

# Rio+20: Has Education Edged Closer to Being Mainstreamed?

Education has always had a difficult place in conservation and development dialogues. Everyone accepts that it ought to be there and it finds a place in most official documents. However, beyond the documents, it is rarely seen as a major factor in making the world more sustainable. Agenda 21 devoted a special chapter to education; all conventions mention it; but when it comes to allocating resources, and policy makers believing that education is indeed a tool for change, the commitment wavers. Unlike other instruments such as policy, financial mechanisms or technology, education has lagged behind in developing the credibility it needs.

A lot has happened since Rio 1992. Today, we are in the final years of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) launched in 2005. More case studies and success stories are available today than 20 years ago. So the question arises: was education more of a mainstream concern at Rio+20 than it was at Rio in 1992?

‘The Future We Want’ is the final outcome document from the Rio+20 Conference held at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 2012. Many would argue that education did emerge as an important component in this final outcome document which noted that sustainability can be achieved ‘including through education’<sup>1</sup>, and accepted that civil society is one of the key players involved in the process of achieving sustainability. The document therefore argues that in order to help civil society participate effectively, relevant information should be shared by various means, and by building their capacity. Information and communication technology is identified as an important means for exchange of information between governments and civil society.

The outcome document further stresses that workers and trade unions can play a crucial role in achieving sustainable development; and, once again, states that to enable them to do so, capacity building, information, education and training on sustainability should be provided. The document specifically mentions rural communities who encompass a significant proportion of the world’s poor and who make a prominent contribution to the economies of developing countries. Again, it argues that it is important to empower these communities and provide better

access to basic necessities, including education. Other groups specifically mentioned include farmers, fisherfolk and foresters who, the report argues, should gain access to advanced technologies and information so that they can make appropriate choices to practise their livelihood sustainably.

Youth were given special importance at Rio+20. Youth were recognised as the future leaders who should drive economies towards sustainable development. Hence, it is essential to empower them and provide them with quality education. The present education system alone is incapable of equipping children and youth with required knowledge and skills for sustainable development. The report mentions that youth should be equipped with necessary skills by government, workers, trade unions and employers so that they also have better job opportunities. In terms of specific techniques, the report states that awareness about sustainable development among youth can be raised through non-formal education in line with the goals of United Nations (UN) DESD. In order to address this factor, more international cooperation is called upon to increase funding in this sector. In terms of involving higher education institutions, the report encourages institutes to 'adopt good practices for sustainable management'<sup>2</sup> of campus and in community, integrate sustainable development in curriculum and develop innovative courses by effectively engaging all stakeholders.

Biodiversity, which is under threat, possesses intrinsic value and provides us with ecosystem services essential for the survival of living beings. It is necessary to conserve biodiversity and traditional knowledge; and practices of indigenous and local communities have exemplified the sustainable use of biodiversity while conserving it.

The outcome document urges nations to reiterate their commitment to 'education, strengthening of international cooperation to achieve universal access to primary education, to provide access to quality education, poverty eradication, gender equality and women empowerment, and Millennium Development Goals'.<sup>3</sup> It stresses that in order 'to improve the capacity of education systems',<sup>4</sup> training in-service professionals/stakeholders is urgently required. The report also notes that funding has always been a critical factor in taking forward the education agenda.

There were several side events organised by a number of governmental organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations at the Rio+20 Conference. There were some important side events organised by United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Earth Charter International (ECI), Soka Gakkai International (SGI), ESD-J and Centre for Environment Education (CEE) which focused on the role of education in creating the shift towards sustainable development. An event organised by UNITAR focused on recognising the opportunity to develop a strategic approach for learning and skills development in order to facilitate the transition towards a green economy.

The Earth Charter side events focused on integrating ethics and an ethical framework into education for sustainable development (ESD). The side event organised by UNESCO emphasised that in order to move towards sustainable development, all individuals and societies should be equipped and empowered with knowledge, skills and values to bring about the required change. It highlighted the contribution of ESD to building green societies and economies; paying equal attention to the

environmental, economic and social pillars of sustainable development. The UNICEF side event highlighted multi-stakeholder partnerships and strategies to enable the implementation of sustainable development through knowledge sharing, information exchange and bringing about change in learning systems. ESD-J side event focused on the role of ESD in achieving sustainable development in the local communities by empowering them and the role of NGOs in empowering the communities. In its side event, CEE shared a variety of innovative, enlightening and dynamic ways of using education as a driver of change for sustainable development from all parts of the world.

At Rio+20, there was general agreement among groups dealing with ESD that there was far more acceptance of the need to integrate communication, education, public awareness and capacity building into all efforts towards sustainable development.

Two key conferences post Rio+20 confirm that new emphasis is being placed on education, lending strength to the argument that it is becoming more of a priority. The first was the 'Intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education for Sustainable Development' (Tbilisi+35) held in Tbilisi, Georgia, in September 2012, at the invitation of the Government of Georgia in partnership with UNESCO and United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The communiqué adopted at this conference by representatives of governments from 104 countries as well as international intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations notes that 'the statements of *The Future We Want*...requires an emphasis on education in bringing about a meaningful change in people's mindsets and attitudes in pursuing sustainable consumption and production patterns as well as training and re-skilling the labour force'.<sup>5</sup> The communiqué goes on to 'affirm that education is critical to achieve sustainable development and to foster green economies and sustainable societies, to overcome social and economic inequality and to promote inter and intra-generational solidarity, peace and responsible lifestyles'.<sup>6</sup>

The next important milestone was achieved at the Conference of Parties (COP 11) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), held at Hyderabad, India, in October 2012, in terms of holding a parallel conference on biodiversity conservation and ESD within the framework of COP 11. The outcome document from this conference, received by the Indian and French ministers for the Environment and the Executive Secretary of the CBD, highlighted the way forward.<sup>7</sup> Noting that the first Aichi biodiversity target states that 'by 2020, at the latest, people are aware of the values of biodiversity and the steps they can take to conserve and use it sustainably', it outlined the need for the development of an educational strategy and plans of action that are supportive to the objectives of CBD. An important memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed on the last day of the conference between the CBD secretariat and CEE in order to take these ideas forward.

But more work is required to establish credibility among policy makers at all levels. One needs to be able to demonstrate and measure the impact of ESD on sustainable development. This requires more research, developing better monitoring and evaluation tools, collecting and documenting case studies and understanding how and where these are most effective. There are two more years to go before the end of the DESD. It is important that the community of educators, practitioners, academics and researchers work towards this goal. With the very positive support for ESD at

Rio+20, the Intergovernmental Conference and the COP Biodiversity, the momentum generated needs to be carried forward.

The current issue of the journal comes in the year that marks 20 years of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held at Rio de Janeiro in 1992. At that time, along with Agenda 21, came the three important multilateral environment conventions on climate change, biological diversity and desertification. This was a period over which the concept of ESD evolved. The UN DESD started in 2005 and UNESCO was given the responsibility to be the lead agency on behalf of the UN. And so, 20 years after Rio, we felt it would be appropriate to ask the DESD secretariat at UNESCO to compile and edit a special section which would help explore the way ESD has evolved over the three conventions. We thank UNESCO for contributing the special section on ESD to this issue of JESD.

## Notes

1. United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, Rio+20. 2012. 'The Future We Want'. Available at <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/futurewewant.html>. Accessed 28 August 2012.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. Intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education for Sustainable Development (Tbilisi+35). September 2012. 'Final Communiqué'. Available at [http://www.tbilisiplus35.ge/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=148&lang=en#.UJpnBq7mPYs](http://www.tbilisiplus35.ge/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=148&lang=en#.UJpnBq7mPYs). Accessed 2 November 2012.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Centre for Environment Education (CEE). 2012. Outcome document on Education and Biodiversity Conservation. Learning to conserve Biodiversity in a Rapidly Changing World. Adopted at the parallel event: International Conference on Biodiversity conservation and Education for Sustainable Development. Held at the XI conference of parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP 11), Hyderabad, India, October 13–14. Available at <http://www.ceeindia.org/cee/esd-cop11/index.html>. Accessed 2 November 2012.

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