

I. STUDII, CERCETĂRI, ARTICOLE

EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND THE 2030 AGENDA*

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ABSTRACT:

Articolul cuprinde o succintă prezentare și analiză, dintr-o perspectivă multidisciplinară, a celor mai recente evenimente intervenite în promovarea educației pentru dezvoltarea durabilă în contextul negocierii, elaborării și finalizării Agendei 2030 adoptată de Summit-ul ONU la 25 septembrie 2015 cu titlul oficial „Transformarea lumii noastre: Agenda 2030 pentru dezvoltare durabilă”. Sunt înfățișate eforturile de trecere de la provocările generate de dezvoltarea durabilă la aspirații menite să contribuie la proclamarea celor 17 obiective ale dezvoltării durabile cu evidențierea strategiilor convenite să ducă la acțiuni hotărâte pentru transpunerea în viață a Agendei 2030. Sunt studiate elementele din Agendă care configurează cadrul conceptual și instituțional în care sunt așteptate realizări semnificative în extinderea la toate nivelele a educației pentru dezvoltare durabilă, precum și criticile formulate pe această temă pe plan politic și academic. În încheiere, sunt schițate aspecte relevante ale procesului de universalizare a educației pentru dezvoltare durabilă, cu accent special pe rolul tinerei generații în acest complex proces.

Cuvinte cheie: educație pentru dezvoltare durabilă, obiectivele dezvoltării durabile, ONU, UNESCO, ASEAN, agenda, declarație, diplomatie multilaterală, negocieri, drepturi, promovare, implementare, aspirație, globalizare, strategie, programe, tineret, universalitate

RÉSUMÉ:

L'article offre une brève présentation et analyse, dans une perspective multidisciplinaire, des récents événements dans la promotion de l'éducation pour le développement durable dans le contexte de la négociation, rédaction et finalisation de l'Agenda 2030 adoptée par le Sommet des Nations Unies le 25 Septembre 2015 avec le titre officiel "Programme de développement durable à l'horizon 2030". Sont présentés les défis posés par le passage aux aspirations du développement durable visant à contribuer à la proclamation des 17 objectifs du développement durable, en mettant l'accent sur les stratégies convenues afin de prendre des mesures résolues pour transposer en réalité l'Agenda 2030. Sont étudiés aussi les éléments de l'Agenda qui configurent le cadre conceptuel et institutionnel dans lequel des réalisations importantes sont attendues dans le vaste domaine de l'éducation à tous les niveaux pour le développement durable et les critiques formulées sur cette question dans les milieux politiques et académiques. En guise de conclusion, sont esquissés les aspects pertinents de l'universalisation de l'éducation pour le développement durable, avec un accent particulier sur le rôle la jeune génération dans ce processus complexe.

Mots-clés: éducation pour le développement durable, les objectifs du développement durable, Nations Unies, UNESCO, ASEAN, agenda, déclaration, diplomatie multilatérale, négociations, droits, promotion, mise en œuvre, aspiration, mondialisation, stratégie, programme, jeunesse, universalité

1. From challenges to aspirations. In the introduction to this article it should be emphasized that September 25, 2015 will be recognized as a date marking a turning point in the history of multilateral diplomacy because of

the adoption by consensus by the United Nations (UN) Summit of the document entitled "*Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*".¹

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¹ The full text of the 2030 Agenda is available at http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/L.1

The meeting during which this document was adopted was unprecedented by the presence of 108 heads of states, 50 prime ministers, 38 foreign ministers and three vice-presidents, as heads of the national delegations attending the UN Summit and the 70th session of the UN General Assembly.²

This programmatic document, which will be called in these pages by its small title as the 2030 Agenda, has 35 pages, 91 paragraphs and contains 17 comprehensive sustainable development goals and 169 targets, which are integrated and indivisible, to be implemented during the period 2016-2030. It opens with a self-presentation: a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity. It captures the fundamental elements for eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions and represents a significant outcome of multilateral diplomacy practiced under the UN auspices, as it sets out a supremely ambitious and transformational vision. However, it should be emphasized that the 2030 Agenda is not a legally binding instrument.

Indeed, in accordance with its own provisions, this document is described as being only an Agenda for global action for the next fifteen years and as a charter for people and planet in the 21st century.

Why is it a historic document, as already called both in official governmental comments and in recent academic analyses dedicated to it? The answer was anticipated in the 2030 Agenda itself which states in paragraph 18: "Never before have world leaders pledged common action and endeavor across such a broad and universal policy agenda. We are setting out together on the path towards sustainable development, devoting ourselves collectively to the pursuit of global development and of "win-win" cooperation which can bring huge gains to all countries and all parts of the world". This is a persuasive example of effective multilateralism.

In this extremely complex process, the role of education is vital. As emphasized by Irina Bokova, Director General of UNESCO, "More

than ever, this is a time when education can – and must – play a decisive role in providing learners across the world with the knowledge, skills and values to discover solutions to today's sustainability challenges. This carries benefit for present and future generations."³

The drafting, negotiation and adoption of the 2030 Agenda which will be discussed in these pages from the perspective of relationship between education for sustainable development and the freshly adopted UN sustainable development goals (SDGs) can be understood in all their complexity only in the light of diplomatic and institutional efforts illustrated by important global conferences and programmatic documents already endorsed by the world community of nations.⁴

The conceptual background reflecting the universal value of education has significant traditions. According to the great philosopher Georg Hegel, "education is the art of making man ethical"⁵ while the famous statesman Nelson Mandela believed that "education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world".⁶ On September 25, 2015 Pope Francis declared in crystal-clear terms before the UN General Assembly that education "is the basis for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and for reclaiming the environment".⁷

³ Quotation taken from the most important and relevant document related to this article entitled *Shaping the Future We Want UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) Final Report* issued by UNESCO and available at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002301/230171e.pdf>.

⁴ From the recent specialized books on sustainable development the following can be mentioned: Maureen Ellis, *The Critical Global Educator: Global citizenship education as sustainable development* (Routledge Research in International and Comparative Education), London, Routledge, 2015, p. 262; Anastasia Nikolopoulou (Editor), Taisha Abraham (Editor), Farid Mirbagheri (Editor) *Education for Sustainable Development: Challenges, Strategies and Practices in a Globalizing World*, SAGE Publications, London, 2010p. 276; From the most recent Romanian literature on this topic see Irina Moroianu Zlătescu, PhD, *New objectives for sustainable development*, Human Rights, Bucharest, No2/2015, pp.7-14.

⁵ See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Quotes, available at http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/6188.Georg_Wilhelm_Friedrich_Hegel.

⁶ See Nelson Mandela, Quotes, available at <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/16243>.

⁷ The full text of the address by Pope Francis at the United Nations is available at <http://www.vis.va/vissolr/index.php?vi=all&dl=4060b076-e728-c7c9-360b-56069193>

² This information is taken from the article by Ion Jinga, Ambassador, Permanent Representative of Romania to the United Nations, *Great Expectations: The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, Huff Post Politics (United Kingdom), September 21, 2015, available at http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/dr-ion-jinga/great-expectations-the-un_b_8167442.html.

These statements have remarkable implications in the 21st century when a significant attention has to be paid to sustainability education, education for sustainability and education for sustainable development (ESD). While these three expressions can be considered as interchangeable, we will give preference in these pages to ESD which is most frequently used internationally and first of all by UNESCO and UN.⁸

ESD is a most challenging objective and comes energetically into the picture when it is considered in the context of broadening the basis for an enlightened opinion and responsible conduct while dealing with the numerous and complex issues of sustainable development. ESD has the capacity of galvanizing creativity leading to gradual pedagogical innovation. In accordance with ESD, all members of society need to develop their commitment to the importance of knowledge, integrity and honesty, and to conduct their lives in conformity with the fundamental values of perseverance, toleration and wisdom, so that the country has the capacity to cope with the rapid and widespread transformations in all fields of human activity which demand international action in search for adequate solutions.

In this regard, a challenging process started in 1992 when a UN conference, also known as Earth Summit, was held in Rio de Janeiro and adopted the Agenda 21, which was a pioneer plan of action for sustainable development. Chapter 36 in Agenda 21 prioritizes educational issues and emphasizes the importance of orienting the education activities to achieve sustainable development. Both formal and non-formal education are indispensable to changing people's attitudes so that they have the capacity to assess and address their sustainable development concerns. It is also critical for achieving environmental and ethical awareness, values and attitudes, skills and behavior consistent with sustainable

development and for effective public participation in decision making.⁹

Ten years later the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002) concluded by consensus that development can be sustainable only if future generations inherit a quality of environment at least equal to that inherited by their predecessors. It presupposes the simultaneous application of three fundamental principles: the precautionary principle, adopting a preventive rather than remedial approach; the principle of solidarity between all peoples of the world and between the present generations and those to come; and the principle of people participation in decision-making.¹⁰

Initially considered an ambiguous concept, sustainability is thus recognized as a way of life that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This generous objective cannot be implemented without adequate education at all levels.

Sustainability is and remains a hot and controversial topic. The main reason is that humankind is not living in times of real sustainable development. More than one-fourth of humankind suffers from chronic poverty. Hunger, military conflicts, terrorism, human-rights abuses, environmental degradation and climate change, natural disasters and pandemics all threaten human dignity and the very survival of mankind.

In 2000 the UN Millennium Declaration was adopted, which emphasizes that a global development demands a comprehensive approach. The declaration formed the basis of time-bound and measurable goals for development (MDGs). It provided a set of tangible and measurable development goals within which education was a significant input and indicator.¹¹

What are the sustainable development goals (SDGs) if compared with MDGs?

They represent a new, universal set of goals, targets and indicators that UN member states will be expected to use to frame their agendas and political policies over the next 15 years, starting on January 1st 2016.

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⁸ We use in this article a number of official UN and UNESCO documents related to education for sustainable development available at two sites: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/>

<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-sustainable-development/>.

⁹ See the relevant documents at <http://www.un-documents.net/agenda21.htm>.

¹⁰ See <http://www.un-documents.net/jburgdec.htm>.

¹¹ See <http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm>.

In fact, the SDGs follow and expand on the MDGs which expire at the end of 2015. As the MDGs deadline approaches, about 1 billion people still live on less than \$1.25 a day – the World Bank measure on poverty – and more than 800 million people do not have enough food to eat. Women are still fighting hard for their rights, and millions of women still die in childbirth.

In the light of these sad realities, education comes on the frontline and one of the main objectives of ESD is to help people understand the complexities of, and synergies between, the global issues, inviting all nations to negotiating a sustainable future.

Being convinced of the importance of ESD, and illustrating again the potential of multilateral diplomacy, the UN General Assembly proclaimed period 2005-2014 the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD), with UNESCO as lead agency.¹²

DESD was optimistically expected to provide an opportunity for refining and promoting the vision of, and transition to, sustainable development – through all forms of education, public awareness and training; and to give an enhanced profile to the important role of education and learning in sustainable development. In this context, ESD has the continuous role of promoting the practice of learning how to achieve and consolidate global and local sustainable communities.

In more practical terms, ESD is focused on four major thrusts: improving basic education; reorienting existing education to address sustainable development; developing public understanding and awareness; and providing training for all sectors of society, including business, industry, and governments. There is no doubt about the participation of different stakeholders in this complex process: governments and intergovernmental bodies, mass media, civil society and non-governmental organizations, the private sector and formal education institutions. All are covered by the omnibus concept of ESD.

It should be recalled that DESD was concerned particularly with the content and purpose of education. In concept and design,

ESD challenges all forms of educational provision to adopt practices and approaches which foster the values of sustainable development guided by a vision of education that seeks to empower people to assume the responsibility of creating a sustainable future.

In this spirit, in order to finalize the DESD, two major conferences on education for sustainable development took place in Japan in November 2014.

The first was the International Conference on Higher Education for Sustainable Development, hosted by Nagoya University and organized by the United Nations University with the support of the government of Japan and various organizations, including UNESCO and the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP).

In the Nagoya Declaration on Higher Education for Sustainable Development, participants renewed their commitment to support activities towards sustainable development, including implementation of the Global Action Program and called on world leaders to recognize the essential role and responsibility of higher education institutions towards creating sustainable societies.

Immediately following the International Conference on Higher Education for Sustainable Development, the World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development was convened – another major event organized by UNESCO and the government of Japan which was attended by nearly 1,000 participants.¹³

A Declaration on Education for Sustainable Development was adopted at the end of the conference, calling for the commitment to education for sustainable development of all stakeholders and inviting governments to allocate substantial resources to enable the implementation of the relevant programs. Inspired by the objectives of the DESD, the United Nations University called for the development of networks for the promotion of ESD, as well as for establishing centers for the research about ESD.¹⁴

In a similar spirit, the UNEP facilitated the

¹² A general presentation of the DESD can be consulted at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001416/141629e.pdf>.

¹³ For the documents of the conferences in Japan see <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-sustainable-development/>.

¹⁴ The full text of the Declaration is available at http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/ERI/pdf/Aichi-Nagoya_Declaration_EN.pdf.

establishment of the Global Universities Partnership on Environment and Sustainability in 2012 as a flagship contribution to the DESD. The focus of this partnership, which reunites nearly 400 universities, is around three pillars: Education, Training and Network.¹⁵

The most remarkable practical outcome registered during the DESD was the creation of networks of regional institutions: MESA in Africa, ProSPER. Net in Asia-Pacific, COPERNICUS Alliance in Europe, ARIUSA in Latin America and the Caribbean. Their general mandate covers building capacity, sharing experiences and expanding the influence of education for sustainable development.¹⁶

Finally, in 2014, after broad consultations with and inputs from a wide range of stakeholders, UNESCO adopted the post-Decade of Education for Sustainable Development Global Action Program, or GAP on education for sustainable development, and a roadmap for implementing it.¹⁷

The GAP identifies five priority action areas: mainstreaming education for sustainable development in both education and sustainable development policies; transforming learning and training institutions by integrating sustainable development principles in daily activities; building capacities in educators and trainers; empowering and mobilizing youth; and accelerating the implementation of sustainable solutions at the local and community levels.¹⁸

It is now obvious that sustainable development is recognized as an omnibus concept that attempts to bridge the divide between economic growth and environmental protection, while taking into account other issues traditionally associated with development. Unfortunately, it is sometimes misinterpreted as focusing exclusively on environmental aspects. In reality, as specified in all official documents, it encompasses three areas: economic, social and environmental. The UN 2005 World Summit Outcome Document refers to these areas as “interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars” of sustainable

¹⁵ See note 3 *supra*.

¹⁶ See <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20150108194231213>.

¹⁷ See the full text of the document at <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco-world-conference-on-esd-2014/esd-after-2014/global-action-programme/>.

¹⁸ See note 17 *supra*.

development.¹⁹

In an aspirational spirit, the second Rio Conference, - the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, or Rio+20 Summit-held in 2012 approved the document “*The Future We Want*” which contains the main directions for the negotiations and drafting work for the 2030 Agenda which was approved on September 25, 2015 by the UN Summit.

Guided also by a practical approach, Rio+20 Summit decided to establish an “inclusive and transparent intergovernmental process open to all stakeholders, with a view to developing global sustainable development goals to be agreed by the General Assembly”. That opened the way for passing from vexing challenges to formulating clear aspirations meant to gradually lead to more action-oriented programs²⁰

In this regard, the 2030 Agenda which was built *inter alia* on the aspirations expressed in the document “*The Future We Want*” recommends itself as a pioneer programmatic instrument as it offers for the first time an agreed operational meaning for the term ‘sustainable development’.

Until 2015 there was a trend to simply accept the already classical definition given in the 1987 Brundtland Commission’s report, according to which “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.²¹ (21) The concept was correctly defined in 1987, but it was also necessary to identify a set of articulated and negotiated meanings acceptable to the 193 UN member states. That involved a complex diplomatic journey of over 27 years.

Unlike the MDGs, which were drawn up only at the UN headquarters, for the 2030 Agenda the UN has conducted the largest

¹⁹ The full text of the 2005 UN Summit Outcome is available at <http://www.unrol.org/doc.aspx?n=2005+World+Summit+Outcome.pdf>.

²⁰ Documents of the Rio+20 conference can be consulted at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/thefuturewewant.html>.

²¹ For the definition of sustainable development and related aspects see http://www.unece.org/oes/nutshell/2004-2005/focus_sustainable_development.html.

See also World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (1987). <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?menu=1300> 3. Goal 4, target 4.7. Full report of the Open Working Group of the General Assembly on Sustainable Development Goals is issued as document A/68/970, available at <http://undocs.org/A/68/970>.

consultation program in its history to collect a great number of opinions on what the SDGs should contain, including education.

The start was given by the Rio+20 Summit in 2012 which mandated the establishment of an open working group to come up with a draft agenda. This group, composed of representatives from 70 countries, had its first meeting in March 2013 and published its final draft, with its 17 suggestions for sustainable development goals, in July 2014. The draft was submitted for consideration to the UN General Assembly in September 2014. A few rounds of negotiations followed, and the final drafting of the goals and targets, as well as the text of the preamble and declaration that are now integral parts of the 2030 Agenda were agreed in a memorable meeting on the evening of 2 August 2015.

In addition to the open working group discussions, the UN conducted also a series of “global conversations”, as a new form of multilateral diplomacy. These included 11 thematic and 83 national consultations, and door-to-door surveys. In the same framework of consultations, the UN launched an online My World survey asking people to prioritize the areas they wished to see addressed in the SDGs. The results of these consultations were presented to the official working group for further discussions and negotiations which led to the adoption by consensus, as mentioned above, on 2 August 2015, of the final draft of the document entitled “*Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*” which can be considered a success story of multilateralism.²²

2. From proclamations to action

Promoting sustainability is a tremendous practical task, as in fact it means building the future. The originality and extreme complexity of the process are illustrated by the clear recognition that in this process the foundations and the walls have to be constructed at the same time. All states have to accept and assimilate the truth that radical changes are the only productive response to the global crisis of sustainability, as persuasively described in 2000 in the UN Millennium Declaration. Indeed, this document asserts in its paragraph 51 that peoples are under the threat of living on a

planet irredeemably spoilt by human activities, and whose resources would no longer be sufficient for their needs. For these reasons, in paragraph 6 it is emphasized that prudence must be shown in the management of all living species and natural resources, in accordance with the precepts of sustainable development. Only in this way can the immeasurable riches provided to us by nature be preserved and passed on to our descendants. The current unsustainable patterns of production and consumption must be changed in the interest of our future welfare and that of our descendants. It is in this context that ESD has to be situated and given a visible place on the list of priorities.

While the UN Millennium Declaration was nearly silent on the major role of ESD, the document entitled “*Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*” contains 22 references to education. The most significant one is formulated in the text of Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

From the 169 targets contained in the 2030 Agenda those specifically related to Goal 4 on education are worded in a significant text which deserves to be reproduced in its original form, with all its nuances, which reads as follows:

4.1 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes;

4.2 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education;

4.3 By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university;

4.4 By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship;

4.5 By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations;

4.6 By 2030, ensure that all youth and a

²² All information and specific data regarding diplomatic activities for the preparation of the 2030 Agenda are available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/>.

substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy;

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;

4.a Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all;

4.b By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries;

4.c By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing States.

The 2030 Agenda does not limit itself to the enumeration of the above reproduced targets. It also contains an explicit and generous advocacy for a world with equitable and universal access to quality education at all levels, to health care and social protection, where physical, mental and social well-being are assured.

Paragraph 25 of the 2030 Agenda contains an ambitious commitment to providing inclusive and equitable quality education at all levels – early childhood, primary, secondary, tertiary, technical and vocational training. All people, irrespective of sex, age, race or ethnicity, and persons with disabilities, migrants, indigenous peoples, children and youth, especially those in vulnerable situations, should have access to life-long learning opportunities that help them to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to exploit opportunities and to participate fully in society.

Finally, target 8.6 does not refer to 2030 but summarizes the commitment to substantially

reduce by 2020 the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training.²³

It can be concluded that, in accordance with the 2030 Agenda, education, including training and capacity building, communication and creating public awareness, all are treated as indispensable components of an ambitious strategy for achieving the SDGs. The experience of DESD was well assimilated by identifying specific targets for developing programs in order to meet the educational needs demanded by the SDGs, as well as to give tangibility to UNESCO's goals contained in the program Education for All.

Adopted in 2015, one year after the end of DESD in 2014, the 2030 Agenda has the merit of bringing to the attention of 193 states the practical lessons learned during the past 10 years from the valuable experience accumulated by the education systems throughout the world. Moreover, while Goal 4 is vital for the education systems, it should be recognized that education is a necessary and promising key to achieving all the other 16 Goals.

As mentioned by Professor Goolam Mohamedbhai, former secretary-general of the Association of African Universities, the implementation of the SDGs will require substantial inputs from higher education. This must be recognized by the relevant UN agencies, the governments and by higher education institutions themselves. Institutions now have the responsibility, more than ever before, to integrate sustainable development into all their teaching, research, community engagement and campus operations.²⁴ There is no doubt that the 2030 Agenda reflects a holistic approach which by its very nature must be universal, strongly calling for tenacious action on the part of everyone everywhere.

The MDGs were targeted primarily at developing countries, while the SDGs are applicable to the world as a whole. By setting targets that require even economically highly developed nations to accept radical changes,

²³ The Goal 4 and the targets related to education are reproduced from the official text of the 2030 Agenda available at http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/L.1.

²⁴ See Goolam Mohamedbhai, *What role for higher education in sustainable development?*, an analytical article available at <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20150108194231213>.

there is a visible movement for passing from development in general to sustainable development in specific terms. At the same time, the emphasis was transferred from a solely economic vision of development to a much larger and nuanced approach including the three pillars of sustainability: environmental, social and economic. In the opinion of the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon the 2030 Agenda marks a paradigm shift and its adoption “heralds a new era of global solidarity for promoting prosperity, equal opportunity, and environmental stewardship”.²⁵ Its originality is persuasively demonstrated by the new way it tackles emerging issues and challenges. The close interdependence of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development is clearly defined and explained. It has the merit of co-relating peace and security to sustainable development, while focusing on the centrality of the rule of law. It does not limit itself to formulating guidelines, as it advances workable solutions for treating the complex issues facing now the world community of nations.

It will be the task of ESD to use adequate teaching and learning techniques to enable first of all the younger generation to properly assimilate the best ways and means to give tangibility to the SDGs contained in the 2030 Agenda.

In addition to educational issues well covered in the 2030 Agenda, a few examples illustrate a realistic selection of other major issues included in the Agenda such as: migration, conflicts, exclusion, violence against women, humanitarian crises, climate change. Vulnerable and marginalized people are high on the list of priorities and the most ambitious commitment is to leave no one behind.

While the 17 goals are considered to be universally applicable, the 2030 Agenda could not fail to recognize the variety of national circumstances, different levels of development and the specific needs of some countries who may find themselves in special situations and demand appropriate assistance from developed

states. In the opinion of the USA, the 2030 Agenda is “a testament to the promise of multilateralism” and takes into account different national realities. Such a balanced approach strengthens the potential for success in the process of implementation. In a realistic evaluation of the document, the “Group of 77” developing countries and China (in fact 134 countries) stated that the 2030 Agenda “was not a perfect document, but represented a political balance” that gave the international community a meaningful and ambitious post-2015 Agenda. In more specific terms, India expressed satisfaction that in the outcome document universalism had not been confused with uniformity. It is true that while the Agenda reflects universality, it recognizes at the same time “common but differentiated” responsibilities.²⁶

An inspiring example in this regard is offered by the ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The adoption of the ASEAN Environmental Education Action Plan (AEEAP) contributes to providing a regional framework for enhancing public awareness on environmental management for sustainable development, and to accelerate the development and advancement of environmental education as a key integrating component for achieving sustainable development in the region. The AEEAP covers the period 2014-2018 and is expected to serve to realize a clean and green ASEAN with citizens who are environmentally literate, imbued with environmental ethics, willing and capable to ensure the sustainable development of the region through environmental education and public participation efforts.²⁷ Indeed, education is part of the solution to global environmental problems and the regional and global recognition of this truth should be interpreted as a strong appeal to appropriate action at all levels.

3. From strategies to practice

A Ministerial Declaration of the high-level segment of the substantive session of 2011 of

²⁵ For the full text of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s remarks at a side event of the United Nations Development Group (UNDG), “From global conversation to global action: making the SDGs work” on September 24, 2015 see <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sgsm17112.doc.htm>.

²⁶ All quotations are taken from the UN press-release of September 1st 2015 available at <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/ga11670.doc.htm>.

²⁷ The full text of the ASEAN Environmental Education Action Plan (AEEAP) is available at http://environment.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/ASEAN_Environmental_Education_Action_Plan_2014-2018.pdf.

the Economic and Social Council, held in Geneva from 4 to 8 July 2011 reaffirmed the leading role of UNESCO in education, including in the implementation of the Education for All action plan and the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014).

The Declaration envisaged education in strategic terms and reaffirmed the right to education and the need for its full realization, and that education is essential for human development, sustainable development, world peace, just and democratic societies and the promotion of all human rights, including the right to development. It specifically emphasized that education and sustainable development are interlinked and mutually reinforcing, and stressed the need to recognize the important role of education for sustainable development.²⁸

Analyzing educational strategy from a more practical perspective, Masozi Nyirendra, a specialist in educational policy, planning, economics and finance, believes that ESD promotes efforts to rethink educational programs and systems (both methods and contents) that currently support unsustainable societies. ESD affects all components of education: legislation, policy, finance, curriculum, instruction, learning, assessment, etc. ESD calls for lifelong learning and recognizes the fact that the educational needs of people change over their lifetime.

Many individuals and organizations around the world already implement ESD (e.g. a teacher weaving sustainability themes into primary education using participatory methods; a community development worker raising people's awareness on rights which are denied to them; or a public health worker training people to draw water from clean sources).

There are many programs and methods using an ESD approach to learning which is critical for achieving sustainability. Some of them are summarized by Masozi Nyirendra. In a short enumeration they are as follows: principles and values that underlie sustainable development; pedagogical techniques that promote participatory learning and higher-order thinking skills; lifelong learning; local needs,

perceptions and conditions; formal, non-formal and informal education; evolving nature of the concept of sustainability; taking into account context, global issues and local priorities; building civil capacity for community-based decision-making, social tolerance, environmental stewardship, an adaptable workforce, and a good quality of life.²⁹

According to another expert, Charles Hopkins, twelve major issues hindered the advance of ESD during the 1990s and new millennium. They are: low awareness on essentials of ESD, structuring and placing ESD in the curriculum, linking ESD to existing issues including educational reform and economic viability, facing the complexity of sustainable development concept, developing an ESD program with community participation, engaging traditional disciplines in a transdisciplinary framework, sharing the responsibility, building human capacity, developing financial and material resources, developing policy, developing a creative, innovative, and risk-taking climate, and promoting sustainability in popular culture.

By addressing these critical impediments, governments can prevent or reduce delays or derailment of ESD efforts and, ultimately, the attainment of sustainability.³⁰

This is a gigantic action which must be inspired by a genuine political determination to overcome existing obstacles and to ensure a robust, systematic and effective follow-up process of the 2030 Agenda in the years to come.

From this practical perspective, many countries have already expressed reasonable expectations that the High-Level Political Forum under the auspices of the UN Economic and Social Council will be instrumental in monitoring and following up on the complex implementation process, starting in 2016. The difficult task of fulfilling this mandate should not be underestimated by the UN member states.

²⁹ See Masozi Nyirendra, *Education tool for sustainable development*, September 21, 2015 at <http://www.ippmedia.com/?l=84538> See also Prithi Nambiar and Kartikeya V. Sarabhai, *Challenges that Lie Ahead for ESD*, *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development*, March 2015, 9, p. 1-3, available at <http://jsd.sagepub.com/content/9/1/1.full.pdf+html>.

³⁰ See the whole discussion on obstacles to sustainable development at <http://www.esdtoolkit.org/discussion/challenges.htm>.

²⁸ The full text of ECOSOC Declaration is available at http://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/docs/declarations/ministerial_declaration-2011.pdf.

In this context it is encouraging to note the commitment contained in the Declaration entitled “*Placing democracy at the service of peace and sustainable development: Building the world the people want*”, adopted on September 2 2015 by the Fourth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament at the UN Headquarters in New York. The Speakers of Parliament recognize the important responsibilities that are incumbent on parliaments to ensure implementation of the new sustainable development goals. As Speakers, they state that they are ready to do everything in their power to facilitate the consideration of relevant legislation and allocation of budgetary resources, and to hold governments accountable for the attainment of the goals. They will draw from a vast catalogue of actions to help build public awareness and national ownership, strengthen coherence within and between national and local administration and parliament, facilitate citizen involvement and evaluate and report on progress.³¹

In this highly demanding context, the implementation of the SDGs in the process of which ESD has a crucial role is more acutely needed than ever before as a result of the perplexities and vulnerabilities generated at present by the process of globalization.

4. Premature criticism? The most convincing test of commitment to the 2030 Agenda as a whole will be its successful implementation by 193 countries. The new SDGs must be adequately incorporated into national and regional strategies and policies. However, skepticism and criticism about it are already being expressed in political and academic circles. Bjorn Lomborg, adjunct professor at the Copenhagen Business School and director of the Copenhagen Consensus Center, recently wrote a quite critical article about the 2030 Agenda under the suggestive title “*Unsustainable development goals*”.

In his anticipatory opinion, the 2015 UN Summit in New York set the path for global development spending more than \$2.5 trillion between now and 2030, but the participating leaders had just to smile for the cameras and sign on the dotted line, missing a one-in-a-generation opportunity to do much

more good. The 2030 Agenda is the result of years of negotiations. Aiming for inclusivity, the UN talked to everyone. But, however admirable that approach may be, it did not prove successful. Indeed, looking at the Agenda they produced – more than 15,000 words and a headache-inducing 169 development targets – one might conclude that they simply threw everything they had heard into the document.

Yet, as pointed out by Bjorn Lomborg, research shows that more than one-third of all school-age children – a quarter-billion in all – currently fail to learn even the fundamentals of reading and mathematics. Should we really divert resources from basic education to ensure that we can promote sustainable development in schools?³²

While this criticism cannot be ignored, it should be recognized that the question of financing must not be underestimated. In this regard, it is rewarding to find that Jim Yong Kim, President of the World Bank Group, announced that multilateral banks planned to provide financial support of more than \$400 billion for sustainable development and would work to increase financing and build on their record of accomplishment.³³

“*The importance of education for sustainable development*” is the title of an article signed by professor Stephen Sterling, head of education for sustainable development at the Centre for Sustainable Futures, Plymouth University in the UK. In his view, however desirable SDGs are, and however wide the consensus around them, they beg a critical question. How are they to be implemented and achieved? His answer is skeptical: “...unless stakeholders, policy-makers, legislators, businesses, agencies, NGOs, the media and civil society are involved in learning processes, the proposed SDGs will not be achieved. This is because such change cannot happen without learning.” The explanations are interesting. Sustainable development is not itself sustainable (that is, lasting and secured), unless relevant learning among all stakeholders is central to the process. Sustainable development

³¹ The text of the Declaration is available at <http://www.ipu.org/splz-e/speakers15/declaration.pdf>.

³² See Bjorn Lomborg, *Unsustainable development goals*, September 15, 2015 at <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/unsustainable-development-goals-by-bj-rn-lomborg-2015-09>.

³³ A summary of the statement by the President of the World Bank, is available at <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/ga11688.doc.htm>.

can be promoted through policy instruments, but these tend to be effective for only as long as they are applied. In the sustainable development debate, the key role of education in realizing sustainable development is often ignored, downplayed and underestimated – or viewed in isolation from the other instruments of change. Education is rarely regarded as a major factor in making the world more sustainable, and its potential is overlooked, asserts in categorical terms Stephen Sterling.³⁴

Indeed, an important question is: How will the SDGs be funded? A UN conference on financing for the SDGs held in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa in July 2015, failed to ease concerns that there will not be enough cash to meet the aspirational nature of the goals. The UN said the Addis Ababa Action Agenda contained “bold measures to overhaul global finance practices and generate investment” for tackling the challenges of sustainable development. It included a recommitment to the UN target on aid spending – 0.7% of GNI – set more than 40 years ago and pledges to collect more taxes and fight tax evasion. But civil society groups were less impressed, saying the summit had failed to produce new money to fund the goals, or offer ways to transform the international finance system.³⁵

These critical assessments have to be seriously considered by the UN. That is why when the 2030 Agenda was adopted on September 25, 2015 it was announced that the financial implications of this document will be examined by the fifth Committee of the UN General Assembly during its 70th session.³⁶

5. Conclusion. 2015 is a pivotal year for the future of sustainable development within which ESD is not a simple program or project, but is rather a comprehensive umbrella for many forms of education that already exist, and for new ones that remain to be created. If education beyond 2015 figures prominently in the 2030 Agenda, then it is high time that a coherent, evidence-based statement on education and skills was available to all those taking

decisions. Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO and Christiana Figueres Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), asserted that to succeed, policymakers must recognize that today’s global imperatives – to eradicate poverty and improve wellbeing, while restoring the Earth’s balance – form a single agenda, and that the most effective means of achieving it is education. The good news is that the set of SDGs, which will underpin global efforts for the next 15 years, reflect this recognition. Likewise, Article 6 of the (UNFCCC) stipulates that education, training, and public awareness on climate change must be pursued.

In the opinion of the two authors mentioned above, it is vital that policymakers’ emphasis on education continues to be reinforced. Together, UNESCO and the UNFCCC are not only promoting climate-change education in schools; they are also giving teachers the tools and knowledge they need to provide that education through online courses. More than 14 million students and 1.2 million teachers in 58 countries have been engaged in such learning, and 550 business schools have signed on to the Principles for Responsible Management Education, developed by the UN Global Compact. This progress, though important, is just the beginning. What is needed now is a global movement, with every student in every country learning about sustainable development from well-trained teachers, equipped with the appropriate curricula and resources. An ambitious sustainable development agenda, together with a legally binding global climate deal, could go a long way toward catalyzing such a movement, believe the two authors.³⁷

If it is possible to mobilize maximum political will and adequate financial resources in support of the 2030 Agenda, there are solid reasons to hope that 2015 will be remembered as a watershed year for firmly putting our planet on a sustainable pathway. With this hope in mind the 193 UN member states optimistically reaffirm in the last, 91st paragraph of the document adopted on September 25, 2015 by the UN Summit their

³⁴ The full text of the article signed by Stephen Sterling is available at <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20141126162856455>.

³⁵ Documents of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development are available at <http://www.un.org/esa/ffd/ffd3/>.

³⁶ See note 33 *supra*.

³⁷ See the full text of the article titled *Educating for Sustainable Development* at <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/world-education-forum-sustainable-development-by-irina-bokova-and-christiana-figueres-2015-05>.

unwavering commitment to achieving this Agenda and utilizing it to the full to transform our world for the better by 2030. It is a responsible promise and message of hope.

From the perspective of ESD, the successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda might bring valuable contributions to the collective efforts to universalize humanism through education.

In the concluding thoughts formulated by UNESCO on the DESD at the end of 2014, it was pointed out that the greatest achievement of the Decade was the establishment of ESD policies, the reorientation of curricula in many areas and levels of education, and in the deployment of new approaches to learning.

In more specific terms, ESD frameworks and tools have been tested, partnerships and networks have been established, materials prepared, and capacities developed. Through 10 years of dedication, all stakeholders, working together, have laid a strong foundation to advance sustainable development through education and learning.

However, it is clearly recognized at the same time that much more work remains to be done. One of the most important success factors identified during the DESD was leadership. Therefore, inspirational leadership will be essential in order to ensure the implementation of ESD objectives. Such leadership is needed at the global, regional, national and local level. Permanent efforts must be deployed for reorienting education, training and public awareness towards achieving the SDGs incorporated in the 2030 Agenda.³⁸

For the full success of the 2030 Agenda further action-oriented measures are urgently needed to give tangibility to all genuine youth-centered development goals.³⁹ All UN Member States have to make a much more firm commitment to implementing youth policies and programs at the national, regional and global levels. The whole UN system is expected to continue to strengthen its coordination mechanisms and ensure a more coherent and holistic approach in the social field in order to maximize the impact of ongoing youth activities as a prerequisite to

promoting global progress. Youth energy, dynamism, motivation, temerity and sense of invincibility are essential assets for today's and tomorrow's world and its continuous progress.⁴⁰

From a Romanian perspective it is rewarding to learn that during the UN Summit President of Romania Klaus Iohannis announced that "In the case of Romania, we will revise our National Strategy on Sustainable Development in order to integrate the new Development Goals. Social exclusion is identified as a major challenge to local Sustainable Development Goals implementation. In the revised Strategy the emphasis will be on supporting the inclusion of disabled people, young people and women in the development policies."⁴¹

The irreversible process of globalization must be faced in a visionary manner at the universal level. To that end, all parties, including first of all developing countries, should emerge stronger and be able to avoid marginalization and reach win-win situations in their collective struggle for sustainable progress and prosperity. This is an imperative task which no country can ignore today, during an era of planetary vulnerabilities, discontinuities and perplexities.

In this truly historic process, while celebrating its 70th anniversary, the UN must demonstrate by indisputable and persuasive achievements that it deserves to be treated as the indispensable common house of the entire human family, through which we will seek to realize our universal aspirations for peace, cooperation and development.⁴²

⁴⁰ See Dr. Ioan Voicu, *Youth and Global Progress*, ABAC Journal, vol. 31, No. 3, 2011, pp. 1-21, available in electronic version at http://www.journal.au.edu/abac_journal/2011/sep2011/01YouthandGlobal.pdf

⁴¹ The full text of the statement made by President of Romania Klaus Iohannis on September 27, 2015 is available at http://www.presidency.ro/?_RID=det&tb=date&id=15997&_PRID=

For a summary of the statement see <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/gal1691.doc.htm>.

⁴² This idea is contained in the last paragraph (32) of the UN Millennium Declaration adopted by the UN Summit on September 8, 2000 and available at <http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm>.

³⁸ See note 12 *supra*.

³⁹ For an updated presentation of UN youth programs see <http://www.un.org/youthenvoy/youth-un/>.