

# WORKING WITH THE SDGs

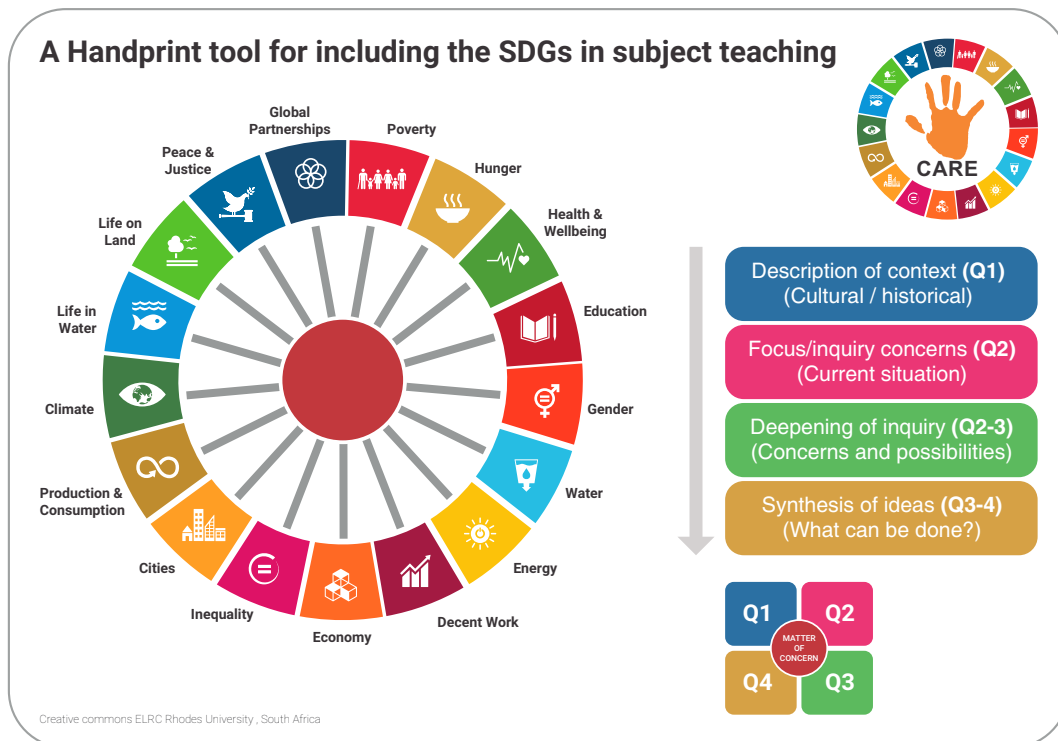
## *How can working with the SDGs enrich subject teaching?*

### Education with the SDGs

The Berlin Declaration on ESD (2020-2030) notes how: “ESD anchored in SDG 4.7 as an enabler for all 17 SDGs, is the foundation for the required transformation, providing everyone with the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to become change agents for sustainable development” (UNESCO, 2021, p. 2).

Following the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), many countries could achieve considerable increases in the enrolment of children in schools. Going beyond enrolment, we are now in the age of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). We are told that these goals were developed through the largest public participation process in history, and unlike the MDGs, foreground sustainability. Goal 4 of the SDGs focuses on education so as to create effective spaces for learning, for collaboration, for critical thinking, for fostering ethics and democracy. This goal resonates with UNESCO's Education 2030 agenda and its ESD 2030 programme. Through SDG 4 we strive for an enabling learning environment that is embedded with the values of inclusiveness, dialogue and collaboration, peaceful resolution of conflict and an ethic of care. ESD is thus key to enabling quality in education.

Education is one of the most important instruments with which to realise the SDGs. For teachers, it is important to be aware of the various facets of each SDG for developing a deeper and broader understanding of the global and local problems with their students. This implies recognising the inter-linkages and interdependencies, on a global and local level, as well as amongst the goals. To empower ourselves as teachers and students, we need to foster the necessary skills and competences.



**Figure 11: The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Wheel for Action Learning**

Handprints are envisaged as a teaching tool that engages with the SDGs and encourages learners, not only to acquire knowledge and skills, but also to find ways to act on them (refer to Chapter 2 on *Handprint Origins*).

The SDGs can become a tool for teachers to use with their students for structuring a local inquiry in order to clarify and resolve a local matter of concern. The Handprint working group has developed an SDG Wheel for Action Learning to support this process (see Figure 11). The SDGs were introduced as a global sustainability agenda of concern. They were not initially seen as goals for students to take up and to act on. But the realisation arose that the best way to work with SDGs in curriculum settings was to place the local matter of concern at the centre of the wheel, to describe the context and use questions as foci for student-led inquiry. This brought inclusivity, ethical issues and knowledge co-production to the fore as students were challenged to relate subject content to local concerns. With inquiry and deliberation, the SDGs can be used to obtain a deeper grasp of the scope of sustainability challenges.

The SDG Wheel was mainly used at the intersection of Quadrants 2 and 3, which made it useful for students to describe the concern and context with deepening insights, leading to the raising of questions to be investigated. It was also effective as a summary tool at the interface of deliberating inquiry data and contemplating change challenges to explore and try out together. It was found that the SDGs themselves were not the central concern as these were generally superseded by the goals that the collaborating students set for themselves in their small-scale change projects.

Thus the SDGs do not need to be seen by teachers or learners simply as goals to achieve, rather they can help to deepen understanding of their own local concerns, by illuminating dimensions. For example, are there issues related to gender, or water, or climate linked to a local concern with a badly eroded area in the schoolyard?

An illustration of this can be seen in the SDG Handprint Lab programme developed by CEE. This programme aims to offer a unique learning environment to youth that involves an understanding of the SDGs through relating them to issues in a local area, while using their skills and knowledge to conduct research and to carry out Handprint actions for sustainability.

The Handprint CARE pedagogy is based on stories. These stories help activate and mobilise concerns and actions as these address concepts of sustainability. The exemplars in this Handbook (see Part Two) are a good way to explain the SDGs while also helping the students to engage with them.

## **Additional Background on the Sustainable Development Goals**

During its initial years the environmental movement was focused on nature and nature conservation. The fact that environmental issues are closely connected to society and economy was given due consideration only when dialogues on sustainable development started. Linkages between the three pillars of development (economic, social and environmental) attained more clarity during the Rio+20 Conference in 2012. The UN General Assembly adopted the finalised Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, clearly stating that the goals are “integrated and indivisible and balance the **three** dimensions of **sustainable development**: the economic, social and environmental”.



Figure 12: The SDGs (UNESCO, 2020)

The 17 SDGs and 169 targets are thus concerned with natural, social and economic dimensions, and are truly global, unlike the Millennium Development Goals of 2000 which focused on the developing countries. With the SDGs, the onus of sustainable development is not limited to the developing countries but includes the developed world as well. The SDGs are fairly comprehensive, although some challenges are not reflected well and not every issue is a stand-alone goal. Nonetheless, targets do address issues as wide ranging as poverty, population growth and plastic pollution.

Sustainable Development with its three pillars is a complex system as each dimension is unique but each is also connected to the other two dimensions. The systems approach to understanding sustainable development and the SDGs is a useful way to make the connections and understand the trade-offs (Hoffmann et al., 2022).

### Concluding Insights

The SDGs are both positive societal goals and tools for the in-depth analysis of local matters of concern that are related to school subject knowledge. They can thus be used in subject teaching as tools for exploring local concerns and engaging students in higher-order thinking skills towards positive learning actions in classroom settings.

## References

Hoffmann, T., Menon, S., Morel W., Nkosi, T. and Pape, N. (2022). Ten Steps towards Systems Thinking: An Education for Sustainable Development manual for teachers, educators and facilitators. Ahmedabad: Centre for Environment Education.

UNESCO.(2020). Education for Sustainable Development – A roadmap. Paris: UNESCO.

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<https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/esdfor2030-berlin-declaration-en.pdf>