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# Heads, hearts and hands

*Achieving Agenda 2030 requires us all to have the knowledge, skills and desire to take action to live our lives more sustainably*

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**M**ost of us did not predict the change that 2020 has wreaked. Coronavirus has infected tens of millions globally, taking a huge toll on human life. It has caused unprecedented disruptions to our societies, threatening progress towards the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the 2030 Agenda, as well as the nationally determined contributions under the Paris Agreement.

The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of global common goods, including science, information, the environment and, my field, education. School closures due to the crisis have affected more than 90 per cent of the world's

#### ◀ Students march in Rome as part of the global climate strike, 'Fridays For Future'

student population in over 190 countries, exacerbating inequalities in access to education and learning, especially for the most vulnerable. UNESCO estimates that 24 million learners will not find their way back to school in 2020.

#### Why education is vital to Agenda 2030

Global problems require global solutions – and education empowers learners to create these solutions. Education is much more than giving learners access to knowledge and skills to find jobs. What, how and where we learn impacts our ideas, capabilities and behaviours – and this has unparalleled potential for the transformation of societies. Governments around the world have recognised this by placing education at the heart of action needed to achieve the 2030 Agenda and prevent the climate crisis.

The United Nations family has also made education central to efforts to achieve the SDGs. The right to education is enshrined in SDG 4, which aims to ensure quality education for all. In 2019, the UN General Assembly reaffirmed that education for sustainable development (ESD) was not only an integral part of SDG 4, but also a key enabler of all 17 SDGs. This is clear in target 4.7, which aims for all learners to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development by 2030. As this shows, ESD is a springboard for development, and a driver for human dignity and freedom.

In April 2020, as COVID-19 took hold in many countries, UN Secretary-General António Guterres called upon governments to 'build back better', using the pandemic as an opportunity to reorient our actions towards avoiding the climate crisis. ESD must be central to these efforts – and UNESCO, with its mandate centred on education, leads this charge.

ESD is a lifelong learning process that empowers learners with the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to make informed decisions and take responsible action for

protecting the environment. As COVID-19 has shown, humans and nature are inextricably linked. To build a better world, we need to acknowledge this relationship and learn how to live in greater harmony with the environment, with a view to creating more peaceful and sustainable societies.

ESD is vital not only because it raises awareness of the SDGs, but also because it helps learners understand these goals, ensuring that they have the capabilities to make changes in the world. This means that learners are better equipped all round. Their heads have the knowledge and skills to collaborate, solve complex problems, and think systemically and creatively. Their hearts are filled with passion and a shared sense of responsibility. And their hands are ready and willing to take action. With their heads, hearts and hands in the right place, they can act accordingly.

#### ESD progress to date

With ESD in mind, the UN General Assembly designated 2005 to 2014 as the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. Following up on these efforts, UNESCO launched the Global Action Programme on ESD in 2015, as a way of scaling up action at all levels and in all areas of the education sector.

Much progress has been made. Students, teachers, schools, policymakers, civil-society actors and governments have worked with us to move towards education that includes and prioritises sustainable development. In UNESCO's monitoring report for 2012 to 2016, 70 of 83 countries – 92 per cent – reported that the implementation of topics related to what subsequently became SDG 4.7 had improved. A UNESCO report presented at COP25 in 2019 showed that almost all countries reviewed include education in their efforts to implement the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement, to varying degrees.

Evidence of this progress can be seen around the world. Kenya, for instance, has adopted an ESD policy and rolled it out across the country's education system. Costa Rica's new national education policy recognises sustainable development as one of

its key components. Germany has established a national platform on ESD, which brings together high-level representatives across sectors to promote ESD throughout the German education system.

However, many countries have also reported that they face obstacles due to a lack of financial, technical and human resources, among other issues. UNESCO monitoring has shown that progress is required in relation to teacher training and education outside the school system, as well as in integrating these learning approaches in student assessment. Joint monitoring with UNFCCC has demonstrated that we are overly reliant on cognitive and content-based learning over socio-emotional and behavioural education, which is crucial for empowering learners.

To address these issues and map the way forward, the 40th session of UNESCO's General Conference adopted a resolution on 'Education for Sustainable Development: Towards achieving the SDGs', or 'ESD for 2030', in November 2019. In 2020, UNESCO is launching the resolution's new framework and roadmap – because the world needs better policies, better learning environments and more empowered teachers, so that young people can actively work towards a more sustainable world.

#### Uncertain path

As the world looks to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become evident that there is no clear path back to 'normal'. We have much work to do in the next decade to curtail the negative impact of the pandemic, without losing sight of the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement. Because when it comes to climate change, we have no time to lose.

Instead, this is an opportunity to rethink our actions for the future of the planet. We must build ESD into the 'new normal', and ensure that its emphasis on knowledge, awareness and action for sustainability is built into education systems worldwide – including solutions for distance learning.

Education gives students the building blocks they need to construct the future. Together, we must ensure that what we learn reflects the world we want to create. ●