



# Sustainable Development and Education for Sustainable Development

**VOLUME 1**

**EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

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## Foreword

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This document, the first of three volumes, is for teaching staff and education consultants. The intention is to support educators in integrating sustainable development into teaching, taking into consideration environmental, social and economic connections when examining a question or resolving a problem. Thus equipped, they will be able to support students in understanding and applying the concept of sustainable development.

This document defines the concept, traces the main historical milestones and describes what education for sustainable development is about. It is part of the Ministère's Plan d'accompagnement du réseau scolaire en matière de développement durable, which encourages educational institutions to make the shift to sustainable development. Bringing this to the attention of stakeholders will ensure that students can benefit from continuous learning on this topic.

Students can be initiated into sustainable development very early in their educational journey. Beginning in preschool and continuing throughout elementary and secondary school, students are afforded opportunities through the Québec Education Program to acquire knowledge and develop competencies that help them gradually develop critical thinking. Students also learn to create forward-looking scenarios to build a better world. This learning encourages them to adopt values and behaviours that can contribute to the longevity of our societies.

# 1 Sustainable development

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## 1.1 Definition and history

Sustainable development can be understood as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainable development is based on a long-term approach which takes into account the inextricable nature of the environmental, social and economic dimensions of development activities.”<sup>1</sup>

The concept of sustainable development pushes us to rethink the relationship human beings have with one another and with nature. It stems from the idea that things cannot continue as they are, and that to protect the longevity of our societies, we have to rectify the shortcomings of a development model based solely on economic growth and examine our methods in light of new priorities. Sustainable development targets the following three goals:

- preserve the ecosystems that support life
- **Upholding social equality** to allow for the full development of all women and all men, the growth of communities and respect for diversity
- **Pursuing economic efficiency** to create an innovative and prosperous economy that is ecologically and socially responsible<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Sustainable Development Act*, CQLR, c. D-8.1.1, s. 2, <https://www.legisquebec.gouv.qc.ca/en/version/cs/D-8.1.1?code=se:2&pointInTime=20180202&20180202>, accessed April 15, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Québec, Ministère du développement durable, de l’environnement et de la lutte contre les changements climatiques, *À propos du développement durable*, <http://www.mddelcc.gouv.qc.ca/developpement/definition.htm>, accessed April 15, 2016. [Translation]

The concept of sustainable development has been defined gradually through discussions at international meetings. The table below presents the stages in the development of the concept, internationally and in Québec.

**Table 1 – History of the concept of sustainable development**

|             | Events                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Key points                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1972</b> | Stockholm, 1st Earth Summit, United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, also known as “Only One Earth”                                                                                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Publication of a report on the limits of growth. Ecological questions were at the top of international concerns</li> <li>• Creation of the United Nations Environment Programme</li> <li>• Québec attended and then adopted a law on environmental quality</li> </ul>                                                                                                |
| <b>1982</b> | Nairobi, 2nd Earth Summit                                                                                                                                                                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summit that led to no decisions</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>1987</b> | Publication of the Brundtland Report, officially titled “Our Common Future,” drafted by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland, of Norway | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal introduction of the concept of sustainable development</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>1992</b> | Rio, 3rd Earth Summit, United Nations Conference on Environment and Development                                                                                                                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adoption of the 2 500 recommendations and 27 principles that form the basis of Agenda 21, the sustainable development action plan for the 21st century</li> <li>• Adoption of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change</li> </ul>                                                                                                                   |
| <b>1997</b> | Kyoto, summit on global warming                                                                                                                                                                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kyoto Protocol on climate change, an international treaty on reducing greenhouse gas emissions</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>2000</b> | New York, United Nations Millennium Summit                                                                                                                                                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adoption of the eight Millennium Development Goals: eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; develop a global partnership for development</li> </ul> |

|           | Events                                                                                                                                                                                  | Key points                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2002      | Johannesburg, 4th Earth Summit, World Summit on Sustainable Development                                                                                                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Issues of socio-spatial and economic equality and combatting poverty overshadowed strictly environmental questions</li> <li>• Few decisions: relative failure</li> <li>• Québec report on sustainable development</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| 2005–2014 | United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development                                                                                                                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public consultation on the Québec Sustainable Development Plan, in 2005</li> <li>• Adoption of the <i>Sustainable Development Act</i> by the National Assembly of Québec in 2006</li> <li>• Tabling of the 2008–2013 Government Sustainable Development Strategy by the premier of Québec, later extended to 2015</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| 2012      | Rio + 20, 5th Earth Summit, United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development                                                                                                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Launch of a process to establish sustainable development goals applicable to all countries</li> <li>• Discussions about the green economy and the institutional framework for sustainable development</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| 2015      | <p>New York, United Nations Sustainable Development Summit</p> <p>Paris, 21st Session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: The 17 sustainable development goals it includes aim to end poverty, promote prosperity and well-being for all, protect the environment and cope with climate change. They cover every aspect of sustainable development: environmental protection, economic efficiency, social integration and social equality.</li> </ul> <p>One of these goals is dedicated to education: “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.”<sup>33</sup></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Québec’s adoption of the 2015–2020 Government Sustainable Development Strategy</li> <li>• Decision by 195 countries to uphold the climate change goals</li> </ul> |

<sup>3</sup> [Goal 4: Quality education.](#)

## 1.2 Commitments of the Québec government

To apply the concept of sustainable development in Québec, a variety of government and departmental orientations have been implemented. They are summarized in Diagram 1, on page 6.

### 1.2.1 *Sustainable Development Act*

In Québec, sustainable development is anchored in the *Sustainable Development Act*, adopted in 2006. The purpose of this law is to institute a new management framework in the public administration so that its powers and responsibilities are used to support sustainable development. The *Sustainable Development Act* calls on all government departments and agencies to contribute. The Ministère du Développement durable, de l'Environnement et de la Lutte contre les changements climatiques (MDDELCC), which later became the Ministère de l'Environnement et de la Lutte contre les changements climatiques (MELCC), is in charge of applying it and coordinating the work of the departments and agencies in question (CQLR, c. D-8.1.1, s. 13).

The *Sustainable Development Act* sets out **16 sustainable development principles**<sup>4</sup> that guide the daily actions of the public administration in terms of sustainable development, including those of the Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur. The principles are rooted in the three domains of sustainable development: environment, society and economy.

The public administration must therefore base its actions on the following 16 principles:

- Health and quality of life
- Social equity and solidarity
- Environmental protection
- Economic efficiency
- Participation and commitment
- Access to knowledge
- Subsidiarity
- Inter-governmental partnership and cooperation
- Prevention
- Precaution
- Protection of cultural heritage
- Biodiversity preservation
- Respect for ecosystem support capacity
- Responsible production and consumption
- Polluter pays
- Internalization of costs

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.environnement.gouv.qc.ca/developpement/principes\\_en.htm](https://www.environnement.gouv.qc.ca/developpement/principes_en.htm).

### *1.2.2 The government's sustainable development strategy*

The government's 2008-2013 sustainable development strategy (Stratégie gouvernementale de développement durable 2008-2013), extended to 2015, and the 2015-2020 strategy, implement the *Sustainable Development Act*. This instrument sets out the vision, issues, orientations, areas of intervention and objectives that must guide the public administration in terms of sustainable development. On page 2 of the 2015-2020 strategy document, all government departments and agencies are asked to adopt an action plan.

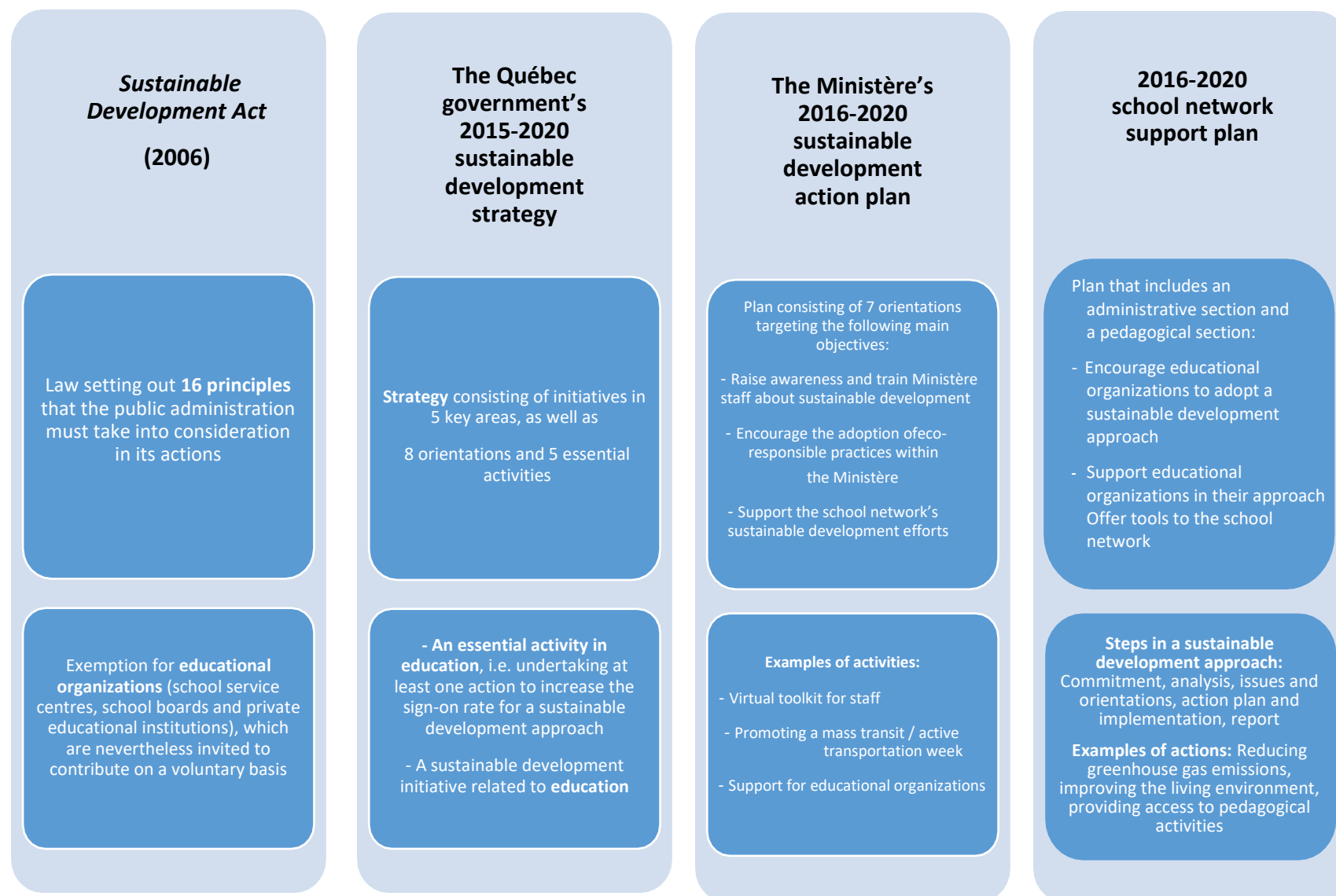
To encourage the achievement of the strategy objectives, the government advocates the implementation of several essential activities. These include increasing the number of educational organizations that have adopted a sustainable development approach and carrying out initiatives in key areas, such as education for sustainable development.

### *1.2.3 The Ministère's sustainable development commitments: Action plan and support plan*

To contribute to the government's sustainable development strategy, the Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur adopted a sustainable development action plan for 2016-2020 (Plan d'action de développement durable 2016-2020). This plan sets out orientations with the goal of promoting staff awareness and training related to sustainable development, encouraging the adoption of eco-responsible practices and supporting the school network's sustainable development efforts.

To achieve these goals, the Ministère has made a commitment to implement several measures, including the development of a sustainable development support plan for the school network, that is, for school service centres, school boards and private educational institutions. The plan comprises an administrative section and a pedagogical section. In the administrative section, the Ministère encourages these organizations to commit to a sustainable development approach. In the pedagogical section, it suggests initiatives that the school network can incorporate into the Québec Education Program and encourages cooperation with partners working in sustainable development.

Diagram 1 – Sustainable development in the Québec government and the Ministère de l'Éducation



## 2 Education and sustainable development

### 2.1 Education at the heart of sustainable development

In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It includes 17 goals, which are presented in the table below. One of them targets **quality education**:



The United Nations has this to say about the goals: “[These] universal, transformational and inclusive SDGs describe major development challenges for humanity. The aim of the 17 SDGs is to secure a sustainable, peaceful, prosperous and equitable life on earth for everyone now and in the future. . . . [They] address key systemic barriers to sustainable development such as inequality, unsustainable consumption patterns, weak institutional capacity and environmental degradation.”<sup>5</sup>

## 2.2 Education for sustainable development

To achieve the selected development goals, the UN recognized the importance of the contribution of education—including education for sustainable development—in training responsible citizens capable of making informed choices. Education for sustainable development is anchored in values such as empathy, solidarity and mutual aid, equality, social and personal responsibility, respect for nature and human beings, openness to others, freedom of expression and creativity. In studying an issue raised by sustainable development, such as climate change, biodiversity or responsible consumption, the students must use a systemic, multi-dimensional approach and develop their critical thinking.

The systemic approach is characterized by the capacity to analyze and understand the complexity of today’s world by developing non-linear thinking that accepts the possibility of multiple points of view when it come to problem solving, and of partial and revisable solutions. To work on themes related to sustainable development, the students must be placed in learning situations that allow them to confront a practical situation—local, but with impacts on other scales—and to analyze it, understand its complexity and propose alternative solutions.

The multi-dimensional approach mobilizes different areas of knowledge and establishes connections for an in-depth understanding of the problem being addressed. Engaging in lucid and informed thinking calls upon the students to examine a problem from several angles, such as scientific, geographic, economic and political.

Critical thinking requires interpreting information from a variety of sources and evaluating its relevance in order to make choices for the future. It leads to reflections on values and awareness of personal and collective responsibilities that take intergenerational and inter-territorial solidarity into account. Education for sustainable development aims to teach the students critical thinking so they can transfer this competency to their daily lives.

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<sup>5</sup> UNESCO, *Education for Sustainable Development Goals: Learning Objectives*, Paris, p. 6, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000247444>, accessed April 29, 2017.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), this knowledge and these competencies “. . . empower individuals to reflect on their own actions, taking into account their current and future social, cultural, economic and environmental impacts, from a local and a global perspective[,] . . . to act in complex situations in a sustainable manner, which may require them to strike out in new directions, and to participate in socio-political processes, moving their societies towards sustainable development.”<sup>6</sup> In short, while education for sustainable development calls for the acquisition of knowledge, it also requires competencies related to know-how (abilities and approaches), behaviours (attitudes and ethics) and soft skills (choices and commitment).

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<sup>6</sup> UNESCO, *Education for Sustainable Development Goals: Learning Objectives*, Paris, p. 7, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000247444>, accessed April 29, 2017.

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