

Paul T. Yillia

From MDGs to SDGs – Education for Sustainable Development

As the world moves into a new development period we need to emphasise that education has the ability to change society or to induce transformation in society.



Paul T. Yillia together with Stella Asimwe and Elisabeth Huber at the KEF Research for Development Roundtable, March 23rd, 2015

This year, 2015, is a very exceptional year for sustainable development. It is the target year for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It is also the year during which the international community has already committed to a new set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the framework of the Post-2015 Development Agenda to pursue economic growth, end poverty and tackle climate change. The result is that eight MDGs are replaced by seventeen SDGs at the United Nations Summit to adopt the Post-2015 Development Agenda in September 2015.

This crucial transition period – a new era of setting and aiming to achieve a new set of development goals and targets in the next 15 years – is seen as the time when education can (and must) play a central role in providing the knowledge, skills and values needed to discover lasting solutions to the problems of today and tomorrow. A glimpse at the proposed SDGs shows that their implementation will require substantial inputs from education institutions at all levels. Education has the ability to change and to induce change and pro-

gress in society. This must be recognised by relevant development partners, in particular UN agencies and development banks, as well as governments and by institutions of learning themselves as the world moves into a new development period.

It is this recognition – that education, at all levels, can be a powerful tool in promoting sustainable development – which led to the concept of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). In December 2002 the United Nations General Assembly, through its Resolution 57/254, declared a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014). It also designated the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as the lead agency for the promotion of the Decade. The Decade focused primarily on building public understanding and awareness, promoting and improving quality education, providing practical training and reorienting educational programmes to include a clear focus on the development of knowledge, skills, perspectives and values related to sustainable development. ESD spread across all levels and areas of education, in all regions of the world and is widely considered as being strategic in supporting sustainable development. It is thought to have advanced the quality education through more innovative ways of teaching and learning and the engagement of all stakeholders, and provided a solid base for scaling up efforts in preparing people to respond to the challenges of today.

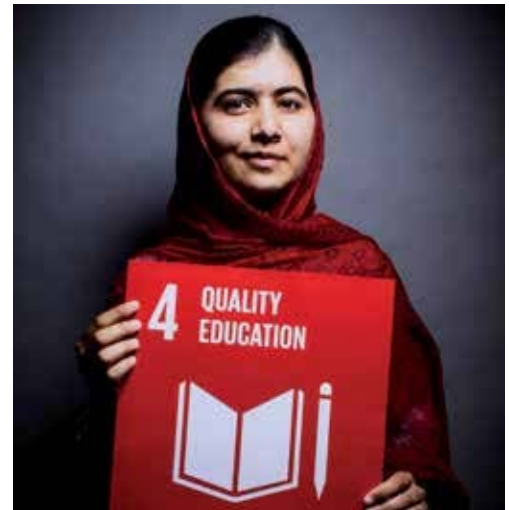
Presently, strategies dealing with the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development reflect ESD to tackle challenges such as poverty, environmental degradation, ecosystem loss and climate change. Nevertheless, many challenges still remain. Even the global MDG target on universal access to primary education will be missed. Almost everywhere education institutions are facing serious challenges and difficulties related to financing, especially in developing countries where the challenges are huge. These are also the countries where the targets to achieve improved access to certain basic services will not be met by the end of 2015. Close to one billion people will still lack access to safe water and more than two billion will lack access to basic sanitation. More than one billion people will still be without electricity, while close to three billion will be lacking access to clean cooking fuel and nearly one billion will go to bed hungry. These are largely the same set of underprivileged people – the so-called bottom billion. Furthermore, deep economic and social inequalities remain pervasive and environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, as well as disruptions caused by climate change and natural disasters are on the increase in those countries. Given that these challenges will persist beyond 2015, leaders all around the world will be required to navigate through a complex landscape of problems that require appropriate human and institutional capacity to respond adequately and education will remain crucial.

In its final ESD report the UNESCO provided valuable directions for policy-makers, educators, experts and other stakeholders in their efforts to advance understanding and action on ESD. Perhaps one of the most significant lessons learned during the Decade is that strong political leadership is instrumental to advancing education programmes that aim at responding to sustainable development. Leadership is essential for moving from policy commitments and demon-

Photos from top to bottom:
 WFP officer Nimdoma Sherpa, raised a flag to represent Goal 2, Zero Hunger.
 Malala Yousafzai picks Goal 4 Quality Education.
 Free diving world champion Umberto Pelizzari, raised a flag to represent Goal 14.
 Mafikizolo raised a flag to represent Goal 8, Decent Work and Economic Growth.
 Shachi Somani, the only Indian female cyclist participating in the HERO MTB Challenge 2015 and cyclist Gurman Reen raised a flag to represent Goal 4, Quality Education.



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ration projects to full implementation across the curriculum, teaching and operations, be it in formal systems or in non-formal learning environments and campaigns for raising public awareness. Additionally, it is very important to engage and empower women and youth to accelerate the implementation of solutions at the local community level.

Stimulating and reinforcing interdisciplinary education and research at the tertiary level to link science and technology with socio-economic development is also crucial. In this respect, higher education and research institutions (HE&RIs) can contribute to sustainable development as a place for specialised education and training – by generating and providing information and developing the skills required to propel “green economies” – and as a place for research and innovation – by developing the knowledge, technologies and services required for sustainable development. In addition, HE&RIs provide expert services (e.g. through consultancy, assessments, reviews, counselling, etc.) on development issues to public or private clients. These services have become increasingly important and they play a very important role in strengthening the external links of HE&RIs and, in particular, improving third-party funding for applied research and development. Third party funding is necessary given that core funding, especially for higher education institutions is principally meant for education and training.

The ESD Decade may have ended in 2014 and it is clear that there will not be another one anytime soon. But it is worth noting that the end of the Decade in 2014 is very timely because on the eve of a new global development agenda there is certainly an increased awareness of the importance of education for sustainable development. Leaders should learn from the experiences gained so far and build on the achievements of the Decade. The Post-2015 Development Agenda will be shaped by key drivers such as population growth, urbanisation, a growing middle class with increased income levels that will demand more resources, in addition to conflicts and post-conflict challenges, and accelerating impacts of climate change. These drivers will present additional challenges that require strong human and institutional capacity that will create an unprecedented demand for education at all levels. Leaders need to be adequately prepared to respond appropriately with the right systems of education to provide the critical mass of educated and skilled people required, especially in developing countries.

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