Importance of Quality Education and Sustainable Development: An Indian Perspective

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Abstract

Education is like a basic necessity if we really want to make our planet environment-friendly and liveable for all. But quality education work as a catalyst for overall socio-economic and environmental development in any country. The concept of sustainable development has become a buzzword and without practicing it we cannot make this world sustainable economically, socially and environmentally. We cannot ignore the impact of climate change in anyway. India is now the most populous county in the world and its rapid industrialization, and materialistic lifestyles are posing a serious threat to sustainable development and environmental sustainability. Sustainable development policy tries to balance contradicting factors like economic development and climate change. SDG 4 strongly promotes to ensure Inclusive and equitable quality education. NEP (2020) has given a special focus on SDG 4 to ensure quality education in the country. Therefore, this article mainly discusses the role of quality education and NEP (2020) in achieving the goals of sustainable development and also emphasizes the importance of quality education in promoting sustainable development.

Keywords: Quality Education, Sustainable Development, Environmental Sustainability, SDGs, NEP, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

Introduction

The great Greek Philosopher, Aristotle has said that the roots of education may be bitter, but its fruit is always sweet.

According to Mahatma Gandhi, education means an all-round drawing of the best in a child and man in body, mind and spirit.

Nelson Mandela former President of South Africa has said about the education that "education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world."

The above-mentioned quotations on education are sufficient to understand the value of education in our life and we all know it very well. Education has the most important role to play in our life from any angle. It is education which distinguishes between man and animal. So, the main purpose of education is to create human capital in any society. But education does not mean simply achieving academic degrees like B.A., M.A., B.Tech. M.B.A., Ph.D. etc. It must be qualitative so that it can contribute to create rich and real human capital rather than a bunch of degree holders. It is all about how to learn, what to learn, and how to make choices and enables people to understand global issues and challenges. The post-2015 development agenda of the United Nations explicitly discusses the significance and relevance of quality education with a clear indication that SDG 4 will focus on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality

education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. The post-2015 development agenda has also recognised that quality education is key to achieving sustainable development goals. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) provides a broader opportunity for both teachers and students as it assists teachers to enhance teaching and learning processes and stimulate students to raise questions, improve decision-making ability and critical thinking. Now it's a fact that quality education for sustainable development has made people more responsible and sensible than earlier regarding making this world more sustainable environmentally. All the member countries of the United Nations in 2015 adopted the 2030 agenda with a motto, 'No one should be left behind' for sustainable development in critical areas of humanity and the environment. This agenda mainly focuses on 4p's principles which are "People, Planet, Prosperity, and Peace for achieving the SDGs. There are seventeen goals of sustainable development in which SDG 4 is most important because it promises to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." There are various objectives of these SDGs, for example, to alleviate poverty, no hunger, and improvement in education and health standards, gender equality, clean water, sanitation and energy and to resist the negative impact of climate change within a given time period. The protection of environment and natural resources is essential for sustainable development as the sustainable development concept is mainly based on the rational utilization of our resources and it teaches how to fulfil the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

The COVID-19 virus has precipitated the perception of vulnerability and unsustainability of the future's development pattern throughout the world. The SDGs Report (2022) indicates based on the latest study that the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development is at stake because of multiple, cascading and intersecting crises. COVID-19, climate change and conflict predominate. It is a well-known fact that problem of environmental degradation and global warming is mainly caused by human activity. The World Bank in 2015 has expressed its serious concern that climate change will make people poorer on a large scale by 2030. So the SDGs provide mechanisms and processes to address these issues for future generations.

Population explosion particularly in Asia and consumption patterns of people are undermining human survival prospects by disrupting ecosystems and depleting resources. We must not forget that India has already become the most populous country in the world after China. India is already facing the negative impact of climate change in the form of heatwaves, flood, and drought affecting millions of people. This will further exacerbate poverty, hunger and instability in the country.

India badly lacks quality education as far as mass education is concerned. People usually prefer getting an academic degree more rather than its quality which is essential for real human development. And it appears that the main purpose of education in India is all about preparing students to pass various types of examinations by and large. The Indian education system faces several challenges including issues related to quality, access, and affordability. That's why; National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has visions for complete revamping and innovation of the higher education system, with equity and inclusion. It also aims to make India a better knowledge society and hub of education. Without quality education, it would be very difficult for sustainable development to achieve its desirable goals at any level.

In the light of above discussion, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are more important and relevant than ever. In this paper, I have tried to

discuss how quality education has a key role to play in achieving various targets of SDGs and its successful implementation in India.

Quality Education and Sustainable Development

Education is an essential tool to change and transform this world. Quality education is the foundation for learning throughout life in a complex and rapidly changing world. Complete access to quality education must be made essential at every level of education to achieve sustainable development goals and it further put focus on ensuring full participation for all particularly young people. Quality education for sustainable development (QESD) also promotes higher-level learning and enhances the competencies of people in various ways to resolve the problems of environmental sustainability.

Education is essential but not simply in the form of educational qualifications. Any educational qualifications without quality are simply degree and it is of no use in our life whatever it may be. And in my opinion, if people achieve any educational qualification without quality they are simply degree holders not educated in a genuine sense. So quality education refers to how we learn skills, make decisions, and think about the world and environment and it also inculcates value and ethics in us. Quality education also makes people more rational, more responsible for their lives and environmental issues. Further quality education also helps people in poverty reduction and the economic development of society. It is needless to say that how quality education is crucial for achieving sustainable development goals. SDG 4 strongly advocates high-quality education for all and provides an opportunity for universal and equal education to all and is also closely associated with the effective implementation of other SDGs. And education is obviously the most important goal of SDGs.

ESD (Education for Sustainable Development) advocates bringing reforms in the education system to provide quality education to improve students' lifelong learning, critical reflexivity, cooperative learning relationships, and complete interpretations of knowledge. The principles of ESD are mainly based on environmental education, which main motto is to enhance the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and behaviours of people to take care of their environment. The purpose of ESD is to enable people to make decisions and carry out actions to improve our quality of life without compromising the planet. And it also includes the values inherent in sustainable development in all aspects and levels of learning.

The World Economic Forum 2016 mentioned that there are some channels through which education affects the productive capacity of a country. First, it increases the collective ability of the working class to perform given tasks efficiently and effectively. Further education helps people to exchange knowledge about new ideas, new products, and regarding new and advanced technologies available in this world. It also helps to increase the country's capacity to produce innovative products, development in education etc. India has also signed an agreement with the SDGs and is committed to ensuring inclusive and quality education for all children by 2030.

India has been doing its best for achieving better outcomes in the field of Education for all. The government has initiated several flagship programmes for compulsory education free of cost in the country. Such programmes are there for all children between 6-14 years age group. Programmes like Right to Education (RTE) and Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA) have been given special weightage to promote and provide compulsory education in the country. Such types of programmes have been successful in terms of high enrolment rates at primary level education in the country but so far as quality education is concerned it is still required to implement it more successfully. And the 12th five-year plan (2012-17) also focused on how to improve quality education and create equal opportunities for all. The

Indian higher education system is one of the largest in the world, with more than 1100 universities and more than 50,000 colleges and other kinds of higher institutions (HEIs) which offer a wide range of courses and programmes. Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) has increased during the last five years, from 24.1 in 2016-17 to 27.3 in 2020-21. Despite many universities and colleges, the quality of education has been a cause for concern in India.

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and Sustainable Development

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has been announced with the vision to renovate the education system of this country including its governance and regulation to make a new system which covers the vision of education of the 21st century as well as SDGs. It also focuses on maintaining India's value system and its rich traditions. If implemented systematically, NEP (2020) policy can achieve the goals and targets set by it timely. This education policy has a broader and inclusive vision for the education system but one of the main visions is Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in the light of achieving SDG 4 which is "Quality Education," which provides inclusive and equitable education to all. NEP (2020) aims to provide comprehensive and integrated environmental education which includes sustainable development and living, as well as several other areas about climate change, waste management, environmental protection and, etc. NEP has a special focus on training which can train teachers about sustainable development and environmental sustainability. It has also made environmental education mandatory as a part of the curriculum. The purpose of NEP (2020) is to promote education in a way that will generate sustainable livelihoods and boost the economy of the nation. So this policy is very well aligned with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and SDG-4. It further aims to transform India into a vibrant knowledge society and global knowledge superpower by making both school and college education more holistic, flexible, and multidisciplinary as per the needs of the 21st century and improving the unique capabilities of each student.

Analysis and Discussion

There cannot be two views that investment in education is the most important investment which yields the highest return than any sort of investment. Quality education makes people more active, skilled and responsible citizens and in this way, they better understand environmental vulnerability and its solutions. And this helps people to make this planet more healthy, safe & secure for everyone now and for future generations. People often argue and express their concerns about various SDGs and whether these goals are achievable and realistic in nature or not. Though we cannot say that efforts have not been made in the past to attain SDGs but quality education has not been used as a tool for promoting sustainability. There are various challenges and issues to achieve the targets of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. As the world is experiencing several challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic, the war between Russia and Ukraine, climate change, disruption of supply chain management, energy crisis and so on. The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2022 indicates the detrimental impacts of these crises as far as the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The COVID-19 pandemic has so far directly or indirectly cost the lives of close to 15 million people and as a consequence of this, millions of people are now living in extreme poverty and became jobless compared to pre-pandemic levels. The current scenario of the global economy is very gloomy and still facing the menace of new COVID-19 variants, rising unemployment, disruptions in supply-chain management, increasing pressure

of the cost of living etc. particularly in developing countries. The survival of mankind will be determined by how they try to deal with the issues like climate change and development in future.

Our country India is also facing above mentioned challenges and problems by and large. We cannot take the risk of ignoring them. India is more vulnerable and exposed to this nexus of climate environment and development challenges. India has already become the world's most populous nation and is already on the path of rapid industrialization, with a high level of exposure to climate change and also actively involved in climate negotiations, so what happens in India will affect the world also. According to "The Climate Change Performance Index 2023" report India has improved its position by getting 8th position in the index which is 2 positions higher from the last edition. Thus India's rank is the best amongst the G 20 countries but despite it; the adverse impact of climate change will affect the Agriculture sector, Drinking water availability, Income Inequality, Energy etc. Therefore, quality education and education for sustainable development (ESD) is badly needed for India at the mass level to understand the causes, and consequences of environmental change, global warming and to implement effectively the concepts and policy of sustainable development. Now NEP (2020) has put a special focus on promoting education for sustainable development and achieving SDG-4. Even before NEP, there has been focus on quality education and sustainable development but the expected result has not been achieved due to different types of constraints. India has still a long way to go to ensure quality education for its people and the attainment of the goals of sustainable development. Much depends on the effective implementation of the NEP. The challenge is that how the NEP and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) components can become an essential part of the curriculum and how it is applied in every educational institution of India. Therefore, the implementation of this Policy requires collective responsibilities of both the central and state government of India. There are various regulatory bodies and institutions like MHRD, CABE, NTA, NCERT, SCERTs, and HEIs which need to work together for the effective implementation of the policy.

There are several challenges to Quality Education and the right implementation of Sustainable Development in India which need to be addressed seriously by society and government. For example, a major obstacle to quality education is the perception of people at a large scale in our country as they simply want to get academic degrees but not knowledge which is essential for everything in our life. And the main reason is that people don't take care about value, knowledge, and ethics in today's life but power, money, and status at any cost. That is to say, that success means mainly power and money rather than anything else and if we as a country do not try to check this type of perception it's going to be very difficult to achieve the goals of sustainable development in a real sense.

According to UNESCO 2014 Publication on the topic "SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT BEGINS WITH EDUCATION" where children are not learning due to poor quality, they are more likely to repeat grades and ultimately drop out. In India, children who achieved lower mathematics scores at age 12 were more likely to drop out by age 15 than those who achieved higher scores. It would be rational to ensure the provision of good quality schools as the cost of those children currently in poor-quality primary schooling and not getting quality education learning environment, is $129 billion per year.

Therefore it becomes the moral responsibility of the entire world community to deliver on commitments and to assist the world's most vulnerable people, communities and nations. We must admit that the effect of quality education outcomes has greater significance on sustainable development and economic growth than merely enrolment rates, and achieving quality education can be more cost-effective because quality education mainly depends on systematic knowledge investments more than new resource

allocation. If there is a main focus on increasing enrolment rates and ignoring quality education then it can lead to inadequate or declining learning outcomes. It requires holistic integration of key educational components salient and relevant to the learner's ability to contribute to social change and transformation in a cooperative and collective manner. This should not only cover the educational contents as mentioned in SDG Target 4.7, but it must also focus on the learning processes that are imperative to increase quality education.

Out of these seventeen SDGs, several goals like eradication of poverty, zero hunger, health, education etc. have been in consideration in India's economic development planning since the 1970s. SDGs are interlinked with each other and they need to be implemented in an integrated manner, with an emphasis on quality, access, equity and inclusion at all levels of formal education. Inclusion and quality education for all will substantiate the fact that quality education is the most powerful weapon in achieving sustainable development goals.

Suggestions

There are some suggestions for government and society which may be vital for promoting quality education to combat challenges of SDGs and how to deal with such type of issues effectively.

1. To run a campaign at the mass level to create awareness regarding quality education and its significance in our lives.
2. 2. Focusing on the quality of teaching and learning in the education for sustainable development.
3. Government must try to increase total expenditure on the social sector particularly on education.
4. To launch different professional courses by education system on sustainable development and environmental sustainability.
5. Brilliant and topper students must be given additional weightage in jobs, promotions and other benefits in their lives if possible.
6. Need for Effective Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation are badly required to improve quality education.
7. Reward and punishment system is a must for implementing SDG policy at the ground level.
8. How to motivate people for quality education at the mass level.
9. Education for Sustainable (ESD) must be included in the curriculum of our schools and colleges across the nation.
10. India is a young country as the majority of the population belongs to the age group of 29 years. India must try to take this advantage by imparting quality education, skills, and training so that they can contribute to achieve various goals of sustainable development.
11. We must create a slogan like "No Quality Education, No Sustainable Development" and the government, institutions, and NGOs must try to work together to make such type of slogan more popular to create awareness among people.

Conclusion

No doubt that Education is an indispensable thing in our life because it changes our personality in every way. It enhances our thinking power, skills, decision-making capacity and several such types of factors which enable people to contribute to society and its well-being. But without quality education we cannot get above mentioned features and simply educational qualifications cannot help society to combat any environmental, economic and social problems in a real sense. It is quality education which creates

genuine human capital. Knowing the fact that climate change, and sustainable development are truly international problems and it requires the collective responsibility of people, governments, institutions etc. to address these issues at the global level. Quality Education has an important role to play in this regard. India is a young country so creating more opportunities and providing quality education to young people can create a sense of responsibility, awareness, knowledge, and skill in them to address sustainability problems. So, it is all about harnessing the demographic dividend. Our education system has intensified its efforts to support sustainable development. The government has also shown its commitment to achieve SDG-4 and designed the NEP (2020) by integrating the principles of sustainable development to support, spread and practice sustainable development to encourage the wholesome development of the country. The government has also initiated several flagship programmes in transforming the education sector with the motto of "Education for All" and promoting quality education. Hence, quality education is most important for achieving SDG 4 and making this world more sustainable.

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