Regional Education for Sustainable Development Networks
Learning together, acting together

Policy brief
Advancing ESD policy

UNESCO Global Action Programme on
Education for Sustainable Development

Key findings and trends over the 10 years of the Decade for ESD highlighted the importance and effectiveness of stakeholder engagement, partnerships and networks in promoting and advancing ESD. This brief examines the importance of regional networks[*].

There are two basic types of regional networks: (i) those working on environmental, social and sustainable development (SD) issues in general, with a strong educational component, and (ii) those formed directly within or by education institutions and educators, including school networks. Both have the potential to advance ESD goals and scale-up transformative change. Networks of the first group have long been considered effective mechanisms to raise awareness and take actions related to environmental protection, and more recently, on issues related to sustainability, such as climate change, biodiversity, water, poverty alleviation, sustainable consumption and production. The education sector has developed its capacity to work in collaboration with these networks in promoting ESD. Similarly, the second group of networks has been encouraged with the support of international agencies such as UNESCO, the higher education sector and NGOs and delivered important changes to the education sector and

beyond. All these regional partnerships and networks, particularly those with permanent structures, serve as platforms for piloting policies, exploring pedagogical ideas and new outreach methods.

Key functions of networks

Dalin's (1999) description of how networks operate refers to four key functions: (1) The "*informative*" function which becomes evident in the direct exchange of and in providing the bridge between practice and knowledge among educators (formal and non-formal), learners, stakeholders and institutions (2) *"professional development"* which offers opportunities for further learning and competence development (3) the "*psychological*" function that encourages and strengthens individual members (4) the *"political"* function based on the power of well-structured networks to influence policies.

Key messages

1) **ESD is complex; regional networks are necessary to promote, deepen and contextualise it, taking into account the specific geopolitical and socioeconomic conditions of the region.**
2) **ESD regional networks depend on mutualism and action towards shared goals; they can create co-responsibility and identify common priorities and opportunities.**
3) **Regional networks can address regional governance schemes and align with policy development of different areas. Usually, they have the capacity to contribute to evidence-based policymaking in synergy with other actors directly (or indirectly) relevant to SD/ESD.**
4) **Apart from promoting ESD in the school system, regional networks are important in building capacities of formal, non-formal and informal educators and raising awareness on SD and ESD, at international and national/local level.**

[*] *The word "region" is not in the UN sense of the term but to denote an "eco-region", a common geo-political entity, given that the countries of a region tend to present common eco-geo characteristics, shared objectives and challenges and frequently, similar socio-cultural features.*

From Environmental Education Networks to GAP Partner Networks

International cooperation and networks, already in the 1940's on intercultural understanding and peace education, later on, in the 1960's-70's on Environmental Education (EE), and then, on ESD, are not a region-specific phenomenon. Since the early stages of EE, efforts have been made at international and regional level to establish experience sharing networks on the organization, development and joint implementation of educational projects (Giolitto, 1997). The first international EE networks were developed between the 1980s and 1990s by:

- Intergovernmental organizations, such as UNESCO and UNEP that supported the promotion of EE in educational systems around the world,

- International or regional NGOs for the environment and development, such as IUCN, EEB and MIO-ECSDE. Apparently, IUCN CEC was the first international network to promote environmental education and communication playing a key role in international framing of this work.

In fact, these partnerships tried to open the educational community (schools, universities) to the entire society (Rickinson, 2001). The **UN Conference on Environment and Development** (Rio, 1992) further boosted dynamic of regional networks. New avenues for regional cooperation were opened up in the dramatically changing political landscape which followed the fall of the *"iron curtain"*. At the same time, the concept of Sustainable Development and its implementation appeared on the educational scene as a new and challenging topic. Chapter 36 of the Rio **Agenda 21** and the Workshop on "Reorienting Environmental Education for Sustainable Development" (by UNESCO, UNEP, MIO-ECSDE, 1996) marked a necessary and appropriate direction change for EE towards ESD. The UNESCO International **Conference on Environment and Society: Education and Public Awareness for Sustainability** promoted ESD as an umbrella subject covering topics related to: sustainable management of increasingly depleted natural resources, poverty alleviation, environmental protection, health, human rights and peace, cultural diversity, gender, etc. and reinforced the need to create broad and effective cooperation and networking (UNESCO, 1998). During the decade leading up to the Johannesburg Summit on SD in 2002 and a couple of years after, the wider educational community gained valuable experience through participation in regional networks. They were able to share knowledge and practices, *co-create* and make the global agenda on policy and pedagogy more specific and relevant to regional/national contexts (UNESCO, 2005).

The **UN Decade on ESD (2005-2014)** provided the solid framework that reinforced ESD networks. Actually, during the Decade we witnessed various schemes of cooperation and networking, many of which are to a large extent: (i) knowledge exchange and collaboration schemes among agencies at international and UN level for the inclusion of education in the Post-2015 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) processes (ii) deployment of mechanisms i.e. coordinating groups, platforms, bodies, etc. to shape ESD policy, support research and ESD implementation at national level (iii) interactions among university networks investing in ESD, that led to fruitful peer support for ESD

Examples of international / regional networks promoting ESD

- Associated Schools Project Network ASP-Net https://aspnet.unesco.org
- Association of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future (ULSF) www.ulsf.org
- Baltic University Programme (BUP) www.balticuniv.uu.se
- Copernicus Alliance www.copernicus-alliance.org
- Eco-Schools Global www.ecoschools.global
- Environment and School Initiatives (ENSI) www.ensi.org
- Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE)
- Global Universities Partnership on Environment and Sustainability (GUPES) www.gupes.org
- Global RCE (Regional Centres of Expertise) Network, www.rcenetwork.org
- International Network of Teacher Education Institutions (INTEI)
- Mediterranean Education Initiative for Environment and Sustainability (MEdIES) www.medies.net
- Promotion of Sustainability in Postgraduate Education and Research ProSPER.Net http://prospernet.ias.unu.edu
- Sustainable Development Solutions Network – Youth www.sdsnyouth.org
- The Learning Teacher Network - http://learningteachernetwork.org
- The Global Education Network Europe - http://gene.eu/

implementation, at the tertiary level (iv) school networks, connecting students to learning and sharing across the globe, particularly using ICTs (v) networks of Civil Society Organizations and other stakeholders that have been crucial in promoting and advancing ESD, particularly at the regional level (UNESCO, 2014)

New opportunities for regional networking on SD/ESD are currently offered in the framework of the **SDGs** aspire to be people-centred, universal, transformative and integrated. Education (see SDG4) is a prerequisite for addressing the other SDGs, and Partnerships are essential in promoting the entire SDG agenda (see SDG17).

ESD regional networks: an effective collaborative space for SD in action

ESD regional networks provide platforms for discussion, exchange, cooperation and co-creation, bringing in experiences and know-how from various contexts. Their value lies particularly in their ability to organize the **joint action of different stakeholders** coming from the formal educational sector (schools teachers, professors, students), but also from areas less direct relevance to SD/ESD, such as NGOs, youth and gender organizations, museums, parks, media and government bodies.

Regional networks help to make the global SD/ESD agenda more specific and relevant to the contexts of their regions and their members. In this way, members are more likely to express deeper political commitment and ownership, undertaking related action at national level. The results of regional networking are much more likely to be used and sustained over time in national policy-making. In this perspective, one of the greatest achievements of regional networks is the **promotion & advancement of policies and strategies** at regional level, where more flexibility is observed compared to the national level. The UNECE Strategy on ESD adopted in Vilnius (2005) was, to a large extent, formulated and promoted by (sub)regional networks of this vast UN region. Other regional examples/frameworks are the Strategy of ESD for Sub-Saharan Africa (launched in 2006) and the Mediterranean Strategy on ESD (endorsed in 2014) that have supported knowledge and expertise sharing, common monitoring and reporting and stronger political incentives (UNESCO, 2018).

Many regional networks are also active in **capacity-building/training**, development of innovative pedagogies and facilitation of access of educators to learning materials and other resources so much needed in the regional context. Several regional networks are instrumental in

engaging higher education and research institutions e.g. the Baltic University Programme (BUP) (Scoullos et al. 2016).

Regional networks help **cooperation** among partners to enrich learning experiences and develop their ESD competencies (EC 2017). Particularly, regional ESD networks require, but might also initiate, an important cultural shift towards deeper understanding and co-creation, which involves competencies related to effective communication, reflection and openness to intercultural learning. The available today potential that the **Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs**) has, removes many of the communication and distance barriers of the past, unlocking the potential benefits of knowledge-transfer and intercultural learning (UNESCO 2018).

At the EU level several important sub-regional networks operate, trying to bridge the gap in the EU agenda, which does not give ESD the necessary prominence (see the examples of the Regional Environmental Centre for Central and Eastern Europe -REC, BUP, ENSI, etc.)

The Regional Centres of Expertise (RCEs) on ESD (coordinated by UNU) working to translate global SD objectives into the regional and local contexts have contributed to the re-orientation of a numbers of existing programmes, subjects and curricula towards SD (UNU, 2010). The RCEs

networks, active in Africa, North and South America, Asia-Pacific and Europe, build partnerships and collaborate on the many themes of SD such as climate change education, traditional knowledge, biodiversity, and sustainable consumption and production. RCEs also provide capacity-building to teachers and others, as well as strategic support to the process of reorienting education systems, through communications, fundraising and engagement with policy-makers (UNESCO, 2014).

Regional networks on ESD: potential and challenges

As evident from the above, regional ESD networks can play a very important role covering the space between global and national organisations addressing regional governance structures in promoting policy formulation, pilot-implementation and monitoring. They can act both as sources of innovation and as means of dissemination of good practices, ensuring diffusion at all levels (EC 2017). In fact, they may serve as **policy and practice incubators** across the countries of a region.

Along broader lines, based on literature evidence regional networks working on ESD have a strong potential to:
- Engage a wide diversity of actors, within and outside the educational sector, in concrete actions.
- Take the lead in ESD debates and processes, at regional level, utilizing policy relevant research and promoting policies and strategies.
- Contribute to the transformation of educational practices, curricula and institutions, following the latest trends.
- Contribute to regional schemes for capacity-building and development of ESD related competencies.
- Facilitate scaling up and replication models.
- Promote research on ESD.
- Enhance the capacities of decision-makers relevant to ESD policy through e.g. peer-to-peer learning, intraregional cooperation, etc.

Nevertheless, regional networks face several challenges (EC 2017; Lambrechts & Hindson, 2016). The most important of these are:

- Coordination problems; to sustain active participation and strong involvement.
- Limited financial and human resources; many of them have not secured adequate funding.
- Shifting of focus and priorities; from agreed common visions and goals to priorities of only some of the members.
- Gradual loss of flexibility; shifting to non-flexible 'bureaucratic' systems.
- Take into consideration and integrate the necessities and potentialities of the different countries without leaving behind other countries in the ESD challenges.
- Lack of transparency; inadequate reporting, monitoring and evaluation of related processes.

Referring to the last one in particular, although several regional networks have demonstrated promising results and were potentially innovative in their context and processes, their work has not yet been independently evaluated. Evaluation may be more difficult when networks are informal or emerging, seems to be a priority, both for members and for donors, and in this case, adoption of evidence-informed tools should be employed. It seems that a self-critical approach is a cost-effective form of evaluation, to periodically reflect upon value, relevance and impact and make adjustments to keep pace with policy, social and economic changes and challenges (ET 2020, 2017).

In conclusion

Regional networks working on ESD are of vital importance for the support and promotion of ESD policy and practice, connecting the global to the national and local level and addressing the most appropriate governance structures. They can effectively promote policies and strategies for formal, non-formal and even, informal ESD. They are instrumental in facilitating exchange of experiences, competencies and co-development of knowledge. They are best placed to consider regional specificities, challenges and needs and simultaneously promote the respect of the cultural identities of the partners, thus enhancing international understanding and peace.

Recommendations for advancing ESD policy on the use of networks[*]

- **Goal-setting and shared goals**: A shared vision is needed to inspire the cooperation of members. Clear shared goals should be defined at the early stages of a network, in order to engage the partners in an appropriate structure. The goals may be redefined as the network evolves.
- **Autonomy, accountability and flexibility**: Attention should be paid to the decision-making capacity of the network's members and their sense of ownership and responsibility. Flexible schemes may encourage increased members' activity. Systematic assessment may help to identify or motivate new network members, to help them identify their own needs and contribute with an increased sense of ownership.
- **Motivation and benefits**: The members' interests should be balanced within and between different levels, as friction and competition between institutions and other actors can undermine their cohesiveness.
- **Roles**: Cooperation within a network should be supported by: a) providing time for dedicated activities; b) assuring recognition; c) giving voice to all; and d) assuring a climate of trust. Members should be aware of their role, while effective distribution of responsibilities is particularly important.
- **Capacity-building**: Collaborative competence should be developed.
- **Cross-sectoral working**: Action should identify points of shared interest with regional governance schemes and align policy development of different areas. Evidence-based policy-making and practice requires connections with actors with direct or indirect relevance to SD/ESD.
- **Network development**: Networks should be flexible. In some cases, they may exist as an initial phase in establishing and embedding a culture of collaboration. They may also make lasting connections of which specific project activities might be included as one part guided by the actors.
- **Visibility of the network:** as an important player on ESD; External relations of the network with other partners/networks is important as well.
- **Impact, quality assurance and evidence**: Monitoring and evaluation is necessary for the understanding of the effectiveness of networks. Considerations on how impact and outcomes will be measured, definition of indicators and decisions on the assessment methods should be included in the design of the network.

* Adapted from the "Networks for learning and development across school education" Report from the ET 2020 Working Group Schools 2016-18, European Commission, Brussels, 2017.

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UNESCO Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development
GAP Partner Network 1 – Advancing Policy

- Beydaar Society and Echo Change, Pakistan
- Centre for Environment Education, India
- German Federal Ministry of Education and Research
- Global Alliance for Disaster Risk Reduction and Resilience in the Education Sector (GADRRRES)
- Hard Rain Project
- Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES) Japan
- International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)
- Mediterranean Initiative for Environment and Sustainability (MEdIES) of MIO-ECSDE
- Ministry of Public Education, Costa Rica
- Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Japan - National Commission for UNESCO
- Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Kenya
- Ministry of Environment, Green Development and Tourism, Mongolia

- Ministry of Education and Training, Vietnam
- National Council on Climate Change and Clean Development Mechanism, Dominican Republic
- Organización de Estados Iberoamericanos para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura (OEI)
- UN Alliance on Climate Change Education, Training and Public Awareness (Secretariat UNFCCC)
- UN CC: Learning Partnership coordinated by UNITAR
- United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)

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