Keynote Talk: Education for Sustainable Development - Enabling Higher Education and Enhancing Community Engagement

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The global calls to action on Sustainable Development (SD) have been triggered by the existential threat to human existence caused by unsustainable human actions. The critical issue is to have a clear understanding on what SD and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) are about, and on the transformative societal actions they entail in the interface of the development and knowledge sectors. The role of higher education is to bring closer together science and SD. There have been positive trends to the effect that SD is being integrated into education, and vice versa, and ESD cuts across formal, non-formal and informal education sectors; but major works remain in accelerating and upscaling sustainable actions, as well as in having policy coherence on ESD across sectors and subsectors aligned with the roadmap to sustainability in higher education.

The launching of the UN Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has shifted the focus of the ESD approach to one that enables and supports the implementation of the SDGs. Unfortunately, according to the UN ESCAP 2022 Report on SDG Progress, as of now, none of the SDGs are on track for 2030. None of the SDGs hit the 2021 timeline, and the full achievements of the targets based on current trajectories are getting delayed, especially on Climate Action (SDG 13) which is regressing. For effective SDG implementation, Quality Education (SDG 4; SDG 4.7 on ESD) and Partnership (SDG 17) are both enablers and integrators to be embedded in all implementation programs across the board. To be effective, SDG implementation needs to be rooted in community and local stakeholders' engagements. SDGs must be localized, underpinned by local values, culture and heritage, focusing on holistic, whole-community approach, and transdisciplinary problem solving.

The UNESCO 'ESD for 2030' Roadmap provides guidance through five priority action areas - Advancing Policy; Transforming learning environments; Building capacity of educators and trainers; Empowering and mobilizing youth; and Accelerating sustainable solutions at local level (community engagement). Two flagship initiatives of the United Nations University Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability (UNU-IAS) illustrate important roles of higher education in SD and community engagement - one is a network of higher education institutions known as the Promotion of Sustainability in Postgraduate Education and Research Network (ProSPER.Net); and the other is a regional/local network of organizations, the Regional Centres of Expertise on ESD (RCEs).