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# Environment and Human Rights in Curriculum: Towards a Strong and Uniform Education Policy in South Asia



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# Environment and Human Rights in Curriculum: Towards a Strong and Uniform Education Policy in South Asia

Visalaakshi Annamalai

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy paper aims to summarise the existing education policy with respect to the environment and human rights in the countries in South Asia as well as address gaps and challenges. While there is an emphasis on human rights education, its link to the environment and climate change is largely overlooked in curricula. It is, therefore, necessary to actively amend the education policy to include human rights and environment-centric courses that enable the youth to play an informed role in immediate and future policy making in the region. In conclusion, this paper will provide policy recommendations to governments in the region on the actions that can be adopted going forward in strengthening aspects of human rights and environment-linked education. It will strongly emphasise the need for the governments to educate the youth on these fronts with the consideration that most of the politicians and bureaucrats in the region are not very well versed in these subjects. This gap is likely owing to past education policies and education itself as a right that is still being realised. The policy brief advocates for a comprehensive and uniform national education policy on human rights, climate change and the environment in the region that will include the experiences from the region in battling climate change and protecting the environment to empower the youth in future decision making.

## INTRODUCTION

The right to access inclusive, equitable and quality education is still being realised owing to several barriers and challenges across South Asia. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates that there are around 11.3 million children at the primary level and 20.6 million children at the lower secondary level out of school (UNICEF 2018). The region also harbours 20 per cent of the world's population and is prone to flooding, landslides, earthquakes, and droughts. This is where the connection between human rights, climate change, the environment and education come to play. Climate change drastically affects the quality and availability of basic human rights such as the rights to water, air, and other basic needs dependent on nature. So, unless we are educated about climate change, the environment and consequently its effects on some basic rights, we will not know what to protect and why to protect. It is therefore necessary to highlight this interface between climate change, the environment, and human rights in school curriculum to foster a sense of belonging to the environment that we intend to protect to protect our own.

The right to education is a human right that enables the realisation of all other rights and helps in making informed decisions (United Nations Human Rights Council 2011; *Brown v Board of Education* 1954). At a juncture where the right to education is still being realised as a progressive right, the incorporation of right information in the curriculum is necessary to enable the child to grow into a full-fledged citizen capable of exercising the rights guaranteed. Education is highlighted as a key component in combating climate change by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations education body. Taking climate change, the environment and human rights content into education helps the youth understand the problems, effects, and possible solutions. Education is and will continue to serve as an essential element of the global response to climate change and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The importance of education is also well recognised in Goal 4 and

it is essential that education policies are aligned to national commitments towards contributing to the 2030 Development Agenda and the Paris Agreement (2015) to set a course for sustainable development. With the advancement in access to schools in some South Asian countries, the focus has also visibly shifted to quality improvements rather than just access to basic education (Kyoto University 2012). The world is witnessing the youth calling for governments and other stakeholders to take action to tackle climate change. Countries such as Italy and New Zealand have introduced climate change curriculum in schools. Italy was the first country to make climate change education compulsory in schools. Reuters reported that many students taking part in the global climate movements stated that their schools have failed them (Elks 2020). The report also emphasises the opinions of different stakeholders including representatives from organisations such as the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR). The opinions and other contexts highlighted the need to teach climate issues and pointed to the fact that teachers often did not have sufficient knowledge of climate change. To address this gap, organisations like UNITAR, UNICEF and UNESCO are offering package courses for teachers and schools.

## CLIMATE CHANGE VULNERABILITIES IN THE SOUTH ASIAN ASSOCIATION FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION REGION

Countries in the south of Asia are at ground zero of climate change. Bangladesh is one of the countries that will be highly affected by climate change in the coming years. Nepal is another country in the region that is drastically affected by climate change. Almost half of the Indian population lives in places that are likely to become moderate or severe climate hotspots by 2050 according to a World Bank study. Afghanistan remains affected by war and conflict with no or low prospects for peace. Climate change is said to further complicate future prospects of peace fuelling natural disasters, mass displacement and conflict (Jones 2020). Bhutan is a small landlocked country in the fragile Eastern

Himalayan ecosystem and climate change is a serious challenge to sustainable development. Sri Lanka is a developing island nation in the Indian Ocean and the impacts of climate change are highly visible and weigh heavily on the policymakers. Pakistan lies in one of the most vulnerable regions in the world in the context of climate change and global warming. Maldives is experiencing effects of climate change in the region as the islands are predominantly coastal entities which are amongst the most vulnerable in the world. Being at ground zero of climate change, this region is in need of a generation that will be more aware of climate change and its implications to combat it with strong and effective policy and measures. Education, in many ways, can help mould and equip the growing generation towards achieving this target.

Knowledge regarding the environment, climate change and their link to human rights helps young people understand different phenomena like global warming and will prepare them to tackle effects of it while also enabling them to adapt to what is already becoming a global emergency. Educating children along these lines enables informed decision making and plays an essential role in several adaptation processes including increasing mitigation capacities of communities and adoption of sustainable lifestyles. Therefore, education is the instrument that will help shape a climate responsive generation.

## ENVIRONMENT EDUCATION AND POLICIES IN THE SOUTH ASIAN ASSOCIATION FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION REGION

The South Asian region is home to eight countries that have formed a regional bloc, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and it is important to note the response of the regional organisation to climate change. The Dhaka Declaration on Climate Change and the SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change were adopted by SAARC countries in 2008. In particular, the Action Plan aimed to provide a basis for a regional framework for climate change through national plans. One thematic area of the Action Plan was education and awareness among

other things. In 2010, the Thimphu Statement on Climate Change called for a review of the first two instruments adopted in 2008. Thapa (2013) assesses the progress made by the SAARC countries following the Thimphu Statement in 2010. The assessment found that the Thimphu Statement, despite having the potential and serving as a foundation to a regional response to climate change, was not enforced at the national level owing to the fact that implementation is driven through national policies and actions. The initiatives of disaster risk reduction and climate change action are more along the lines of relief and rehabilitation rather than prevention and protection under which education will mainly fall. This section will briefly visit the existing educational policies in the eight SAARC countries in relation to human rights, the environment and climate change and highlight some available notable research on the policies, their implementation and identified gaps and barriers in the region.

*Afghanistan*, in recent times, has seen the active involvement of Afghan youth in climate change. For example, in September 2019, they took to the streets to fight against global warming. They emphasised that if war does not kill them, climate change would (Jones 2020). Afghanistan has made immense progress in education since the fall of the Taliban. Nevertheless, instability in the country continues to keep schools closed or children out of schools. Currently, the country is following its third National Education Strategic Plan and focuses on quality, access and effective management of education. The country also has several other frameworks to achieve quality education across the country but lacks a specific uniform curriculum at the national level with respect to the environment, human rights and climate change.

*Bangladesh* has notified its Education Sector Plan (ESP) for fiscal years 2020/21 – 2024/25 and has also moved to reform the National Education Policy of 2010. The ESP emphasises effective response plans in cases of unusual situations such as climate change and the pandemic including disaster and emergency response in education. It focuses primarily on preparing teachers to engage in support and remediation for children in schools in the post-COVID-19

context, implications of climate change and other emergencies. The ESP relies on Das (2010) and notes that inadequate climate-responsive curricula and deficient awareness and training of persons exist. The SDG 4 Strategic Framework for Bangladesh also emphasises sensitising children about climate change. While the ESP indicates that progress in curricular reform was assessed, specific changes and outcomes of the assessments are yet to be known. The 2010 policy also notes the need to build students as skilled human resources to fight challenges of climate change and other emergencies and to create social awareness about the environment. Research in 2014 has found that the school textbooks on the environment were not only ill-organised, but also lacked integrity for logical progression. It also found that there was ample scope to include emerging issues such as climate change and human adaptation while recommending a complete revision of the textbooks (Chowdhury 2014). A 2011 research also identified that there was no formal network particularly focused on climate change education or the environment and sustainable development (ESD) and recognised that article 10(e) of the Kyoto Protocol (1997) and article 6 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (1992) (both these articles call upon governments to address climate change education, training and public awareness) have not received deserved attention at the national level (Masum Hasan 2011).

Education receives utmost importance in *Bhutan* and is seen as a means to achieve Gross National Happiness (GNH) (UNESCO & IBE 2011; Drakpa & Haridev Singh 2018). The progress that has resulted from this initiative included the adoption of 'Green School for Green Bhutan' and the values of environmental care and protection inducted into the school curriculum. The initiative prepared children to conserve the natural environment and resources (Drakpa & Haridev Singh 2018). Unfortunately, there is limited literature on the impact of these initiatives and reforms in Bhutan. What is available suggests that these initiatives have indeed brought changes to the domain (Sapam, Singh & Ratna 2019). Bhutan's draft education policy of 2019 reiterates policy on schools to promote

and teach environmental education in schooling (Royal Government of Bhutan 2019).

*India* unveiled its new education policy in 2020. It has given importance to innovative curricula including environmental and climate change for all higher education institutions. The policy suggests curricular integration of essential subjects, skills and capacities including environmental awareness at the school level (Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India 2020). The Global Environmental Education Partnership and the Centre for Environment Education (GEEP n.d.) conducted a study on compulsory environmental education in India. Following a Supreme Court decision in 1991, (MC Mehta's case) the National Council for Education Research and Training consulted with states and union territories across the country to adopt a compulsory environmental education framework in schools. The outcomes of the research indicated positive improvements and increased awareness among the stakeholders about the prioritisation of environmental education. However, it was observed that students still had inadequate exposure to the subject. It was recommended that the approach needed to accommodate localised needs and limitations (Joshi 2019). While climate change is a part of the Central Board of Secondary Education's curriculum, the emphasis and level of engagement vary from school to school and are even different for schools in other state boards (Joshi 2019).

The Yale Project on Climate Change Communication found that almost 65 per cent of Indian adults were not aware of climate change (Leiserowitz, Thaker, Feinberg & Cooper 2016). Licypriya Kangujam, a young climate activist in India, has been protesting regularly in front of the parliament demanding stricter laws to battle climate change and compulsory climate education in schools (Sudevan 2020). India has also been investing in education for adaptation of climate change since the early 21st century like many other countries in South Asia. However, structured courses in formal education are still not uniform and available across the length and breadth of the country.

*Maldives* views environmental education as crucial for sustainable development, and unlike

many other countries, environmental education is mandatory in primary schools (Shareef 2016). However, this does not carry on to the secondary levels unless they specialise in relevant subjects. The research also sheds light on the absence of literature in the evaluation of environment education in the country (Shareef 2016).

A study was conducted in 2019 on climate change education and the perception of school children in Nepal (Adhikari 2019: 91). The status of environmental education in Nepal was first reviewed by the National Conservation Strategy Implementation Project in 1990. Environmental education for primary schools was initiated based on this review. Since 2009, courses on environmental issues have also been integrated into secondary schools (Adhikari 2019). The survey results from the study revealed that students had acquired basic knowledge on disaster risk reduction and sustainable development, however, the basics of climate change were not clearly addressed in the syllabus. Some students opined that it was necessary to incorporate the environment into the curriculum through focused contextual examples. In 2018, the government in collaboration with Wildlife Conservation Nepal had integrated the Green School Program emphasising inducting local conservation and environment issues into the national curriculum (Sijapati 2020). Several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are involved in a nationwide campaign to make Nepal's schools into catalysts for nature conservation and sustainable living. However, this advancement does not involve government enforcement in all schools across the country uniformly. Nepal's new education policy (2019) and School Sector Development Plan 2016/17 – 2022-23 are not very clear on human rights linked climate education, and therefore need to be revisited.

*Pakistan's* National Education Policy (2010) emphasises the integration of environmental education into all levels of curricula and syllabi from primary to university levels. A study in 2015 has identified that the existing secondary curriculum has very limited content on environmental studies (Masih 2015). The research calls for environmental education at the secondary school levels to incorporate relevant issues. Another

research in 2019 studied curriculum in relation to ESD. The findings suggested that the primary curriculum embraces most ideas relating to ESD without mentioning the terms. It concludes that little attention was given to environmental concerns and understandings in relation to current times and lacked a global perspective. The analysis noted that teachers needed enhanced training on the subject. Like in other countries in the region, NGOs have made advancements in the education sector to fill gaps in government policies. The findings called for reformation in the national education policy (Khanum 2019).

*Sri Lanka* has been engaged in adaptation plans and several other measures responding to the impacts of climate change. The Proposals for a National Policy on General Education in Sri Lanka builds on the educational resources at present to advance towards a vision of a prosperous Sri Lanka (National Education Commission 2016). It acknowledges that curriculum development is a continuous process amenable to changes in knowledge, demands from society, global influences, social and political imperatives and environmental impacts. It also calls for revisions in the education laws to include extra-curricular activities in schools in at least two of the listed subjects – among which environmental conservation features. Basic concepts of the environment are included in the school curriculum. The 'School Pioneering Program' is an initiative that aims to create awareness among students about the environment and associated issues (Dharmasiri 2019). The country also has several other initiatives under the Central Environment Authority, and in collaboration with international NGOs (INGOs) and NGOs. However, there seems to be not much literature on the current impact of these policies on the population, despite the country having one of the highest literacy rates in the region.

In essence, most of the countries in the region lack a uniform and comprehensive national curriculum in schools on the link between human rights, the environment and climate change. While there exists some form of policy, there also exists visible absence of clarity in these subjects. It was also seen that some countries, despite having good policies in place, have not studied their success or reach in practice. In short, there

seems to be a problem with the content of the policy and its subsequent implementation.

## PROPOSED POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The SAARC has taken the initiative to emerge as a leader in responding to climate change. Countries have committed to a shared set of goals and priorities in combating climate change including imparting awareness and education. While the commitment has been vocal, efforts to implement and monitor them remain scarce. Despite a number of declarations, many policies are not ratified or operational at the national levels (Krampe & Swain 2018). SAARC countries must attempt to transcend political winds and implement the frameworks of SAARC at national level to advance human rights linked climate change education in schools to prepare the next generation to protect the environment and combat effects of climate change effectively.
- SAARC should also move from emphasising national and local implementation of policies towards the regional approach to enhance climate resilience in the region, considering climate change induced migration is on the rise in the region.
- Monitoring the implementation of existing policies must be strengthened and re-evaluated. Countries can borrow best practices from each other to attain best results.
- Inclusion of all other related stakeholders in environmental decision making must be adopted at both national and SAARC levels.
- At national level, policy must be revised to include uniform, comprehensive courses on human rights linked environment and climate studies in curriculum.
- Curriculum should be deliberated through a separate SAARC expert panel to suit the needs of children in the region and to incorporate region specific information in textbooks. There should be a conscious push towards a uniform climate change and human rights education in the region as a whole, to prepare future generations to combat climate change effects.
- Teachers must be trained in educating

children on human rights, climate change and the environment. Active trainings must be conducted to make teachers informed and capable of imparting effective education.

- Efforts should be taken to review existing best practices and study its impact on the target population for future adoption by other countries and regional establishments. This will also pave way for evidence-based policy making.
- Active collaborations with INGOs and NGOs involved in the environment, human rights and climate change education will also lead to spreading awareness among the population and stress on the importance of climate education.
- The content of the revised policy must be brought to the attention of a common person through active campaigns, workshops, and other activities across the region.

## CONCLUSION

The Global Education Monitoring Report (2015) calls education the lynchpin of a sustainable development agenda whose success relies on individuals acquiring the right knowledge and attitudes to address global challenges such as climate change. UNESCO's policy brief on Education for Sustainable Development and SDGs (UNESCO 2018) recommends educational transformation through curricula and enhanced capacities for involved stakeholders including curricula developers, teachers, policymakers and school administrators.

Educating youth in climate change, the environment and human rights will enable them to better understand and adapt to changes in their natural surroundings. Such education and training will also help them informed, qualified and equipped for green jobs in a green economy in the future. As mentioned earlier, there are efforts and initiatives taken by several international organisations and NGOs, however, what is missing, in essence, is the insufficiency of penetration of climate education nationally as well as regionally. This comes to light when progress is reviewed at international events (like the 7th Dialogue on Action for Climate Empowerment 2019) or other independent research. Reid



details the reasons for this insufficiency. First, climate education remains far from being a requirement for core educational professionals or institutions (Reid 2019). Second, a vast majority of educators are not required to engage in professional preparation or learning related to climate change and empowerment (Reid 2019; UNESCO 2019; Benavot et al. 2019).

School is a compulsory part of everyday life, particularly for children. It is one of those institutions that mould us to take on life and its challenges in the future. As much as mathematics is important to study in school, so is climate change. These children are the future of the world, and they need to be well informed and equipped to face emergencies like climate change and adapt to keep the world a better place to live in. Environment, climate change and human rights need to be gradually inducted into curricula in school, building a foundation as the child grows into an adult. To achieve this, the teachers must be well prepared to shoulder this responsibility of teaching climate change and the environment in schools. There are several resources, materials and courses that are available, and what is required is a positive force from governments to enforce such uniform curricula at the national level.

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## Global Campus of Human Rights

The Global Campus of Human Rights is a unique network of more than one hundred participating universities around the world, seeking to advance human rights and democracy through regional and global cooperation for education and research. This global network is promoted through seven Regional Programmes which are based in Venice for Europe, in Sarajevo/Bologna for South East Europe, in Yerevan for the Caucasus, in Pretoria for Africa, in Bangkok for Asia-Pacific, in Buenos Aires for Latin America and the Caribbean, and in Beirut for the Arab World.

## The Global Campus Policy Observatory

The Observatory is a 'virtual hub' which comprehends a team of seven researches from the regional programmes to produce, publish and publicly present seven different policy analyses in form of policy briefs, with the aim of making of each regional programme a solid focal point for policy expert advisory in human rights issues.

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