



Education for Sustainable Development (ESD): A way out of the crisis A Resolution of the German ESD National Platform

Background

The corona pandemic has exacerbated the challenges already faced in Germany's education system: adaptability in times of crisis, the digital transformation in education institutions, equal opportunities in participation and inclusion, and insufficient opportunities for continuing vocational education and training, both for students and for teachers. The following questions arise: How do we perceive 21st century education? How can we ensure equal opportunity in our education system? What are the values we want to communicate? What does a resilient education system have to look like – one that is more robust in the face of conflict and challenge – to enable future crises to be either prevented or dealt with in a better way?

Education for Sustainable Development: A solution

Answers to these questions must be found together and with all stakeholder groups involved. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) offers a solution-focused education model for the creation of a resilient, participative and inclusive education system. It enables people to shape their lives in a sustainable way and achieve a sense of self-efficacy. It promotes participation, solidarity and future-focused thinking and action – key skills needed in shaping sustainable development for the society in which we live. ESD's global implementation is called for in the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – more specifically in SDG Target 4.7. In 2017, we, the members of Germany's National ESD Platform, adopted the National Action Plan for ESD (NAP ESD) to embed ESD in all areas of education by 2030. With its 130 goals and 349 action recommendations, it shows how education can be made future-proof and lists the stakeholders from science, government, industry and civil society that must be involved in the process.

As the global fight to combat the corona pandemic continues, other crises are worsening still, most notably the climate crisis, bringing yet greater challenges than those already faced. Action that has been missed in the current crisis must now be taken without further delay. Universal implementation of Education for Sustainable Development at both civil society and policy level can significantly mitigate the outcomes of crises or prevent them.

Recommendations

We, the members of the National ESD Platform, will intensify our efforts to enable truly equitable education and provide a future-proof education system. Structural changes of this kind call for strong partnerships in education, government, science, industry and civil society, which is why the recommendations set out below address stakeholders at all levels and especially the Federal Government, the state (Länder) governments, the German Bundestag and the state parliaments (Landtage), as well as all local authority and civil society stakeholders involved in German education.

1. Truly equitable education

Opportunities for education and participation differ for people in Germany – a situation that has worsened during the corona crisis. It can be seen, for example, in unequal access to digital media and

devices like laptops and tablets, in a lack of skills in using digital tools, and in learning conditions made more difficult by confined learning environments and existential fears.

A fair education system addresses differing life situations, enabling everyone a future built on equal opportunity. To ensure no one is left behind, equal access to education must be placed at the core of education policy at both regional and national level. And in doing so it must be remembered that ESD is not a linear education model, but one that builds the “Gestaltungskompetenz” (shaping competence) of all involved. This ensures that new approaches can be taken together, allowing room neither for individual nor for structural discrimination as catalysts of inequitable education – be it on grounds of origin, life situation, physical or mental disability, racist attributions, religion or belief, gender, sexual identity or any other reason. Education has to be made equitable and resilient and the corona pandemic must be seen as a compelling reason to bring about change.

2. Sustainable education

In response to the current crisis, a wide range of highly committed people in various areas of education have used new skills, methods and experiences to create a foundation for a sustainable education system, one which is already being used in many places and must be further expanded in the future, such as for example the online tutoring that university students are offering to support school children in learning

Implementing future-focused ESD is thus reliant on an associated digitalisation campaign that ensures education actors protection in matters of data security, working conditions and the pressures of working from home. And in the course of that process, those actors have to be given more intensive training in the use of online education formats to promote their media skills, and education institutions must be consequently better equipped.

In addition, education policy must place greater focus on providers of non-school education institutions, such as associations and clubs, which, due to their participative nature and their role in promoting democracy, form an important pillar of the educational landscape. This includes the provision of funding to help overcome the problems faced along with the implementation of long-term government support programmes that can be taken up at low-threshold level.

By following the whole institution approach (WIA), education must communicate the social, environmental and economic dimensions of sustainable development while enabling dialogue in online and offline form. This calls for education that is equitable, diversified and focused on the specific target group.

Final remarks

The future of our society is not only created in the offices of hip start-ups or by developing new combustion engines. It also happens in the morning circle at day-care centres, in classrooms at schools, in companies offering vocational training, in lecture halls, in citizens’ gatherings, and in meetings held by associations and clubs. We demand that the fallout from the corona crisis is taken seriously and we want answers to questions that are long overdue. As a model for education, ESD is not just some fashionable must-have or trend, it is a guiding principle that helps us join forces in a combined effort to find and develop solutions.