

Education, Developing Economies and Sustainable Development Goals: An Agenda for the Research Process

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Abstract

Within the thought line of achieving Sustainable Development Goals in developing economies of the world, education is an important factor. The 2030 Agenda for sustainable development focuses attention on lifelong learning opportunities for all. Hence, the improvement of quality, as well as the quantity of education is essential to sustainable development as few other areas offer as great a return on investment as qualitative upgrades in education. As such, the inclusion of quality education needs not to be seen as simply a Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) but also as an essential factor for other SDGs. Making connections between education and other SDGs will reduce the likelihood that elements of quality education are cut from policy agendas, budgets, and curricula. This is to ensure an improved and inclusive educational system which will, in turn, give citizens the opportunity to acquire the values, skills and knowledge that will empower them to contribute to sustainable development.

Keywords:

Education,
Developing
Economies and
Sustainable
Development Goals

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Background to the Study

The importance of education in the development of any economy cannot be overstressed. Robert and Paul (2015) noted that education has a long history as an international priority, and the right to education was first enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Improving education and ensuring all people are afforded a high standard of education will be reaffirmed as a key global goal of development under the post-2015 development agenda. The recent synthesis report of the UN Secretary-General on the post-2015 development agenda stated that “high-quality education and life-long learning” and the capacity of teachers are key factors in empowering youth as a “globally connected engine for change” (UN Secretary-General, 2014: 21-2).

In fact, many people around the world believe that education is the most important goal for this agenda. At the World 2015, individuals can rank their top priorities for the agenda. Over 7.6 million people have voted, and of the sixteen potential priorities, provision of a good education is consistently ranked as the highest priority across all cohorts and has received prioritization by over two-thirds of all voters (Robert and Paul, 2015).

Education is a fundamental component for the achievement of all other SDGs. Education is a pillar for the achievement of human development. It is crucial that more investments and efforts are geared into ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. Additionally, education serves as an important means of implementation (MOI) that cuts across all of SDGs and will support the overall achievement of the post-2015 development agenda, for which education is recognized as having one of the highest long-term returns on investment of all development goals (Robert and Paul, 2015). In this regard, this review defines the importance of education in the actualization of SDGs in developing economies and further sets an agenda for the research process.

The concept of Sustainable Development Goals

The concept of sustainable development emerged as a response to a growing concern about human society's impact on the natural environment. The concept of sustainable development was defined in 1987 by the Brundtland Commission (formally the World Commission on Environment and Development) as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (Brundtland, 1987). This definition acknowledges that while development may be necessary to meet human needs and improve the quality of life, it must happen without depleting the capacity of the natural environment to meet present and future needs.

The sustainable development initiative has grown and campaigned on the basis that sustainability protects both the interests of future generations and the earth's capacity to regenerate. At first, it emphasized the environment in development policies but, since 2002, has evolved to encompass social justice and the fight against poverty as key principles of sustainable development (Nevin, 2008).

Education for sustainable development in developing economies

The primary objective of education for sustainable development (ESD) is the improvement of the quality of life for people without damaging the environment. Therefore, although all three 'educations' have much in common they differ in their primary goal. The relationship between ESD and other educational sectors is the subject of ongoing debate with the latter often regarding ESD as being 'part of' their education. Moreover, what most scholars regard as the closest sector to ESD - environmental education - is not necessarily content to be seen as an equivalent to ESD. Many believe that ESD should embrace all these educational sectors to a certain level and, with sustainable development assuming increasing importance in policy and educational contexts, there will be a need for each of these sectors and their practitioners to explore more closely the commonalities between them.

Education for sustainable development expands upon the social and human rights dimension in DE and other educational sectors to include a strong environmental focus. ESD shares many similarities with DE and addresses issues such as climate change, oil shortages, and water pollution, the need to maintain biodiversity as well as poverty alleviation and human rights. ESD and DE also employ similar methodologies including critical thinking and problem solving, experiential learning, role play, guided interpretation, debate, futures thinking, and participatory decision making. ESD also helps to develop links between the lives of people locally and in the developing world and encourages us to link our actions at a local level to the needs and management of the planet and its population.

According to Nevin (2008), good quality education is an essential tool for achieving a more sustainable world. This was emphasized at the UN World Summit in Johannesburg in 2002 where the reorientation of current education systems was outlined as key to sustainable development. Education for sustainable development (ESD) promotes the development of the knowledge, skills, understanding, values, and actions required creating a sustainable world, which ensures environmental protection and conservation, promotes social equity and encourages economic sustainability. The concept of ESD developed largely from environmental education, which has sought to develop the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and behaviors in people to care for their environment. The aim of ESD is to enable people to make decisions and carry out actions to improve our quality of life without compromising the planet. It also aims to integrate the values inherent in sustainable development into all aspects and levels of learning (Nevin, 2008).

There are a number of key themes in ESD and while the dominant focus is on environmental concerns, it also addresses themes such as poverty alleviation, citizenship, peace, ethics, responsibility in local and global contexts, democracy and governance, justice, human rights, gender equality, corporate responsibility, natural resource management, and biological diversity. It is generally accepted that certain characteristics are important for the successful implementation of ESD, reflecting the equal importance

of both the learning process and the outcomes of the education process (adapted from 'UN Decade of Sustainable Development' UNESCO Nairobi Cluster, 2006). ESD should:

1. Be embedded in the curriculum in an interdisciplinary and holistic manner, allowing for a whole-institution approach to policymaking.
2. Share the values and principles that underpin sustainable development.
3. Promote critical thinking, problem solving and action, all of which develop confidence in addressing the challenges to sustainable development.
4. Employ a variety of educational methods, such as literature, art, drama, and debate to illustrate the processes.
5. Allow learners to participate in decision-making on the design and content of educational programmes.
6. Address local as well as global issues, and avoid jargon-ridden language and terms.
7. Look to the future, ensuring that the content has a long-term perspective and uses medium and long-term planning (Nevin, 2008).

To promote ESD, the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, 2005-2014, (DESD) was adopted by the UN General Assembly with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) designated as the lead agency for promotion throughout the decade. The decade pursues a global vision 'of a world where everyone has the opportunity to benefit from quality education and learn the values, and lifestyles required for a sustainable future and for positive societal transformation (UNESCO, 2017).

The goal of the decade, as outlined by UNESCO, is to integrate the principles, values, and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning. This aims to encourage changes in behavior that will create a more sustainable future. One of the most important aspects of the DESD is the recognition that ESD must engage a wide range of stakeholders from government, the private sector, civil society, non-governmental, and the general public.

In its International Implementation Scheme (IIS) for DESD, UNESCO states that ESD is fundamentally about values, particularly respect for others, including those of present and future generations, for difference and diversity, for the environment and for the planet's resources (UNESCO, 2006). Education enables us to understand ourselves and others and our links with the wider natural and social environment; this understanding serves as a durable basis for building respect. Along with a sense of justice, responsibility, exploration and dialogue, ESD aims to move us toward adopting behaviors and practices which will enable us all to live a full life without being deprived of basic human needs.

Conclusion

It is clear that education will remain important in the post-2015 development agenda, but how best to integrate and frame education's role in strengthening sustainable development must be further explored. To effectively promote these aspects, an

international development goal on education must continue to support increases in both educational access and attainment. This goal must also be ambitious in its efforts to achieve essential improvements to the quality of education in order to catalyze the transformative learning needed for realizing a sustainable future for all (Robert and Paul, 2015).

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