

National policy on education for sustainable development in Vietnam preschool and general education - Reality and solution

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ABSTRACT: *In order to implement the National Action Plan of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, Vietnam needs to focus on completing the institutional policy system to ensure a full legal framework for the action plan, in which the education for sustainable development should always be focused. The article reviews the current status of national policies on education for sustainable development in preschool and general education in three areas of economy, culture - society and environment. From that point of view, the article provides some key findings about the achieved results, as well as the shortcomings and limitations of national policies related to education for sustainable development. Based on the results of the policy analysis, the authors have made recommendations on a number of key solutions to improve the effectiveness of planning and implementation of education policies for sustainable development in preschool and general education in Vietnam. Among the recommendations mentioned, the development and implementation of coordination mechanisms among stakeholders is considered as the key solutions to improve the effectiveness of planning and implementing education policies for sustainable development.*

KEYWORDS: Policy; education for sustainable development; preschool education; general education.

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1. Introduction

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is considered to be the key element of a high quality education that provides a foundation for sustainable development in every country and all over the world. In Vietnam, the Party and the State have identified that ESD as one of the important solutions to implement sustainable development. This spirit has been unified in many policies, strategies and plans of the Party, the State and ministries, sectors and localities for more than two decades. It reflects the awareness increasingly of the close and interactive relationship among the three pillars of sustainable development, including economy, culture - society and environment as well as the role of education in ensuring national sustainable development goals. The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) is assigned by the Government to be the focal agency to bring the goals and contents of ESD into the education and training programs and implement specifically in the education process.

Over the years, MOET has developed and promulgated many policies from ministerial to local level to direct

and implement contents related to ESD in education reality. However, in practice, ESD in educational institutions generally, in preschool and general education particularly is still limited, not achieving the desired effects. Therefore it is essential to review the ESD policy on preschool and general education in order to help policy makers and educational managers to have an overview of the national ESD policy over the time, as well as to orient solutions to improve the policy system in order to enhance the opportunities of implementing ESD effectively in preschool and general education in the coming period.

2. Research content

2.1. The concept of Education for sustainable development

The concept of “sustainable development” is defined in the report “Our Common Future” by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) (commonly known as the “Brundtland Commission” 1987) as “... ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. The ultimate goal of sustainable

development is to improve the life quality for all citizens in a nation and all the world - while ensuring the integrity of systems that support the lives of all humanity and other creatures.

ESD is described by UNESCO (2015) as “*ESD empowers learners to take informed decisions and responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society, for present and future generations, while respecting cultural diversity. It is about lifelong learning, and is an integral part of quality education. ESD is holistic and transformational education which addresses learning content and outcomes, pedagogy and the learning environment. It achieves its purpose by transforming society*”.

ESD targets the knowledge, skills, values and action capacity to achieve national goals according to pillars of sustainable development, namely: economy, culture - society and environment. The representation of each ESD dimensions as the following areas:

- **Economy:** education of skills to maintain a sustainable economic system to support benefits for people and environment, to predict the limitations, risks and potential of economic growth and their impacts on society and on the environment, with a commitment to assess personal and societal levels of consumption out of concern for the environment and for social justice.

- **Culture:** education of an understanding of physical and spiritual values that influence and shape the personal and social choices, including the role of world faith and philosophy, the way of maintaining good relationships with others and with the natural world, creative ways used to express these values and relationships. **Society:** education of an understanding of social institutions and their role in change and development, as well as the democratic and participatory systems which give opportunity for the expression of opinion and implementation on inclusion, rights and social equity, responsibility, interests, the selection of governments, the forging of consensus and the resolution of differences.

- **Environment:** education of an understanding, respect and protection of ecosystems and their attributes of livelihood, beauty and diversity, the limitations of using resources and fragility of these systems as well as their contributions and affects of human activities, welfare and decisions, with a commitment to factoring environmental concerns into economic and social policy development.

ESD needs to develop an understanding of the close relationship among the three pillars. Therefore, ministries and sectors should coordinate with MOET to promote and enhance the awareness of relevant topics such as climate change, natural disaster and risk management, health/ HIV, water and sanitation, gender equality, cultural diversity,... Communication and education programs play an important part in national programs

and action plans. As a result, the policy of ESD should be implemented in all areas of sustainable development and according to an interdisciplinary approach.

Current status of national policies on ESD in Vietnam

There are many broad and narrow connotations about *policy* in general and *ESD policy* in particular. In this article, the *ESD policy* is understood as all instructions and resolutions of the Party; laws/ codes and resolutions of the National Assembly; decisions, strategies, circulars, directives,... of the Prime Minister; decisions, strategies, action plans, circulars, directives, guiding documents,... of MOET and inter-ministries; decisions, guiding documents, directions, action plans,... of the local educational authority levels, at the educational institutions related to ESD.

The national policy on ESD includes policies relating to the three pillars of sustainable development: economy, culture - society and environment, involving the policy system from the central level (the National Assembly, the Government) to MOET and inter-sector levels. An overview of the content covered by the national policy on ESD can be described as follows:

2.1.1. Economy

The main policies on sustainable development in Vietnam economic sector clearly express the orientation of sustainable economic development, focusing on raising awareness of social responsibility of stakeholders in the economic development; specially dealing with solutions that promote the use of advanced technologies and techniques to create green, clean, safe and friendly products and services to environment and human. The document contents refer to the role and responsibility of the education sector in the implementation of sustainable development in economy. For example, *the National Green Growth Strategy* that tends the goal of green growth, has clearly defined the role of education as well as the basic solutions on strategy implementation, namely: *Solution 1:* Organizing communication, education, increase on awareness of people and communities about the role and meanings of green growth, practical actions to contribute to green growth. *Solution 15:* Development of human resources for green growth based on research, selection of contents on green growth, green technology, sustainable resource exploitation,... at all educational grades and levels. *The National Target Program for Sustainable Poverty Reduction (2016-2020)* addresses policies and solutions on hunger elimination and poverty reduction, economic development for the poor. In particular, education is considered as an effective way to help the poor to increase accessible capacity to public services, especially in health, education, legal aid, housing, and water.

The role of education in sustainable economic development has been concretized in the documents

issued by MOET. *The Education Development Strategy for 2011-2020* (according to Decision 711/QD-TTg dated 13/6/2012 of the Prime Minister) shows that education always plays a key role in sustainable economic development nationally, especially in disadvantaged areas. The role of education for sustainable economic development is also reflected in *the General Goals of Education until 2020*, in which “national education is fundamentally and comprehensively renovated in the direction of standardization, modernization, socialization, democratization and international integration (...), meeting the demand for human resources, especially high-quality human resources serving the national industrialization and modernization and developing knowledge economy”. *The General Education Curriculum* published in July 2012 has made remarkable progress. One of them is the focus on developing students’ potential, sufficiently attaching to enhance students’ knowledge, practical skills, knowledge application to solve practical problems, meet the requirements of career orientation and prepare for labour-market joining, contribute usefully to the economy.

Some specific policies of the Government and the education sector to develop education to promote socio-economic development in disadvantaged areas and ethnic minority areas: In addition to the general provisions of the 2005 Education Law, the Universal Primary Education Law, the 2004 Child Protection, Care and Education Law (now the 2016 Children Law), there are many policy documents having a positive impact on overall development as well as sustainable economic growth of disadvantaged areas, ethnic minority areas; creating opportunities for ethnic minority people to learn their language and script in addition to using the Vietnamese language, as well as creating favorable conditions for ethnic minority students to receive the State preferential policies. In addition, a number of financial, business and vocational education programs in schools, which were coordinated by MOET and some organizations, have been integrated into education subjects and activities in educational institutions over the time.

2.1.2. Culture - society

The ESD policy of cultural-social development focuses on raising awareness of the community about the physical and spiritual values that influence and orient on personal and social action ways, education of an understanding of social institutions and their role in change and development, towards inclusion, rights and social justice, the forging of consensus and the resolution of differences.

The ESD policy focuses on preserving cultural values and at the same time, ensuring the basic rights of educational objects - especially for the disadvantaged,

and divided into the following main groups: i) Policy on supporting children with disadvantages to have equal access to quality education¹; ii) Policy on language and integration of cultural heritage into educational programs²; iii) Policy on improving knowledge and skills for children³; and vi) Policy on gender equality and safe school development⁴. The policies outlined the opportunities and solutions to facilitate ESD at preschool and general education establishments, such as tuition exemption and reduction, support for learning expenses for students; reducing the living condition gaps among groups of children and among children at different regions; developing ethnic minority language programs at general education levels; identifying education as an effective way to help the poor increase their access to public services, especially in health care, education, legal aid, housing and water.

Remarkably, many policies have specific provisions on stakeholders’ responsibilities in the implementation of ESD contents, stating the demand of stakeholders’ coordination to raise each party’s awareness and responsibilities in ESD activities, and simultaneously strengthen their capacity to play a role in promoting social transformation. For example, *Directive 23/2006/CT-TTg dated 12/7/2006 of the Prime Minister on increasing health care in schools* emphasizes the task of communicating and raising awareness of social responsibility for the protection, care and improvement of students’ health at preschools, general schools and other educational institutions; or *Guidance 73/HD-BGDDT-BVHTTDL dated 16/01/2013 of the Ministry of Education and Training, and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism on using cultural heritage in teaching at general schools and continuing education centers* clearly states the requirement of maintaining and promoting the cultural values and heritages of ethnic groups through education curriculums at general education institutions, in order to gradually implement ESD goals extensively in educational institutions.

1 Group i: The National Action Plan for Children at the period of 2012-2020; Decision 2123/QD-TTg of the Prime Minister approving Project on Education Development for ethnic minority groups at the period 2010-2015; Decision 85/2010/QD-TTg dated 21/12/2010 of Prime Minister issuing several policies on supporting the boarding students and ethnic boarding schools.

2 Group ii: The inter-sector guidance No. 73/HD-BGDDT-BVHTTDL dated 16/01/2013 on using cultural heritage in teaching at general schools and continuing education centers; the Project on increasing the Vietnamese for preschool and primary students at ethnic minority areas at the period of 2016-2020, towards 2025.

3 Group iii: Project on universal preschool education for 5-year-old children; Direction 23/2006/CT-TTg dated 12/7/2006 of the Prime Minister on increasing health care in schools.

4 Group iv: The 2006 Gender Equality Law; the National Strategy on Gender Equality at the period of 2011-2020; Regulation on safe school development, accident prevention at general schools.

In addition, the education and training sector has own issued a number of regulations and guidelines on teaching issues related to sustainable development such as gender equality, culture and language of ethnic minority groups,... in curricula for children and students at educational institutions, training programs for teachers at pedagogic universities and capacity building programs for education managers.

2.1.3. Environment

The ESD policy of environment, from macroscopic policies¹ to MOET and inter-ministerial policies, are structured systematically and comprehensively, covering the key requirements of environmental protection targets. In education, environmental education requirements are primarily aimed at raising awareness of the role and importance of environmental protection; to raise the essential capacity for community in carrying out activities of environmental protection and natural disaster prevention; capacity building for managers and teachers in integrating environmental issues into the teaching process. Education sector has made remarkable efforts in specifying the regulations in general policies into programs of improving knowledge, attitudes, methods and skills to integrate the contents of environmental protection in subjects as well as educational activities for teachers in preschool and general education institutions². The subjects that often integrate environmental protection contents include Literature, History, Geography, Civic Education, Physics, Biology, and Technology. In each school-year, educational management levels have developed guidelines for preschool and general education establishments to carry out activities to integrate the education contents of environmental protection, climate change control and natural disaster prevention and control - the important aspects of sustainable development.

The national policies related to ESD mentioned above also include measures to create investment resources for

education, such as mobilizing participation of communities and international organizations to educational programs on environment protection; defining responsibilities of MOET and stakeholders; the State prioritizes the training of human resources for environmental protection; increasing the training activities and raising awareness and capacity for educational managers, teachers on environment protection, climate change adaptation, natural disasters prevention and control,... Several policies clearly stated to increasing the stakeholders' capacity and responsibilities in coordinating with the education sector to implement activities of environment protection, towards Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

3. Main findings

Through reviewing and analyzing national policies related to Vietnam's ESD, it is possible to summarize the achievements and shortcomings as follows:

3.1. Achievements

The national policies and policies of the education sector cover quite broadly the main contents of ESD in the fields of culture - society, economy and environment, including core issues such as accessing to quality and equal education, gender equality, human rights, equal rights of ethnic groups, climate change adaptation and natural disasters prevention, accessing to finance, business and economics to ensure life quality,... The policies also offer solutions that contribute to improving education and communication capacity, regulating the responsibilities of ministries, sectors, agencies, local authorities, policy implementers in education and awareness raising for communities, children and students about sustainable development.

General policies have stipulated some requirements on teaching and learning of sustainable development issues such as gender equality, culture and language of ethnic minorities, financial and business education, cultural heritage education, environmental protection education,... These contents have been integrated into teacher training programs at pedagogic schools, capacity-building programs for education managers and teachers at all levels from preschools to general schools.

Many policy documents at the central level specifically regulate the responsibilities of stakeholders in the implementation of the content related to ESD and particularly emphasize the coordination among the stakeholders. Thereby it will raise the responsibilities of stakeholders in guiding and organizing ESD's activities, promoting positive changes in society.

The MOET has also issued a number of documents to guide educational management agencies, educational institutions, and other stakeholders to implement ESD, typically the Decision 2161/QD-BGDDT dated 26/6/2017 promulgating *Action Plan on implementing the Sustainable Development Goals in the field of*

1 The 2014 Environment Protection Law; the 2013 Natural Disasters Prevention and Control; National Strategy on Environment Protection until 2020, towards 2030; the 2008 National Target Program on Climate Change.

2 Decision 4068/QD-BGDDT dated 8/9/2011 of the Minister of MOET issuing the Action Plan on National Strategy of Natural Disasters prevention, control and reduction at the period of 2011-2020; Decision 5523/QD-BGDDT of the Minister of MOET dated 21/11/2014 approving the Framework of knowledge, skills and attitudes on educating Climate Change adaptation and National Disasters prevention and control at preschools, general schools and continuing education centers; Decision 2161/QD-BGDDT of the Minister of MOET dated 26/6/2017 issuing the Action Plan on implementing the Sustainable Development Goals until 2025 and orientation towards 2030. This is the concretization of the Decision 622/QD-TTg dated 10/5/2017 of the Prime Minister issuing the National Action Plan on implementing Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development; Official Document 3857/BGDDT-GDTrH dated 11/5/2009 on integrating the education contents of Environment Protection into subjects of secondary and high schools.

education and training up to 2025 and orientation to 2030. Up to now, this is the legal document collecting fully objectives, solutions, roadmaps, contents, and stakeholders' responsibilities to implement ESD.

3.2. Shortcomings

Although Vietnam has made great efforts in the domestic regularization of SDGs, including the goal of promoting ESD, the implementation of domestic policies remains challenging because of following limitations.

Most national policies only provide general direction and principles in the implementation of SDGs and ESD. Each policy refers to one or more contents of ESD.

A number of MOET's documents guiding the implementation of ESD (including the Decision 2161/QĐ-BGDĐT about the Action Plan on implementing the Sustainable Development Goals in the field of education and training up to 2025 and orientation to 2030) are general, lacking specific guidance. This restriction causes considerable difficulties for the levels of policy implementation, especially for local education authorities, managers and teachers of preschool and general education institutions. In fact, the status of local education administrators, because of an unclear understanding of implementing the policy, that sent the legal documents to subordinates instead of continuing to concretize the guidelines of the Ministry to suit to conditions and actual situations in the locality, is quite common. Consequently, the implementation of ESD's policy in many places is only formal.

Mechanisms and modes of coordination among relevant ministries and agencies, specialized agencies in implementing the national targets for sustainable development in the field of education are unclear. For example, the Joint Circular 03/2000/TTLT-BYT-BGDĐT dated 01/03/2000 of MOH and MOET guiding the implementation of school health issue, and the Joint Circular 13/2016/TTLT-BYT-BGDĐT regulating school health issue is not implemented effectively. In the field of economics, although the policies on sustainable economic growth, green growth, sustainable agriculture and rural development, etc. have mentioned the role and mission of education and communication, in the specific implementation steps, the roadmaps, the implementation assignments of each document, the participation and coordination of the education sector as well as the proposed activities and solutions for the education sector related to sustainable development are unclear. Within MOET, the specific contents and requirements for ESD are also guided by different management units of the Ministry, it makes difficulties for the local authorities to comprehend, implement and report.

Some ESD policies are not specifically responsible for stakeholders to promote educational contents in a number

of areas to form a crosscutting system¹. Responsibilities of agencies, units and levels in education sector for implementing ESD have not been clearly defined, so the implementation is hardly comprehensive and effective.

The activities related to ESD in the reviewed policy documents mainly focus on raising awareness and knowledge for preschool children and general school students without appropriate attention to behavior changes to rapid and effective changes in society².

Some basic contents of ESD and methods of integration of these contents into the subjects and education activities have been included in training and in-service training programs for teachers of preschool and general education levels. However, the guidelines are generalizable, lacking specific examples, especially the example of ESD in each subject. At the same time, the training of teachers and pedagogic students for ESD is still very theoretical and less practical, so the ESD capacity of teachers is still limited. Many teachers do not fully understand the concept of ESD as well as the content of ESD, not effectively apply the method of integration of ESD contents into subjects and educational activities that restrict the quality and effectiveness of ESD at preschool and general education establishments.

A number of reviewed policies on ESD have not yet been clearly defined in terms of funding and financial resources for implementing the policy³. This is a great barrier to put policy into practice. In addition, because the budget for implementation is limited and inappropriate to local conditions of fund raising, there are a number of policies that their realization still has a lot of barriers.

In the MOET's policies, ESD has been not considered as a priority task, there are no specific regulations on inspection, monitoring and reporting.

4. Recommendation on major solutions to improve the effectiveness of forming and implementing policy in Vietnam

Based on the results of analyzing the national policies on ESD, it is possible to provide some recommendations

1 For example, in economics, the National Strategy on green growth 2012, the Strategy on Economic - Social Development in Vietnam 2011 - 2020 regulating specially the educational objectives and contents as well as the requirements of integrating educational contents in all levels; MOET also has some guideline documents (finance education program, business education program) but these documents are still general, lacking specific documents in this field, so the implementation is hardly comprehensive and effective.

2 For example, guideline documents on finance education, business education, gender equality education,... of MOET

3 For example, the National Strategy on Gender Equality 2011 - 2020 has clear and specific regulations on implementing the Strategy with the projects on capacity building according each period, and having mechanisms of close coordination among stakeholders, but having no terms on funding for organizing activities of the Strategy.

on major solutions to improve the effectiveness of forming and implementing policy related to management levels of disciplinary and interdisciplinary from central to local level as follows:

- Completing the policy system from central to local level to ensure the integrity and uniformity of the same field and cover the full range of ESD contents.

- Strengthening tasks of direction, communication, strategic orientation, updating the contents of policies and regulations related to ESD in order to raising awareness and responsibility of management levels of the education sector and the local authorities, thereby increasing the quality of ESD in schools.

- Promulgating the framework of knowledge and skills on ESD towards ensuring the universality, uniformity as well as the relevance, connection of all stages, types and modes in the education system.

- Specifying the ESD contents that needed and be able to included in preschool and general education, identifying the ESD goals and contents from the step of designing curriculum and textbooks to the implementation through educational process.

- Demonstrating ESD goals and contents in the Guideline of Plan implementation of each school-year, and planning to mobilize resources and conditions for ensuring the feasibility and effectiveness.

- Strengthening training, in-service training and capacity building for students of pedagogic schools, preschool and general teachers on ESD contents and methods of integration of ESD, paying attention properly to changes behaviors to create rapid and effective transformation.

- Developing and implementing a mechanism of

coordination among the MOET and the provincial People's Committees and central ministries, sectors, agencies; among the MOET's units and departments, sectors, units at local level; Developing and implementing a mechanism for monitoring, reporting, and evaluating the results of ESD implementation in the education sector.

5. Conclusion

The strategic orientation for sustainable development in Vietnam underscores the importance of education. *"People are at the center of sustainable development. One of the most important tasks is to improve the education system and raise awareness of sustainable development for all citizens, communities, businesses, organizations and governmental agencies at all levels"* and *the role of education in reorienting society towards sustainability*. Vietnam's national policies for sustainable development have addressed the issues in UNESCO's SDGs, highlighting issues related to Goal 4 and the implementation of these goals in the education system from preschool to general education, introducing regulations, guidelines and solutions contributing to capacity building, defining the responsibilities of the concerned ministries, sectors, agencies, local authorities, policy implementers in education and awareness raising for the community, children and students on issues of sustainable development. At the same time, in order for policies to be effective and to create a synchronous change in the best implementation of ESD goals in the next time, it is necessary to have closer coordination among stakeholders so that the above proposed solutions are well implemented, contributing to improving the effectiveness of policy formulation and implementation in Vietnam.

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