Introducing TESF

A Briefing Note

What is TESF?

Education can play a role in supporting sustainable development, but if it is to do so then education itself needs to be transformed. The Transforming Education for Sustainable Futures Network Plus (TESF) will seek to develop the knowledge, skills and agency that can contribute to this transformation process. The aims of this briefing paper are to provide a basic introduction to the objectives of TESF and how people can get involved in our work; and to set out what we understand by key terms and concepts that inform our work as a Network Plus in the making.

We understand sustainable futures and transforming education systems as a 'work in process' in which all people can participate in different ways to shape the futures that they want. The project thus offers an open invitation for people interested in the role of education and learning in creating more sustainable, just futures to help co-define what sustainable futures mean to them, and how they would like to contribute to the unfolding process.

TESF is an expanding network (hence the idea of Network Plus) of researchers funded by the UK Global Challenges Research Fund at £4.75 million for three and a half years between November 2019 and April 2023. We have partners in the UK, India, South Africa, Rwanda, Somalia and the Netherlands.

Our aim is to develop new knowledge that can assist education policy makers, practitioners and other stakeholders in implementing new policies and practices in education that can support socially just and environmentally sustainable development.

Specifically, through the work of our hubs in India, Rwanda, South Africa and Somalia we will strengthen capacity to co-produce new knowledge about how education can contribute to:

- skills and development of people's agency to achieve sustainable livelihoods;
- development of sustainable cities and communities;
- taking action for addressing climate change.

In particular, we will focus on the role of education in meeting the needs of historically marginalised groups including those most affected by poverty, women, youth, indigenous peoples, urban and rural dwellers. All research projects will focus on contributing to this interest.

What is the problem we are trying to address?

People all over the world today are subject to the pernicious effects of unsustainable development. In the global South, this trajectory is often accompanied by structural inequalities that reproduce persistent poverty, exacerbate inequality, and leave learners with limited opportunities to create sustainable livelihoods. A lack of suitable infrastructure and facilities exacerbate these challenges. Histories of coloniality continue to marginalize indigenous

cultures and languages, and some contexts are troubled by violence, conflict and associated social stressors. Communities also increasingly face the challenges posed by climate change and the wider threat to life support systems created by unprecedented levels of biodiversity loss.

At the same time, new ideas about what education might be and do are emerging and we need to build on these. To respond to these intersecting concerns, there is need to strengthen learning for sustainable development, and amplify existing forms of agency for change. Such forms of learning and agency are present, even in the most complex of contexts, but are most often under-supported and under-valued, especially amongst communities and social movements, civil society organisations and education system actors that are seeking to respond pro-actively to emerging challenges in their societies

In challenging times, where the need for transformation is high, formal education systems are often not well set up for engaging pro-actively with transformations required. And so, we find that many young people in schools, colleges and universities, continue to have inadequate access to quality, relevant education; many leave school without even the most basic skills and find it difficult to access further learning pathways. As such, basic formal education often fails to provide learners with the capabilities they require to sustain and develop viable livelihoods and to participate in peaceful and democratic societies, despite some laudable efforts in this direction. Even when they receive high quality education, even in universities, it often results in employment and life practices that make inequality, overconsumption and the climate and biodiversity crisis worse.

In response, the aim of the TESF Network Plus programme is to co-create new knowledge that can assist education policy makers, practitioners and other stakeholders in defining, framing, generating, evaluating and implementing policies and practices in education that can support socially just and environmentally sustainable development.

What is our vision?

We believe sustainable futures are based on principles of social and environmental justice and that education is critical in establishing these principles in people and the communities of which they are part. A working definition that is currently guiding our thinking is:

Social and environmental justice can be understood as putting in place social arrangements that permit existing and future generations to participate equitably as peers in social life and in the construction of viable, fairer economies, that foreground the well-being of all, while also recognising the integrity of other species and of natural systems.

Overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalised obstacles and normalised systems and practices that prevent many people from participating on a par with others as full partners in social interaction and the construction of viable, fairer economies, and in addressing barriers that prevent the wellbeing and flourishing of all humans along with other species and natural systems.

In practice, this means the following:

- that resources, goods and services are more fairly distributed in society and accessible to the poorest;
- the rights, needs and cultural identities of existing and future generations including the most marginalised are recognised, that their knowledge, agency and capabilities are valued, that their voices are heard and they are engaged in the development process;
- and, that we learn to meet our basic needs as a species whilst operating within planetary boundaries and in harmony with natural systems.

We foresee that sustainable futures can be achieved through critically constituted, inclusive, and socially just processes of sustainable development. These challenges are enormous. We believe that education can play a role in contributing to sustainable development, but it cannot do this on its own and needs to be linked to wider processes of social transformation. If it is to play a role then education systems themselves need to be transformed. That is to say that learners across the lifespan need to be given access to a good quality education, but that we also need to transform what we mean by quality education such that learners acquire the skills needed to achieve sustainable futures.

What do we mean by sustainable development?

There are many definitions of sustainable development that have evolved over many years. These are linked to different theories of development including modernisation theory, neoliberal, market-led theories, rights-based theories and environmentally focused theories. For our purposes we offer a working definition of SD in this briefing paper that is linked to our vision of sustainable futures

"*development that supports the rights, freedoms and capabilities of existing and future generations to live the lives they have reason to value whilst protecting and co-evolving in a more harmonious relationship with the natural environment of which human beings are an integral part so that natural and social systems may flourish*".

The United Nations have defined a set of Sustainable Development Goals (see box 1) that drive global policy making in this direction. These offer useful, if incomplete, directions for future policy making and much is being done globally at present to refine and reflexively review these development goals as they also iteratively unfold in policy and practice processes.

What do we understand by education for sustainable development?

In addressing the demand for education processes that are more responsive to global challenges, there has been a long history of different kinds of education such as environmental education, peace

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BOX 1: THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere
Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
Goal 7 Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
Goal 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries
Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
Goal 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
Goal 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
Goal 15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
Goal 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development

Source: United Nations (UN 2015c)

BOX 2: SDG 4 TARGETS AND INDICATORS

4.1 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes
4.2 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and preprimary education so that they are ready for primary education
4.3 By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university
4.4 By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship
4.5 By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations
4.6 By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy
4.7 By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development
4.8 Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, nonviolent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all
4.9 By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries
4.10 By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing states
Source: Adapted from UNESCO (2017b)

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education, climate change education and global citizenship education. The UN has recently linked these forms of education under the banner of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and they are reflected in Target 4.7 of SDG Goal 4 (see box 2), which advocates for quality education within a lifelong learning framework.

While we recognize many emerging developments and meanings around the broad concept of ESD, we offer a working definition of ESD in this briefing document:

"access to a good quality education for all that can facilitate existing and future generations of learners across the lifespan, in formal and informal settings, to realise the rights, freedoms and capabilities they require to live the lives they have reason to value and to protect and co-evolve in a more harmonious relationship with the natural environment of which human beings are an integral part so that natural and social systems may flourish".

What will we do in practice?

- Half of our total funding will be used to support new research projects. We anticipate funding a number of large scale (up to £100k), medium scale (up to £30k) and smaller scale pilot projects (up to 10k) in each country through an open process of competitive bidding.
- We are holding country engagement workshops in our four hub countries in early 2020. The aim of these workshops is to find out from key stakeholders such as yourselves, what the priorities are for research into the role of education in supporting sustainable development in your country.
- We will use your feedback to help develop a call for proposals which will be launched in December 2020* and to help shape the invited projects.
- We plan to hold capacity and project development workshops

at a date to be confirmed following the call for proposals*. Interested parties will be invited to apply to participate in the workshops.

- We will aim to include in our capacity development activities not only established researchers but other stakeholders such as policy makers, practitioners, NGOs, the private sector, CBOs, indigenous groups, women's and youth organisations who may not usually get involved in research but
bring valuable perspectives and resources to the research process.
- Those who have taken part in capacity development activities will be invited to submit funding proposals. The proposals will be evaluated by a group of experts against agreed assessment criteria.
- Priority will be given to proposals that actively involve researchers and non- academic stakeholders to co-produce impactful research in one of the areas highlighted above.
- Larger scale projects will be expected to have a duration of 18 months with a start date of July 2021* whilst medium and smaller scale projects will have a duration of 12 months with a start date of September 2021*.
- Additional support will be provided to successful applicants who are new to research to develop the skills required to conduct research and to manage research projects.

* For most current dates of our timeline and key events, please be sure visit www.tesf.network and sign up for updates.
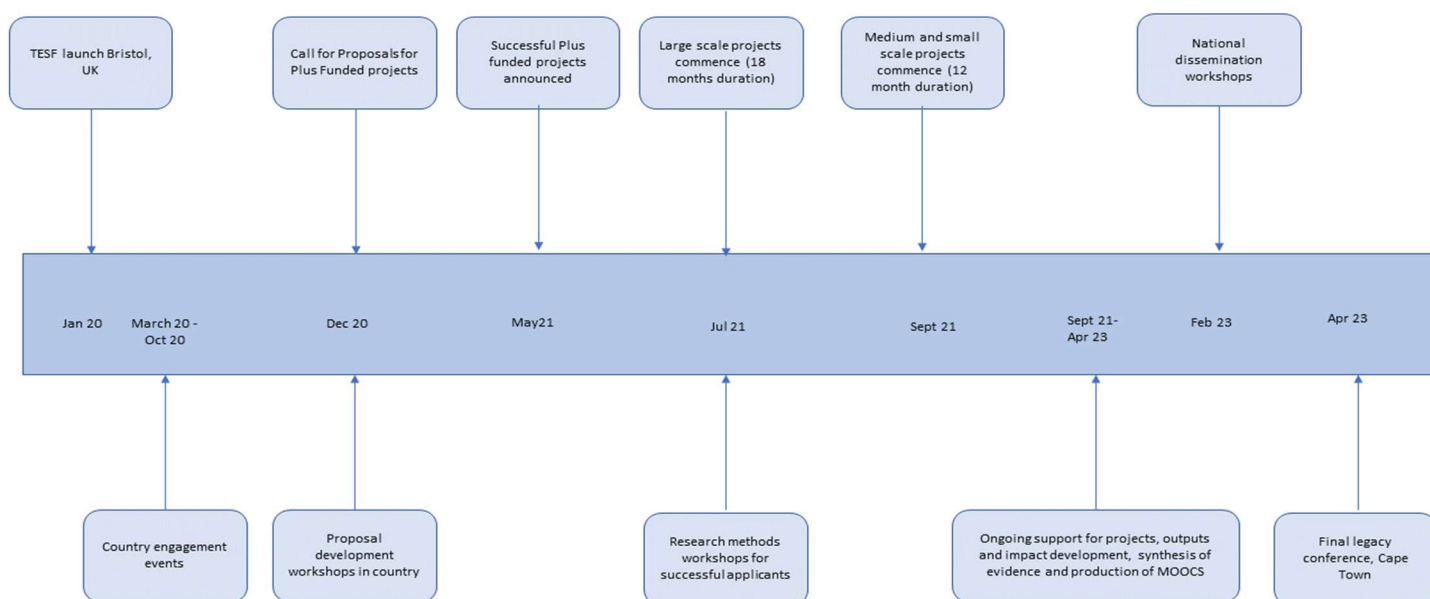
How can research bring about meaningful change?

We believe that real transformation needs to happen at different scales:

Change at the level of the system as a whole, including formal and informal education and training and covering all areas of policy including curriculum development, assessment and teacher education. This requires cultural change as well as changes to national policy.
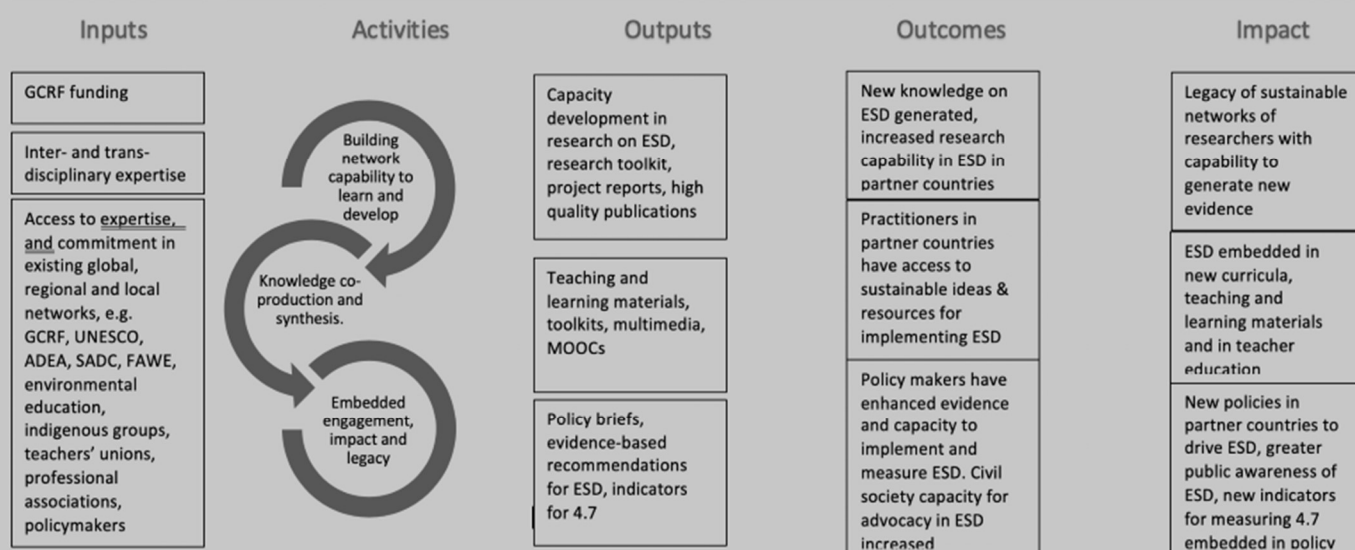
Change at the level of institutions as a whole, including the curriculum, teaching and learning, materials and resources, opportunities for professional development, changes in leadership, organizational culture and governance and in ways of working with communities.

Change at the level of teaching and learning and community engagement, where we will particularly seek to develop transformative, transgressive approaches to learning, agency and change via the research processes.

TESF will aim to achieve change at all of these levels simultaneously in the four countries we are working in through actively engaging policy makers, practitioners and other stakeholders.

Theory of Change for TESF

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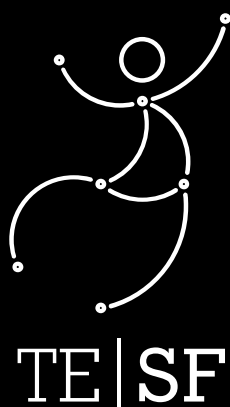
TESF is a GCRF funded Network Plus, co-ordinated out of the University of Bristol, working with partners in India, Rwanda, Somalia/Somaliland, South Africa the United Kingdom and the Netherlands.
We undertake collaborative research to Transform Education for Sustainable Futures.

TESF partner institutions are:
Indian Institute for Human Settlements
Rhodes University
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University of Bristol
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