

Role of teachers in building sustainable, resilient societies

At the just concluded COP26 conference on climate change, one of the key messages that emerged is that we all need to do more. While the politicians and policymakers were in the foreground of the discussion, there were other sidebar conversations in which other social actors, including educators, engaged in discussions about their respective responsibilities in achieving the goal of mitigating the risk of climate change for current and future generations.

In 2015 on the cusp of the sustainable goals, we at TTUTA published an article on the role of teachers in building sustainable societies. Considering the 2021 climate change discussions as well as our continued navigation of the covid19 pandemic, we reproduce the article as a reminder of what is required if the education sector is to do its part, especially if we are to develop a resilient society.

Teachers have long been recognized as having an integral role to play in nation building and development given the nature of their role in facilitating knowledge growth and development. In the current thrust towards the building of sustainable societies, this role takes on even more significance. Within this context the role of the teacher is not simply one of transmitting knowledge and perpetuating existing cultural norms. Rather, teachers must assume a transformative role in which they act as catalysts for change in helping to create the society that we would like to have.

To be transformative agents of change, teachers need to be empowered on several fronts. In the first instance is the issue of capacity building, that is, equipping teachers with the knowledge and other competencies they will need to help develop citizens who possess the attitudes, values and social aspirations needed to address the interplay among the three dimensions of a sustainable society – the economic, the social and the environmental. This capacity building, however, must occur within a broader social, philosophical and policy framework that clearly defines for us our vision of a sustainable society.

There is no gainsaying that education is the key to building sustainable societies. There are several questions that we will need to answer: What are the challenges that we face as a society across the dimensions of sustainability we need to address? What competencies (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values) will our citizens need to address these challenges?

What is the role of education in ensuring that our citizens acquire these competencies? Given that role, what will teachers need to know and be able to do to achieve the goals that we set towards sustainability?

Beyond this kind of capacity building for our teachers, they must also be treated with professional courtesy. The society needs to recognise that contrary to what many may believe, you cannot simply walk off the street and become a teacher. While some may think, well that's the way we have done it all these years, a closer look at what is happening in our society would suggest that we need to reconsider our modus operandi. Teachers must be adequately trained and resourced to perform in an efficacious manner.

This is becoming more of an imperative in the face of climate change concerns, [the impact of covid19] and the need to build a resilient society. When we equip teachers with the professional literacies they need in terms of their knowledge of students and their respective disciplines, and an understanding of the relationship between policy frameworks and their practice, then we must respect that as the practising professional their two cents matter. They have a vantage point that others don't have. The information and experience gained at this vantage point positions them to make meaningful contributions that have the potential to aid in the transformation of the sector, but they must be given the opportunity to exercise their professional judgment.

Furthermore, there is a need to create the enabling environment for teachers to realise the outputs expected by the society. In the context of aging plants, limited and insufficient resources, and inadequate support services, teachers are expected to deliver while the populace fails to recognise the quality of the output is influenced by the quality

of the inputs. If we are desirous of improving the outputs across all layers of the education system, then there must be clear policy directions, adequate levels of investments and a legislative framework that will support the change that is needed.

The sustainable development agenda, of which responding to climate is a part, recognises that education's input is integral to realising the articulated goals. Making this happen cannot occur without teachers since our work helps shape our society. Let's ensure that the conditions are right for teachers to fulfil their role in building sustainable and resilient societies.