

Sustainable Development - A Mandate For Education

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“Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world.”

– Nelson Mandela.

Introduction

Education is essential for sustainable development. Citizens of the world need to learn their way to sustainability. Our current knowledge base does not contain the solutions to contemporary global environmental, societal and economic problems. Today’s education is crucial to the ability of present and future leaders and citizens to create solutions and find new paths to a better future. Education for sustainable development (ESD) is not a particular programme or project, but is rather an umbrella for many forms of education that already exist, and new ones that remain to be created (UNESCO, 2015).

The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) seeks to mobilize the educational resources of the world to help create a more sustainable future. Many paths to sustainability (e.g. sustainable agriculture and forestry, research and technology transfer, finance, sustainable production and consumption) exist and are mentioned in the 40 chapters of *Agenda 21*, the official document of the 1992 Earth Summit. Education is one of these paths (UNESCO, 2015).

Education alone cannot achieve a more sustainable future; however, without education and learning for sustainable development, we will not be able to reach that goal either. Education is the primary agent for transformation towards sustainable development. Education augments people’s potentials and capacities; it provides not only the requisite scientific and technical skills, but also the understanding and justification for their judicious application. Education is essential for mobilizing minds and communities in the endeavour for sustainable development.

It is for this reason that society must be deeply concerned both with the access to education as also the quality of education imparted. Education for sustainable development concerns itself with the long term future of the economy, ecology and social well being of all communities and building these capacities is the key task of education.

The global literacy scenario

Initiatives for education access have been taken up both nationally and internationally - more people are now entering secondary education and the rate of completion for upper secondary education is rising steeply with each successive age group. Worldwide, secondary education enrolment has expanded ten-fold over the past fifty years, from 40 million in 1950 to more than 400 million today. Over the same period, tertiary education enrolments increased nearly fourteen fold from 6.5 million in 1950 to 88.2 million. The number of literate adults grew significantly over the past decade, from an estimated 2.7 billion in 1990 to 3.3 billion. The overall global adult literacy rate now stands at 85 per cent for men, 74 per cent for women. More than 50% of the world's adult population has now attended primary school (UIS, 2015).

India too has made noteworthy progress in terms of access to basic education and reducing inequalities of educational opportunities. More persons are now entering secondary education and the rates of completion for secondary and upper secondary education are rising steeply. The non-formal education system adopted in the country has significantly increased adult literacy rates. Census 2011 revealed that Literacy in India has made remarkable strides.

Literacy rate of India stands at 72.99% (MHRD, GOI, 2015).

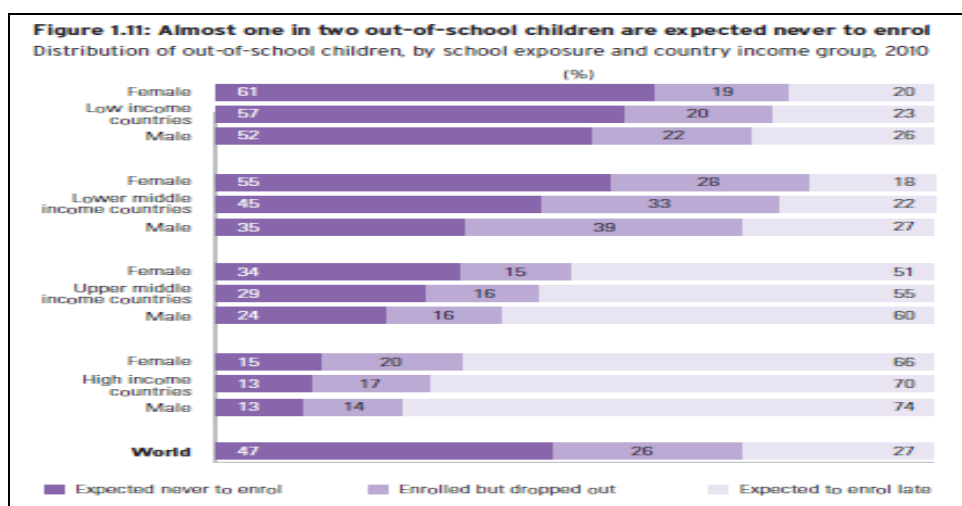
- Overall Literacy rate has grown by 8.15 percent points in the last decade (64.84% in 2001 & 72.99% in 2011)
- The male literacy rate has grown by 5.63 percent points (75.26% in 2001 & 80.89% in 2011) whereas female literacy rate 10.97 percent points (53.67% in 2001 & 64.64% in 2011).
- Number of illiterates (+7 age group) decreased from 304.10 million in 2001 to 282.59 million in 2011.

Disparities in educational access and quality – a major impediment

Despite these remarkable achievements made, much of current education still falls far short of what is required and glaring disparities still exist.

International statistics show that 110 million 6–11 year olds still do not attend primary school. Millions more attend only briefly often for a year or less then leave without the most essential elements of a basic education or the skills to make their way in an increasingly complex and knowledge-based world. It has been estimated that 40% of children are not learning the basics in reading and mathematics, over one-half of whom have spent four years in school, according to the Education for All Global Monitoring Report (UIS, 2014).

These then join the nearly 900 million adults, the majority of whom are women, who cannot read. Lack of education leads to enormous social and economic disadvantage - they are amongst those with the poorest health, lowest housing standards, and poorest employment prospects in the world.



Source : http://data.uis.unesco.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=EDULIT_DS

The educational scenario in India too reveals a similar picture - people in poor, rural and remote communities, ethnic minorities and indigenous populations have been marginalized and have shown little or no progress over the past decades.

Enrolment in various levels of education in Rural India (in '000s): 2009–10

	Pre-primary	I-V	VI-VIII	IX-X	XI-XII
No. of institutions	67,822	823,162	367,745	123,726	66,917
Enrollment (%)	4.7%	56.8%	25.4%	8.5%	4.6%

Source: Ministry of HRD, 2009–10

The national survey on Education, ASER, has indicated that despite initiatives and incentives given by the Government, enrolment data has not improved – % of small primary schools (those with enrolment less than 60) has gone up from 27.3% (2010) to 36% (2014).

Not only enrolment, ASER has also repeatedly reported that less than half of Class V students can read a paragraph or do a simple arithmetic sum from a class II text. The Report states that learning outcomes have declined in recent years despite the nation spending thousands of crores on the Right to Education Act.

% Children enrolled in different grades who can read Std II level text (or higher)

Grade	% of children
Std III	23.6 %
Std V	48.1 %
Std VIII	74.6 %

Source: DISE 2013-14

Std. III, IV and V data indicate that there are about 80 million children in different age groups and immediate attention is needed to help these children acquire basic skills without which these children will not be able to progress or go to the higher grades. Without basic skills in place, it is difficult for children to cope with grade level content. Knowing numbers and operations is needed before tackling higher content. The more serious implication is that without being able to read well, a child cannot progress in the education system and all efforts at literacy will be defeated.

Yet another malady afflicting the system is the poor relevance of existing education – the analysis of the Indian system displays a grave picture of the current scenario. Although the current primary education enrolment is improving, not many students complete their high school education in order to graduate to tertiary education. As a result, there are many youth drop outs. They are not aware about the right direction and do not have access to any guidance around their future or the path that would lead them towards employability. Furthermore, the overload of information and choices often confuse the learner compelling him/her to withdraw from the system completely.

India is a fast growing knowledge-based, service driven economy, waiting to take its position as a global force; with a rich democratic dividend of over 130 million people, aged between 18-23 years.

An issue of concern here is that while its human capital is perceived as a major strength and opportunity for growth, the poor inclusion of these graduates into the economy is a sad reminder that there is a clear mismatch between what the Indian Education system produces and what the country really needs (NSDC 2010). This has awakened the country to the inadequacies prevalent in the Indian Education system - in terms of the content, context, opportunities and delivery.

The mandate for Education -

These concerns represent a new vision of education, a vision that helps students better understand the world in which they live, addressing the complexity and interconnectedness of problems such as poverty, wasteful consumption, environmental degradation, urban decay, population growth, gender inequality, health, conflict and the violation of human rights that threaten our future.

This vision of education emphasises a holistic, interdisciplinary approach to developing the knowledge and skills needed for a sustainable future as well as changes in values, behaviour, and lifestyles which requires us to reorient education systems, policies and practices in order to empower everyone, young and old, to make decisions and act in culturally appropriate and locally relevant ways to redress the problems that threaten our common future. In this way, people of all ages can become empowered to develop and evaluate alternative visions of a sustainable future and to fulfil these visions through working creatively with others.

There is need to rethink existing education policies, programs and practices so that they build the concepts, skills, motivation and commitment needed for sustainable development.

Periodic assessment of learning outcomes will play a critical role within the context of current educational reforms. There are many benefits to be derived from setting standards for what students are expected to know and be able to do and from assessing their performance against these standards. It is within this positive context of high expectations that educational systems are most likely to move forward in their educational reform agenda (Marion & Sheinker 1999).

There is need to focus on vocational education right from the elementary years of schooling with substantial expansion of quality vocational education for raising employability and

productivity. This is especially imperative for the Indian demographic dividend, an important national asset, which will be seriously threatened if the demand for skilled personnel is not rapidly met through the production of quality vocational education (Indo-US Summit on Higher Education, 2010).

These urgent issues must be addressed right from the formative years of education which play a crucial role in identifying, nurturing, and cultivating the unique capabilities of every student (Armstrong, 1994). Conversely, if not attended to, the unique potentials and talents of young children may quickly atrophy and disappear without recognition and encouragement. There is need to identify the varied types of intelligences but more importantly, to develop potentials among individuals to both address the social and economic diversities in our society and develop excellence across all professions (Gardener, 1960). It would not only help in getting right kind of resources for respective roles but also curb on dropouts during training as well as attrition.

All these concerns have been given their due consideration both internationally and nationally and illustrate that the international community now strongly believes that we need to foster through education the values, behaviour and lifestyles required for a sustainable future. Education for sustainable development has come to be seen as a process of learning how to make decisions that consider the long term future of the economy, ecology and social well-being of all communities.

Building the capacity for such futures-oriented thinking will be the key task of education.

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