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Transdisciplinarity now and then: an early shaper of Education for Sustainable Development to enable a sustainable future.

The concept of [Education for sustainable development](#) (ESD) is not only acknowledged a vital means of implementation for sustainable development, an integral element of a quality education, but seen as a key enabler of all *United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)* of the [2030 Agenda](#).

What is often lost today is the fact that ESD is grounded in transdisciplinary approaches, composed and shaped by perspectives from several academic disciplines. ESD's 'environmental' roots date back to the [UN Conference on the Human Development](#) in Stockholm (Sweden) in 1972 and a subsequent emergence of environmental education as a field of action is well documented. Less well known are the influences on ESD from other disciplines and pedagogical approaches, such as development education, ecological economics, social sciences.

These transdisciplinary foundations of ESD trace back to 1992, when member states at the [UN Conference on Environment and Development](#) in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) jointly adopted [Agenda 21](#) as the world's first concerted action plan to act on sustainable development. This success of uniting the world in a shared pursuit of a sustainable future took place only five years after the UN had recognized the concept of sustainable development for the first time, following the consultations that led to the [Brundtland Report](#) "Our Common Future" in 1987.

Moving from development to sustainable development while recognizing not only the environmental but also the economic and social dimensions and addressing resources, participation and means of implementation, all encompassed within Agenda 21 as a concerted global plan, was a crucial moment in recent history. Considered central to the implementation success was the role of education.

UNESCO as the UN agency tasked with the broad mandate of education, science, culture, communication/information contributed to all 40 Chapters but was specifically requested to become task manager for two Chapters within Agenda 21 that were included in the means of implementation: Chapter 35 *Science for Sustainable Development* and Chapter 36 *Promoting Education, Public Awareness and Training*.

To carry out this responsibility, new integrated approaches were to be found within UNESCO to address the social, economic, cultural, and environmental dimensions of development that were to be treated in a balanced way and that could be accepted by the world community within the new pursuit of sustainable development.

In November 1993, the UNESCO General Conference adopted the inter-agency and transdisciplinary project '[Environment and population education and information for development](#)' (EPD). This initial EPD Project was instituted as one of two Transdisciplinary Projects at UNESCO: the other being [UNESCO's Transdisciplinary Project 'Towards a Culture of Peace'](#) (1996-2001).

EPD was experimental, independent and self-administered. EPD aimed to work within the intellectual framework of the international community at that time: interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and intersectionality. The project was hoped to take leadership within the United Nations system to improve inter-agency co-operation in this field, and to contribute to the overall modernization of the Organization by developing new ways of working both within UNESCO and with its partners. Within UNESCO, EPD received support and technical discussions by the [Social Sciences Sector](#). Additionally, considerations and proposals were sought from recognized academics and intellectuals, and prominent

international leaders on the urgency of a radical change, the potential of transdisciplinary, and how to engage on a significant impactful scale.

In 1997, an international evaluation of EPD suggested a name change towards 'Educating for a Sustainable Future' to continue the work while in the international community a terminology of 'Education for Sustainable Development (short: ESD)' emerged. In 1999, UNESCO launched a book under the title '[Seven complex lessons in education for the future](#)' promoting a radical transdisciplinary approach, yet addressing complexity instead of transdisciplinarity. By 2000, the focus on transdisciplinarity was lost within UNESCO during the UN-wide efforts towards creating the new framework of the *Millennium Development Goals* (2000-2015).

Yet, the need for addressing complex, 'wicked' issues continues to grow at an unrelenting pace and [transdisciplinary approaches are again called for](#). Today's SDGs, the third attempt of the UN to unite the world on the path towards a sustainable future by 2030, explicitly recognize the essential need of partnership and collaboration.

ESD [can deliver on that request](#) through empowering learners with knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes to make informed decisions and take responsible individual and collective actions for environmental integrity, economic viability, just societies respecting cultural diversity, and empower people for present and future generations. ESD is holistic, transformational, and its foundation in transdisciplinarity creates a basis for learners to create new knowledge and insight. ESD fosters connecting academic disciplines with governments, practitioners, civil society towards a new level of research and action.

This time, with the broader recognition and delivery of ESD, we might be ready to take on the challenge of societal and systemic transformation needed for a sustainable future.