

Education for Sustainable Development

A Comprehension of ESD and a Contribution to the
Discourse

éducation21 – 2016



Introduction

The following definition reflects the Foundation éducation21's understanding of education for sustainable development¹ (ESD) and does not claim any universal validity. Guided by this comprehension, éducation21 supports various approaches of ESD in an open and transparent manner, integrating different perspectives and responding to the specific needs of each context.

This comprehension is based on significant literature from the field² and the expertise of éducation21 staff as well as of our partners. Even though the text is structured in a linear way, the understanding of ESD should be understood as a whole, constituted of elements interacting among themselves dynamically. Key words underlined in red refer to notions that can and should be object for debate and further reflection.

Education for Sustainable Development

Education is an active and lifelong process accomplished by each individual in a **personal, self-determined and autonomous manner**. The process of education is situated in, fostered through and influenced by social **interactions and is embedded in a particular cultural context**.

Notion of education

The process should empower persons to find an own place in the world, to build positive relationships with others, to shape an own life and to assume its responsibilities in society.

Based on this definition of education, ESD promotes and fosters specific competencies and aims. These will help **learners addressing and dealing with challenges related to our society's development in a globalised world**. Learners are empowered to participate creatively to the construction of a **future oriented towards a sustainable development**.

Objective of ESD

ESD is a concept for teaching and learning strategies and includes the whole school development, by encouraging **holistic learning processes**. As a such, it stimulates learning and change processes not only on the individual level, but also on the level of **groups** and whole institutions. The approach is both interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary, and allows learning to be **situated in concrete objects and supported by real-life settings**. Schools and their environments are considered to be learning and living environments.

Concept for school

Sustainable development enables each person to **live in dignity and with equal rights**. It is reflected in a way of life that respects **the carrying capacity of the Earth system and the biosphere's regeneration limits**. Furthermore, it aspires toward a just world. By preserving natural resources and the functions of ecosystems, **the present generations** satisfy their **needs** without risking that **future generations** will not be able to satisfy theirs.

Sustainable development

¹ The vision of the Foundation éducation21 is that of a sustainable and viable society that aims to develop by integrating equity and social justice and maintaining the functions of each system, while taking into account the limits of the latter. It uses the term « sustainable development » which is widely known and disseminated. However it is aware of the debates and semantic vagueness that characterise it, and rejects an over-restrictive understanding of the term, for example in the sense of sustainable economic growth, industrialisation or an accumulation of capital of the latter. The foundation uses the terms «sustainability» and «sustainable development» synonymously.

² See sources on page 4

ESD is built on a **systemic comprehension** of the world and takes account of relations, interdependencies, as well as limits in the interaction between **environment, society, economy and individuals**. It empowers learners to address complex questions, dynamic processes, **contradictions** and **uncertainties** and encourages them to reflect on their **role in the context concerned**.

ESD supports learning on several levels:

- » **Knowledge, feelings and the capacity to take action**
Best possible acquisition of available knowledge, capacity to identify one's feelings and those of others, ability to discern possibilities to take action and implement them in an autonomous manner by drawing on positive experiences.
- » **Meta-reflection**
Capacity to develop a critical eye on ways of thinking, values, decision-making and knowledge acquisition.

These **two sides of learning**, complementary and interdependent, make it possible to achieve the stated goal of ESD.

Positive development in the long term is supported if learning and teaching strategies, as well as whole school approaches, aim at the promotion of the following **competencies**, attitudes and capacities:

Acting autonomously (personal competencies)

- » Developing a sense being part of the world → **Responsibility**
 - Perceive oneself and the social and natural environment in a holistic manner and in a global context.
 - Perceive oneself as part of this environment and show respect and responsibility towards it.
 - Identify positive and negative emotions and address them in a constructive manner.
- » Reflecting on one's own values and those of others → **Values**
 - Become aware of one's own and collective ways of thinking, values, attitudes, norms and actions, question their origins and evaluate them from the perspective of sustainability.
 - Understand sustainability as one guiding principle of societal development, question the underlying values and compare them with other guiding principles.
 - Reflect on one's own values or those of others, in particular on conceptions of justice, and use them as basis for action.
- » Taking responsibility and using one's scope of action → **Action**
 - Recognise, evaluate and use one's own as well as collective scopes of action to promote sustainable development.

Using tools interactively

(disciplinary and methodological competencies)

- » Build interdisciplinary knowledge by taking different perspectives into account
→ **Relation to knowledge**
 - Identify the knowledge essential for sustainable development, and acquire information autonomously as well as collaboratively by adopting an interdisciplinary approach and different perspectives.
 - Be aware that knowledge is constructed, generated and influenced by the situational particularities and the socio-cultural context. It must be questioned and devised from the perspective of sustainability.
 - Take into account the spatial, temporal, individual and collective dimensions of sustainable development.
 - Identify and analyse the gaps and inconsistencies in information referring to sustainability. Question the quality and origin of the given information and compare and relate the different sources.

- » Connected learning → **System**
 - Understand and analyse the linear and non-linear relations, the (inter-) dependencies and interactions between persons, the different societal fields and the natural environment, both on a local and global scale.
 - Address complex issues, analyse and understand the causes and mechanisms of non-sustainable development.
- » Think and act with foresight → **Anticipation**
 - Develop visions for the future; compare them with reality and current development orientations.
 - Evaluate strategies for action and decisions, their effects, consequences and associated risks and think up future-oriented solutions for sustainable development.
- » Think in a critical and constructive manner → **Creative thinking**
 - Develop independent ideas and the capacity to think beyond present days experiences and knowledge in order to find innovative solutions.

Interacting in heterogeneous groups
(social competencies)

- » Change perspective → **Perspectives**
 - Distinguish different interest groups, formulate one's own positions, change perspective and adopt new ones.
 - Use the capacity to change perspective in order to analyse concrete situations and collaborate with others with a view to sustainable development.
- » Address questions related to sustainability collaboratively → **Cooperation**
 - Identify questions related to sustainable development and seek joint responses.
 - Address and resolve in a constructive manner disagreements and conflicts of interest with respect to sustainable development.
- » Contribute to collective processes → **Participation**
 - Analyse the social dynamics, identify the stakeholder groups concerned as well as their interests, and explore their power relations.
 - Recognise individual and collective scopes for action to promote sustainable development, and participate in political and civil society processes.

ESD is a concept meaning and launching new developments, but also relying and affiliating on proven transversal pedagogical approaches and existing disciplines. It integrates and links elements from a number of pedagogical approaches, in particular:

- » Education for the environment
- » Global learning
- » Promotion of health
- » Education for citizenship including human rights education
- » Economic education
- » Education for gender equality
- » Intercultural education

etc.



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