Education for Sustainable Development: Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development?
The years 2005-2014 have been declared the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (the UNDESD). World leaders attending the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002 endorsed the rationale for the establishment of the DESD. The United Nations General Assembly then authorized the Decade as an official decade of the United Nations and tasked UNESCO with the role of lead agency for the Decade.

2. What is the purpose of the Decade?
By declaring a Decade for ESD, the United Nations hopes to help concentrate efforts on using education as an essential tool for achieving sustainable development and to ensure that adequate resources are mobilized for this purpose. The overall goal of the UNDESD is to integrate the principles, values, and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning. This educational effort will encourage changes in collective behavior that will create a more sustainable future in terms of environmental integrity, economic viability, and a just society for present and future generations.

The objectives of the DESD as outlined in UNESCO’s International Implementation Scheme for the Decade, are to:
1. facilitate networking linkages, exchange and interaction among stakeholders in ESD;
2. foster increased quality of teaching and learning in ESD;
3. help countries make progress towards and attain the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) through ESD efforts;
4. provide countries with new opportunities to incorporate ESD into education reform efforts.

3. Why should countries become involved in the Decade?
The DESD was initially proposed at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, signaling recognition of the importance of education and learning in finding new approaches to sustainable development. The Decade offers an opportunity to build education and communication into national sustainable development strategies and make education an integral component of sustainable development at the national level. With focused efforts in the area, we have the opportunity to develop innovations and learn new skills to effectively apply the tools of ESD in achieving sustainable development.
4. **What practical things can we hope to achieve during the Decade?**
The Decade will be implemented at many levels - internationally, regionally, nationally and locally. This means that the possibilities of what might be achieved during the Decade are very broad. However, the most important thing to achieve during the Decade is an increased understanding of, and commitment to, education as a crucial means of achieving sustainability. In practical terms, this means increased financial commitment to education for sustainability and increased capacity at the national level to deliver quality education for sustainability.

5. **What is sustainable development?**
The generally accepted definition of sustainable development is “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” This definition was made popular in the 1980’s following the publication of the Report of the World Commission on Sustainable Development (often referred to as the Brundtland Report). Although there are many different views on the matter, it is commonly held that social/cultural, environmental, and economic priorities of development must be in harmony for sustainable development to be possible.

6. **What is Education for Sustainable Development?**
Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is a vision of education that seeks to empower all people to assume responsibility for creating a sustainable future. Central to ESD is the concept of culture as an essential underlying theme. ESD recognizes that there is no “single route” to sustainable development. It recognizes that understandings of, and visions for, sustainability will be different for each of us and that we will need to work together to negotiate the process of achieving sustainability.

There are many different “players” or stakeholders in sustainable development. Each group of players has a different vision for and role in, sustainable development. Some are interested in environmental preservation and protection; some have economic development interests while others may be more interested in social development. In addition, how each nation, cultural group and individual views sustainable development will depend on their own values. The values held in a society helps to define how personal decisions are made and how national legislation is written.

The challenge for ESD is to bring these different stakeholders together so they may work in partnership to find a balance between each of their interests and priorities. ESD seeks to do this by encouraging people to (a) understand the complexities of and synergies between the issues threatening planetary sustainability; and (b) understand and assess their own values and those of the society in which they live in the context of sustainability.

7. **Isn’t ESD the same as Environmental Education?**
Environmental education encompasses many of the characteristics of ESD. However, the vision and scope of ESD is broader, and hence, more complex than that of environmental education.

Environmental education has traditionally focused on changing individual behavior in order to develop mechanisms to collectively protect the natural environment. Education for Sustainable Development goes beyond environmental education in that it tries to also address other priorities of development such as peace, health, economic growth, consumption patterns, political structures, indigenous rights, gender equity and other critical issues. In effect, ESD attempts to provide a learning framework through which individuals may address community issues in a systemic and holistic problem-solving context. Environmental education may therefore be said to be an essential, indeed foundational, component of ESD.
8. What skills does ESD entail?
If ESD is to be an effective tool for engaging people in negotiating a sustainable future and in making decisions and acting on them, it must first address the challenges of our current ways of thinking about sustainable development and about education in general. Essential to ESD are the following skills:

- Envisioning – being able to imagine a better future. The premise is that if we know where we want to go, we will be better able to work out how to get there.
- Critical thinking and reflection – learning to recognize the challenges in the world around us and to recognize the assumptions underlying our knowledge, perspectives and opinions. Critical thinking allows us to examine economic, environmental, social or cultural structures in the context of sustainable development.
- Systemic thinking – acknowledging complexities and looking for links and synergies when trying to find solutions to problems.
- Building partnerships – dialogue and negotiation, learning to work together.
- Participation in decision-making – empowering people.


9. What does it mean when people say ESD relates to everything?
This is a very general statement that, like the concept of sustainable development, is in danger of being misused and thus becoming meaningless. ESD “relates to everything” in the sense that addressing sustainable development requires us to address the many facets of our lives in a holistic and systemic manner. For example, if we choose to spend excessive amounts of money on luxury items, we are encouraging the production of more of these items. This in turn, means that more natural resources are being consumed and more waste produced. This results in environmental degradation and thus, unsustainable development. Similarly, if a teacher treats one child in a room differently to another because of their race, religion or gender, we are role-modelling inequality. Inequality leads to societal tensions such as unemployment, increased crime and violence. Again, the end result is unsustainable development. But merely addressing one or other of these issues will not automatically lead us to sustainable development - these (and a host of other) issues need to be addressed together. This is why ESD “relates to everything”.

10. What are the MDGs?
The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were adopted by Member States of the United Nations in September 2000 and further committed to at the WSSD in 2002. The eight goals serve as a framework for measuring development progress. Countries must report on their progress on the MDGs on an annual basis and targets and indicators have been developed for each goal. More information on the MDGs is available on www.un.org/millenniumgoals/.

11. How does ESD relate to me?
There is little argument today that Planet Earth is reaching a point where it can no longer sustain our consumption levels. If we care about the future of the planet - and that of ourselves, our children and other living things - then we need to learn how to turn things around and bring about lasting change. This “future” is not necessarily 100 years down the track; rather, it is within most of our lifetimes. Our current lifestyles and consumption patterns are already resulting in negative change to the planet. Thus, whether you are young or old, a school student, a teacher, a parent, a university student, a businessperson interested in profit margins, or a journalist, you probably have a vested interest in looking after the earth’s natural resources and building healthy and just societies. ESD helps us learn together to find alternative ways of living and solutions to current problems that will put us on the path to sustainable development.
12. How do I get involved?
If you are reading this FAQs sheet, chances are that you are already doing something relating to ESD. The best way to get involved is to decide what ESD means to you in terms of your life and work. Do the principles of ESD add value to what you are already doing? Is there opportunity to apply some of these principles to your own area of work (and even to your daily life)? Learn more about what you can do and apply this in your own “sphere of influence”.

13. Who is organizing the DESD?
The lead agency for the Decade is UNESCO. At each country level, UNESCO has a National Commission, which acts as the focal point for UNESCO, and the UNESCO National Commissions have taken on the responsibility of organizing the Decade. UNESCO collaborates with other UN agencies and partner organizations on initiatives for the Decade. Whereas UNESCO leads the coordination of the Decade on the international level the national coordination is managed through UNESCO National Commissions and the ministries involved. However, the ownership of the Decade is and should not be restricted to UN agencies and UNESCO National Commissions. Various partners from the media, private sector and civil society organizations have been engaged in the Decade and have adopted an active role in organizing events and activities in the local, national or sub-regional level. It is essential to ensure that all possible partners and stakeholders in ESD are involved in the Decade as ESD is for everyone and from all sectors of life.

14. What will happen when the Decade ends in 2014?
The aim of any United Nations Decade is to raise the profile of, and to gather concentrated support for, an idea or issue. The conclusion of the Decade should not mean that efforts should subside. What happens at the end of the DESD will depend on what we do during it. If substantial progress is made during the Decade, we should have gained sufficient momentum by 2014 for ESD to become well integrated into our thinking and way of life. This progress will be measured using indicators that are currently being developed as part of the Decade’s efforts.

15. What are the core themes of ESD?
Agenda 21, the main outcome of the Rio Earth Summit of 1992, identified four areas of education for sustainable development. These areas continue to define the themes of ESD:

   (a) Improving quality of basic education: provision of basic education to all is seen to be essential to the process of sustainability. Basic education means different things in different societies however it generally focuses on reading, writing and developing skills necessary to fulfill the individual’s expected roles in society. To be effective in the sustainability process, basic education will not only need to become available to all but be reoriented to include the ESD skills listed above.

   (b) Reorienting existing education programmes to address sustainable development: this requires acknowledging that current education systems, from pre-primary through to tertiary institutions, are not compatible with sustainable development. The content and pedagogy of the education system must undergo change to better address the vision, principles and values of sustainable development. In some cases this will challenge existing structures and systems and strategies will need to be developed and trialed to address this.

   (c) Develop public awareness and understanding: if current ways of thinking are to be challenged, it will be necessary to develop informed populations, who understand the imperative of sustainable development and are motivated to participate actively in change.

   (d) Provide training for all sectors of private and civil society: people need to be equipped with appropriate skills to work effectively towards sustainable development. The skills required will depend on the situation. For example, architects and building engineers may need skills to design more energy efficient buildings while people living in a rural setting may need skills to make and use solar cookers effectively.
16. **What are some of the challenges for ESD?**
The very concept of ESD challenges the way most people think about the world today. Economic growth and increased consumption patterns tend to characterize the aspirations of a large part of the planet’s society. ESD aims to challenge these aspirations by encouraging us to imagine a different future and reflect on how our values, beliefs and current behaviour might affect our ability to realize such a future. To do this requires that we also change our view of the purpose of education. This transformative aspect of ESD makes the concept difficult for many to accept. There is thus, a need for proponents to themselves establish an understanding of the concept and decide how they will communicate this to those in a higher position of responsibility. This will take planning, good communication strategies and a willingness to be open to the ideas of groups and individuals who may not be traditional partners.

17. **How is the DESD financed? How is ESD financed at the national and the local level?**
The DESD is financed through UNESCO’s Regular Programme Budget as well as several extra-budgetary sources such as the Japanese Funds-in-Trust which supports numerous ESD initiatives in Asia-Pacific and other parts of the world. At the national and local level the relevant ministries and UNESCO National Commissions manage and coordinate the financing for DESD. As ESD employs a broad ownership and has a wide range of partners from all sectors of life, e.g. the media, private sector, youth groups, and other civil society organizations funding for DESD activities is also provided through these various stakeholders.

18. **Where can I obtain funds for implementing a project on ESD?**
Information on the funding of ESD projects can be found through the UNESCO National Commission in your country. Many corporations in the private sector as well as youth and other organizations also provide sponsorships for education for sustainable development projects and initiatives.

19. **Are there any “good practice” examples of ESD?**
Yes! [Some examples can be found here.](#)