



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

# Education for Sustainable Development and the Millennium Development Goals



The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) provide a universal framework for development, agreed to by all UN Member States in 2000. They provide a means for developing countries and development partners to work together in pursuit of a sustainable future. *Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)* can contribute to the achievement of *all* the MDGs. It can help governments and development partners to ensure that capacity exists for achieving the MDGs. ESD provides *learning goals* that help to achieve the MDGs.

***New research shows that learning failures have high costs for countries.***

—MDG Global Monitoring Report, 2007

## ***How ESD contributes to the MDGs***

ESD addresses interrelated social, economic, environmental and cultural issues with a future’s perspective. It can contribute to achievement of the MDGs by:

- ◆ Supporting the education and learning goals of the MDGs;
- ◆ Enhancing knowledge of MDG issues in society;
- ◆ Developing action competence that strengthens political leadership and governance for service delivery related to the MDGs;
- ◆ Enhancing women’s empowerment and action competence to make decisions about their own and their children’s health and well-being;
- ◆ Developing knowledge and action competence for natural resource management, ecological sustainability, and sustainable living practices;
- ◆ Developing knowledge and action competence of sustainable agriculture to reduce hunger and improve food security;
- ◆ Developing critical thinking and evaluation skills to consider tensions that exist in development decision making;
- ◆ Developing creative thinking skills for new development solutions; and
- ◆ Engaging the corporate sector in promoting sustainable production and consumption.

## The Millennium Development Goals

- MDG 1 Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- MDG 2 Achieve universal primary education
- MDG 3 Promote gender equality and empower women
- MDG 4 Reduce child mortality
- MDG 5 Improve maternal health
- MDG 6 Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- MDG 7 Ensure environmental sustainability
- MDG 8 Develop a global partnership for development



## ESD provides learning goals for the MDGs

Monitoring of the achievement of MDG 2 (achievement of universal primary education) indicates that both *universal coverage* and *high learning levels* are required for sustainable development. Progress has been made in achieving universal coverage or access to education. An intensive effort is needed to enhance *quality* and *learning goals* to ensure that learning is effective and relevant. ESD can contribute to the quality agenda in education. It helps to close the gap between everyday and school knowledge, between intellectual and personified activity, between concepts and experience. It closes the gap between the curriculum, formal learning and the social context.

To achieve the other MDGs, the quality of education, training and capacity building needs to be improved. Monitoring of MDG 4, 5 and 6 on Health shows that the knowledge of health workers does not necessarily correlate with what they do. Evidence shows that such knowledge practice gaps are retarding achievement of the MDGs. Building capacity of health workers to practise their profession effectively is a critical learning goal to meet MDGs 4, 5 and 6. Similar knowledge practice gaps exist in other fields relevant to the MDGs. (See front page for a list of the MDGs.)

A distinguishing characteristic of developing countries is their high dependence on natural resources. Monitoring of the MDGs shows that the effectiveness of natural resource management has a significant impact on development prospects and performance. ESD is needed to develop action competence for improved natural resource management. This is a critical learning goal for developing countries, if they are to meet MDGs 1, 3 and 7 simultaneously.

ESD provides other learning goals for the MDGs such as:

- ◆ Developing knowledge and action competence for sustainable agricultural practices to reduce hunger and enhance food security (MDGs 1, 7);
- ◆ Empowering women to make decisions about their own health and the health of their children (MDGs 3, 4, 5, 6);
- ◆ Developing action competence of leaders, politicians and youth groups for service delivery and work (MDG 8).

### Closing the gap between knowledge and practice has direct results

In Zambia, long-lasting insecticide treated anti-malaria mosquito nets were made available by the government with support from development partners. Using ESD strategies, rural women and children were taught why the nets were beneficial, and how to use them effectively on a daily basis. The incidence of child deaths in Zambia, estimated at 50,000 per year, has been cut by a third. This shows how ESD, combined with government leadership and material provisions, can close the gap between knowledge and practice. This has direct and positive results for achieving the MDGs (Goal 6).



*Children in India monitoring access to safe water in their community in an ESD activity.*

## ESD builds knowledge of MDG issues

ESD brings issues of society, environment, economics and culture to the fore in education and learning. The core objective of the MDGs is the alleviation of poverty. ESD, through education and training, enables children and adult learners everywhere to investigate MDG issues:

- ◆ Strategies for addressing poverty and hunger;
- ◆ Issues affecting maternal and children's health;
- ◆ Factors leading to and sustaining gender inequalities;
- ◆ Issues affecting the empowerment of women;
- ◆ Human rights, social justice and environmental issues;
- ◆ Strategies for combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases;
- ◆ Principles and practices of sustainable development;
- ◆ Strategies to gain access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation;
- ◆ Urbanisation challenges; and
- ◆ Principles and practices of production, consumption, fair trade, good governance etc.

## *ESD develops action competence and values to address MDG issues*

Success in some countries demonstrates that rapid and large-scale progress towards the MDGs is feasible with strong government leadership, good policies and practical strategies. Strong government leadership and putting policies into practice requires *action competence*, and *values* that prioritise MDG issues. ESD emphasises action that is targeted towards the solutions of problems (i.e. the MDG issues). ESD develops *action competence* to address MDG issues, by developing knowledge of the issues, and *decision making capacity* for actions that are targeted towards solutions. Such actions can be direct, and provide direct solutions (e.g. a change in practice such as increased use of mosquito nets) or they can be indirect (e.g. influencing policy makers to provide funds for a mosquito net project). They can also be individual or collective.

Action competent learners will have:

- ◆ Broad and coherent **knowledge** of the nature and scope of the problems (e.g. health and sanitation issues), how they arose, who and what is affected by the problems and knowledge of what can be done;
- ◆ **Commitment and values** that motivate them to participate in contributing to changes in society;
- ◆ An **interest in the future**, and capacity to predict what change might be possible in a given context;
- ◆ **Social, critical and creative thinking skills**, why things are as they are and what needs to be done;
- ◆ **Experience of real-life situations** gained through participating individually or collectively in facilitating changes.

This develops **decision making capacity**. Action competent learners are also able to **evaluate, reflect on and restructure** their actions within an ongoing process of learning and change. Such learning is **learning as sustainable development** because it contributes directly to creating solutions to MDG issues in ways that are more sustainable and equitable.

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## *ESD develops critical thinking for evaluating MDG issues*

ESD encourages inter-disciplinary and holistic thinking and analysis of issues in context. MDG monitoring shows that achieving one MDG (e.g. reduction in poverty) might be at the expense of another MDG (e.g. ecological sustainability). Capacity is needed to critically evaluate development options and to come up with new solutions to tensions that arise in the process of achieving MDGs.

Education for Sustainable Development can develop critical thinking skills for evaluating and assessing the relationship between the different MDGs, and between the MDGs and other development frameworks such as the globalisation of capital. ESD can develop creative thinking skills to explore new development alternatives.

## *The MDGs are still achievable if we act now.*

–The UN MDG Report, 2007

Action competent learners can evaluate, reflect on and re-structure their actions



Adult women evaluating and reflecting on healthy eating and sustainable consumption practices in an ESD programme. Here they evaluate their food buying practices, and the health and nutrition choices they make for themselves and their children.

*High economic growth is contributing to the reduction of the global poverty rate. However, high economic growth also has high environmental costs.*

–MDG Global Monitoring Report, 2007

# Policy Dialogue Questions

Use these questions to review education and development policies

- Are learning goals for the MDGs included in education and training system policies, strategies and programmes?
- To what extent are MDG issues dealt with in education policy, curriculum and learning programmes?
- Do education and training policies and programmes exist to develop the action competence of leaders and government officials for service delivery related to the MDGs?
- Do education and training policies and programmes for women develop decision making skills that benefit their own and their children's health and well-being?
- Are there adequate education and training policies and programmes that focus on action competence for natural resource management, ecological sustainability, sustainable agriculture and food security?
- What values need to be integrated into education policies, strategies and programmes to strengthen achievement of the MDGs?
- Do educational policies and programmes emphasise the critical thinking skills and evaluation of development options and tensions?
- To what extent is ESD integrated into the formal education system and the national curriculum? How is the contribution of ESD to educational quality being monitored?
- Can ESD learning goals be monitored as a mechanism for helping to achieve the MDGs?

www.un.org/millenniumgoals  
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## References and Resources

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