

# Community-based learning for sustainable development

UNESCO Global Action Programme on  
Education for Sustainable Development



The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development sets ambitious goals to transform our world, balancing the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. To rise to the challenges posed by these goals and to ensure no one is left behind, it is critically important that local communities are involved in the planning and management of sustainable development and the promotion of sustainable lifestyles. The 2030 Agenda encompasses all aspects of our lives, which implies that learning, if it is to contribute fully to this agenda, must be seen as both lifelong and life-wide. The relevance of community-based non-formal education and informal learning for children, young people and adults, especially those not in education or from marginalized or disadvantaged parts of society, must be recognized and fostered in every country of the world if the 17 Sustainable Development Goals are to be met. This *Policy Brief* proposes six action principles and four policy recommendations to advance community-based lifelong learning for sustainable development. They summarize the lessons of successful community-based learning for sustainable development, drawn from around the world.

## Community drivers of sustainable development

Community-based learning is important for sustainable development and active citizenship. It enables people to take direct, practical action to tackle the challenges of a rapidly changing, increasingly global world. It also helps people gain new knowledge and skills to improve their lives in sustainable ways, for example through eco-friendly farming or by working to address social and economic inequalities. Learning empowers people to make informed decisions that can lead to transformative actions. By developing greater shared ownership of their community's future, they are able, through learning, to participate in the development of their own communities while also responding to global issues. A community approach to lifelong learning for sustainable development helps people to re-identify, re-evaluate and further develop local and indigenous

knowledge, based on still-relevant but frequently neglected traditional wisdom, which community-based learning can help reclaim.

## The role of community learning centres

Community learning spaces, centres and networks (hereafter 'community learning centres' or 'CLCs') are active in different cultures and societies and play a key role in expanding access to lifelong learning for adults, young people and children. People of all ages, from diverse cultural, economic, social and ethnic backgrounds, benefit from taking part in learning activities organized by or at CLCs. While there are differences from culture to culture, common features of CLCs are: (1) strong community ownership, (2) diverse learning provision and (3) low costs of participation in learning activities (UIL, 2014).

Creating CLCs and promoting participation in adult learning and education were commitments made at the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education in 2009. This was reiterated in the *Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education 2015* (UIL, 2016) and was one of five priority action areas in the UNESCO Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2015). The Education 2030 Framework for Action emphasized the need to ‘make learning spaces and environments for non-formal and adult learning and education widely available, including networks of community learning centres’ (UNESCO, 2016b, p. 52).

The 2014 Kominkan-CLC International Conference on Education for Sustainable Development in Okayama City recognized that community-based learning contributes to the creation of sustainable societies in the following ways:

1. As a ‘PLACE’ for advancing sustainable development by promoting participation, learning, action, creation and empathy.
2. As a bridge between formal, non-formal and informal education.
3. As a provider of inclusive and flexible education to socially marginalized peoples.
4. As a facilitator of relevant and responsive learning.
5. As a catalyst for innovative and effective learning.
6. As a weaver of intergenerational and multidisciplinary knowledge and cultural diversity, contributing to social inclusion.
7. As a capacity builder of community education professionals.
8. As a hub to engage and empower individuals by changing their mindset from thinking and acting for themselves to working for the benefit of the wider community.

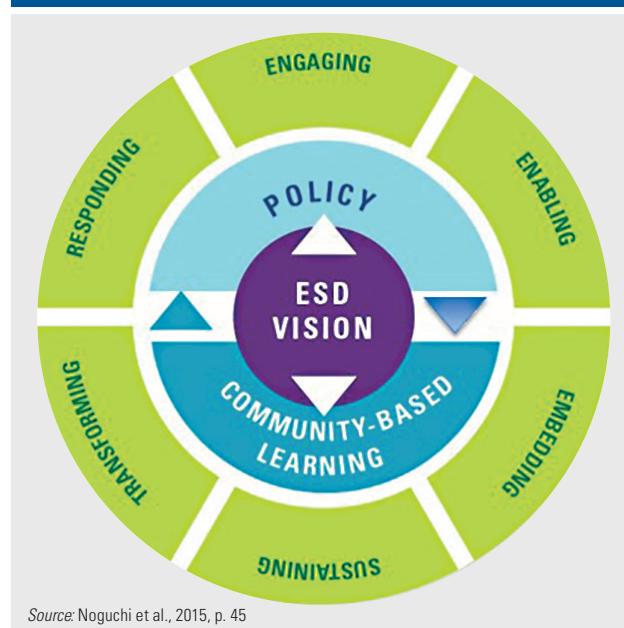
The proximity of community learning venues to home or the workplace is another key enabler of sustained participation in learning and education. For many learners, distance or inaccessibility of learning can be insurmountable barriers. Although many CLCs organize only a limited number of courses, usually in basic literacy and equivalency education, income generation or life skills education, in some communities they support a range of social cohesion and sustainable development activities. In Indonesia, for example, education for sustainable development (ESD) is widely practised in more than 10,000 CLCs through a skills development programme which uses locally available materials and activities to prepare for and prevent natural disasters. National government supports their work through regulation, funding and partnership. These interventions are of practical importance, but they also give due recognition to the role of CLCs as significant institutions in the education system as well as in environmental

protection and management (UIL, 2014; NILE and UIL, 2017). With this sort of support, CLCs can help create the foundation for a learning society characterized by social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development.

## Six principles of action

While it is important to underscore the reciprocal relationship between community-based learning practice and national and local public policy, it is even more important to acknowledge that both should be guided by a shared vision of ESD (first two circles in *Figure 1*). Learning and development programmes organized by CLCs following the action principles described below are responsive to local needs and local contexts. These six action principles (third circle in *Figure 1*) do not exist independently of each other, but are mutually reinforcing, and are most effective when practised in an integrated manner.

**Figure 1: Six action principles towards a shared vision of education for sustainable development**



Source: Noguchi et al., 2015, p. 45

**(1) Responding:** Providers of community-based learning are often at the forefront in responding to emerging issues experienced by local communities. This has led to ESD being identified with specific environmental issues. This responsiveness to specific issues is, however, only the entry point for learning. ESD has a deeper role in developing understanding of the complex and interconnected nature of cause and effect, as well as in devising an appropriate response. Education that responds only to symptoms can be described as *reactive*, while education that attempts to establish links and identify holistic and

comprehensive solutions can be characterized as *responsive*.

**(2) Engaging:** Community-based ESD acknowledges that the complex nature of the issues at stake requires engagement with different disciplines and knowledge systems in order to identify comprehensive, long-term solutions. Engaging with these different approaches productively requires working in partnership with different players both within and outside the immediate communities. This, in turn, demands recognition that there will often be more than one perspective involved. Allowing different generations, sectors and cultures to contribute knowledge and ways of learning is vital to finding sustainable solutions. This may involve recognizing and harvesting the contribution that formal, non-formal and informal education make in achieving the vision of a sustainable future. It also implies the need for CLCs to engage with socially marginalized or minority groups and empower them by providing educational activities and spaces to learn and interact with other community members.

**(3) Enabling:** This holistic, partnership-based approach to learning requires ongoing capacity-building of both local communities and the institutions that enable and conduct community-based learning. It acknowledges and addresses the dynamic context of change often experienced by communities. In this rapidly changing context, we need to rethink our notion of basic literacy, starting with language policy. Language policies within formal education often limit the capacity of indigenous peoples to learn and share their own stories. While reading, writing and mathematics will continue to be essential, new knowledge and skills, such as in using technology, will gain importance in most contexts. However, the most important basic skill will continue to be individuals' and institutions' capacity for ongoing learning and creation of knowledge for sustainable futures.

**(4) Embedding:** It is not sufficient for organizations that facilitate community-based learning merely to respond to problems by engaging across generations, sectors or disciplines. The ESD approach needs to be embedded within all aspects of education and work. ESD is not just another subject, but rather another way of learning and living that recognizes the complexity and interrelatedness of issues and the need to work together to contribute to attaining the vision of an equitable and sustainable future. This begins with embedding a new way of thinking, learning and working together in the institutions that facilitate ESD.

**(5) Sustaining:** Community-based learning providers need to survive and flourish for the long-term change

process of sustainable development to bear fruit. However, it is not only the projects or institutions that need to be sustained but also the communities that host these institutions. These communities have both material needs, such as physical infrastructure and human and financial resources, and less tangible needs concerning, for example, relationships and the spiritual properties some communities attribute to nature, which need to be supported.

**(6) Transforming:** The challenge of ESD for community-based learning providers involves not just changes to the way we learn or the way we live. It also demands a complete transformation of the social, economic, political and cultural systems that have contributed to the issues this agenda is trying to address. Part of this transformation will require that we embrace new ways of teaching and learning made possible by new technologies; part will involve changes to the way we work.

## Policy recommendations

To secure the success of community-based lifelong learning for sustainable development, the six interrelated action principles must be promoted by ongoing policy support from national and local government. Examples of successful community-based learning for ESD indicate that the following policy support mechanisms are particularly important:

**1. Provide dedicated resources for community-based learning,** including material, human and infrastructural as well as financial resources. CLCs that enjoy long-term stability are often supported by policy guidelines, such as those in the Republic of Korea and Thailand, that are effective in mobilizing and allocating these resources to local community organizations (NILE and UIL, 2017; UNESCO, 2016a). However, the public resources available to education, and more specifically to non-formal community education, are declining. The next policy recommendation is essential to expanding the contribution to these resources.

**2. Create mechanisms for partnership and networking opportunities** that facilitate the sharing of available resources and mutual learning among institutions and people working for the target group of participants. While partnerships are common between similar institutions, such as civil society organizations and community groups, governments can foster partnerships among non-traditional partners, such as universities and community groups, research institutions and non-governmental agencies, and with the private sector. Partnerships can involve evaluating learning programmes across institutions or working towards a system of equivalency to create pathways for further learning.

**3. Organize ongoing capacity-building to ensure well-qualified and trained staff and volunteers.** While learning is often perceived as something that needs to be provided to local community members, a number of case studies (UIL, 2014; UNESCO, 2015) highlight a need for greater capacity-building among policymakers, community organizations and community education professionals and practitioners to support the successful and sustained management of CLCs. Governments should continue to support such training courses and workshops, in order to facilitate peer learning and the development of new knowledge and skills. When resources are shared equally, the dedication and quality of work of people working for CLCs are the critical factors that encourage learners to continue their participation.

**4. Support learning content development.** This concerns the support provided by government to assist community organizations in identifying the issues or entry points for engagement and in developing relevant, high-quality teaching and learning activities. While these are often made clear by the immediate problem experienced, whether poverty, pollution, HIV-AIDS or conflict, community members will often identify links between these obvious concerns and other related sustainable development issues. Documentation of good practice and solutions, and sharing through different means and media – such as conferences, print or online magazines and online

portals – are among government measures used in Brazil and Japan, for example, to support the development of teaching and learning content at local level (UIL, 2014).

The action principles and policy support mechanisms described in this Policy Brief represent a practical guide to transforming education and training to ensure that CLCs and lifelong learning more generally play a full role in sustainable development. The guiding question is how government policy can support CLCs in practising the action principles in a holistic and integrated manner. While the challenges of sustainable development are global, locally relevant solutions must be key drivers of any rational, coherent response. We need to support and empower CLCs if we are to rise to these challenges and make the best use of lifelong learning in developing sustainable solutions at local level.

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The six action principles and four policy recommendations are adapted from *Communities in Action: Lifelong Learning for Sustainable Development* (Noguchi et al., 2015), a guide to implementing the *Okayama Commitment 2014: Promoting ESD beyond Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014) through Community-based Learning*. The *Okayama Commitment* celebrates the contribution of community-based learning to the UN Decade for ESD and identifies commitments to advance ESD practice. *Communities in Action* highlights community-based ESD practice and policy from around the world.

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