# Beyond ESD-EFA Dialogue

**YOKO MOCHIZUKI\***

*United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Paris, France*
*Email: y.mochizuki@unesco.org*

**Abstract** The importance of the role of education in achieving sustainable development is underscored by the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). As the final year of the DESD approaching in 2014 and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Education for All (EFA) goals approaching their target date in 2015, this article provides an overview of the emerging context in which Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and EFA are played out, based primarily on the review of the recent UN publications. Building upon the outcomes of the Rio+20 conference and on-going re-thinking of development trajectories, the article calls for going beyond the traditional ESD-EFA dialogue and reshaping education as a critical lever for realizing more resilient, equitable and sustainable societies. The understanding that people are essential agents for redirecting development paths should profoundly change the ways in which education policy-makers craft and implement education policy.

**Keywords** Education for Sustainable Development, ESD, Education for All, EFA, climate change, Rio+20

## INTRODUCTION

The United Nations (UN) Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD), spanning 2005-2014, marked its midpoint in 2009. As a global education initiative coordinated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the DESD has been closely aligned, at least conceptually, to the forerunning global education and development initiatives, notably the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Education for All (EFA) movement (see, for example, UNESCO, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009). Whereas the conceptual alignment of 'education for sustainability' with 'development goals' is at times negatively interpreted (by some environmental educators) as diluting the project of transformative learning for the transition to sustainability, promoting dialogue between Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and EFA has been emphasized by UNESCO as its official strategy to mobilize support for the DESD. Such searching for common ground between EFA and ESD has led UNESCO to the obvious position that they are both about improving the quality of education. This special section of *International Journal of Environmental and Rural Development* is an attempt to advance ESD-EFA synergies by taking a closer look at the present situation and future prospects of cooperation between ESD and EFA stakeholders and activities. This article, as an introduction to the section, provides an overview of the emerging context in which EFA and ESD are played out.

## SHAPING THE NEW GLOBAL EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

### A renewed focus on learning

The 1990 adoption of the EFA goals at the World Conference on EFA (Jomtien, Thailand) demonstrated an international commitment to meeting basic learning needs for all. This commitment was affirmed in the 2000 Dakar Framework for Action's Goal 6, which focuses on "improving every aspect of the quality of education, and ensuring their excellence so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills"

(UNESCO, 2000, p.8). As we approach the target year of the EFA goals and MDGs in 2015, there is growing concern that millions of children and youth do not have the basic knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in school and life.

Since the official establishment of MDGs in 2000, most developing countries have sought to achieve the education MDGs (MDGs 2 and 3) and EFA goals as part of their national development policies, education policy formulation and planning, budget allocations and strategic interventions, with support from international and bilateral agencies which in turn aim at achieving these goals as part of their development assistance strategies. At the same time, high political profile of the MDGs (agreed by Heads of States) has overshadowed the EFA goals (agreed by sector Ministers). Education MDGs are restricted to primary level education (MDG 2) and gender equality (MDG 3). While EFA has always been not only about guaranteeing access but also about achieving quality learning for all since its inception in 1990, the strong focus on education MDGs has distorted progress with EFA, masking a variety of disparities and neglecting critical factors beyond access and completion of primary education.

The education MDGs underline enrolment rates, completion rates and gender parity index as key indicators of educational development, which has significantly contributed to making advocacy messages easy to understand and directing countries' efforts towards getting more children into school and reducing disparities between groups. These indicators are, however, inadequate for assessing benefits gained from investing in education. It is not access, completion or parity *per se* that matters; it is learning achievement that correlates with development both at individual and collective levels. The World Bank's education strategy now has a new emphasis on learning achievement over enrolment: "ultimately what matters for growth is not the years that student spend in school, but what they learn" (World Bank, 2011, p. 12). In order to "shift the conversation in education from a heavy focus on access to access plus learning" and "ensure that learning for all is a central component of the global development agenda", UNESCO and the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution convened a "Learning Metrics Task Force" to identify common competencies (learning outcomes) at early childhood, primary and post-primary education levels (Global Compact for Learning, 2012).

Furthermore, to make a final push to meet the MDGs and prepare for the post-2015 agenda, the UN Secretary-General launched the global education initiative "Education First" in September 2012. The five-year initiative has three pillars: (1) put every child in school; (2) improve the quality of education; and (3) foster global citizenship. The second and third pillars demonstrate a renewed focus on learning, providing ample room for ESD implementation as an integral element of quality learning. Notably, the initiative identifies "understanding local environments, designing greener technologies, changing consumption and production patterns and coping better with the impacts of economic and natural shocks" as skills essential to ensuring environmental sustainability, which is added to the list of critical roles of education in development (UN Secretary-General, 2012, p.11). The Education First initiative provides a platform to enhance the ESD-EFA synergies by recognizing the role of education in promoting environmental awareness, knowledge and skills in addition to its classic roles in enhancing gender equality, economic opportunities and health.

**ESD and Rio+20**

The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012, also referred to as Rio+20, provided UN agencies an opportunity to articulate the role of education in contributing to sustainable development. As one of the two main themes of the conference, "green economy" has emerged as a pathway towards sustainable development. As inputs into Rio+20, many UN documents were published with explicit references to the role of education in making a transition to greener economies. For one, UNESCO (2011) published a report entitled *From Green Economies to Green Societies: UNESCO's Commitment to Sustainable Development*, highlighting ESD and greening Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) as important educational contributions to sustainable development.

A number of other UN reports also noted the significance of ESD. The UN Environment Management Group (2011) called for ESD to ingrain "requisite attitudes, knowledge and values needed for responsible eco-citizenship" (p.103). The UNDP Human Development Report 2011, titled *Sustainability and Equity: A Better Future for All*, demonstrated that progress in human development cannot continue without paying adequate attention to sustainability and equity. In its brief reference to the DESD, the Report singled out "tempering excessive consumption" and "encouraging sustainable consumption" as a major goal of ESD (UNDP 2011, p.27, Box 2.3). While the UNDP's interpretation of ESD was considerably narrower than UNESCO's definition, this is nevertheless one indication that ESD is being mainstreamed into the development agenda.

The International Labour Organization's (ILO/Cedefop, 2011) report *Skills for Green Jobs: A Global View* made a conclusion that strongly supports integration of ESD at all levels of education, although it did not use the term ESD: "Coherent multi-level skills development responses are seen as the most effective approach to greening economies, as they address both consumption and production patterns. They influence consumption by raising environmental awareness through general schooling or mass media; and they help production move to more environmentally conscious practices through training programmes, vocational, technical and higher education and training, and lifelong learning at enterprise level" (p. xxiii).

Furthermore, the final report of the United Nations Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Global Sustainability (2012), titled *Resilient People, Resilient Planet: A Future Worth Choosing*, highlighted "[advancing] education for sustainable development, including secondary and vocational education, and building of skills to help ensure that all of society can contribute to solutions that address today's challenges and capitalize on opportunities" as one of the six priority areas for action needed to empower people to make sustainable choices (p.6).

The Rio+20 Conference marked a significant milestone in the advancement of ESD. In the Rio+20 outcome document *The Future We Want*, nations have agreed to "promote education for sustainable development and to integrate sustainable development more actively into education beyond the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development". Another relevant outcome of Rio+20 is the agreement by Member States to launch a process to develop a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which is to converge wit the post-2015 development agenda.

**Preparing for the Post-2015 Development Agenda**

With the MDGs and the EFA goals approaching their target date in 2015, the UN Secretary-General established the UN System Task Team to support UN system-wide preparations for the post-2015 UN Development agenda. The UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda (2012), in its first report entitled *Realizing the Future We want for All*, clearly signals the integration of the concept of sustainability into the mainstream development discourse: "[the] continuous striving for improvements in material welfare is threatening to surpass the limits of the natural resource base unless there is a radical shift towards more sustainable patterns of consumption and production and resource use" (p. i). The Task Team further asserts: "Business as usual … cannot be an option and transformative change is needed" (p. i). Time is ripe to reconceptualise the role of education in making such transformative change happen.

**ESD AS STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS**

**From Rio to Rio+20**

The year 2012 marked the twentieth anniversary of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, which produced Agenda 21 as a major outcome. Chapter 36 of Agenda 21—which relates to the promotion of education, public awareness and training for sustainable development—consolidated the international discussions on the role of education in achieving sustainable development, and it is generally viewed as marking the birth of ESD in the international community. As Task Manager of Chapter 36 of Agenda 21 and lead agency of the DESD, UNESCO has promoted ESD, but its efforts have

focused largely on advocacy until recently. The 1992 Rio Summit also gave rise to the three Rio Conventions: the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). The Rio conventions include Articles which relate to education and oblige the State Parties to the conventions to develop and implement education and training programmes in these areas.

Partly because the main emphasis 20 years ago was to address long neglected and then emerging environmental concerns, environmental health and ecological balance have been emphasized in policy and practice on sustainable development. In the case of UNFCCC, "the extreme focus within the climate field on the science of emissions and impacts on the environment, compounded by the late entry of social scientists and social organizations into climate change work, as well as the late attention to adaptation as a priority in policy and practice" have delayed the integration of social dimensions into the climate change discourse—including the ways in which mitigation and adaptation measures are designed and assessed (UN Systems Task Team on Social Dimension of Climate Change, 2011, p. 8). Today the UN System Task Team on Social Dimension of Climate Change (2011) aims at integrating "social dimensions"—dimensions that reflect "the social, economic and behavioural aspects of the human conditions" including education—into the climate change architecture (p. 3).

Despite the recognition of ESD as a moral imperative and an important dimension of quality education, ESD has often been perceived as all-encompassing lofty ideals which have little relevance to strategic education interventions in developing countries. Such perception will quickly change as sustainability is mainstreamed into the development discourse. The UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda (2012) identifies human rights, equality and sustainability as the three fundamental principles upon which a vision for the future should rest. Twenty years since the 1992 Rio Summit, the international development community has come to accept the limits of the current model of progress and the need for major transformations in patterns of consumption and production and social organization. Today both the development discourse and the climate change discourse are being rearticulated to realize a better world for all, creating many entry points for ESD as concrete and strategic interventions in developing countries.

**Climate change education as a tangible entry point to ESD**

In 2009, UNESCO developed its strategy for the second half of the DESD, highlighting climate change, disaster risk reduction and biodiversity as priority themes. Consequently, UNESCO established the Climate Change Education for Sustainable Development (CCESD) Programme in 2010. This new development was at times misinterpreted as narrowing down ESD to thematic approaches to sustainable development and compromising its holistic approach. Such misinterpretation is based on the assumption that CCESD will be mainly about the greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere and how to reduce emissions.

In recent years, the concept and practice of "Climate Change Education" have gained importance and been broadened to go beyond a traditional focus on climate science. ESD is increasingly understood as a holistic framework to advance Climate Change Education (Anderson, 2010; UNESCO/UNEP, 2011, p.56). Child-focused organizations like Plan International and UNICEF also recognize a holistic approach to education (formal and non-formal) —to increase the learner's understanding of key sustainable development issues and readiness to take action for shaping a resilient and sustainable society—as an integral aspect of reducing children's vulnerability to climate change and safeguarding their rights. UNICEF (2011) identifies "promoting environmental education and life skills" as one of the eight recommendations to enhance people's capacity to adapt to climate change, and calls for adapting TVET and non-formal education to "the requirements of low carbon economies" (p. 21, 6.6). Polack (2010) points out that the analysis of children's rights to education should reflect "the need for a more holistic approach to education focused around sustainable development" (p.34). These calls for an integrated approach to promoting climate change ducation—for mitigation and adaptation—and ensuring children's rights give a strong support to ESD implementation in developing countries.

Climate change is far from a solely environmental matter in terms of its root causes and actual and anticipated impacts, which makes it a strategic entry point to implementing ESD activities in a holistic manner. First, climate change has far-reaching repercussions for where people can settle, grow food, keep built infrastructure and count on functioning ecosystems. Climate change therefore touches upon myriad aspects of sustainable development, ranging from human displacement to food security and sustainable livelihoods, concretizing what it means to address environmental, economic and social dimensions of sustainable development in an integrated manner. Moreover, climate change does not affect everybody equally, not only because its effects on temperature, rain fall, sea level and natural hazards vary across regions, but also because the capacity of individuals and societies to respond and protect themselves also varies tremendously. Overall, developing countries bear many of the costs of climate change. For example, Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are highly exposed to natural disasters and vulnerable to sea level rise. There is broad consensus on the central importance of education in enhancing resilience of vulnerable groups and communities and their coping capacities. In regions vulnerable to extreme weather events—such as droughts, storms and floods—that can be induced or exacerbated by climate change, there are emerging positive synergies in efforts to promote Climate Change Education as an adaptation strategy and efforts to integrate disaster risk reduction (DRR) in education.

Second, while focusing on climate change impacts on human life allows ESD interventions to target the most vulnerable populations or "victims" of the adverse effects of climate change, addressing the root causes of climate change and designing mitigation and adaptation measures require ESD programmes to highlight human-beings as both the "drivers" of climate change and the "essential agents for redirecting development trajectories" (UN System Task Team on Social Dimensions of Climate Change, 2011, p. 5). Climate Change Education thus can address the needs of the most vulnerable populations (who are also the targets of MDG and EFA interventions), encourage rethinking of the current model of progress, and empower people to become change agents. Climate Change Education in the context of ESD is especially compelling at this critical juncture when the international community is deliberating the next set of development goals and many nations are committing themselves to more robust strategies for mitigation and adaptation.

**CONCLUSION**

Sustainable development has always been about addressing the development and environmental agendas in an integrated manner, but it has too often been associated exclusively with the environmental agenda. This explains why ESD has often been equated with environmental education. With Rio+20 and the on-going rethinking of the development goals towards 2015, the development community and environmental community are making mutual approach towards sustainable development in the genuine sense of the word. As the global development agenda will be renegotiated in the coming years, we should go beyond the traditional ESD-EFA dialogue (which assumes the dichotomy between ESD and EFA) and start articulating education as a critical lever for realizing more resilient, equitable and sustainable societies. The understanding that people are essential agents for redirecting development trajectories should profoundly change the ways in which education policy-makers craft and implement education policy.

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