The American Journal of Interdisciplinary Innovations and Research
ISSN 2642-7478 Volume 08 - 2026

The Prospect of 'Education for Sustainable Development' in Bangladesh

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Received: 22 May 2026 | Received Revised Version: 08 June 2026 | Accepted: 23 July 2026 | Published: 07 August 2026

Volume 08 Issue 08 2026 | Crossref DOI: 10.37547/tajiir/Volume08Issue08-02

Abstract

Our lifestyle is unsustainable. The planet's resources are being depleted by humans. All species are being impacted by climate change, which is destroying ecosystems and causing previously unheard-of environmental devastation. Finding answers and building a more sustainable world requires learning. We must start living for the earth! People who get education for sustainable development are equipped with the beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge necessary to live in a way that benefits society, the economy, and the environment. It inspires people to make responsible, wise decisions that contribute to a brighter future for everybody. The ESD for 2030 program of UNESCO will be covered in the paper, along with how it is bringing changes in a few developing nations. The purpose of this article is to ascertain the chances for ESD in Bangladeshi high school and university education. It will assist researchers and stakeholders in taking the required actions to create an ESD curriculum that works for Bangladeshi high schools and universities. The possibilities of ESD in Bangladesh will be briefly surveyed. Students in high school and college are the target demographic.

Keywords: ESD, global advocacy, global partnership, action research, green education, SDG 4, Bangladesh education sector, quality education, educational equity, sustainable development

Cite This Article: Akhter Lina, N. (2026). The Prospect of 'Education for Sustainable Development' in Bangladesh. The American Journal of Interdisciplinary Innovations and Research, 8(08), 17–23. https://doi.org/10.37547/tajiir/Volume08Issue08-02

1. Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a central driver of sustainable development, poverty reduction, and economic growth. ESD empowers learners of all ages with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes to address interconnected global challenges, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and inequality. Among UNESCO's Sustainable Development goals (SGD's), particularly SGD4 promotes critical thinking and transformation action for environmental integrity, economic viability and society. The United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, with SDG 4 focusing specifically on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations, 2015). UNESCO's ESD for 2030 framework aims to scale up actions to transform education and society. It prepares individuals to act for the well-being of the planet and its people. ESD is essential for empowering people to become agents of change for a more sustainable world. Bangladesh as a developing country can integrate sustainability into education system. It can be aligned with national priorities regarding educational quality and civic education. Monitoring teams can observe how schools and universities are incorporating sustainability into their practices. Tools can be designed to access and strengthen ESD. If students are committed to come for the environment and share at home what they learn in class, they can become the agent of change It will make us aware of how our own actions can impact the environment around us. For Bangladesh, a lower-middle-income country that has experienced steady economic growth over the last two decades, achieving SDG 4 is

both a developmental necessity and a strategic national priority. Bangladesh has made notable progress in expanding educational access, especially at the primary level. However, ensuring quality, reducing disparities, and strengthening institutional effectiveness remain critical challenges. This paper explores Bangladesh's progress toward SDG 4, reviews existing academic and policy literature, and identifies key gaps that must be addressed to meet the 2030 targets.

Literature Review

Scholarly and institutional literature on Bangladesh's education sector highlights both impressive achievements and persistent structural challenges.

According to the United Nations (2015), SDG 4 emphasizes not only universal access but also quality learning outcomes, equity, and lifelong learning. This broader framework shifts the focus from mere enrollment expansion to measurable competencies and inclusive systems. The UNESCO (2022) argues that developing countries, including Bangladesh, face significant challenges in aligning national education systems with SDG indicators, particularly in assessing learning outcomes and ensuring equitable participation.

The Government of Bangladesh's SDG Progress Report (General Economics Division [GED], 2020) indicates that Bangladesh has achieved near-universal primary enrollment and gender parity at both primary and secondary levels. However, the report acknowledges shortcomings in quality assurance, teacher training, and infrastructure development. Public expenditure on education remains below international benchmarks, limiting systemic reform.

Research by BRAC (2023) highlights the impact of non-formal education initiatives in reaching marginalized communities, especially children from low-income families and rural areas. BRAC's interventions demonstrate that community-based and flexible learning models can significantly improve access and retention.

Academic studies have also examined the issue of learning outcomes. The World Bank (2018) reports that although enrollment rates are high, many students in Bangladesh struggle with foundational literacy and numeracy skills. This "learning crisis" reflects deficiencies in teacher preparedness, curriculum design, and assessment systems.

Furthermore, Alam (2020) argues that Bangladesh's rapid expansion of education has outpaced improvements in quality control mechanisms. He notes that disparities between urban and rural schools remain pronounced, particularly in access to trained teachers and digital learning resources.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also been widely discussed in recent literature. According to UNICEF (2021), prolonged school closures in Bangladesh led to substantial learning losses and increased dropout risks, particularly among disadvantaged groups. The pandemic exposed the country's digital divide and weaknesses in remote learning infrastructure.

Overall, the literature suggests that Bangladesh's progress toward SDG 4 is substantial in quantitative terms but constrained by qualitative and structural limitations. There is consensus among scholars and policy analysts that systemic reform, increased financing, and targeted interventions are essential for achieving sustainable educational development.

Objectives

1.To make young people of Bangladesh familiar with the idea of ESD.

2. To find out the prospects of ESD in schools and tertiary level education.

3. To find out necessary measures to be taken to make effective ESD curriculum for schools and tertiary level education.

Methodology

1.The study provided a questionnaire to the participants through email and has collected data from the responses.

2.It has used secondary data to review the purpose and output of ESD.

UNESCO's ESD program for 2030

Education Sustainable Development (ESD) is the strategic answer to the new challenges faced by UNESCO regarding our planet. ESD 2030 creates and disseminates knowledge, policy advice and technical support to Member States and undertakes at ground level pilots. It fosters learning amongst peers and creates improvement through the flow of information, building of networks and establishment of relationships. It is in this institutional context that UNESCO is the management of the Secretariat of the Greening Education Partnership, a tool that aims at augmenting national

capacities to provide high-quality climate-changing education and to make every aspect of learning green. ESD 2030 program, launched in 2020, is still producing and disseminating knowledge, giving policy advice, offering technical support to nations, and realizing ground dynamics.

ESD 2030 program prepared by UNESCO fosters peer learning and innovation by disseminating information, creating networks, or partnerships. The ESD for 2030 Framework and Roadmap drive the initiatives of UNESCO in education towards sustainable development. The Framework captures the action in five main areas namely policy, learning environments, educators, youths and communities. To facilitate these efforts on the national, regional, and global scales, the ESD for 2030 Global Network (ESD-Net 2030) was established in October 2022 to facilitate synergy and cross-sectoral cooperation.

Sustainable Development Goals

Achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals is based on concerted jurisdiction as well as the mutual participation of the global community. An ESD-Net 2030 was opened accordingly to create synergy and cross-sectoral cooperation to support the implementation of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in 2030 nationally, regionally, and globally.

The Network is a world community of practice and a laboratory of action, offering the prospect of discourse and collaboration among authorities of education and professionals, youth, and researchers, and other stakeholders through activities orchestrated around the following objectives:

• Practices that promise, sharing of knowledge, and learning.

• International lobbying and policymaking.

• Team building and teamwork.

• Monitoring and evaluation

Enhancing practice for ESD for 2030 through action research

The present project uses action research to enable educators and institutions all over the world in their endeavor to promote sustainable development by their educational efforts. The program promotes new teaching styles and deals with the local issues successfully by incorporating sustainability concepts into educational frameworks with the help of practical instruments and capacity building. By working together, teachers are engineering a radical change to a sustainable future that is in line with the 2030 Agenda.

Action research is a methodological choice, which allows an educator and an institution to react to problems at the local level, empirically test any solutions in practice, and create new knowledge by doing. It does the theory to practice gap, consequently promoting professional growth, critical reflection, and capacity building in the long term. Through this process, teachers become action agents who change teaching, learning and communities in which they live.

The project helps teachers and learning institutions improve ESD teaching and practice through action research using guidance tools that have recently been developed. It is implemented together with 35 ASPnet schools, four institutions of higher education, and in ten countries -Brazil, Costa Rica, Côte d'Ivoire, Cuba, Germany, Japan, Kenya, Malaysia, Romania, and Slovenia. This undertaking is based on the fieldwork and local activities of UNESCO Associated Schools Network (ASPnet) and UNESCO Chairs, and thus contextualized and pioneering practices in ESD.

Action research is already being used by educators, leaders, and learners across the globe in order to promote sustainable development in education. Their stories shed some light on how creative, problematic, and effective implementing sustainability in real-life learning is. Some of the objectives of the project include building stronger teacher potentials, building of case studies, and gradual incorporation of education on sustainable development into the curricular, methodological, and assessment frameworks. All these targets are in line with ESD Roadmap 2030 and the 2023 Recommendation by UNESCO on Education in Peace, Human rights, and Sustainable Development.

On the one hand, with its Transforming futures: Enhancing practice to ESD in 2030, a groundbreaking action-research program, UNESCO gathers teachers, administrators, and researchers in ten countries to put sustainability at the heart of day-to-day pedagogical activity.

Through workshops, visits to the institutions and group planning, the schools concerned are introducing pilot instruments that systematically embed Education for

Sustainable Development into all the aspects of the scholastic life and that facilitates the process of instructional approaches, governance system and community participation.

These tools will be available in 2026 and will serve the purpose of influencing national education policy and developing the world towards Sustainable Development Goal 4: quality education to all.

Local actions, global impact

Individual country activities on the local needs were launched between the years, March and June 2025:

In Latin America and the Caribbean, Brazil, Costa Rica and Cuba used a selection of schools as representatives of different territories as well as schools of models. I think that ESD work is necessary to the realization of SDG 4, but again it was J. Micans Carbo of Escuela Federico Engels in Cuba who said that. And it is a privilege to add our knowledge in testing these tools and thus add to the ballpoint enriching the results of the project.

In Europe, Germany, Romania, and Slovenia, there were workshops conducted nationally in order to coordinate ESD activities with the new tools. Sustainable education, according to Professor Mihaela Groza (Romania), is not only about what is in the curriculum, but also the transformation of culture, governance, evaluation, as well as the participation by the students.

In Africa, in Kenya, identified schools developed action plans that included the community, and Cote d Ivoire concentrated on the training and incorporation of ESD in the schools' priorities.

In both Asia and Pacific, Japan and Malaysia participated in peer education and specialist-led debates to reinforce their attitude toward sustainability education.

The action research UNESCO on ESD has been involved in by uniting the schools, researchers, and teachers of different countries, is assisting to determine viable strategies that could be used to inculcate sustainability to the education systems. As these local initiatives are supported by UNESCO, they can join a global movement such as one that provides learners with the knowledge, skills and values they require to build a more just and sustainable future.

In the fight to establish a more climate-resilient and sustainable education sector, Malawi has initiated the integration of climate-change learning into the national curriculum and teacher training programmes, which further enhances the country in achieving an improved education sector. This is being developed with the assistance of the UNESCO, in close consulting association with the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education and the Ministry of Higher Education of Malawi.

Aya, aged ten years, takes pride in watering her vegetable garden made together with her classmates in a Marrakesh primary school in the sunlit courtyard. An example of environmental education influence of such habits outside classroom includes practicing how to conserve water and sort our waste at home, as she did with her parents, which is a perfect example in how environmental education informs behavior. Children in Morocco are turning to be eco -citizens through projects like the Eco -Schools and are bringing sustainable change in their families and communities. Awareness is also created by students with the help of the Young Reporters for the Environment (YRE) program, when students, with the help of media highlight environmental issues in the area.

The culture of sustainability is finding its way to root in the Overseas School of Colombo in Sri Lanka, a country with a tropical climate which harbors a variety of plants and animals and helps in changing the society. The school is also transforming the nature of the interaction among the young learners with nature, community, and individual education through the innovative Food Forest Initiative. Another thing that attracted attention is the Food Forest of the school, which has a multi-layered canopy appearance imitating the forest ecosystems. The mango trees form an upper canopy that supports the growth of mid-level crops like papaya, banana and cinnamon, as well as edible vines growing on trellis.

The Greening Education Partnership

The Greening Education Partnership (GEP) is an integrated program at the international level, which has a whole-of-system approach to helping countries address climate crisis through the central need of education. Being an integrative platform between governments and other stakeholders, including inter-governmental bodies, civil society, youth, academia, and the private sector, GEP tries to provide strong, coordinated and far-reaching action steps that will equip every learner with knowledge, competencies, values, and dispositions required to meet climate change and foster sustainable development.

Progress Toward SDG 4 in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has achieved remarkable progress in increasing access to education. Primary school net enrollment rates exceed 97 percent (GED, 2020). Secondary enrollment has also improved significantly, supported by stipend programs, particularly for girls. Gender parity has been largely achieved at the primary and secondary levels.

The introduction of free textbooks, school feeding programs, and financial incentives has contributed to improved retention and reduced dropout rates. Technical and vocational education programs have also expanded, aiming to equip youth with employable skills.

Gender Equity

One of Bangladesh's most notable achievements is closing the gender gap in education. Female enrollment at the secondary level now matches or exceeds that of males. This progress reflects targeted policy measures such as female stipend programs and awareness campaigns to reduce early marriage.

Persistent Challenges

Quality of Education:

Despite high enrollment, learning outcomes remain weak. Many students fail to meet grade-level competencies in reading and mathematics. Large class sizes, limited teaching materials, and insufficient teacher training undermine educational quality.

Teacher shortages remain a critical issue. In rural areas, schools often lack qualified teachers in science, mathematics, and English. Continuous professional development programs are limited in scope and effectiveness.

Inequality and Marginalization:

While national averages show improvement, disparities persist among rural populations, ethnic minorities, children with disabilities, and urban slum dwellers. Infrastructure deficits, such as inadequate sanitation facilities, particularly affect girls' attendance and retention.

Financing Constraints:

Public expenditure on education in Bangladesh remains around 2 percent of GDP, below the recommended international standard of 4–6 percent (GED, 2020). Limited financial allocation restricts infrastructure development, teacher recruitment, and technological investment.

Governance and Institutional Gaps:

Policy inconsistency and fragmented implementation mechanisms weaken long-term reform efforts. Monitoring and evaluation systems are insufficiently robust to track learning outcomes effectively.

Impact of COVID-19:

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted Bangladesh's education system. Schools remained closed for extended periods, affecting millions of students. Remote learning initiatives, including televised lessons and online classes, were introduced; however, limited internet access and technological resources created unequal learning opportunities.

Learning loss has become a major concern, with increased risks of dropout and early marriage among vulnerable populations. Recovery strategies are still in development and require substantial investment and innovation.

Survey Interpretation

To find out what school and university students know about ESD, a brief survey was carried out. Forty people responded to the poll after it was given via email. Students between the ages of 13 and 26 who replied were 50% male and 50% female. Of them, 57.5% attend school and 42.5% attend universities. Although just 40% of respondents claimed to be familiar with ESD and its programs, 77.5% felt that it ought to be included in their courses and curriculum. For a better future and a greener environment, 85% of people believe that we should form partnerships with EDS-practicing nations. Since climate change is becoming worse every day, 95% of people think it is a major problem. 75% of respondents think ESD will make the environment more environmentally friendly. The current situation of our environment worries our students, who claim that global warming poses a serious threat to humankind. The majority of participants think that Bangladesh's largest environmental problem is air pollution. Inappropriate waste disposal, climate change, drought, earthquakes, floods, fuel crises, water pollution, increasing sea levels, rising temperatures, ozone layer depletion, and sewage blockages are among the other problems cited.

Recommendations

1. Educate students on ESD through workshops and seminars.
2. Incorporate ESD into university, college, and school curricula.
3. Modify reform initiatives to ensure ESD.
4. To support ESD, increase money for education.
5. Strengthen professional development for teachers.
6. Make learning assessments that are in line with SDG indicators stronger.
7. Put into practice effective working models.
8. Promote targeted programs for marginalized communities, including children with disabilities and ethnic minorities, are essential.
9. Expand digital infrastructure.
10. Combine expertise to build high quality and successful education programme.
11. Develop realistic strategies to promote ESD.
12. Create partnerships with ESD practicing countries.
13. Stimulate debate and public participation to initiate ESD actions.
14. Value and give due recognition to important contributions to enhance ESD actions.

Abbreviations

1. UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

2. ESD – Education for Sustainable Development

3. SDG 4 – Sustainable Development Goal 4

4. BRAC – Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee

5. UNICEF – United Nations Children's Fund

6. ESD Net 2030 – A Global UNESCO Network

7. ASP Net – Associated Schools Network

8. YRE – Young Reporters for the Environment

9. GED – General Educational Development

Limitation of the study

Each research has its limitations. I cannot reach the full population of this study due to the time limitations. It would be good if I could reach more participants. Therefore, the limitation of this paper is it covers limited population.

Privacy of the participants

The privacy of the participants is highly respected by the researcher.

Conclusion

Bangladesh has achieved gender parity and increased educational access because of focused measures and strong political commitment. However, a change from quantitative expansion to qualitative transformation is needed to achieve SDG 4 by 2030. Systemic reform and ongoing investment are necessary to solve enduring issues with learning outcomes, funding, governance, and fairness. By incorporating ESD into our school, college, and university curricula and courses, Bangladesh can ensure sustainable human capital development and better align its education sector with SDG 4 objectives by improving accountability mechanisms and strengthening teacher capacity. We anticipate that sustainable education in Bangladesh will give students (and their teachers) the chance to incorporate cross-curricular topics including environmental education, economic and industrial understanding, health education, and personal and social education. In order to fully realize this promise, practitioner-based life skills education and training for a variety of professions would be integrated with environmental education and development education to provide a comprehensive and practical education for sustainable development. This combination entails a locally derived empowering process and is not only a content issue but also an ideology and epistemological undertaking.

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