

# **Learning for Sustainable Living: An Education for Sustainable Development Resource for Schools Developed by BirdLife International**

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## **Abstract**

Learning for Sustainable Living is a programme developed by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) in collaboration with some BirdLife Partners. If teachers are to educate students about the environmental and development issues in their country, they need to be provided with the appropriate teaching materials. There is an absence of relevant, good quality materials for teachers in many countries. This programme involves the development of locally written, indigenous teaching materials for use in primary schools. The activities and information within the teachers' guides are curriculum-linked to the environmental and development priorities of each country. The materials are tested in schools prior to final editing and publishing. All primary schools are then provided with free copies of the teachers' guides. A training programme for teachers, linked to the materials, is also developed in each country. The programme is designed to make teachers' lives easier, not to impose another requirement on them

## **Introduction**

This paper will explain the development of the Learning for Sustainable Living programme that is currently being implemented in South Africa, India and Kenya with plans for expansion into Middle Eastern countries within the next two years.

Learning for Sustainable Living produces teachers' guides for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).

*Key features of this programme are:*

- Led by the national BirdLife Partner for each country, in partnership with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Environment
- Linked to the current school curriculum of the country
- Linked to environmental and development priorities of the country
- Filling a niche in resources for teachers in each country
- Developed by teachers and educators in each country
- Tested in schools prior to final editing and publishing
- Free copies are distributed to all primary schools
- A training programme for teachers is developed to support the materials.

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Learning for Sustainable Living encourages Active Learning as the basis for the education activities contained within the materials. Active learning is an essential part of the process to enable young people to develop the knowledge, understanding and skills required to take action for the environment. When an issue is identified, key questions that are asked include:

- What will we need to investigate the problem/issue?
- How can we do something about it?
- What do we know already?
- Where will we find more information?
- Who can we contact and how?
- What do we know about the issue and what have we achieved?

The programme has been implemented in South Africa, the Seychelles and Sierra Leone. It is currently being developed in Maharashtra, India, and in Kenya; both will publish teachers' guides and other materials in late 2005. BirdLife is currently planning a multi-country Learning for Sustainable Living programme in a few countries in the Middle East, with publications in Arabic. It is hoped that RSPB and BirdLife International will expand the programme into other countries, provided that external funding is secured.

BirdLife International is a global alliance of conservation organisations working together for the world's birds and people. Over one hundred countries are now represented by an appropriate non-government organisation (NGO) as part of the BirdLife Partnership. The RSPB is the United Kingdom's representative.

This paper explains how some BirdLife Partners have worked with educators in their countries to develop teachers' guides that include information and activities that are relevant to the needs of people and the environment.

### *The need for Learning for Sustainable Living*

The need for effective formal education programmes, linked to Sustainable Development (SD), is well recognised. The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development is the latest international initiative that advocates an expansion of ESD in schools. However, very few countries have teaching materials that refer to sustainability. The textbooks and other teaching materials used in schools in some countries are not relevant to the environmental and development priorities of the country. In many countries, teaching materials are often inadequate, ineffective and fail to develop young people's knowledge and skills to take positive action for their local environment. For example, textbooks may contain information that is inaccurate or irrelevant and activities that fail to develop understanding. A familiar complaint about some Environmental Education (EE) programmes is that they fail to develop action for the environment. A lot of material is only information-based and does not challenge the learner to think or to take action. Although, most Ministries of

Education recognise the importance of producing effective teaching materials for schools, the reality is that materials for SD or the environment are low on the list of priorities and, therefore, funding is either absent or inadequate.

In the countries where Learning for Sustainable Living has been developed, a feasibility exercise to identify and agree on the need for the teaching materials is first undertaken. The feasibility exercise in a country includes:

- Consultations with senior staff in the Ministry of Education and curricular development department
- Consultations with senior staff in the Ministry of Environment
- Consultations with teachers
- Consultations with education staff of non-government organisations
- Consultations with ESD or EE experts in higher education
- An informal analysis of teaching materials used in schools

Following the feasibility exercise, an agreement to develop the teaching materials and to distribute them to schools is reached with the Ministries of Education and Environment. A project management group composed of representatives from the two Ministries, the BirdLife Partner and RSPB is formed to ensure effective implementation of the project.

## **The development process for Learning for Sustainable Living**

### *Funding*

Following the feasibility exercise and agreement to implement Learning for Sustainable Living, funding to produce the materials needs to be found. In the countries where this is being implemented, the Ministries of Education have insufficient funding available to develop and produce the materials, so RSPB and the BirdLife Partners have to raise funds for the programme. The RSPB and the BirdLife Partner produce an accurate budget forecast for the programme. A search for potential donors is undertaken and funding proposals submitted. Donors have included the UK Lottery, a US Foundation, and corporate sponsors.

It is ironic, that key government development departments from Western countries have failed to provide any substantial funds for these programmes, despite negotiations and applications to them. Although these government departments claim that SD is a priority, they appear unwilling or unable to recognise the importance of funding education programmes as part of this process.

The funding of Learning for Sustainable Living is the major obstacle for implementation in any country. A key achievement for the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development would be increased priority for funding by governments. This would include increased funding by western governments to ESD programmes in developing countries. Several governments, during the next few years, will produce a

lot of rhetoric, including ambitious statements and strategies linked to ESD. However, sufficient money will be required to turn this rhetoric into reality.

#### *Identification of the environmental and development priorities for each country*

In order to ensure that the teaching materials are linked to a country's priorities a consultation exercise is undertaken by the BirdLife Partner. This is likely to be in the form of a workshop with environmental and development experts from the country. Reference materials are likely to include the country's SD strategy (if it exists), the state of environment report, poverty reduction strategy and any other relevant materials, including the national curriculum. A guidance document that includes the relevant information and issues linked to the environmental and development priorities is then produced.

Based on the agreed priorities, a structure for the teachers' guides is then agreed upon. Examples of key themes are given below.

#### South Africa:

- Ecology
- Water
- Air
- Soil
- Energy
- Population

#### Kenya:

- People and the environment
- Water
- Energy
- Health
- Agriculture
- Biodiversity

#### Maharashtra, India:

- Water
- Land use and soil
- Energy
- Air
- Biodiversity
- People

#### *Developing the content for the teachers' guide*

The first stage of this part of the process is to find experienced and innovative teachers and other educators to form the creative working group (CWG). The guidance document containing the environmental and development priorities is

distributed to all members of the CWG. Workshops are then held with the CWG in order to develop activities linked to the priority themes.

The format of the teachers' guides is consistent. Each thematic chapter includes priority information related to each theme, followed by activities that enable students to learn about issues in an interactive way. The draft content is tested in a sample of schools from across the country. Based on the feedback from teachers, a final edit led by a professional editor/writer produces the final text. Professional illustrators and designers are contracted to produce the final publication.

The creative process can be summarised in the following key steps:

- Assembly of the Creative Working Group (CWG)
- Creative workshop involving the CWG
- Development of information and activities that will form the draft materials
- Testing of the draft materials in a sample of schools from across the country
- Review of the feedback from the pilot test
- Final edit
- Printing and publication of the materials

*Assessment of activities*

In order to assist the development of activities by the Creative Working Group, I devised two matrices linked to SD skills and factors. The matrices are to enable the members of the CWG to make an immediate assessment of the appropriateness of activities for developing awareness and skills related to SD.

Table One shows a matrix to identify SD factors in the activities. Factors are linked to problems and solutions involving social, economic, political and environmental reasons. My reasoning is that if an activity includes links to some or all of these factors, then the learner is more likely to develop an understanding of how people are the problem and the solution to achieving SD.

Table One

**Matrix to identify SD factors in activities**

Does the activity include reference to these factors?

**Theme:** e.g. Water \_\_\_\_\_

	Activity one	Activity two	Activity three	Activity four
<b>Problems caused through economic reasons</b>				
<b>Solutions through economic reasons</b>				
<b>Problems caused</b>				

<b>through social reasons</b>				
<b>Solutions through social reasons</b>				
<b>Problems caused through political reasons</b>				
<b>Solutions through political reasons</b>				
<b>Problems caused through physical environment reasons</b>				
<b>Solutions to solve physical environment reasons</b>				

The skills that are featured in Table Two are those mentioned on UNESCO's ESD website. The UNESCO website advocates a review of recommended and mandated approaches to teaching, learning and assessment so that these lifelong skills are fostered. I therefore decided to produce the matrix to enable an assessment as to whether any of these skills are developed by an activity.

Table Two

**Matrix for identifying skills in *Learning for Sustainable Living* activities**

Theme: e.g. Water

Does the activity help to develop the following skills?

	<b>Activity number</b>	<b>Activity number</b>	<b>Activity number</b>	<b>Activity number</b>
<b>Develops creative skills</b>				
<b>Develops critical thinking skills</b>				
<b>Develops oral communication skills</b>				
<b>Develops written communication skills</b>				
<b>Promotes collaboration and cooperation</b>				
<b>Develops decision-making skills</b>				

<b>Develops problem solving and planning skills</b>				
<b>Promotes practical citizenship</b>				
<b>Develops conflict management skills</b>				

### *Evaluation of Learning for Sustainable Living*

A valid criticism of Learning for Sustainable Living is that there has not been any substantial research about whether the programme has effectively developed positive attitudes and behaviour in young people towards the environment. There was insufficient funding available for baseline research in Kenya and Maharashtra. However, there may be opportunities to do some qualitative research in the future. In South Africa, there were mid-project and end of project reports produced by external consultants (Shongwe, 2001, Ashwell, 2003). Both reports refer to limited research with a small sample of teachers to assess the usage, quality and effectiveness of the materials. The findings indicated that the majority of teachers liked the appearance of the book and that it did fill a niche for schools. The training programme resulted in teachers being more likely to use the materials in a regular and effective way. In 2003, Learning for Sustainable Living won a national award for EE in South Africa.

### **Future plans**

As mentioned previously, the Learning for Sustainable Living guides for Kenya and Maharashtra will be published in 2005. The search for funding for BirdLife's Middle East Learning For Sustainable Living project will commence in early 2005 and, if funding is acquired, implementation will begin as soon as possible.

RSPB will be seeking to expand the programme in some countries with the appropriate BirdLife Partner taking the lead. However, this will be subject to appropriate funding being available.

Funding of initiatives like this appears to be a perennial problem. As I stated in an earlier section, it is hoped that the Decade will help to highlight the importance of ESD with governments and donors. If we are to reorient formal education systems in order to make teaching and learning more relevant to the needs of today's citizens and planet, we will need to support the teachers. By providing good, relevant teaching materials linked to effective training programmes, we may make progress in responding to the challenge. However, the production of the materials and the implementation of the training programmes will only happen if governments and other donors are prepared to pay for this. In my opinion, the biggest challenge for the Decade is to turn the rhetoric into reality by finding the funds and political commitment to make this happen.

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