

EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN MALTA¹

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INTRODUCTION

As is well known, sustainable development stresses the need for a holistic approach conducive to a better quality of life within a long-term time frame, rather than one aimed at short-term gains. Sustainable development strategies are multifaceted, taking into consideration economic, social, cultural, environmental, participatory, and political factors that affect human welfare.

Environmental, economic and social aspects of sustainable development basically relate to the preservation of the integrity of nature, eradication of poverty, and removal of social injustices, developments which are essential for the promotion of welfare of current and future generations.

Sustainability also has a strong ethical dimension and can be considered as a value to be upheld (Briguglio, 2003). In this regard, the issue of responsibility towards future generations takes centre stage – and this aspect of sustainable development was an important component of the most widely used definition of sustainable development, namely that proposed by Bruntland (WCED, 1988).

All these dimensions can only be fruitfully and effectively realised if the actors are suitably educated to understand the values (including the ethical ones) underpinning sustainable development and to participate in relevant and appropriate action conducive to sustainable development.

This paper is intended to make a case for mainstreaming Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in school and University curricula in Malta. It identifies gaps in ESD and proposes a plan of action to put ESD on a strong footing in Malta.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 focuses on education for sustainable development, pointing mostly to a number of deficiencies in this regard. Section 3 proposes an action plan to strengthen ESD in Malta. Section 4 concludes the paper.

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The Institutional Setup for ESD

In Malta, education for sustainable development in the formal, informal and non-formal sectors is mainly addressed by the Education Division (the Government's agency responsible for formal education), the Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA), the University of Malta and various environmental NGOs. Although traditionally each organisation used to function independently of the others, these last few years have been characterised by several successful attempts to co-ordinate such educational activities.

School syllabi used to be determined by a foreign examination board and the relation to the local Maltese environment was practically non-existent. This changed with the setting up of the local Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate (MATSEC) Examinations Board, in June 1992. Consequently various new subject syllabi were drawn and over this last decade, the incidence of environmental topics and the range of environmental issues has been given increasing importance in formal education, particularly within the Social Studies and Science syllabi. Moreover, two new subjects: Environmental Studies, combining elements of geography, social studies and history at secondary level; and Environmental Science, targeting post-secondary students, have been introduced in 1992 and 1994 respectively (Pace, 1997).

The new National Minimum Curriculum (NMC) process, which occurred during the nineties, heralded a new era of curriculum development in Malta in which various stakeholders in education were formally involved in a thorough nationwide consultation exercise to determine the content of the curriculum. Although the proposed curriculum does not contain provisions for ESD, nevertheless it proposes several measures (such as interdisciplinarity a learner-oriented pedagogy, the development of critical thinking and participatory skills, interaction with the community and autonomy for schools) that, if adopted, would facilitate ESD's infusion in the educational system (Ministry of Education, 1999).

A successful infusion of ESD in the formal educational system would mean a full assimilation of the principles of sustainable development within the management policies of educational

institutions. The Eco-Schools³ programme was introduced to Malta with this specific aim in mind, i.e. that of systematically weaving ESD principles within a school's management policy progressively incorporating an environmental ethic within the school ethos. The programme adopts a whole school approach to ESD by empowering students to adopt an active role in environmental decision-making and action in their school and in their community.

With regard to tertiary education, the sustainable development dimension is increasingly being featured in the various professional courses offered by several faculties at the University of Malta, notably the Environmental Education Unit (EEU) of the Faculty of Education, the Faculty of Science and the Islands and Small States Institute.

Personal development components are integral features of the environmental education course offered by the EEU for student teachers, with a focus on the promotion of sustainable lifestyles. The EEU also initiated a research programme through which several environmental education curriculum resources were produced. Furthermore, in collaboration with MEPA and the Education Division, the EEU organised several in-service courses aimed at helping teachers to apply environmental education principles in their teaching.

Informal and non-formal environmental education has become more varied and has characteristically involved an input from a host of governmental and non-governmental organisations. Consequently a large proportion of community resources (e.g., nature reserves, industry and historical sites) are increasingly being mobilised and used as sites of ESD. Opportunities for public participation in environmental decision-making relating to the approval of development projects have become a regular feature. However, the vast majority of the public lacks the necessary skills to interpret the technical data presented in Environmental Impact Assessment reports and to organise themselves into effective pressure groups.

In conclusion, although there are attempts to foster ESD in Malta, in all sectors, a properly-integrated ESD policy is lacking in the country, and, as a result, ESD initiatives tend to be sporadic and disjoint. The approach remains mostly one of providing environmental information, and the fostering of sustainable development values is not given due importance in educational programmes.

³ The EcoSchools programme was launched in 1994 by the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE) and now includes over 7000 schools distributed around the world.

National Environmental Education Strategy

In 1995 there was an attempt to remedy this situation through the development of a National Environmental Education Strategy (NEES). This was launched during a *National Training Workshop on Environmental Education* held on 26-27 May 1995. The workshop set out to bring together all local environmental education organizations to (a) become aware of the state of environmental education in Malta (b) identify the problems, needs and support required for the successful implementation of environmental education initiatives and (c) discuss the possibility of co-ordinating these initiatives so as to improve their effectiveness (Pace, 1996).

The workshop participants proposed a *National Environmental Education Strategy* (NEES), in line with Agenda 21's guidelines, that would "... focus its action on the formal and informal sectors of education with the goal of directing educational processes towards the development of a new environmental ethic - education for sustainability." (University of Malta, 1995). Acknowledging that every citizen has a valid contribution to make towards the achievement of a sustainable society, a consultative process was initiated with different target groups, including government/policy making organizations; environmental, social and business organizations; the mass media and the arts; national associations of educators; and religious organisations. Since its inception, NEES was constrained by limited resources. In addition, for some of the target groups ESD was not a priority and their participation in the consultation process was inadequate.

Recent Initiatives

In response to the Environment Protection Act (Act No. XX, 2001) the Maltese Government set up the National Commission for Sustainable Development. A major task of the Commission is to prepare a national strategy aimed at promoting sustainable development and to build consensus on action needed to achieve set goals. At the outset, the Commission acknowledged the importance of education in any strategy that advocates sustainable development and consequently set up a task force whose major concern was that promoting ESD.

In order to assist and accelerate this process the University of Malta, together with the Ministry for Rural Affairs and the Environment and the Malta Environment and Planning Authority, are

currently engaged in the setting up of a centre (called Centrum) that would co-ordinate ESD initiatives in Malta, increase the opportunity for ESD research, make scientific and technological research results more accessible to the public and facilitate resource transfer and capacity building in Malta and beyond.

Centrum would primarily be structured around the three main sectors of ESD: the formal, non-formal and informal sectors hence ensuring diverse research interests that would allow the centre to respond a wider cohort of research needs and address emerging needs in the community. Centrum will function on a national, regional and international level and seeks to attain its targets by (a) offering opportunities for undergraduate and postgraduate study and research in ESD, (b) initiating and co-ordinating community-based environmental awareness programmes to encourage the adoption of sustainable lifestyles, (c) offering support to institutions and organisations on the development of ESD programmes, and (d) adopting the role of a news desk gathering and disseminating environmental information.

A PROPOSED PLAN OF ACTION FOR ESD IN MALTA

Formal Education

ESD should not be considered only as a separate subject (such as for example environmental studies) but as something permeating all subjects. It implies a learner-centred pedagogy that promotes interdisciplinarity, ensures relevance of knowledge to the learner's experiences, encourages active learner participation, helps the development of critical thinking and participatory skills and caters for life-long education. Consequently, initiatives promoting ESD within the formal education sector should not be viewed as intrusions into other subjects, but as opportunities for the country to improve its educational system.

What follows is a proposal for strategic action to mainstream ESD in all levels of education in Malta, through a list of suggestions, which can be considered as elements of an action plan in this regard.

Primary and Secondary School Level

Schools and other institutions of primary and secondary education in Malta should:

- Develop appropriate curricula that promote sustainable development, based on an interdisciplinary approach, in line with a National ESD strategy.
- Ensure that syllabi refer to and deal with issues related to sustainable development that are relevant to the experiences of the learners.
- Promote a holistic education that combines technical knowledge with moral, social and personal development.
- Encourage children to actively take part in decision-making processes in their school and to be responsible for the improvement of their school environment.
- Encourage children to take an active role in activities which foster sustainable development in their school and community.
- Involve the school in Local Agenda 21 initiatives and in partnerships of a national, regional and international nature.
- Appoint a coordinator responsible for the implementation of ESD in the school.
- Involve the whole school community (including parents and children) in drawing up school policies and action plans for the sustainable development of the school itself.
- Encourage planning and responsible management of the school and its grounds, promoting prudent energy consumption and water usage, sustainable waste management schemes, including recycling, and safe transport of school children.

Tertiary Level

The University of Malta and the Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology should *inter alia*:

- Promote interdisciplinarity with a view to fostering a holistic approach to education.
- Infuse sustainable development values in all aspects of higher education.
- Take a leading role in promoting an ethically-oriented form of education.
- Encourage staff and students to participate in networking and partnerships across Universities at the national, regional and international levels.
- Encourage planning and responsible management of the University and its grounds, promoting prudent energy consumption and water usage, sustainable waste management schemes, including recycling and, in general, lifestyles compatible with sustainable development.
- Train employees to upgrade their participatory skills, to avoid waste, to promote efficiency

and safety and in general to adopt work practices and processes compatible with sustainable development.

- Develop and consolidate opportunities for interaction with the community.

Informal and Non-Formal Education

Maltese NGOs, CBOs, business concerns and the media should, *inter alia*:

- Foster public awareness about the advantages of sustainable development, and organise educational activities towards this end.
- Encourage local communities to develop ESD programmes aimed at empowering citizens to take an active role in environmental decision-making fora.
- Promote the concept of value-based action.
- Organise training for leaders and their members on sustainable work practices and processes, encouraging planning and responsible management of the institution, prudent energy consumption and water usage, and sustainable waste management schemes, including recycling, and participatory skills.
- Promote participatory schemes in the respective organisations and within society in general.

The Government

The government of Malta should, *inter alia*:

- Develop and implement a national strategy for ESD.
- Facilitate the development of a curriculum that promotes sustainable development through nationwide consultation to support its infusion in the educational system, as distinct from simply imparting environmental information.
- Support and encourage initiatives aimed at reorienting existing educational structures and practices to address sustainable development at all levels.
- Support initiatives by NGOs and CBOs, to organise environmental education programmes, especially for adults, in order to promote lifelong learning, sustainable lifestyles and active participation in decision-making.
- Promote networking among, and training for, environmental educators and facilitators.
- Support training schemes on sustainable work practices and processes.
- Strengthen the capacity of schools and universities to promote ESD.
- Support and promote traditional knowledge and traditions that are conducive to sustainable development.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that ESD in Malta, though given some importance, is not coherently organised and does not effectively offer the adequate opportunities for individuals to develop the necessary skills and overall capacity to deal with sustainable development issues. Nevertheless, Malta is gradually building up an infrastructure aimed at supporting future ESD initiatives with the ultimate goal of assisting Malta in its challenge to adopt sustainable development principles.

The paper has stressed the need for Malta to make ESD a national priority, and for the government and other stakeholders to develop a National Strategy for ESD, adopting a clear policy about such an education in the National Minimum Curriculum.

There is an urgent need in Malta to provide more formal and informal ESD education programmes, especially children and adults, promoting the adoption of sustainable lifestyles and values, and active participation in decision-making relating to sustainable development.

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