



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

# Education and National Sustainable Development Strategies



Since the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 countries around the world have been developing and implementing National Sustainable Development Strategies (NSDS). Sustainable Development competes with many deeply entrenched values and therefore progress has been slow. Tensions between long term and short term thinking, and between economic growth and social and environmental sustainability, are not easy to resolve. The NSDS process has gained impetus following the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, where it was agreed that countries need to take immediate steps to elaborate and formulate NSDS systems that can continuously improve. The UN Guidance Document describes an NSDS as a comprehensive, adaptable, continuous and long term undertaking that helps a country to achieve economic prosperity and higher levels of social welfare, while at the same time preserving the environment.

An NSDS is not just something that can be put together in a document and be promulgated. Development of an NSDS requires multi-stakeholder participation, partnerships, country ownership, shared vision with a commitment to continuous improvement, capacity development and the ability to build on existing knowledge and processes and a clear focus on outcomes. **Education** is a central dimension of achieving sustainable development, and needs to be incorporated into the NSDS process. **Learning** is central to the process of NSDS development and implementation.

## *Education for Sustainable Development and National Sustainable Development Strategies*

*Education* has been identified as an important social strategy for the realisation of a sustainable future. *Education for Sustainable Development* (ESD) recognises that it is impossible to achieve sustainable development without appropriate education, training and public awareness for all sectors of society. Thus,

- ◆ ESD needs to be a central focus within an NSDS;
- ◆ ESD can build capacity and learning capabilities within an NSDS development process; and
- ◆ Countries can also develop specific ESD strategies to strengthen the role of education, training and public awareness in achieving a sustainable future.

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*“Out biggest challenge in this new century is to take an idea that seems abstract – sustainable development – and turn it into a reality for all the world’s people.”*

—Kofi Anan, former UN Secretary General



## ESD as a central focus in a National Sustainable Development Strategy

Most National Sustainable Development Strategies identify education as key to achieve sustainable development. Education is needed to build capacity for implementing sustainable development objectives. Education can be integrated into the NSDS process in different ways, depending on the approach taken to the development of NSDS. There are four main types of NSDS development approaches (see Table 1 below).

Approach to NSDS development	How education is included
Comprehensive and multi-dimensional	Education is normally included under social strategies, or as a separate section in the NSDS.
Cross sectoral	An integrated approach to ESD involving education, training and public awareness is framed, but implemented sectorally.
Sectoral	Education is dealt with by the education sector. Other sectors that require education develop their own ESD strategies and plans.
Integration of sustainable development planning into existing planning processes	Sustainable development priorities are integrated into education and training policies.

*In the field of education, state policy will need to concentrate both on maintaining the present day obligatory general education system at a good level in all the territories, and think of some new trends specific to the sustainable development concept.*

—NSDS, Republic of Moldova

Table 1: Approaches to NSDS development and inclusion of education

## ESD builds learning capability within an NSDS process

National Sustainable Development Strategies involve stakeholders from a range of different sectors. Major challenges in the NSDS process are: leadership, multi-sectoral thinking, integrated or cross-cutting management, new economic thinking and practice, and multi-stakeholder participation. Few countries have developed the **learning capabilities** necessary for:

- ◆ Analysing the inherent trade-offs and inter-linkages among the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, and adapting national strategy accordingly;
- ◆ Restructuring economic policy, national budgeting and revenue generating processes through, for example, ecological taxes, subsidy reform, user fees, etc. for sustainable development;
- ◆ Co-ordinating sub-national and local sustainable development action; and
- ◆ Visionary leadership for sustainable development.

Education for Sustainable Development programmes are needed to build these learning capabilities in society. These learning capabilities are necessary if sustainable development is to move from the periphery of government decision-making to the centre.

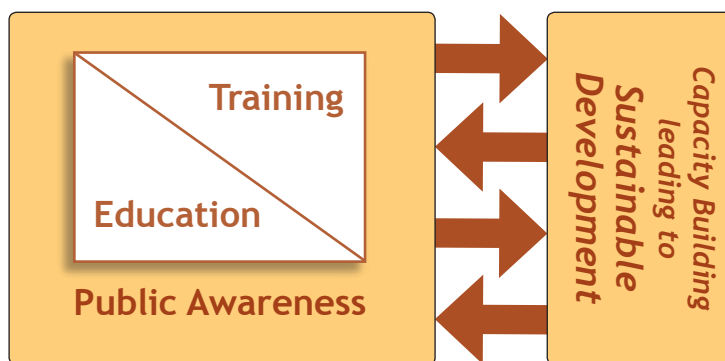


Sweden has developed learning capabilities to increase environmental taxes on carbon and sulphur emissions, diesel fuel, heating oil and electricity, while lowering income taxes and social security contributions – and has lowered carbon emissions.

## Developing a national strategy for ESD

ESD is multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral. Learning for sustainability needs to take place in all sectors of society and all walks of life. ESD is a lifelong learning process and needs to be integrated into the entire education, training and public awareness system to build capacity for sustainable development.

The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development is providing the impetus for countries to develop specific Education for Sustainable Development strategies or action plans. These are to *strengthen the role of education, training and public awareness* in building capacity for sustainable development. Such strategies can be *regional, sub-regional and national*.



### Some examples

The Asia-Pacific ESD strategy identified the following key stakeholders: governments / UNESCO national commissions; communities; private sector; formal education institutions; civil society; media; youth and international agencies. The strategy provides recommendations for engaging stakeholder groups.

The UK ESD strategy indicates that a force for action must be local strategic partnerships – urban and rural – involving local authorities, learning and skills councils and colleges. Universities and trade unions are also identified as stakeholders.

ESD strategies typically:

- ◆ Provide a situational analysis of key sustainable development issues and their relevance to education, training and public awareness;
- ◆ Identify key stakeholders involved in ESD;
- ◆ Develop country-based goals and strategies for ESD;
- ◆ Identify lead agents and an implementation mechanism (including roles and budgets);
- ◆ Establish a multi-stakeholder forum or committee to steer implementation; and
- ◆ Establish a monitoring and evaluation system to ensure continuous improvements.

### Strategy as practice and learning

National Sustainable Development Strategies, with their associated Education for Sustainable Development Strategies, are useful tools to guide decision making and set direction for re-orienting society towards sustainable development. Such strategies mean little unless they are used in **practice**. Thinking about strategy as something that *people do*, rather than something that *organisations have*, establishes *strategy as a practical process that is learning centred*. It helps to focus on how strategy actually works, and what changing knowledge, skills and action competences are needed throughout the process.

NSDS and ESD strategy should continuously maintain an effective balance of formal planning to guide practice, and informal learning that occurs through practice. This is necessary to respond to the complex and ever-changing sustainable development challenges they address.





# Policy Dialogue Questions

Use these questions to review education and development policies

How is education integrated into the National Sustainable Development Strategy?

Is education viewed as a key means of achieving sustainable development, and are new forms of education being developed to address sustainable development issues?

Are new education/training programmes being developed to build capacity for the NSDS process and its challenges?

Does the country have a specific ESD strategy or action plan that sets out objectives for education, training and public awareness for sustainable development?

Have key stakeholders who have an interest in ESD been identified? Are they also part of NSDS processes?

Have their roles and responsibilities in the ESD process been clarified?

Has a lead agent and a co-ordinating mechanism for ESD been established?

How can an ESD strategy be viewed as something that *people do*, rather than only something that *organisations have*?

How can practices and learning in the strategy process be supported?

## The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development – 2005-2014

Resolution 57/245 adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2002 declared 2005-2014 a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). This signals global commitment to strengthening the role of education in achieving sustainable development. It helps countries to re-orient education towards sustainable development.

### Objectives of the DESD:

1. Facilitate networking, linkages, exchange and interactions among stakeholders in ESD.
2. Foster an increased quality of teaching and learning in ESD.
3. Help countries make progress towards the Millennium Development Goals through ESD efforts.
4. Provide countries with new opportunities to incorporate ESD into education reform efforts.

[www.unesco.org/education/desd](http://www.unesco.org/education/desd)



### References and Resources

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