



United Nations
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Success Stories

Sweden: World Wide Classrooms drive Sustainability Solutions

by Margareta Mildsommar



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“I understood that the best way to make a difference is to teach about attitudes when young people are still in school. ‘Prevention is better than cure.’”

As a fifteen-year-old, Raphael Bhembe from Swaziland took part in the very first activities of the Swedish web-based Young Masters Programme on Sustainable Development in 1999. On Friday afternoons after the regular school day had ended, Raphael and three of his classmates at the U-TECH High School in Big-Bend in east Swaziland, met with their teacher to learn about sustainable development.

“In those days the Internet was such a novelty that one could only type lower case letters. We had to learn to use the computer together with our teacher. I was one of the first children to use one in my country,” he recalls. Today, Raphael teaches Life Orientation at a secondary school in Johannesburg, South Africa.

In the mid-90s, the Swedish International Institute of Industrial Environment Economics (IIIEE) opened its doors at the Lund University in the city of Lund, promoting a unique approach to learning: finding sustainable solutions.

Since its early days, IIIEE has offered study courses, master programmes, and even specialised distance education for global leaders on sustainability solutions. “To be able to meet sustainability challenges of our time it is not enough to implement technology fixes, new legislation and environmental taxes,” says Torvald Jacobsson, Director of the Young Masters Programme. “You have to work with peoples’ values. And when you are trying to change value systems, the most powerful tool you have is education. Integrating sustainable development into educational systems across the world is vital.”

IIIEE developed the Young Masters Programme (YMP) on Sustainable Development to accomplish just that. The free web-based education and learning network puts social, environmental and economic awareness on high school timetables all over the world. More than 20,000 teenagers, aged 16 to 18, from over 100 countries have already taken part in the YMP programme since its start in 1999.

The YMP learning takes place in web-based global classrooms. Each classroom brings together 120 students and teachers from around the world. Here, students undertake the same readings and assignments and compare and discuss their results. They share experiences and knowledge and give each other feedback. By interacting with students from other countries in the online-community, they learn from each other, get an understanding of global sustainability challenges, and get to know that there are many different local perspectives and solutions. Last but not least they have the opportunity to make friends for life.

Unlike in the early stages, when only some hundred teenagers could interact; when there was no Google or Facebook and learning material was sent out on CD-Rom via snail mail, the number of participating students and global classrooms is basically unlimited today. The upgraded YMP web platform provides enhanced e-learning tools and social networking and game capabilities.

Being engaged in YMP activities, Raphael Bhembe was one of 600 international students who participated in a sustainability youth summit that was organised by IIIIEE and Lund University in 2000. "It was the first time I left my country and it was the first time I was on an airplane. It was all very exciting. The YMP was a wonderful experience. I met people from all over the world; we shared ideas and I got many new insights. Even though I was young, I knew that I wanted to stay engaged with YMP. It appealed to my heart."

Bursting with new knowledge and inspiration, Raphael realised that sustainable development was not a focus back home. "In Swaziland, the environment was not a big topic. Back then only a few people recycled. The government focused only on AIDS and poverty. I understood that the best way to make a difference is to teach about attitudes when young people are still in school."

Twelve years later, Raphael now teaches Life Orientation at Michael Rua School, a junior secondary school in Johannesburg, South Africa. As often as he can, he makes use of his YMP experience when teaching; and he has registered a YMP group himself.

"I remember a slogan from YMP: 'Prevention is better than cure.' I practise this with my students all the time. A lot of trees and rainforest are cut down in Swaziland. But trees are providing us with oxygen. So I try to raise my students' awareness of how important it is to take care of our trees, to not cut them down, and to plant new trees. I explain to them that we can still protect our environment and that by taking care of it; we are taking care of ourselves."

According to Torvald Jacobsson, Raphael Bhembe's story is impressive, but not uncommon. "The work posted online by the YMP students shows how many good projects are taking place around the world."

And YMP has more to offer. "Often when students are doing YMP project work, they also become social entrepreneurs. For example, we had students from Jordan teaching 40 families how to make soap out of waste oil from a local water treatment plant. Thanks to their engagement, these families now have a sustainable income. That is amazing."

"In Egypt," he continues, "a group of students started collecting scrap cooking oil from the school's restaurant and learned how to make biodiesel out of it. Now, their school bus runs on that biodiesel. Of course, a single project does not change the world. But if we map all of them, we will see that we have thousands. Together, they drive change."

Torvald Jacobsson is optimistic that with the help of the new web platform, launched in cooperation with UNESCO, and new outreach initiatives, YMP will continue to grow. “This is only the beginning.”

YMP spreads further. Recently, it started a partnership with the Centre for Environment Education (CEE) in India. Funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) they are running a pilot in 30 schools in 6 different regions.

YMP is one of the main initiatives developed under the UNESCO Chair on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), established at Lund University and IIIIE in 2006. As such YMP actively contributes to the objectives of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD, 2005-2014).

Further information:

www.goymp.org

UNESCO as the lead agency for the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) promotes an education that allows every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to shape a sustainable future.

Education for Sustainable Development means including key sustainable development issues into teaching and learning; for example, climate change, disaster risk reduction, biodiversity, poverty reduction, and sustainable consumption. It also requires participatory teaching and learning methods that motivate and empower learners to change their behaviour and take action for sustainable development.

Contact:

Section of Education for Sustainable Development

esddcade@unesco.org

www.unesco.org/education/desd
