the concepts of education for sustainable development and sustainability mainstreaming. At the same time, the evaluation highlights the fact that individual institutions are boldly playing the sustainability card to give them a competitive edge when projecting their image to prospective staff and students. The Advisory Council welcomes the fact that some institutions have implemented forward-looking sustainability strategies throughout their university or college. The *HOCH^N* ('To the power of ^N') project supported by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research is hailed as a success in the evaluation. The Advisory Council's recommendation to the Federal Government in this context is that it expand its support for sustainability projects, student initiatives and sustainability awards so as to make it clear that sustainability and ESD are a matter of major importance to universities and colleges of higher education and will remain so.

Both the ESD evaluation and the Science Platform Sustainability 2030 forum emphasise that sustainable development needs interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and, to an increasing extent, transformative research. This means linking diverse disciplines and involving non-academic practitioners from the field under examination in the formulation of research questions and in the process of knowledge generation with a view to arriving at implementable recommendations for action. In this way, new social perspectives and needs are fed into the research process on the one hand, while on the other hand the transfer of scientific knowledge to society at large is promoted. The Advisory Council emphatically endorses the recommendation that structural support be provided for interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, participatory and transformative research. The Advisory Council also refers to the recently published paper from the Science Platform Sustainability 2030 forum⁴ and urges the Federal Government to act on its recommendations by promoting transformative research, increasing incentives for the provision of scientific advice to policymakers, giving greater consideration to

⁴ <http://www.wpn2030.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/wpn2030-Relexionspapier2019.pdf> (in German)



the social relevance of applied research designed to address major social challenges, encouraging the Federal Government's scientific advisory councils to take account of the German Sustainable Development Strategy, supporting cooperation between governing bodies and reinforcing the provision of strategic political advice. Research and development should be expanded, focusing especially on those areas where unsustainable trends are being observed and where new challenges are emerging and on the problem-solving skills that are needed for the transformation to a sustainable society.

Non-formal and informal learning

Non-formal and informal learning occur throughout people's lives and are therefore a key educational factor. In this context, education for sustainable development can be imparted in settings such as nature reserves, adult education classes, environmental education centres, social organisations and sport clubs but also in families, among friends and at holiday destinations. One of the key findings of the evaluation is that providers of non-formal education can effectively complement formal training courses by offering different ways of learning. The characteristic features of non-formal and informal learning opportunities are that they are voluntary and needs-based, that they can involve experiencing nature, hands-on learning, play and experimentation and that they can be shaped by learners. The Advisory Council emphasises the importance of supplementing formal education for sustainable development with non-formal and informal learning and welcomes the detailed attention given to this element of the education system in the National ESD Action Plan. The Advisory Council wishes to encourage the Federal Government to involve providers of non-formal and informal education closely in the ongoing development of the National Action Plan and to develop made-to-measure support mechanisms for this heterogeneous part of the education system. This includes creating a reliable funding scheme and supporting the establishment of a body to represent the interests of providers of non-formal and informal ESD.

Youth involvement

The role of young people as change agents in the spread of education for sustainable development has hitherto been underestimated. Empowering and mobilising youth is a priority action area of the Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development, the aim being to enable and mobilise young people to promote a more sustainable future and to target them as agents of change. The Federal Government should therefore create easily accessible comprehensive participative structures for young people to perform this role and so enable children and young people to become involved in the places where they are growing up.

Education for sustainable development in the global context

As regards the international dimension, the Advisory Council refers again in this context to its opinion on the last Peer Review Report on the German Sustainable Development Strategy.⁵ Greater importance must be attached to the education sector in international politics and in

⁵ <https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/586346/08ff6f89b4df9525c52c82f6f03cd108/stellungnahme-Peer-Review-data.pdf>



development cooperation. In accordance with Article 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, all children should have a right to primary education. In order to move progressively towards this goal on the basis of equal opportunities, the Advisory Council strongly advocates supporting efforts to establish compulsory primary education and free schooling. In addition, more should be done to promote the development of various forms of general and vocational secondary schools so as to advance the process of sustainable development in the education sector. To ensure that investments in education yield sustainable returns, measures should be taken to encourage school attendance and to reduce the number of young people who leave school prematurely.

An imperative aspect of sustainability is the need to step up efforts to help eliminate illiteracy in the world and to facilitate access to scientific and technical knowledge and to modern teaching methods. Together with development deficits resulting from malnutrition, neglect or mistreatment, the lack of education opportunities in early childhood has long-term and indeed permanent effects on children. Particularly for those born into poverty, the development of key life skills offers children a great opportunity to improve their station in life on a sustainable basis. It is entirely contrary to the Sustainable Development Goals that access to education should be difficult, especially for girls.

The lack of quality education plays a key role in this context; conversely, its availability plays a crucial role in peacebuilding. Especially when education systems are inclusive and encourage mutual understanding, tolerance and respect, they can make societies more resistant to violence and conflict. Studies show that people who can read are more likely to engage with the democratic institutions of their society. And when an acute crisis abates, it is hard to rebuild a country if the population does not possess the most basic skills such as the ability to read and write. While the importance of education as a key to conflict prevention and resolution, economic recovery and stability is common knowledge, 75 million children in the world between the ages of three and eighteen cannot attend nursery or school because they live in crisis or conflict zones. Without learning and training opportunities, these children are liable to become 'lost generations'. The absence of prospects in their home countries leads to flight and destabilises societies. Investment in children pays dividends in the form of a more stable and peaceful future.