**Education and the climate crisis**

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Climate change poses the biggest existential threat to humanity. As world leaders prepare to renew their pledge to combat the crisis amid increasingly frequent natural hazards and the raging pandemic, one measure that so far remains grossly under-tapped is the transformative role that education can play in mitigating climate change.

In the lead up to COP26, more countries have been committing to achieving carbon neutrality by 2050. This includes using regulation and policy to improve energy efficiency, develop alternative energy sources, reduce overall energy consumption, and minimise wastage.

These measures require financing, public consensus, and lifestyle changes. They will also have profound impacts on countries’ industrial structures and economic policies which may lead to a short-term jolt to the global economy.

But these actions are a vital step towards ending the worldwide, indiscriminate exploitation of low-cost natural resources that is now taking its toll on the environment and fuelling the climate crisis. Asia and the Pacific is responsible for nearly half of global greenhouse gas emissions and more than 60 percent of people in the region work in sectors that are highly susceptible to changing weather patterns. It is clear that the battle against climate change will be won or lost in Asia and the Pacific.

This is why Asia and the Pacific must promote a new paradigm of economic development that can turn climate actions into drivers of economic growth that are ecologically sustainable and climate-friendly. Pursuing this new paradigm requires a fundamental transformation of the mindset and lifestyle of future generations.

Education in the region and beyond can and must become an active agent in catalyzing climate mitigation and adaptation in line with the global agreements. Education can be transformative in at least three ways.

First, universal values such as global citizenry and sustainable development must be incorporated into mainstream, foundational, and formative years of study. This will help students become self-directed, lifelong learners. It will also help raise self-awareness, enable a cultural transformation, and change the mindsets and lifestyles of future global citizens – equipping them with the tools to lead and actively support sustainable development.

This is why young leaders like Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousufzai are inspiring millions of young people around the world to make societies smarter, greener, and more inclusive and resilient.

Second, more investment and better quality of expenditure in education to scale up learning – particularly for disadvantaged and marginalised groups including girls and women – is the best strategy to support sustainable development. The more well-educated people there are in a country, the better the capacity and agility of that country to prevent or mitigate future hazards.

Third, education can be more responsive in producing experts, innovators, and leaders with the skills to tackle climate change and other related development challenges. Such challenges include converting waste to energy, increasing food production and minimising food waste to feed the growing population sustainably, transitioning to clean energy and transport, and creating and preparing for green jobs.

Education is the cornerstone on which the world needs to build a successful transition from effective short-term climate actions to sustained, structural medium- to long-term changes that are underpinned by new mindsets.

Developing this education system will require comprehensive cooperation between central and local governments, schools, universities, communities, non-government organisations (NGOs) and the private sector. This collaboration is critical to develop education policies that will prepare and engage students in sustainable development through science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) projects.

There are already good examples of climate change education led by some governments. Italy requires all students to take more than 33 hours of climate change classes each year in higher secondary education. The Department of Education in the Philippines has committed to intensify climate literacy and support climate action in schools. The Republic of Korea has started a project to transform schools into green campuses that will showcase education programmes for environmental protection and use eco-friendly energy.

The international community, multinational corporations, and international NGOs are equally critical in harmonising and providing this support. The Paris Agreement calls for its signatories to undertake educational and public awareness campaigns on climate change, and ensure public participation in programmes to achieve its targets.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) launched the Climate Change Fund in 2008 and has since actively pursued ways to mainstream climate change issues in education. The bank is supporting clean energy in several education projects including preparing graduates with green skills.

The Ban Ki-moon (BKM) Foundation For a Better Future is urging governments and the international community to prioritise environmental education, encourage enthusiastic young international leaders, and empower women and young people. ADB and the BKM Foundation will collaborate closely to mobilise more partners, resources, and expertise to do more and build back better from the pandemic.

At this critical juncture in the history of humanity, we must now reimagine education. This will bring about the early-stage mindset change that will help prepare the global citizens and innovators of tomorrow with the skills to address climate change and nurture the long-term health of our planet.

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