



GET INTO... **Education for Sustainable Development**

7 September 2022

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) represents a particularly interesting area for engagement by libraries. Referring to efforts to promote a more active, values-based mindset among citizens, it is arguably close to what many libraries are already doing through their programming on different topics – from culture, to inclusivity, climate action and more.

This briefing offers more background around the concept of ESD, who is involved in providing it, what libraries can contribute, and how libraries can get involved.



What is Education for Sustainable Development?

Education for Sustainable Development refers to efforts to help people not just understand the world and their place in it, but also to develop the agency and ability to try and change it. Crucially, it is not just about knowledge, but also about values.

The term “Education for Sustainable Development” covers a variety of related terms that are used including Development Education, Global Citizenship Education (GCE). ESD/GCE is practised by a range of actors, including environmental and development NGOs, community and voluntary organisations, educational institutions and networks, trade unions, educators, researchers, and activists. It engages large numbers of people across all ages and communities.

It is therefore strongly focused on action in order to address the sorts of challenges that policy-makers themselves aim to resolve through policy, including injustice, inequity, climate change and beyond.

It is also explicitly about lifelong learning, rather than something only based within schools. Clearly, schools do offer a ready framework for providing this, and teachers and school librarians are potentially very important educators for sustainable development, but it is something that is applicable to people of all ages. There is also a strong focus on evolving methods, focused on the needs of learners, in order to have maximum impact.

Implicitly, it stands out among other forms of education by its global focus, being closely connected to social, environmental and economic issues, its emphasis on stimulating action, and its dynamic nature.

ESD gives learners of all ages the knowledge, skills, values and agency to address interconnected global challenges including climate change, loss of biodiversity, unsustainable use of resources, and inequality. It empowers learners of all ages to make informed decisions and take individual and collective action to change society and care for the planet. ESD is a lifelong learning process and an integral part of quality education. It enhances the cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioural dimensions of learning and encompasses learning content and outcomes, pedagogy and the learning environment itself. ([UNESCO](#))

ESD as an ingredient of development policy

As a result of its focus on empowering all members of society to take collective action for positive change, there is a strong argument that ESD should be part of the toolkit available for governments in achieving development goals. Given that the effectiveness of policy depends so much on changing behaviours – for example greener consumption, engagement in civic life, volunteering – it makes sense to invest in efforts to promote behaviour change.

This is recognised in the UN 2030 Agenda, which even makes the incorporation of Education for Sustainable Development into an indicator of success in achieving the relevant Sustainable Development Goal, 4.7.

SDG4: *Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*

Target 4.7: By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development

Related terms and concepts

You will want to be aware that there are different ways of talking about Education for Sustainable Development or similar concepts. It is possible that in your country, people will use terms like:

Global Citizenship Education
Development Education
Global Education

If you are interested, take a look at this [set of definitions](#) prepared by [developmenteducation.ie](#) for more ideas. Another list of meanings is given in this [article](#). You will want to be aware of the prevailing terminology in use in your country in order to engage effectively.

Indicator 4.7.1: Extent to which (i) global citizenship education and (ii) education for sustainable development are mainstreamed in (a) national education policies; (b) curricula; (c) teacher education and (d) student assessment

These concepts are reflected in more specific efforts, for example, around climate change through the initiatives on [Action for Climate Empowerment](#). Some definitions of media and information literacy also have a strong relation to education for sustainable development.



Who is involved?

The ESD field is a varied one, with actors ranging from governments and international organisations to NGOs and dedicated individuals looking to share their understanding and help others.

For example, UNESCO has the lead within the United Nations system on Education for Sustainable Development, as well as having teams working on Global Citizenship Education and Human Rights Education. It collects national initiatives on its [website](#).

At the national level, there can often be a ministry or agency responsible for education for sustainable development – for example the members of the [Global Education Network Europe](#) include foreign ministries, development agencies, education ministries, interior ministries, and national UNESCO commissions. It can be anticipated that similar models will work elsewhere.

Outside of governments, many countries already have established networks of development educators. For example, the Irish Development Education Association acts as a platform for nearly 100 organisations and people in the country to share ideas and seek support.

At the international level, [Bridge 47](#) (alluding to SDG4.7) was an initiative for civil society organisations and networks. It aimed to mobilise a wide range of actors around ESD, as well as to share good practices and define standards and guidance. While the project's EU funding has come to an end, its [website](#), and the [list of its network members](#), already offers a powerful idea of who is active in this space in your country, as well as a lot of great materials!

Why should libraries get involved?

The value of libraries to ESD efforts is covered in the previous section, but what about the value of engaging in ESD for libraries?

The reasons are largely the same. As explained, many of the initiatives already taken by libraries can be described in one way or another as education for sustainable development, even if they don't necessarily use the term. As such, further engagement around ESD can align closely with efforts to achieve wider library goals, not least as set out in the Public Library Manifesto mentioned above.

Going one step further, engaging alongside other ESD actors can allow libraries to increase their reach and further their input. Reflecting together with partners can mean that you can draw on the strengths of each player. This could mean, for example, drawing on the experience and tools of ESD professionals, and the space, wider resources and staff of libraries. Library partnerships on ESD provide opportunities for people outside of the formal education sector to engage on these topics as library users are drawn to the collective goals of the SDGs. An added bonus is what libraries themselves can learn from them.

Working in this space also opens up advocacy opportunities and broadens possibilities for libraries to engage in the wider sustainable development agenda. Given the importance of ESD and related forms of education for policy effectiveness, getting involved is a way for libraries to underline their relevance, including to a wider-than-usual range of stakeholders in government. Such connections can pay off in other ways, such as new opportunities, or new allies for advocacy efforts.

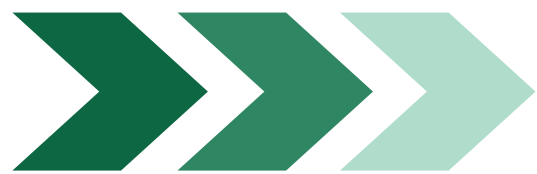
What can libraries contribute?

Some of what has been suggested above defining ESD likely sounds very familiar to libraries. It especially aligns with efforts they are already taking to turn access to information into real development outcomes.

Libraries in many countries are already experienced in developing programming that would fall under the banner of ESD, even if they haven't used this formally to describe it. For example, sharing materials around climate change, demonstrating how renewables can be generated or encouraging recycling can all support ESD. So can forms of civic education which encourage greater solidarity and cooperation in society.

Freedom, prosperity and the development of society and of individuals are fundamental human values. They will only be attained through the ability of well-informed citizens to exercise their democratic rights and to play an active role in society. Constructive participation and the development of democracy depend on satisfactory education as well as on free and unlimited access to knowledge, thought, culture and information.

IFLA-UNESCO Public Library
Manifesto 2022



As with so many other things, the uniqueness of libraries comes from their combination of spaces, staff and resources – both traditional and digital.

Library spaces are of course extremely well suited for providing ESD, given that they are usually well known, sited at the heart of communities, and of course not commercial. They already have the reputation of being learning spaces, many of which are accessible to learners throughout life and outside the formal education system. Given the density of library networks in many countries, working through libraries offers the possibility to carry out ESD in a more systemic fashion than with only ad hoc initiatives.

Of course, this is only possible through **library staff**. Once again, staff are trained to help people find and apply information in order to improve their lives. While there is clearly some discussion to be had about neutrality, many librarians see the commitment to society that is at the heart of their profession as being well aligned with ESD-like activities. Staff bring in unique skills and experience, opening people's eyes to the world through information and helping them to engage with it.

Finally, there are **library collections** themselves. The materials libraries hold can already be powerful tools to support ESD. They can help address and contextualise issues encountered by the community. Crucially, there are also plenty of other resources available, including those produced by ESD organisations (see the examples mentioned above!), ranging from full course plans to individual lessons.

One interesting possibility, and one that perhaps has yet to be fully explored, is the role of libraries in helping to curate and ensure the discoverability of resources for ESD. There is a growing body of Open Educational Resources on sustainable development. Work to organise this could help significantly widen library efforts, and those of partners, and help transform core principles of the [IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto](#) into practice.

Steps to engagement

- 1) Think about activities that you already carry out which could count as Education for Sustainable Development
- 2) Think about what other potential there is to carry out ESD through libraries, from the local to the systemic level
- 3) Find out about what ESD-related terms are used in your country – how do people talk about this as a concept?
- 4) Explore which members of the Bridge 47 network are based in your country. Find out about them and their activities, and about how they could fit in with library planning
- 5) Hold a call or a meeting with ESD players in your own country, in order to develop a joint activity or simply an event – for example, you could invite them to your congress, or to contribute an article for your newsletter or journal
- 6) Talk to the relevant government ministry or agency for ESD. Prepare your arguments on why libraries could be powerful partners, including using the examples you've come up with under point 1. Make sure you also clearly define specific outputs that you could deliver.