Opinion



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Middle East's youth face grim future if education fails to act

Education, sustainability and climate change are intrinsically linked



When I reflect on the progress made in 2022 for climate education — a year in which the United Nations Climate Change Conference, COP27, came to the region — there remains an urgent and worrying disparity between dialogue and consequential binding action.

From my vantage point as both an executive leader for climate change and a school principal — a dual role that takes me across the world to observe the progress being made in education and climate — any consistency in action is missing entirely. Without a consistent and coordinated approach among education, policy, and related stakeholders, progress will remain hamstrung at a time when decisive strides forward are imperative.

Few understand this better than the United Nations. In Glasgow in 2021, COP26 focused on the interconnectedness of education and sustainability more so than any COP event in history. The conference played host to a first of its kind summit, Together for Tomorrow: Education and Climate Action, which brought together ministers and youths to discuss commitments to education and climate action.

COP27, while not explicitly centred around climate education, continued to press the need to prepare learners to tackle the world's climate crises. Here, UNESCO called on stakeholders to commit to the organisation's Greening Education Partnership, which urges countries to develop learners with the skills necessary to eventually deliver sustainable economic development.

Furthermore, Dubai Cares — the civil society organisation connected to the United Nations Department of Global Communications — joined COP27 to champion its Rewiring Education for People and Planet report. The literature calls for cross-sector collaboration and a whole-of-society approach to leverage education towards achieving the UN's sustainable development goals. And herein lies the root of the problem.

Dialogue is found in abundance, but too often, that's where it ends. Education International's Climate Change Education Ambition Report Card, which assesses the success of nations towards quality climate education, makes for grim reading — especially for our region. The report found that climate change education ambition in MENA is poor, falling far below global ambition.

Specifically, in their Nationally Determined Contributions — a core submission each country makes toward the Paris Agreement — just five MENA nations made any reference to climate change education — Georgia, Jordan, Mauritania, Tunisia, and Qatar. On the extent of policy integration of climate change education, none of these five countries is urging for compulsory climate education in schools.

This lack of ambition is cause for real concern when we consider the context facing young people today. UNICEF's Children's Climate Risk Index found that for four countries in MENA, the risk of climate change to children was ranked as 'high' to 'very high'. This means that around 120 million children and youths in the region face this urgent level of risk. Additionally, a Malala Fund report found that if current trends aren't addressed, by 2025, climate change could prevent more than 12 million girls from completing their education every year. The time for action was yesterday.

2023 marks a new year in which to address lingering challenges. Here are three areas of discussion that must urgently become reality if education is to be activated against climate change.

Embedding climate literacy across the curricula

Underscoring the importance of Dubai Cares' action-oriented narrative at COP27, recent UNESCO findings on education and climate change showed that approximately half of the countries assessed had no reference to climate action in their national curriculum. From my perspective of those that do, current approaches to teaching sustainability don't do enough to address the root of climate issues. And merely educating students on the causes and effects of climate change fails to achieve what is most important of all — lasting behavioural change.

To create concrete change among future generations, curriculums must be redesigned to weave climate literacy into all subjects, rather than remaining a special area of focus. The scope for teaching sustainability is broad. Beyond science, lessons in geography, mathematics, and business can demonstrate to students how their dietary and mobility choices impact their carbon footprint, or how economic growth correlates to environmental impact. Achieving this will reveal to students how their everyday actions contribute to climate change.

More importantly, embedding climate literacy as an inherent part of the curricula creates empathy among students, as they recognise how society's collective actions impact individuals. When students are empathetic, they understand the plight of others and build emotional connections, which are powerful drivers of action.

Upskilling teachers to deliver climate literacy

According to a 2022 survey from Take Action Global, Shift Insight, and EARTHDAY.ORG, less than 30 percent of primary and secondary school teachers feel prepared to teach climate change education. This must be addressed through funding if education providers are to embed climate literacy across all areas of the curricula. Teachers require targeted upskilling to prepare them for an evolved role as enablers of climate action.

Climate science should become a focal point of professional development programmes across subjects broadly, so educators can customise the content to reflect the objectives of their subject area. Importantly, upskilling must also impart the knowledge of how to catalyse climate action among students — going beyond the simple transfer of information to encourage self-reflection, self-determination, and other soft skills that underpin personal behaviour change.



Expo City Dubai is the host venue for the 28th United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP28), which will be held in November 2023

Bringing education closer to industry

The third area of focus demanding action is the relationship between education and industry. I am confident that progress towards addressing climate change can be accelerated if young learners gain exposure to real-world problem solving. That means industry and education coming closer together through practical opportunities where students spend a meaningful period of time focused on existing challenges in industry.

The same is true for educators. Going hand in hand with a need to upskill teachers is a need for they themselves to step closer to industry and collaborate with companies on projects that seek to tackle existing challenges through learning outcomes. Collaboration is the key word here. If the problem we face is the same, why aren't we working to address it together?

The climate crises facing our region are staring us in the face. Platforms such as COP are vital for generating discussion, and now we must seize the opportunity to show the world how COP27 and the like can convert dialogue into meaningful action. COP28, which arrives in the region once again in 2023 at Dubai's Expo City, provides a fitting pulse check of the progress made.