

Implementing the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD): achievements, open questions and strategies for the way forward

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Abstract This paper looks at the implementation of the DESD from a global perspective. It takes the position that quality education is fundamental for learning how to live sustainably, and that the DESD needs to be better positioned in the education landscape and conceived as a global social movement that must be fostered and nurtured for the well-being of humankind. It suggests that, while there has been progress, much remains to be achieved. Several key challenges are identified. With regard to overcoming these obstacles, it focuses on macro-level strategies that would allow the development of environments in which actions can take root and grow so that the work of the DESD endures beyond the decade itself. Finally, it suggests that there are some opportunities that can be seized to make the task ahead easier to accomplish.

Keywords Education · Sustainable development · ESD · Way forward · Progress · Strategies

Résumé Mettre en oeuvre la Décennie des Nations Unies pour l'éducation en vue du développement durable (DEDD): résultats, questions en suspens et futures stratégies – Cet article analyse dans une perspective mondiale la mise en oeuvre de la DEDD. L'auteure avance qu'une éducation de qualité est essentielle pour apprendre à vivre dans une perspective durable, que la DEDD doit être mieux positionnée dans le monde éducatif et conçue comme un mouvement social planétaire qui doit être encouragé et enrichi pour le bien-être de l'humanité. Elle constate que, si des progrès ont été réalisés, il reste beaucoup à accomplir. Elle

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identifie plusieurs grands défis, et dans l'optique de surmonter ces obstacles, elle se penche sur les stratégies au macro-niveau qui permettraient la création d'environnements dans lesquels les actions pourraient s'enraciner et s'amplifier, de sorte à prolonger l'action de la DEDD au-delà de la Décennie. Enfin, elle propose de saisir les opportunités censées rendre plus aisée la tâche qui reste à accomplir.

Zusammenfassung Die Umsetzung der UN-Dekade "Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung" (DESD): Was bisher erreicht wurde, offene Fragen und Strategien für den Weg in die Zukunft – Dieser Beitrag beschäftigt sich mit der Umsetzung der DESD aus globaler Sicht. Darin wird die Position vertreten, dass man nur durch hochwertige Bildung nachhaltig leben lernen kann und dass die DESD einen prominenteren Platz in der Bildungslandschaft erhalten muss. Sie sollte als weltweite soziale Bewegung gesehen werden, die um des Wohlergehens der Menschheit willen gehegt und gepflegt werden muss. Auch wenn es Fortschritte gegeben hat, so bleibt doch noch eine Menge zu tun. Es stellen sich große Herausforderungen. Gesamtgesellschaftliche Strategien zu deren Bewältigung können ein Umfeld entstehen lassen, in der Initiativen Fuß fassen und sich weiterentwickeln können, sodass die Arbeit der DESD auch nach Ablauf der Dekade selbst weiterhin Bestand hat. Zum Schluss werden einige Vorschläge gemacht, wie man die bevorstehende Aufgabe leichter bewältigen kann.

Resumen Implementando la Década de la Educación para el Desarrollo Sostenible (DEDS) de las Naciones Unidas: logros, cuestiones abiertas y estrategias para el camino a seguir – En este trabajo, la autora contempla la implementación de la DEDS desde una perspectiva global. Adopta la posición de que la calidad educativa es fundamental para aprender cómo vivir de forma sostenible, y que la DEDS necesita estar mejor posicionada en el ámbito educativo y ser concebida como movimiento social global que debe promoverse y cuidarse para el bienestar de la humanidad. La autora plantea que, pese a los progresos que efectivamente se han registrado, aún quedan muchas metas por alcanzar. En este trabajo, identifica diversos retos clave. En cuanto a la superación de los obstáculos que se presentan, la autora se centra en estrategias de macronivel que permitan el desarrollo de entornos donde las acciones puedan echar raíz y crecer, de modo que el trabajo de la DEDS perdure más allá de esta década como tal. Finalmente, sugiere que hay ciertas oportunidades que pueden ser aprovechadas para que la meta establecida sea más fácil de alcanzar.

Резюме Реализация программы ООН «Десятилетие образования для устойчивого развития»: достижения, нерешенные вопросы и дальнейшие стратегии – В данной статье рассматривается реализация программы «Десятилетие образования для устойчивого развития» в глобальном отношении. Считается, что качественное образование является фундаментальным для того, чтобы научиться жить устойчиво, и что необходимо лучше позиционировать «Десятилетие образования для устойчивого развития» в образовательном ландшафте, так как оно было задумано как глобальное общественное

движение, которое следует укреплять и поддерживать для благосостояния человечества. Несмотря на некоторые успехи, все еще необходимо многого достичь. Определено несколько ключевых проблем. Для преодоления этих препятствий акцент ставится на стратегиях макро-уровня, которые содействовали бы развитию той среды, в которой инициативы могли бы укореняться и развиваться таким образом, чтобы работа по программе «Десятилетие образования для устойчивого развития» продолжалась и после окончания этого десятилетия. Наконец, утверждается, что имеются некоторые возможности, которыми следует воспользоваться для того, чтобы облегчить выполнение предстоящего задания.

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD): a definitional dilemma

According to UNESCO, “The overall goal of the DESD is to integrate the values inherent in sustainable development into all aspects of learning to encourage changes in behaviour that allow for a more sustainable and just society for all” (UNESCO October 2005b, Executive Summary). The definition of ESD is one that has challenged many. One definitional approach when considering the implementation of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) is to focus on a concept that is fundamentally educational in its nature—to define the education component of ESD as quality education that includes the range of ideas and concerns that emerged out of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) where the decade under consideration, the DESD, was born. Thus quality education can be described as an education that underpins learning for sustainable development and that it could be defined as follows:

A quality education understands the past, is relevant to the present, and has a view to the future. Quality education relates to knowledge building and the skillful application of all forms of knowledge by unique individuals who function both independently and in relation to others. A quality education reflects the dynamic nature of culture and languages, the value of the individual in relation to the larger context, and the importance of living in a way that promotes equality in the present and fosters a sustainable future (Pigozzi 2009).

This definition has the advantage of not being tied to any modality of education (informal, non-formal or formal); of not addressing any particular level of education (higher education, early childhood, for example); of being able to reflect different ideological, sociological and/or political perspectives; and of not being limited to any particular kind of learner (youth, adults for example). In addition, it can be reflected in educational activities that have a particular subject or philosophical intent, such as citizenship education, peace education, or lifelong education. There is an implementation challenge, however, if each of these kinds of education wishes to retain its own identity rather than looking toward its links, contributions and possible constraints to sustainable futures.

A strength of this definition is that it is embedded in learning processes. It emphasises the education dimension of ESD—the learning for sustainability, and does not have a primary focus on a specific subject or some aspect of sustainable development such as environmental stewardship or political inequality. It does, if successful, enable learners to be actors for sustainability, for them to have understood the issues, and to have sought and implemented relevant, meaningful and practical solutions in their own lives. This is not sufficient for understanding or commenting on a decade that has been initiated and is actively involved in implementing this concept, however.

This education-oriented definition has to be coupled with considerations of to what extent and how well this concept is understood, is practiced, and is having or is likely to have an impact on human behaviour such that we learn to live more sustainably. It is here that the dilemma emerges. To what extent does one focus on education itself and to what extent does one expand the definition to ensure that the wishes of the WSSD and the subsequent UNESCO implementation scheme, which was approved by the UN General Assembly, are taken into account (UNESCO October 2005b)? Certainly these aspects have to frame this paper on implementation. Equally as important in selecting this approach, however, is an understanding of the relevant discourse in education itself, and particularly the quality of education.

Framing the education context

The education landscape at the midpoint of the DESD

There are several parallel and reciprocal movements in education that share both time and space with the DESD. It is important to understand them to better contextualise both the progress and the challenges that the DESD has faced and will continue to face. UNESCO has summarised in a clear way how most, but not all, of these different and related movements in education relate to each other (UNESCO September 2005a).

As noted earlier, the DESD was proposed at the WSSD in Johannesburg in 2002 and agreed to by the UN General Assembly (UNESCO December 2002b). The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014), for which UNESCO is the lead agency, seeks to integrate the principles, values and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning, in order to address the social, economic, cultural and environmental problems we face in the twenty-first century.

The Education for All (EFA) movement, which began in 1990 and was reaffirmed at Dakar in 2000, focuses on six key goals that, if achieved in 2015, will have an enormous impact (UNESCO 2000). These goals cover basic education, which includes early childhood, primary and, in many cases, all or some of secondary and adult education—all including both formal and non-formal approaches.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were also agreed to in 2000 (United Nations General Assembly 2000). These eight goals address the broader

development agenda. They include two specific education goals—one addressing universal primary education and one calling for gender parity at primary and secondary levels.

Convinced that “literacy is crucial to the acquisition, by every child, youth and adult, of essential life skills” (<http://www.unesco.org/en/literacy/un-literacy-decade/>), the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD) was declared by the United Nations General Assembly in December 2001 and spans from 2003 to 2014. It aims to support the goal of achieving EFA by addressing the more than 774 million adults and 72 million out-of-school children in this world who are still deprived of literacy and of access to literacy learning activities (UNESCO 2002a).

Emerging from the Dakar EFA meeting was a commitment from wealthier countries to help under-resourced countries that had difficulty attracting external funding to “fund any credible national education plan”. Over time this has developed into the Fast Track Initiative (FTI), which had two separate funding streams for countries (EFA FTI Secretariat). The Catalytic Fund (CF) and the Education Program Development Fund (EPDF) were consolidated early in 2010. Financial resources come from a variety of external sources and are pooled and allocated by the FTI Secretariat. Currently approximately 40 countries are either receiving funds from the FTI or in line to do so.

Because many countries are emerging from fragile situations (due to conflict, natural disaster, or other destabilising circumstances) and because these countries may not have reliable government financing mechanisms in place, it became clear to the international education community that there needed to be funds made available to them to facilitate achieving the EFA goals and the MDGs. The Netherlands government initiated a large fund, held by UNICEF, to promote educational provision in these circumstances. The British Department for International Development (DfID) has augmented this fund.

Equally important as the funding have been questions around the need for all partners in the education sector to harmonise and align their activities so as to get better impact and decrease transaction costs in countries that receive external funds. Agreements have been reached and are documented in the Paris Declaration (OECD 2005) and, more recently, in the Accra Agenda (OECD 2008). Discussions around harmonisation and alignment are conducted at country level under the auspices of an Education Group or Committee that includes Government and development partners.

While all these actions at the global level make it clear that there is a strong international commitment to education, they also demonstrate that the DESD is one thrust of many. The DESD has many advantages in that, from one perspective, it spans the other movements. It offers a more complex approach, because it focuses on quality and not quantity and because it calls for interdisciplinarity, which is inherently more complex than a single sector approach. This approach may reflect reality more closely, but its very complexity means that many are less comfortable with it or see the possibility for their particular concerns to become “buried” in what is perceived as a more general issue—ESD. The DESD is challenged in gaining visibility in such a “busy” educational landscape and concerning issues of “alignment” of movements within the UN system. Furthermore, its focus on

principles, values and practices that emphasise the importance of sustainability in relation to such things as resource use, social and economic inequities and related accountabilities meant that different personal and national perspectives on these topics can be quite fraught.

Key education issues at the midpoint of the DESD

The global discourse around the quality of education is one that is salient and gathering momentum. The increases in enrolments across the globe as a result of the EFA movement have drawn even greater attention to issues surrounding educational quality as even learners with access “vote with their feet” when quality is unacceptably low. Of particular importance in this domain are concerns that are being voiced globally about the definition of quality, which is tied to understandings about the purposes of education and about its relevance to the modern world. This is a point that we shall return to in relation to where ESD fits in the wider concerns about education.

There is a lot of discussion and much less agreement in education on the nature of quality and how to measure it. Among the perspectives are the following:

- Quality is essentially the basic academic skills of reading, writing and mathematics;
- Quality is much broader than basic academic skills and includes twenty-first century skills such as communication, teamwork, the ability to negotiate and the ability to function in a diverse environment (Haichour et al. 2008);
- Quality should include notions of citizenship and civic education;
- Quality can be measured by learning achievement;
- Quality should not be measured by learning achievement alone as that measure includes the innate abilities of individuals that are not necessarily a component of quality;
- Quality can be measured as the sum of all or some of the inputs that go into education; and
- Quality is a result of much more than inputs and should also include processes and outputs.

These perspectives are illustrative, but not exhaustive. Some of these are also somewhat contradictory. Nevertheless, they point to the fact that there is ample opportunity for the range of principles and concerns that underlie ESD to be incorporated into the quality of education discourse and to influence mainline thinking in education.

In addition to the nature of quality itself, there are several other issues in education that are relevant to implementation of the DESD given its commitments to equity, equality and a dignified life (Pigozzi 2006; UNESCO October 2005b). Those that are emerging include:

- *Youth* A quick review of population trends shows a large increase in young populations globally. The few exceptions are in the highly industrialised world—but even there, in many countries populations are growing as a result of

migration. This expansion is putting pressure on secondary education and the job market and is raising concerns about how to handle large numbers of young people who are frustrated more generally by lack of access to opportunity.

- *Gender* This has always been a key issue in education, but it is taking on a new perspective. For two decades concern was about girls' education—and this remains a major concern in several places, including Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, as well as in certain levels and subjects in education globally. But the issue is becoming much more nuanced with concerns about boys' participation and performance and about how boys learn what masculinity means in their own environments.
- *Employability*¹ Even for those students who have access to secondary education and complete it there is concern that what they are learning is not useful to living and working in a world outside of formal education. Higher education and corporations are united in finding that the young people they receive are ill-prepared for the reality of the next stage of their lives. This argues for a different focus in secondary (and primary) education that helps young people develop skills and competencies in a range of areas including communication, teamwork, negotiation and acceptance of diversity—sometimes called life skills or twenty-first century skills.

There is also a number of ongoing issues that are significant enough to warrant attention because of their relationships with sustainable development. Among these are:

- *HIV and AIDS* Across the globe this is a concern. In some countries and within some particularly vulnerable populations, HIV and AIDS have reached, or could reach, crisis proportions. Education provides an extraordinary opportunity to prevent transmission of the virus through prevention education. Education systems are also vulnerable to the impact of HIV and AIDS on its workforce, its students and their families. Thus efforts to mitigate the effect of the pandemic on education are equally as important.
- *Girls' education* As noted, while enormous strides have been made in providing girls' access to education, a lot remains to be done. There are still countries and regions where girls' access to primary school is extremely limited. Data on girls' access to and completion of secondary education indicate that enormous problems remain. Data suggests that young women that make it to higher education tend to persist and do well, even though there are many discriminatory practices in place that make the experience difficult and equal pay has yet to be achieved.
- *Fragile situations* At any point in time, between 20 and 40 countries are experiencing sufficient fragility that education is not functional or no longer universal. This presents enormous problems for national well-being and growth in both the short- and the long-term.

¹ Employability refers to a person's capability of acquiring employment, maintaining employment, and obtaining new employment if required. For individuals, employability depends on the knowledge, skills and attitudes an individual possesses, the way they use those assets to present themselves to employers or for self-employment, and the context (e.g. personal circumstances and labor market environment) within which they seek work.

- *Climate change* This is one of the most urgent and immediate challenges that has been recognised at the beginning of this Century. Its ramifications go far beyond ecological issues into related concerns about health and habitat, and food and security, for example.

Each one of these has import for ESD, even though they might not come to mind immediately when one thinks of ESD in terms of the three pillars of economy, society and environment. Two examples are used for illustration as there is insufficient space to address each in this paper. Countries with high HIV prevalence are experiencing increased pressure on budgets and productivity as citizens in their prime need health care and are less able to work due to illness, while children are orphaned at unprecedented rates. Or, young people dissatisfied with what education offers or learning too well from schools that teach “single truths” may resort to extremism and threaten social stability (Davies 2008). An enormous amount of work remains to be done to better understand how ESD can contribute to these and other pressing issues. This is an ESD imperative.

Implementation of the DESD

In considering the implementation of the DESD in light of the overall educational framework, which has been summarised above, it may be useful to consider the half-Decade through two lenses—one that looks at national responses to moving the decade forward and one that considers how education as a sector has taken on the Decade or its principles.

National responses to the DESD

Across the globe nations have responded differently to the call of the DESD to reorient education to help citizens learn to live sustainably. At the mid decade meeting in Bonn, Germany it was clear that significant progress had been made in several areas (UNESCO 2009a, b).

At the policy level ESD is well represented, with many countries reporting that policies exist at a broad level to address sustainable development and/or ESD, but not many countries have a specific ESD strategy. A majority of the countries responding to the call for reports to the Bonn meeting indicated that there were national ESD coordinating bodies in place, especially in Europe and North America, but with notable slow progress in this regard in Africa (Wals 2009a, b). But even in countries that have ESD coordination bodies there remain constraints to working across ministerial, departmental and other boundaries. This is further complicated by funding and budgeting processes, which emphasise conventional boundaries rather than encouraging collaboration and cross fertilisation. Consistent with this, there are few public budgets and financial incentives that address ESD.

It would be easy to be disappointed by these findings, but there is one area where there has been significant progress that points to the possibility of accelerated action. This is the area of international networking. There is a rich and diverse set of

networks that are sharing information and cooperating with regard to ESD. These networks transcend the institutional boundaries that are referred to immediately above and mirror the strong networks that made the DESD possible less than a decade ago. Thus, one can hope that they, too, will move the ESD agenda forward in all fronts at the national, regional and international levels. This movement can go in more than one direction, however. To move the ESD agenda forward it will require that these networks focus on the changes in knowledge use and behaviours necessary for living sustainably. Because maintaining the status quo has so much inertia, the networks will have to consciously strive against the current globalising forces that emphasise consumption and economic gain and growth.

Education's responses to the DESD

Progress in support of ESD has been relatively easier to monitor in formal education and a number of governments have committed themselves to including ESD in the offerings that are provided by their education systems. In most cases, changes are minor adjustments to existing curricula, texts, training programs, etc., but in a few others, much larger reforms have been envisioned and started, such as whole school approaches or inter-disciplinary learning. Within formal education, the vanguards of change have been teacher education (Hopkins n.d.), higher education (Holmberg and Samuelsson 2006) and vocational education and training (see, for example, www.UNEVOC.UNESCO.org).

Research and development related to ESD is only just beginning to take hold. The immediate and growing focus on global climate change provides another opportunity for ESD. While a lot remains to be done, the fact that ESD is beginning to be addressed in professional journals is a good indicator that the concept is finding traction and is not likely to disappear. In part, perhaps, because of its variety, progress of inclusion of ESD in non-formal education has been much harder to gauge. One cannot automatically say that ESD is not present because it may be there and not have been measured yet. Both informal and mass education played a key role in ensuring that the need for the DESD was on the international agenda at the WSSD, although there have not been any solid attempts to qualify or quantify this to this author's knowledge. There is a growing recognition in the sustainable development community that the quality education that is grounded in ESD principles, even though they are likely to vary somewhat to according to context, is critical for sustainability. Unfortunately, linkages from education to this community are not strong.

Current challenges to policy and practice in relation to the DESD

While policy and practice are different, they also should be inextricably linked. For this reason the two are not necessarily treated separately when outlining some of the major challenges the DESD faces in its "home stretch". A few, selected challenges are summarised below. These are not all the challenges, but they are essential to moving the DESD forward.

- The *education landscape is complex* at a time when education is high on political agendas (for different reasons) across the globe. Negotiating this complexity will not be easy, especially in light of education's visibility. It is incumbent upon those concerned with ESD to take advantage of the currency of education as it likely will not retain this position for ever. Part of the challenge is to be able to make good use of interest in education and to link ESD concepts to this without being seen as being unaware of the other important and valued movements in education. A challenge for ESD, and UNESCO as the DESD's lead, is how to link effectively to this education landscape, recognising that many of its components are changing and/or may be facing challenges of their own. The different players and emphases are important to ESD and the DESD but careful consideration needs to be given to linkages and modalities of collaboration. This has implications for policy and how ESD is positioned, as well as for day to day implementation of the principles of ESD in learning environments.
- There is a need to *recreate a movement for ESD*. While sustained change will require national commitment and government institutions for ESD to take root, these institutions are slow, and sometimes resistant, to change. In most cases, institutions and governments change once they realise that the change promoted by the population is essential for credibility—politics are important. Education is a conservative institution—education is a long-term process that needs to deliberate before it makes major changes in direction. This change seldom comes from within education alone. Yet, when presented with evidence and a strong popular voice, education can and often does change.
- Within education there are significant forces that are arguing that in order to have measurable impact one needs to pull back from all the complexity and inter-relationships that plague consensus building around what is quality education and what impact it has and to *return to the basics*—to conventional academics. While nobody will argue with the value of the basics, underlying our understanding of ESD is a more complex notion of education as a combination of knowledge, competencies and skills, values and behaviours (Pigozzi 2006). Yet, putting this notion into practice in schools and other learning places where resources may be scarce and teachers may be insufficiently trained means that even if the philosophical and policy struggles are won, the implementation challenges might overcome them. Political will is essential for education reform.
- *Maintaining balance among the three pillars of the WSSD* is becoming increasingly difficult at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. General recognition by societies of what environmentalists have known from some time is creating very strong support to attend to climate change for our survival. The more recent global economic crisis, which is still having disastrous effects, particularly on the world's less advantaged, is focusing attention on employment and trade issues. Yet each of these resulted, at least in part, from lack of commitment to the basic values and behaviours that underpin ESD (equity, justice and responsible consumption, for example) and that are captured in the societal-political pillar. The current economic growth thrust of our globalising world works against a holistic approach.

- For a movement to take hold it needs *consistency and coherence* in relation to these values, starting with and modelled by leadership at the top. The UN family has many priorities and challenges, many audiences and intended beneficiaries, and these sometimes mean that consistent attention to supporting and enabling actions such as the implementation of the DESD is extremely difficult. The DESD must become relevant to more members of the UN family.

The race to the end of the decade—is acceleration of the DESD possible?

As noted in the introduction, this paper focuses on the “big picture” of the DESD with an eye toward sharpening our strategic vision for continuing its momentum. In light of changing times, it would seem that acceleration is critical to DESD if it is to have the impact that it should. How then might we accelerate action in the Decade? The following suggestions are put forward. These suggestions are not in a sequential order. Indeed, they are all important to acceleration. Implemented one at a time, it is unlikely that much momentum will be achieved, but if several are implemented together, strategically and intentionally, each supporting the others, much could be gained.

- *Positioning the DESD in the education landscape* is essential. This is primarily the role of UNESCO as the lead agency. UNESCO has done a remarkable job of launching and shepherding the Decade from a multi-faceted beginning into a more holistic movement that has been inclusive from the beginning. The Organization has been praised for being able to do the equivalent of “herding cats” in a short period of time. It needs, however, to also place the DESD firmly in the education landscape as one of a series of mechanisms that is relevant to and in the best interest of a better educated world. ESD is not greater than EFA—it is not smaller than EFA either, and this needs to be made clear, showing the strategic, technical and political advantages of the various players in the EFA landscape.
- *Empowering education beyond formal education to pave the way for education reform* Non-formal, informal and mass education were all critical in the social movement that put ESD and DESD on the international agenda. Since the inception of the Decade and with the increasing focus on climate change and other environmental issues, mass education, particularly from individual corporations that have much at stake economically, is again taking on a more active and visible role in terms of sustainability issues. As with the creation of the DESD, the groundswell created and maintained by these three forms of education may have a critical role to play in swaying public attention and concern toward ESD and in encouraging a positive response by public institutions such as formal education in the near future. The possible competing values of corporations and other players deserve serious attention, however (Manteaw 2008).
- *Framing twenty-first century skills in a doable way* will be essential for educators and populations to understand that the world cannot afford to choose between “the basics” and the rest. In today’s world, and in preparing for

tomorrow, every person must have the opportunity to be equipped to live and learn in a fast changing and increasingly globalising world while understanding the unique contributions that each one brings to bear. Often twenty-first century skills are presented as extremely complex. Yet they are skills that many people come by naturally and most can learn fairly easily. It is important to promote the skills as essential and to recognise that the difficulties in measuring them do not limit their value.

- *Finding a way to give the societal pillar its equal place in education* is becoming increasingly important. One of the major challenges to sustainability is fragility—political, economic, environmental, and it is often fragility that has resulted from political upheaval that has long-term and hard to quantify consequences. Yet this is an area that tends to get short shrift in education. It links directly to the idea of twenty-first century skills but has likely impact in areas such as building peaceful and stable societies, the value of whose existence goes far beyond their own borders.
- *Showing other UN partners how the DESD is relevant to their missions* is important for the DESD to be able to take advantage of the enormous reach and platform that the UN can provide it. To take advantage of the potential of the UN system will require thoughtful analysis of key players in the UN system, what their mandates and particular challenges are, and how the DESD can contribute to those mandates and help overcome obstacles to success.
- *Growing political will* for education reforms that embrace the concerns and principles of ESD is essential for any measure of success of the DESD. UNESCO is well placed for this.

Some open questions and opportunities

While this paper is necessarily quite limited in its scope, it still leaves some major questions open. A few that related directly to this paper will be outlined here.

There are always pleas for more and better research and one cannot deny the importance of evidence in moving forward—data-based decision making is a solid approach that has been found to be very valuable. What is important, however, is to be sure not to limit the term “data” too much. The political environment and context is as much data as an enrolment rate or a repetition rate. Bearing this in mind, it raises the question as to what kinds of research are most likely to result in commitment to or acceleration of the Decade. A careful choice here could result in additional funding for research, which would address one of the shortcomings noted in the Mid-Decade assessment.

The Mid-Decade assessment, the country reports, and the Bonn meeting all attest to the value of the full range of stakeholders that have been active in and essential to the DESD so far. There still remain concerns about apparent disconnects between and among, for example, civil society, NGOs and governments. Yet little is known about what factors were at play when exchange and coordination between governments and their people were successful or what kinds of relationships are

most beneficial and healthy in the long run. This seems to be a very important question to the DESD as it is reliant on the full range of partners for success and seems to have a limited evidence base regarding how best to orchestrate them to the best advantage of all.

A question that needs to be asked is “is a decade long enough”? We all admit that education is a long-term endeavour and the issues around sustainability are complex and deeply entrenched in long histories, yet the world has allocated a short and finite decade to address them. This is not to suggest that one needs automatically to extend the time for DESD or to proclaim DESDII. Rather, it is to ask the important question of what paths do we need to lay, what footprints (to borrow a metaphor from the ecologists) do we need to leave in place to ensure that the fundamental principles of ESD are sufficiently rooted in societies and their education systems that they can be nurtured and grow?

Another question that needs to be asked is if we have focused sufficiently on developing political will—especially among those who currently benefit disproportionately from the status quo. Acceleration in this area would require strong and effective advocacy.

In addition to the proposals for acceleration above there are a few opportunities that present themselves for carrying ESD principles forward. The growing number of young people globally is an enormous resource. They are better educated than ever before, have energy and creativity, have learned how to use ICTs to connect across borders, and want to make a difference. Empowering them to share leadership in the movement may be an important step forward.

Life for young people is not so easy, however. Their growing numbers is putting a great deal of pressure on employment opportunities at a time when employers are looking for employees who have the ability to learn and adapt with technological and other changes that govern the workplace. Surveyed employers have indicated that, when they hire new workers, they are looking for what we are calling in this paper twenty-first century skills. It would seem that this is a great way to promote and get support for the new kind of education that we wish to see in formal and other forms of education—it demonstrates in very real terms the value of this aspect of an education.

Conclusion

Half way through the DESD a lot remains to be accomplished. A key question is whether the vision for the DESD can be accomplished in a Decade. Knowing what we do about the societal “reproductive” functions of education and the challenges of reform in education, the DESD bar was set very high. At the same time, education in its broadest sense contains the elements that allow people to transform themselves and their societies.

Taking an optimistic view, we have learned a great deal and much good is happening in homes, schools, villages, nations, and across regions. There are some strategic actions that can be taken that can help to create space for ESD to take root and grow, and it would seem that this should be a priority in moving forward—to

help to put in place processes, procedures and environments that foster enduring actions in support of ESD with education quality at its core. These strategic actions can take advantage of some opportunities that, as a function of time and circumstance, present themselves now. They are there for the taking, as the saying goes. At the same time we need to pursue some key questions, the answers to which should greatly enhance our concerted action.

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