

Chapter 8

Contribution of the RCE Community to the Global Action Programme on ESD: Some Reflections

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The Global Action Programme (GAP) on ESD is a follow-up to the DESD after 2014. Building on the successes of and lessons learned from the DESD, the goal is to generate and scale up action at all levels and in all areas of education and learning in order to accelerate progress towards sustainable development. The objectives are two-fold: to re-orient education and learning so that everyone has the opportunity to acquire the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that empower them to contribute to sustainable development; and to strengthen education and learning in all agendas, programs and activities that promote sustainable development.

In order to enable strategic focus and stakeholder commitment, GAP has identified five priority action areas as key leverage points to advance the ESD agenda. These are:

1. Policy support: Integrate ESD into international and national policies in education and sustainable development.
2. Whole-institution approaches: Promote whole-institution approaches to ESD at all levels and in all settings.
3. Educators: Strengthen the capacity of educators, trainers and other change agents to become learning facilitators for ESD.
4. Youth: Support youth in their role as change agents for sustainable development through ESD.
5. Local communities: Accelerate the search for sustainable development solutions at the local level through ESD.

GAP is expected to be implemented at the international, regional, subregional, national, subnational and local levels. All relevant stakeholders are encouraged to develop activities and commitments of key partners are solicited under each priority action area. Individual RCEs and the global network of RCEs are in a strong position to commit to GAP implementation in all priority areas.

At the time of writing this book, GAP's strategy of implementation has been centred on the global governance mechanisms of the program. Drawing on this work, this chapter identifies areas and actions where RCEs can make significant contributions to GAP implementation. The reflections are informed by a survey conducted by the Global RCE Service Centre in which RCEs across the world shared views and opinions regarding the value-added roles of RCEs in engaging with each priority area¹, and the possibilities for actions towards up-scaling and mainstreaming. The chapter also highlights already demonstrated achievements and challenges to be overcome to pave the way for a more robust Global RCE Network in its quest to advance the ESD agenda.

Inputs from the following RCEs are gratefully acknowledged and are referenced in the chapter:

Africa: RCEs Buea, Kakamega, Kano, KwaZulu Natal, Greater Nairobi, Greater Pwani, Lesotho, Maputo, Minna, Nyanza, Swaziland, Western Nigeria, Zambia and Zomba;

Americas: RCEs Bogota, Greater Portland, Guatemala, Lima-Callao, Saskatchewan and Western Jalisco;

Asia-Pacific: RCEs Bohol, Delhi, Goa, Greater Phnom Penh, Greater Western Sydney, Guwahati, Penang, Pune, Tongyeong, Waikato, and Yogyakarta; and

Europe: RCEs Euroregion-Tyrol, Lithuania, Middle Albania, Munich, Nizhny-Novgorod, Rhine-Meuse, Severn, and the consortium of RCEs in Germany.²

¹ GAP's priority areas have been interpreted from the perspective of individual RCEs and the RCE community as a whole. As GAP terminology and concepts are still evolving, the editors hope that reflections of this chapter will contribute to further shaping of the GAP.

² Reference to RCE inputs does not present an exhaustive picture of activities of these RCEs nor that of the whole RCE community.

Policy Support

The strategic objective of the Policy Support priority action area of GAP is to integrate ESD into international and national policies in education and development. An enabling policy environment is crucial for education and learning for sustainable development and for the scaling up of ESD action in formal, non-formal and informal education and learning. Relevant and coherent policies should be grounded in participatory processes and designed through inter-ministerial and intersectoral coordination, also involving civil society, the private sector, academia and local communities.

According to the GAP, creating an enabling policy environment linked properly to implementation requires, in particular, systematic integration of ESD into:

- Sectoral or sub-sectoral education policies at the national level and also as an important element of international education agendas;
- Policies relevant to key sustainable development challenges at the national level, and into relevant international agendas in sustainable development; and
- Bilateral and multilateral development cooperation frameworks.

ESD and Policy Processes: Opportunities for engagement

As described in Chapter 6, there may be two distinct thrusts in policy process intervention, namely, the integration of ESD issues and skills into relevant education policies, and into policies relevant to sustainable development. It is also important to recognize that engagement with policies can be done along several entry points in the policy cycle: problem definition, policy objectives and options (policy framing), policy implementation (change management), and policy evaluation. These roles may occur at various levels – organizational, local, national, regional (multinational), and global – and global-local alignments are important and desirable.

By virtue of their constitutive character, RCEs have contributed to policy processes by providing platforms for policy dialogues, serving as a policy support base (e.g. policy research and providing expert opinion), and influencing policy through demonstration of good practices. ESD and SD capacity development is a major thrust in the functioning of RCEs; it behooves the RCE community to cultivate these vast opportunities into the future. As demonstrated in the following sections, in the context of GAP on ESD implementation, RCEs can add value to SD policy processes at virtually all stages of policy development.

Facilitating Networking and Creating Alliances

Value additions derived from RCE interventions in ESD and SD policy processes are evident in RCE actions. RCEs are already seen as contributors to development of national ESD strategies (e.g. RCE Greater Nairobi, RCE Zambia), and serve as platforms that bring together relevant actors to participate in designing and establishing ESD policies and policy evaluation system (e.g. RCE Buea). The aim is to integrate ESD systematically into education policies that cover the whole of the education sector or parts of it.

Specific achievements of RCEs are demonstrated in networking and building linkages with stakeholders – government and non-government – in advancing ESD (e.g. RCE Delhi) and in facilitating activities and projects that enable members to work towards the goal and objectives of national environmental education and ESD policies (e.g. RCEs Lesotho, Bohol, Yogyakarta). These included, inter alia, participation in developing ESD strategies and pursuit of ESD objectives for the country (e.g. RCEs Pwani, Greater Nairobi), lobbying for the formulation of ESD action plans, and fundraising for and guiding the implementation of ESD activities. Policy consultation meetings and policy-practice dialogues among multisector stakeholders were held by RCEs Greater Nairobi, KwaZulu Natal and Yogyakarta (as illustrated in Chapter 6), policy review and analysis were conducted by RCEs Goa and Saskatchewan (ibid.), and participation in relevant local Agenda 21 processes and collaborative work with the local government has been demonstrated by RCE Munich.

Development of Policy Research

Another way of contributing to the policy process is through policy research. This is illustrated in Chapter 6 by the experience of RCE Saskatchewan where the member higher education institutions were involved in providing analyses and recommendations on an energy issue to the provincial government. As several RCEs are led by higher education institutions (HEIs), and as all have at least one HEI as a member, they are well placed to ensure that policymaking is based, among other inputs, on process informed by science.

Participation in Policymaking at the Regional and Local Levels

National policies are expected to trickle down to the level of local governance and organizational policies. Many initiatives of RCEs centre on policy influence in organizations, including those of RCE stakeholders. These aspects are elaborated in the GAP priority action area on whole-institution approach (see next section in this chapter). RCEs assist in ESD programs and initiatives and projects are shaped into education contexts (e.g. RCE Waikato) in partnership with local government and other local multistakeholders (e.g. RCE Munich).

Some important examples of RCEs working with local stakeholders with regard to policy formulation and implementation are attributed to schools. Successful implementation of ESD policy in schools depends greatly on the commitment, effort and the level of enthusiasm of the school leadership and teachers. Eco-schools are committed to investing effort, enthusiasm and creativity in finding ways to continuously improve the inculcation of a culture of caring for the environment, society and economy. Many RCE initiatives, for example those of RCEs Zambia and Guwahati, centre on policy influence for eco-schools in terms of a vision and mission that reflect the ESD culture of concern for the environment, enhance the development of human resources in terms of skills and in ESD, and support a clean and healthy school environment with efficient utilization of resources.

Advocacy

A direct value-added contribution to policy processes is in SD policy development and implementation (e.g. RCEs Pwani, KwaZulu Natal, Bohol, Yogyakarta, Guwahati, Greater Western Sydney). RCEs provide a platform for SD policy dialogue, where stakeholders from government can articulate SD issues and learning from

RCE initiatives (e.g. RCEs Zomba, Buea, Zambia, Munich). Policy research, including designing and proposing new strategies for SD policy processes, collaboration and implementation (e.g. RCEs Saskatchewan, Buea, Goa), are areas where RCE interventions can have pronounced impacts. It is important to also recognize the advocacy role of RCEs for more holistic approaches in SD policymaking, more governmental commitment, and practical involvement (e.g. RCE Buea). Finding and reporting unsustainable practices for the purpose of self-compliance of ESD and SD ethos are actions that RCEs can contribute (e.g. RCE Kano). These are areas where ESD can be systematically integrated into policies relevant to key sustainable development challenges.

Aligning Local and Global Policy Processes

The Ubuntu Alliance, through the Ubuntu Committee of Peers for RCEs, supports the global RCE movement, provides direction, and recommends policies for the effective functioning of RCEs. Through the participation of RCEs in national and international sustainability processes (in partnership with national governments, UN agencies and international organizations respectively), their role in integrating ESD as a component of international bilateral and multilateral agreements can be enhanced. These agreements are expected to be aligned with national development plans and priorities, and when development of national plans embraces ESD and SD issues, it becomes possible for these international agreements to also include sustainability concerns. Through the influence of RCEs in national development processes, the contributions of the RCE community in aligning local and global policy processes are enhanced.

The Way Forward

Looking forward, various perceived challenges for more effective impact on policy processes need to be overcome, although to different degrees across RCEs. Prominent challenges include the inability of stakeholders to see the whole policy picture and the lack of understanding, awareness and strategic focus on the processes of policy engagement. These critical issues need to be addressed in a manner whereby local stakeholders, assuming shared responsibilities and working together, are empowered and become committed to contributing to policymaking processes and successful implementation. It is imperative to scale up actions called for by GAP based on experiences gained during the DESD; the process necessitates involvement of policymakers. It is incumbent upon UNESCO and its partner UN agencies, including UNU, to exercise their important functions in facilitating implementation, monitoring progress and serving as a clearinghouse of key actors and successful practices of policymaking and implementation.

Whole-institution approaches are based on the premise that change towards sustainability can only occur if all levels and contexts within an institution are aligned in their efforts to implement policies and practices on ESD (Ferreira, Ryan & Tilbury, 2006). The GAP priority area on whole-institution approaches to ESD requires the re-orientation of teaching content and methodology as well as of policies and practices, and collaboration of institutions with key sustainable development stakeholders in the community (UNESCO, 2013). Whole-institution approaches require a *systemic approach to change* in order to address complex and seemingly unconnected sustainable development challenges within institutions and beyond.

Whole-Institution Approaches

Underpinning these approaches is the assumption that institutions are complex social systems whose performance in sustainability change efforts is the product of the interaction of their parts (Doppelt, 2003).

Following UNESCO (2013) the promotion of whole-institution approaches to ESD at all levels and in all settings requires that:

1. All stakeholders – leadership, teachers, learners, and administration – are engaged in jointly developing a vision and plan to implement ESD in the entire institution. In other words, whole-institution approaches seek to simultaneously engage all stakeholders within an organization, as well as key external stakeholders, in aligning efforts towards agreed ESD goals.
2. Technical and financial support is provided to the institution to support its re-orientation. Technical support may include the provision of relevant good practice examples, training for leadership and administration, the development of guidelines, as well as associated research in whole-institution approaches.
3. Existing relevant inter-institutional networks are mobilized and enhanced to facilitate mutual support such as peer-to-peer learning on a whole-institution approach. RCEs are well placed in meeting this requirement.

GAP's strategic objective on whole-institution approaches seeks to build on the successes found in the areas of higher education and secondary schools. Scaling up and expanding these successes not only to the many as yet uncovered schools and HEIs the world over, but also to other levels and types of education is a key leverage point to advance ESD after 2014.

Because of their primary focus on enhancing multistakeholder engagement processes in ESD, RCEs have a distinct value-added role in promoting whole-institution approaches. The following section outlines these value-added roles, challenges and possibilities for scale-up actions on promoting these approaches to ESD.

Box 8.1 **RCE Reflections on Value-added Roles**

The whole-institution approach has been introduced and popularized through the University of Swaziland's Mainstreaming Environment and Sustainability in African Universities (MESA) Chair. On behalf of RCE Swaziland, the university leads an initiative for mainstreaming environment sustainability in the local institutions of higher education and teacher training. This has resulted in the mainstreaming of environment and sustainability across the

[cont.](#) ►

Value-added Roles of RCEs

For the last 10 years, RCEs have been fostering partnerships and networks across knowledge and interdisciplinary boundaries through multistakeholder engagement processes in ESD. RCEs are thus well placed to promote whole-institution approaches to ESD. RCEs can optimize their role as networks of change agents to actively promote whole-institution approaches through explicitly linking research, transformative learning and community engagement activities of member organizations.

Working collaboratively as envisaged within an RCE network has the potential to build an understanding of how each stakeholder has a role to play in promoting whole-institution approaches. It can also enhance

stakeholder commitment to and ownership of the implementation of the whole-institution approach across an RCE network and beyond. RCE reflections highlight value-added roles and potential achievements of the multistakeholder engagement network in promoting whole-institution approaches to ESD (see Box 8.1).

From those RCE reflections and the requirements put forward by UNESCO (2013), four areas in which RCEs have distinct value-added roles to promote and implement whole-institution approaches are synthesized as follows:

1. *Mobilizing existing inter-institutional networks.* RCEs support a systemic approach to building multilevel partnerships and inter-institutional networks that are ideal for promoting whole-institution approaches to ESD. Mobilization of exiting inter-institutional networks is central to the alignment of organizational/institutional goals and those of the RCE and its stakeholders. Moreover, networking partnerships within RCEs can be used to connect RCE members from different institutions, where they may be working in isolation.
2. *Engaging with all forms of learning.* As networks of formal, non-formal and informal education organizations, RCEs have the capacity to engage with all possibilities and forms of learning and education with regard to promoting whole-institution approaches.
3. *Drawing upon pooled resources, capacities and expertise.* Through well-defined governance and coordination mechanisms, RCEs are already pooling together resources, expertise and practices on whole-institution approaches. This is critical for an RCE to produce the maximum possible ESD value, greater than the sum of what each single stakeholder could achieve in promoting whole-institution approaches without collaboration.
4. *Increasing the visibility of whole-institution approaches.* RCEs have communication and networking channels at their disposal through which they can promote a whole-institution approach to ESD as a model for adaptation. The Global RCE Service Centre has developed a communication portal (see <http://www.rce-network.org/portal/home>) that is very useful for increasing the visibility of whole-institution approaches. The portal and other channels of communication offer RCEs opportunities for seeking support in terms of training, strategic advice or information on available resources, including funding opportunities.

school curriculum and in institutions of higher learning. (RCE Swaziland)

RCE Munich tries to influence the institutions that provide ESD by encouraging them to concentrate their management towards a more holistic approach to sustainability. (RCE Munich)

RCE Lesotho has created a platform for networking and sharing of information that enables members to access information about further training, conferences and other opportunities related to ESD. Since the RCE is legally registered, it has a framework for sourcing funding for projects that can promote whole-institution approaches. (RCE Lesotho)

RCE Bohol is instrumental in the whole-institution approach by sponsoring seminars and trainings for the integration of SD in the curriculum both in basic and tertiary education. The RCE is also mobilizing its non-formal education institution members to integrate sustainable development in their functions and activities. (RCE Bohol)

RCE Guwahati has been engaged in demonstrating models for a whole-school approach through various programs such as Paryavaran Mitra and WASH in School. RCE Guwahati is pushing the approach through teacher training programs and activity-based modules developed for children. (RCE Guwahati) ■



Challenges

Although it is evident that RCEs are well placed to promote whole-institution approaches to ESD, the global network still faces a number of challenges in advancing the whole-institution approach as a model for adaptation on a large scale. One of the possible reasons is that often, activities of the RCEs have been predominantly inter-organizational in nature. Implementation of the whole-institution model requires use of a range of strategies that target different dimensions of an organization as a social system. Within an RCE network there has been a tendency for a particular section of an institution to be more proactive than other sections. As pointed out by RCE Bohol, integration of ESD into the curriculum, for example, comes easier to those rooted in ESD, such as RCE directors, but other officials of universities and learning institutions have to deal with concerns such as instruction and research, and internal operational problems, as well as external pressures such as those related to standardization requirements. As a result, “ESD is given the second, if not the least, priority”. RCE Goa believes that it is extremely challenging to change the mind-set of administrators and teachers to deviate from a decade-old approach with which they are comfortable, to a new approach. Furthermore, RCEs have not developed clear frameworks for implementing whole-institutional approaches that address multistakeholder engagement ESD processes.

Possibilities for Scaled-up Actions

As highlighted in UNESCO’s GAP proposal, there is need to scale up actions to promote whole-institution approaches beyond areas of higher education and secondary schools. As a multistakeholder learning network, the global RCE movement is crucial in advancing the ESD agenda through promotion of whole-institution approaches. Possibilities for scale-up actions are aptly captured in reflections from RCEs (Box 8.2).

RCEs are well placed to lead the way in scaling up and expanding whole-institution approaches in ESD. This is central to addressing complex and seemingly unconnected sustainable development at local and global levels. Further provision of policy, technical support, finances and training is required to capitalize on the strengths and lessons learned by RCEs on scaling up actions on whole-institution approaches. There is an urgent need to engage and enhance systemic thinking capabilities of key change agents at all levels and in all settings within an RCE network. This has the transformative potential of keeping them in touch with the wholeness of their existence in their RCEs and member organizations. Key RCE actors and change agents need to be identified with a view to forming core groups that can drive multidimensional change at various levels. This is important to attain commitment to and

Box 8.2

RCE Reflections on Scaled-up Actions

In terms of whole-institution approaches, RCEs engaged in similar work or projects can document and showcase experiences so that a rich database can be assimilated, sensitive to context and locale-specific challenges in order to contribute to cross-learning and knowledge sharing. *(RCE Goa)*

One of our next steps will be to offer advanced training on transformation from the perspective of whole-institution approaches for educators. *(RCE Munich)*

RCEs have been advocating integrated learning development that involves learning and understanding knowledge advanced through practice. The strengths and lessons learned can form a promising foundation for up-scaling actions in learning and education. Lessons learned and challenges faced can be shared and solutions sought from those RCEs that have managed to address such challenges. *(RCE Pwani)*

Perhaps one contribution from the RCE network to the realization of GAP can be through a networked and nested collaborative action-learning experiment on locally situated multistakeholder ESD processes. *(RCE Pune)* ■

ownership of whole-institution approaches across institutions. Value-added roles and achievements in promoting whole-institution approaches provide a strong motivation to rejuvenate RCEs in advancing the ESD agenda beyond 2014. RCEs need to work both individually and collectively to develop and share guidelines, tools and strategies on whole-institution approaches towards promoting the model for widespread adoption.

Educators

The GAP proposal (UNESCO, 2013) reiterates a fundamental requirement of ESD, namely to:

Strengthen the capacity of educators, trainers and other change agents to become learning facilitators for ESD. Educators are one of the most important levers to realize educational change and to facilitate learning for sustainable development. There is a continuous need to build the capacity of educators, as well as trainers and other change agents, regarding relevant issues related to sustainable development and appropriate teaching and learning methodology.

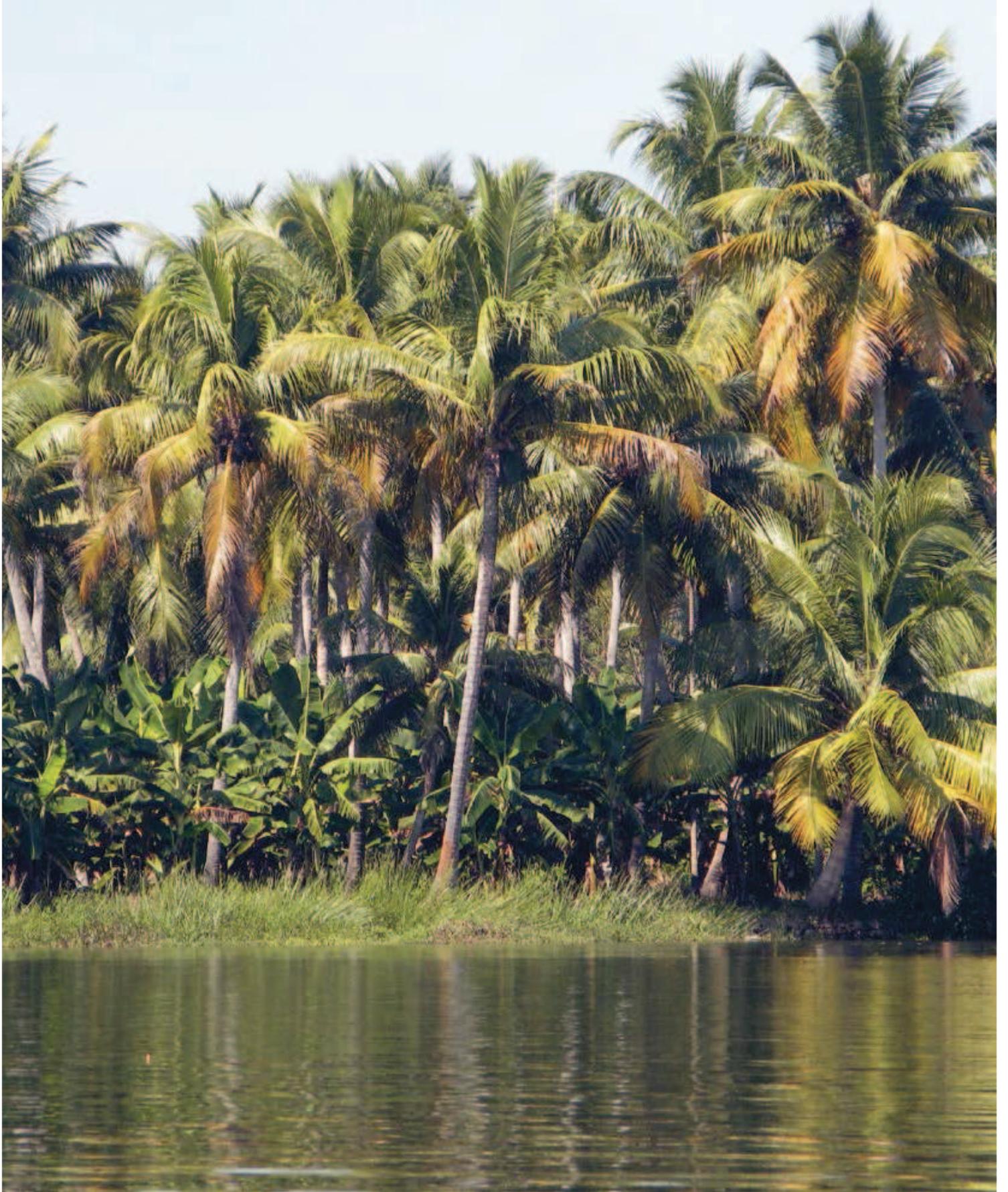
GAP recognizes that sustainable development requires a higher level reflection that would lead to “changes in the way we think and act” (Annexe I, 1). To achieve transformation through education, educators must first be trained in the skills and competences expected of their students (in formal education, training institutions, community, youth), in addition to the pedagogical skills required for the purpose. To become competent facilitators of ESD, educators require capacity-building and complementary support—a meaningful and relevant curriculum, access to appropriate teaching/learning resources, access to expertise, exposure to emerging knowledge and innovations, access to forums for dialogue and peer learning, exposure to and sensitization towards cultural diversity and traditional knowledge, involvement in whole-institution initiatives, and opportunities that generate a sense of ownership of ESD. A fundamental requirement is for educators to have the “capacity to be open to new ideas”.

Capacity Development

A primary mandate of RCEs is capacity development in ESD and SD. RCEs are multistakeholder networks rich in expertise in a variety of fields that can contribute to ESD, anchored, as they often are, by institutions of higher education, and locally grounded while situated within a global learning space. As such, RCEs are well suited to provide the necessary support to educators of all kinds – school teachers, teachers in the higher education sector, trainers and master trainers, community leaders, youth leaders and other change agents. As RCE Severn points out:

The RCEs are an example of a network that has been strengthened and expanded as a platform for cross-boundary social learning. The strength of the RCE network is its flexibility and its ability to adapt to the local context and culture, and to truly engage people to take action. RCEs bring together and mobilize multiple organizations that include HEIs to address local sustainable development challenges using ESD.

Capacity development of school teachers is a service widely offered by RCEs around the world (e.g. RCEs Lesotho, Guwahati, Delhi, Bohol, Penang, Greater Phnom Penh, Swaziland, Greater Nairobi, Kakamega, Greater Pwani). The composition of RCEs, especially the connections between HEIs, which include teacher



education institutions, and schools, provide fitting forums for this activity and the potential for an expanding reach. The role of RCEs is further enhanced by the collectivity of knowledge, skills and expertise of the network members. These characteristics also contribute to the capability of RCEs to offer professional development to college and university teachers and to develop or help develop ESD curricula. By incorporating educators in their programs and activities, RCEs are able to promote research and re-orientation of curriculum for various levels and situations.

The deep engagement of the network members with the evolving understanding of ESD and of the local context, encourages further enrichment and evolution of all kinds of capacity development programs, including those for youth leaders and community educators. RCE networks are thus well placed to undertake capacity-building, which requires constant upgrading and development. Where HEIs are the anchors of the RCEs, self-reflection in the context of ESD often leads to professional development programs for the faculty and the development of relevant and contextual curricula at least in some disciplines or subjects. RCE Waikato in New Zealand offers an example of such development. Given the fundamental ethical dilemmas of sustainable development, ESD curricula should, and often do, focus on ethical issues to provoke reflection and critical thinking. RCE Waikato has, however, introduced ethics for sustainability into the conventional Management program at the University of Waikato, a network partner; and the ethics of responsibility is a cross-cutting theme across all of the RCE's work.

As multistakeholder networks that sometimes have government agencies as constituent members, RCEs could possibly influence ESD policy at the national and subnational levels, and leverage these links to expand their reach using government networks of institutions. RCE Guwahati engaged in policy advocacy to get ESD concepts infused in the mainstream school curriculum of the Indian state of Assam. Next, in partnership with the Secondary Education Board of Assam, it developed an ESD training module for secondary school teachers in Assam, and has trained more than 5,000 teachers in SD and ESD competences. This module, which has the stamp of approval of the Education Board, has also been made available to other member and non-member organizations that have been using it to train teachers, thereby further expanding the reach of this capacity-building initiative.

Innovation and Funding

Given a wide mandate and a structure unconstrained by rules and regulations that bind formal institutions, RCEs have the freedom to be creative and innovative in the kind of activities they undertake and in their approach to work. This approach is exemplified by RCE Rhine-Meuse's OPEDUCA (Open Educational Areas) Project which enables people and organizations (including educational institutions, businesses and government departments) to interact in ways that promote integral learning, connecting theory, practice and experience, and leading to quality improvement of education from primary schools up to higher education. One of the keys to the success of the project is the "professional upgrade of teachers' skills, competences and real-life-learning abilities".

Experiments and innovations require funding, which as networks the RCEs are better equipped to leverage than individual institutions. For example, some European RCEs are currently engaged in a European Commission funded project that seeks to develop professional development opportunities for university educators to develop ESD competences.

These are all evolving initiatives. The needs of different kinds of educators can often be different and call for different kinds of capacity-building and support inputs. RCE Greater Western Sydney, for its community-based project “Our Place”, provided skills training for the diversely located community educators and identified the resources, support and kind of education required by the community members to successfully engage in a grassroots collaborative project.

Resources to Support Educators

Access to appropriate resources helps support individual learning of the educators and strengthens their teaching/learning efforts. Being rooted in the region and familiar with the local contexts, and endowed with the expertise of its multiple partners, RCEs are competent facilitators for the development of context-specific materials and tools for educators for implementing ESD in the regions that educators help develop (e.g. RCEs Greater Nairobi, Buea, Greater Pwani). Working across boundaries, the RCEs in southern Africa have been very active in networking, sharing and capacity-building among themselves. They also hosted African RCEs for developing flexible and adaptable capacity-building resource materials for use in the expanding ESD work on the continent. They have also established a regional information system to document and disseminate best practices and deliver ESD to local communities. RCEs have incorporated educators in their programs and activities, which has promoted research and re-orientation of curriculum at different levels. RCE Greater Portland is involved in the Regional Equity Atlas (<https://clfuture.org/equity-atlas>) project and has conducted project-related training through the Coalition for a Liveable Future. They have also created a database of sustainability educators. In addition, as part of their self-evaluation exercise, RCEs are expected to document current good practices as well as mapping and collecting resources that are already being used (materials, methodologies, etc.).

Box 8.3 Forums for Learning

In line with the series of lectures *Leitbild-Nachhaltigkeit*, we managed to bring 15 colleges and universities as well as several NGOs together to a lecture on sustainability. This cooperation is the first of its kind in Germany. The highlight of the event was Prof. Dennis Meadows’ lecture in 2012 on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of *Limits to Growth*. In 2013 we developed the concept of this cooperation further and turned it into the annual University Days on Eco-Social Market Economy and Sustainability (<http://www.hochschultage.org/>). On these occasions, exchange about possibilities concerning the integration of sustainability topics into their [educators’] teaching is playing a crucial role. (RCE Munich) ■

Given the multiple areas of expertise covered by RCE networks and their mandate of being the regional centres of expertise in ESD, RCEs are able to provide exposure to new or different ideas and innovations, and new or different ways of thinking and acting. Lectures, conferences and seminars, in both academic and non-academic milieus, provide educators an opportunity for ongoing learning (See Box 8.3) by gaining and updating knowledge, and stimulating thinking and reflection, especially in terms of the cross-curricular nature of ESD (e.g. RCEs Delhi, Lesotho, Munich, Greater Portland).

A powerful concept being translated into action is that of living laboratories for ESD. According to Roger Petry of RCE Saskatchewan:

Many RCEs are interested in creating local living laboratories for ESD to explore new sustainable paths so that unsustainable choices made in the past may be modified and, where needed, substituted in a way that maintains local employment and other livelihood opportunities and improves quality of life.

RCE Greater Western Sydney's flagship initiative, the University of Western Sydney Riverfarm Redevelopment, links land, food, culture and water for a range of sustainability education and research purposes is one such living laboratory. The RCE is now scoping the potential of using this "as a site for researching the integration of place-based sustainability in teacher education programs".

Higher Education and Community

Institutions of higher education, in addition to teaching and research, are also charged with the responsibility of service to society, primarily through community outreach, which offers them the opportunity of much wider reach and influence. This can be a valuable engagement for collaborative action-learning for educators and students to learn through real-life projects, and for communities to benefit from the knowledge and professional approach of academia.

RCE Guatemala points out that the traditional relationship of higher education with local communities has been criticized for being that of marginal activities, unrelated to teaching and research, and of no significant benefit to the communities in solving their developmental problems. However, the philosophy, structure and objectives of RCEs are demonstrating the potential of this engagement. In RCE Greater Nairobi, educators have been working on a project to improve the livelihoods of slum dwellers in the city. For the past seven years, RCE Pune has been supporting the Participatory Budgeting process in the city, which involves helping develop systems at the municipal authority, enhancing community participation in the process by outreach work, as well as documentation of and research on different elements of the budget process, which is done through university students and their educators.

The Way Forward

Despite their many value additions and achievements with regard to GAP's priority area 3, RCEs face several challenges. A specific challenge highlighted by RCE Guatemala is that "in higher education the most difficult aspect to accomplish has been the respect for cultural diversity. The prevailing educational pattern in higher education is very Western and does not respect any other knowledge that does not have the quality of so-called scientific rigour". This applies not only to Guatemala but all across the developing world, which is so rich in cultural diversity, and also to the Western world, not just with regard to the indigenous peoples, but also increasingly with its immigration-induced changing cultural profile. A comprehensive training program for educators in the theoretical aspects associated with cultural diversity and community development methods, to promote respect for the indigenous worldview and traditional knowledge of indigenous and other peoples, is a way forward. So is introducing intercultural debate and knowledge dialogues at all levels of education to overcome "the wall of the so-called 'scientific

rigor' which does not allow appreciating the knowledge of indigenous peoples and afro-descendants". A member of RCE Guatemala, San Carlos University, has taken the initiative of promoting academic discussions within the university on indigenous knowledge, and has introduced indigenous knowledge as an element in its current curriculum. RCE Lima-Callao calls for giving a voice to local and indigenous communities in what is taught in formal education.

Other challenges faced by RCEs include a lack of a sound understanding of the ESD concept by educators both within the university and in the community (RCE Penang), and a lack of methodological competences, like multidisciplinary, holistic and systemic thinking, cross-curricular approaches and the ability to transform ESD contents into practical learning experiences (RCEs Guwahati, Euro-region-Tyrol). Time pressure and the pressure to perform dominate within the educational system, making it difficult for educators to implement newly-gained approaches within their work (RCE Munich). The challenge is thus to explore ways to integrate sustainability across the curriculum so that it becomes a part of how teaching and learning happens in all disciplines and in all spheres. But as RCE Penang points out, "When it comes to greening the teacher educators' curriculum with ESD, while many teacher educators are interested and ready to design such a curriculum, the higher authority, such as the concerned Ministry, may not be ready for it." This calls not only for continued, strengthened and extended capacity-building of educators but of other stakeholders and decisionmakers as well.

Youth comprise 18 per cent of the global population, of which 87 per cent live in developing countries (UNESCO, 2007). Whereas several challenges faced by youth need to be better addressed in sustainability policies and practices, there is also a need for creating spaces, and empowering and integrating their vision, perspectives and vitality in such policies and practices. Most importantly, youth are adaptive to innovative thoughts and developments and form the future agents of sustainability, including through influencing educational processes. Therefore, "generating action among youth and supporting youth led initiatives" has been aptly identified as one of the priority areas in the GAP Proposal. The Proposal further states:

Youth

Youth has a high stake in shaping a better future for themselves and next generations. Moreover, youth are today increasingly drivers of the educational processes, especially in non-formal and informal learning. There is a need for supporting youth as change agents for sustainable development through ESD. (UNESCO, 2013)

Sustainability Challenges and Youth

Being in a state of flux, youth face several challenges of this transition from dependence to independence; compulsory education to employment; and the development of identity and citizenship. Some of these challenges include: opportunities for appropriate education; employment corresponding to capacities and preventing outmigration; effective participation and integration in societal decision-making; protection from violence, abuse, and addiction; maintaining intergenerational links and cultural identity; and health-related concerns, among several others. There are also specific challenges of girl children, young women, the differently-abled and a number of other marginalized youth communities.

A major concern is the non-participatory decisionmaking with respect to these sustainability challenges faced by youth. Being multistakeholder platforms, RCEs play a significant role in both recognizing concerns and empowering youth to

address their own issues as well as the broader societal challenges of sustainability. This necessitates context-specific needs assessment as well as action planning. Several RCEs already have clear principles, active youth wings, and have developed specific youth interventions. For example, RCE Delhi has a specific mandate of youth involvement in sustainability practices. The YUVA Meet, an annual event conducted by the RCE, is an excellent platform through which the RCE has played a key role in bringing together a network of youth.

In some RCEs, such as Greater Pwani and Kano, youth even take key roles in the governance and implementation of RCE activities. The RCE youth community is in the process of formalizing a global youth network to guide contextual approaches and collective projects involving youth. An RCE youth framework has been proposed whose purpose would be to facilitate the investment and creation of societal development goals that can be achieved by youth through sustainable development projects. The projects resulting from the framework will utilize youth in ways beneficial to participating youth and their surrounding communities. These strategic steps clearly are an added advantage in advancing the GAP agenda.

Box 8.4 and Box 8.5 analyze specific interventions undertaken by the RCEs in networking, developing sustainability learning, thematic areas, and policy capacities.

Youth and Sustainability Learning

For youth to be socially responsible, ethical, environmentally conscious and culturally sensitive, it is important for them to have access to various forms of learning. They need to also be aware of sustainability practices from a multilevel perspective of local to global and vice versa. It is also critical to have appropriate pedagogical materials that impart reflexive learning and critical and holistic thinking skills.

Youth and Policy Engagement

Policy engagement is a role rarely assumed by the youth in most communities. Policymakers do not consider youth to be competent enough for such major engagement. This requires building of appropriate

Box 8.4 Sustainability Learning

RCE Greater Portland is facilitating the development of a new Portland Public Schools Youth Network, inspired by other RCE models around the world and focusing on the four Es: education, environment, economy and equity. The network connects students from kindergartens through high schools (K-12) across different school districts in the region, as well as college students who receive course credit for working with K-12 students. Currently, high school students from two schools in different towns are collaborating on a presentation on food security for the 2014 Virtual Youth Conference hosted by RCE Grand Rapids. Another group of students is developing a Hands On Greater Portland Team in order to apply their education to service projects focused on environmental, economic and social sustainability. The RCE believes it is essential to channel the psychological angst of learning about environmental problems into effective actions that give our youth hope for the future. It therefore strives to inspire them to engage in their communities and offer clear opportunities for service and volunteering. *(RCE Greater Portland)*

RCE Munich believes that youth, being enthusiastic, need steady partners for their search for meaning. Commitments to justice, nature and the possibility to change something oneself are basic ideals supporting youth through ESD. The Kreisjugendring München, an umbrella organization for extracurricular education for children and youth and a member of RCE Munich, has developed a sustainability strategy over the past few years. A platform is being currently developed to enable the numerous project groups of youth (subcultures) to be involved by online communication. *(RCE Munich)* ■



YUVA Meet 2011.



YUVA Meet 2011.

Box 8.5

Thematic Competences

RCE Greater Nairobi: Conservation Education

Wildlife Clubs of Kenya (WCK) provides conservation education to youth and supports wildlife clubs through training, information sharing and advocacy. WCK seeks to share knowledge and stimulate interest in ESD, especially about wildlife conservation and biodiversity. This is supported through a teacher-training program and an annual student competition on ESD best practices. WCK has also published and distributed a number of ESD-related materials including thematic packs on conservation of forests, energy, water, wildlife and combating climate change. To create awareness WCK also organizes an annual community conservation day and supports radio programs on environment and youth. WCK has a mobile environmental education outreach program for schools and HEIs. *(RCE Greater Nairobi)*

RCE Guatemala: Wisdom Dialogues

Through the wisdom dialogue project, the RCE engages with the keepers of culture within local communities. These include indigenous groups, youth, elders, faith organizations, artists and cultural organizations. The basic philosophy is to promote cultural diversity and pluralism through comprehending, revitalizing and promoting good practices in Mayan communities. *(RCE Guatemala)*

RCE Guwahati: Carbon Dialogue

RCE Guwahati, over the past six years, has hosted more than 100 interns and volunteers to engage in ESD activities. Constituent educational institutions direct interns/volunteers to the RCE Secretariat, where on need-based matching, they are engaged in various programs in partnership with other member organizations. A formal internship program offered in partnership with UNU has been proposed by the RCE to engage and train youth in ESD competences. The RCE Guwahati Secretariat has also promoted a youth group

named CARBON, which is running a cyber dialogue on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/groups/214497101982085/>. *(RCE Guwahati)*

RCE Penang: Energy Efficiency Awareness

A project on developing awareness on energy efficiency among schoolchildren is being run at Universiti Sains Malaysia, the lead organization of RCE Penang. The successful implementation of the project has had the involvement of two ministries, namely the Education Ministry and the Ministry of Energy and Green Technology. A review of the national curriculum to integrate energy efficiency awareness across the curriculum is being undertaken. The project involves the training of more than 2,000 teachers to reach out to more than 100,000 students (youth). Students from the Sejahtera campus work on raising awareness among the students in the entire university. *(RCE Penang)* ■

skills and technical competences among the youth. Some RCEs, such as Kwazulu Natal, have initiated programs to familiarize youth with policy processes and policy practice linkages.

The Way Ahead

The GAP identifies youth key stakeholders and change agents in advancing ESD. They have a critical influence today in shaping non-formal as well as informal learning processes. GAP calls for the enhancement of learner-centred learning opportunities for youth. This is to be done by utilizing the strengths of information and communication technologies, and by developing participatory skills and empowering youth to act at multiple levels of sustainable development processes such as local, national and global (UNESCO, 2013).

Being multistakeholder networks, RCEs have a vital role in advancing this agenda as outlined above. Several RCEs have evolved a clear vision and perspectives (e.g. RCE Goa, Box 8.6), and developed focused model projects. Documenting and replicating good practices, knowledge sharing and capacity development, inter-RCE networking, joint RCE projects, and policy engagement are the means to achieve this goal. In this

context, the RCE youth network is developing a youth framework for action and is identifying a few areas for immediate action. They are prioritizing potential focus areas, formalizing the youth network and regional nodal points. They are engaged in capacity development, creation of an active online community, sharing stories and good practices, and active policy engagement. They are participating in various RCE meetings and conferences, encouraging innovations through youth awards, networking and engaging with other multilateral and national organizations, and in RCE internship programs aligned with academic interests on specific themes. They have also identified some key challenges, such as the long-term sustainability of the network and financial resources for productive engagement. It is expected that a strategic approach of the RCE youth network would help contribute to GAP and beyond.

Box 8.6 Perspectives

Youth are not only receivers of impacts/outcomes of the various sustainability interventions, nor just active facilitators of or contributors to it; they are also a connecting link for the targeted sustainability initiatives being driven in society for the larger public good. RCE youth can continue to take forward their current work with individual RCEs at the community/society level. They can create youth platforms at the formal education institutes with which they are affiliated by taking a lead role in getting other youth involved. RCEs can thrive on this multidimensional strength to guide and facilitate the formation of a larger youth brigade under the identified RCE domains of work. (RCE Goa) ■

Priority 5 of the GAP calls for accelerating “the search for sustainable development solutions at the local level through ESD”, a goal relying on developing, strengthening and expanding local multistakeholder cross-sectoral networks. It recognizes the role of ESD in supporting multistakeholder learning and community engagement, and links the local to the global. Local authorities and governments are seen as critical partners in realizing the ambitions of Priority 5 as they are able, among other measures, to openly support learning opportunities for all stakeholders and facilitate the integration of ESD in formal education.

Local Communities

The track record of the RCEs as well as the principal characteristics of the RCE community demonstrate their ability to contribute to individual priority areas of the GAP focused on policy, whole-institution approaches, educators and youth in the earlier sections. However, its role in accelerating search and implementation of sustainable development solutions at the local level (Priority 5) is what makes the RCE movement particularly powerful. Having said this, one must be careful not to assign RCEs exclusively to one or the other priority area.

Collaboration for Meaningful Learning

Through the first conceptual articulation and at each stage of development of the RCE community, the RCEs were envisioned as entities that would mobilize and up-scale sustainability of the regions through transformative learning and action research (Chapter 1). It brought learning into sustainability processes (E to SD) and sustainability and resilience principles into educational practices and policies (SD to E). The RCEs contribute to regional sustainable development either by aligning the vision of the stakeholders (as shared by RCE Yogyakarta, Indonesia) or by promoting work around stakeholders’ areas of interest while searching for opportunities to synergistic actions (as shared by RCE Goa). They have been a platform for dialogue on concerns and practices among RCE stakeholders, a local resource base to support ESD work, and a networking structure for enabling ESD

in local educational and community initiatives. In some regions, work of the RCEs has been focused on development of a community of practice leading to change.

The learning community character of the RCEs lends itself to aspirations towards meaningful and relevant learning articulated by the GAP. Through reflexive experimentation and change practices, and by assessing directions of learning and charting new trajectories, RCEs help organizations and people in the communities to understand ongoing processes while serving as living laboratories for change (Box 8.7). Information shared by the partners of individual RCEs and between

RCEs, according to RCE Bogota, helps “empower communities to take appropriate decisions in relation to their ... problems and allow[s] them to change their roles as mere observers to actors in the construction of [their] own reality”. Processes of engagement, technical assistance and knowledge-sharing opportunities “move ideas into fruition, without top-down approaches of management, or charity” (RCE Greater Portland).

Aligning Learning and Action

As has been asserted earlier, the multisectoral, trans-disciplinary character of RCEs lends itself not only to information exchange but also to the alignment of learning and action. From the perspective of RCE Lithuania:

A multistakeholder approach in the context of RCEs means not only cross-sectoral or integrative approaches in exploring particular sustainability questions, but also a rational interplay between research (by involvement of higher education institutions), practice, and public interest leading to transformative innovation ... the “citizenship triangle”, i.e. education-research-community is emerging together with the knowledge triangle of studies-research-business.

In such alignment of actions, the partners receive a unique opportunity to counteract pressure on various learning communities to focus narrowly on limited, from the perspective of sustainable development, sectoral goals. RCE Greater Western Sydney, for example, recognizes that in the changing financial policies of the federal government channeling funds away from public academic institutions, it is critical that RCEs deliver convincing outcomes (for regional development) in the core areas of higher education – outcomes that can be leveraged through the whole RCE network, helping research and education be more useful to the communities through programs and research work (as shared by RCE Buea). Many RCEs,

Box 8.7 Changing Ways of Thinking and Acting

(By Roger Petry, RCE Saskatchewan)

As noted in the GAP proposal, SD requires higher-level reflection that leads to “changes in the way we think and act” (Annexe I, 1). This higher-level reflection, however, needs to be thought of both individually and collectively. For a community to reflect at this level, especially regarding pressing sustainability issues of the day (which force often difficult reflections on the current degradation of systems providing long-term support for such communities), requires new institutional and organizational structures. RCEs can usefully play this role by acting as catalysts for such reflection. With the expertise their members gradually accumulate, RCEs can create pointed and strategic educational interventions in local communities and regions where a region is at a critical juncture in its development path. An RCE can capitalize on opportunities that emerge within a region where systematic patterns of unsustainable development practice self-generate new points for critical reflection at all levels. RCEs need to, in turn, identify local capacities and strengths to reflect, learn, collaborate and act on these situated experiences. At the same time, an RCE should not be purely reactive. Many RCEs are interested in creating local living laboratories for ESD to explore new sustainable paths so that unsustainable choices made in the past may be modified and, where needed, substituted in a way that maintains local employment and other livelihood opportunities and improves quality of life. ■

including Zomba, Yogyakarta and Rhine-Meuse, reflected on their own considerable strength in aligning stakeholders from government, academia, the private sector and NGOs to have a common vision and to work on the transformative community projects making them innovative, intellectually reflective and politically recognized.

The RCE was conceived as a concept, and consequently implemented as a strategy, to re-orient education towards sustainability as understood at the regional level. It has been developed further to bring the learning aspect into the development agenda, thereby becoming a regional community of practice and change. As a community it succeeded in bringing learning and action (Box 8.8), and exchanged the experiences through various regional and global fora. Inter and intra-regional exchanges of the RCEs often play a critical role in facilitating learning and development innovations, enabling steps outside of the institutionally designated opportunities. RCE Saskatchewan, for example, has a regular event showcasing best sustainability projects of the region. RCE Bogota regularly organizes community events and workshops to give visibility to innovations. The annual RCE Award gives global recognition to RCE projects thereby providing visibility to local practices while inspiring creativity in others.

Mediating Local and Global

Contributions of the RCEs in the realization of the fifth priority area of GAP would not be complete without highlighting the international dimension that RCEs bring to the regions. RCE Lithuania asserts that connection among the RCEs and between the RCEs and international sustainability development processes provide mutual learning beyond the community of local stakeholders. That signifies not only a multisectoral approach but also a multicultural approach and values clarification in regional development. “A great advantage of an RCE is that it chooses the areas and approaches appropriate to its environment and the SD priorities of where it is located – no two RCEs are exactly the same” (Goolam Mohamedbhai, Advisor to African RCEs). As contextuality of RCE actions leads to a diversity in their actions, the diversity of cultural contexts within and between the RCEs becomes elevated. Such realization results, according to observations of RCEs Guatemala and Lima-Callao, in “knowledge dialogues and respect of all systems and types of knowledge, including indigenous and traditional knowledge” (RCE Guatemala).

Box 8.8

RCEs as Centres of Innovation and Practice for Sustainability Commons

(By T. Pesanayi, RCE ZwaZulu Natal)

Sustainability commons were developed at RCEs Makana, KwaZulu Natal, Swaziland, Zomba (Malawi), Lesotho and Mutare (Zimbabwe). These are centres of practice of ESD through exhibiting, modeling and using working models, among others, of energy saving, alternative energy, heritage practice, visual art, water harvesting, sustainable and climate-smart farming. Through value creation and more intensive networking, the RCEs can create more sustainability commons using community input that can provide fora for purposive and incidental learning. These commons appear to work best where practitioners, researchers, interested users and advocates work together collaboratively. ■

Box 8.9

Translation of Global Sustainability Agenda into Local Realities

(By Betsan Martin, RCE Waikato)

[There are] many global initiatives for sustainable development, such as the work of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, the Earth Charter and the UN engagement process for the post-2014 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These vast global aspirations can be overwhelming in scope; the RCEs offer a global network grounded in local practice. The RCE network is a learning community where good practice and challenges sit alongside encouragement to inno-

cont. ►

vate in our own context. At the present scale, the RCE network has the quality of face-to-face engagement and keeps the possibility of interaction among RCEs. The generous and warm-spirited interactions at regional and global conferences make this evident.

Belonging to the global RCE network bridges the global scope of sustainability aspirations through an interactive, inspiring global network of practitioners, and enables local practice to be developed in ways that are highly contextual and globally referenced. The universalist discourse of sustainable development must always be open to questioning from local situations. A prime example is to make provision for the worldviews and voices of indigenous peoples. There is a risk that sustainable development will overwhelm the specific qualities of indigenous knowledge, and exclude some of its dimensions, such as spirituality and the understanding of human kinship with all living things. This is where RCEs have a role to play in keeping alive local, grounded, practical and responsive activity that feeds into policy at national and global scales. ■

Global sustainable development processes also are better translated into local realities when there is a community of partners, such as RCEs, that, through collaborative engagements, question universal discourses while enabling sustainability-inspired change processes (Box 8.9).

Concluding Remarks

The ability of RCEs to bring together significant stakeholders, including policymakers and regional administrators (Chapter 6), engage across educational and sectoral boundaries, including with traditional knowledge holders (Chapter 3), and their ability to mediate local and global alliances (Chapters 1, 2 and 6), make them significant partners in realizing the potential of learning in the regions and local communities.

The RCE community has developed and matured during the DESD and now provides a powerful platform for the mainstreaming and scaling up of ESD after 2014, along the GAP priority areas and beyond. With the change of international agenda and the emergence of the SDGs, UNEP's 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production (10FYF), green growth discourse, and others, the RCE community needs to also transition to the next level of development to deliver its full potential. This will be explored in the next chapters of the book.

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Reflections

Practitioners, observers, and others with interest in ESD are eagerly awaiting the adoption of the Global Action Programme (GAP) on Education for Sustainable Development during the World Conference on ESD to mark the conclusion of the UN DESD in Japan in November 2014. As a follow-up to the DESD, GAP will focus on strengthening ESD in five priority action areas. As key partners of UNESCO Bangkok from the very beginning of the DESD, the RCEs will once again be expected to play an important role in implementing GAP, notably under the Partner Networks of the implementation structure, through their activities and expertise that will help other stakeholders generate activities that support and enhance ESD.

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