

## **Environmental Education for the citizens of tomorrow**

*According to UNESCO, education is an essential element of the global response to climate change, as it helps young people understand and address the impact of global warming, encourages changes in their attitudes and behaviour and helps them adapt to climate change-related trends. **Malusi Vatsha**, chief executive officer of the Delta Environmental Centre in Johannesburg, explains how important it is to ensure that young people understand the impact of global warming and how his centre is increasing "climate literacy".*

Education and awareness are key enablers of responsible environmental behaviour and practice. While the latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warned that we have to act urgently, within the next twelve years, to avoid climate change, we have to realise that this is not only and simply an adult problem.

As adults we have to make the decisions to stop using fossil fuels, eat meat and fly, as well as curb general reckless consumption to avoid 1.5°C of global warming that will lead to irreversible, dangerous and devastating climate change.

Although we have to make the decisions to stop the actions responsible for climate change, we have to remember that it does not end with us. Our children have to be educated about climate-friendly practices as well to ensure that any good work that is done now will continue into the future.

We can use the valuable opportunity that education offers to combat climate change to ensure that children and young people have the knowledge and skills that will enable them to make informed decisions. They have to be able to adapt their lives, as well as ecological, social or economic systems in a changing environment to guarantee the future of our planet.

Education is needed to help children change their behaviour and environmental education will teach them how to become carbon neutral and energy efficient, with a reduced ecological footprint. In turn, they can carry the message home to their families and teach them how to be environmentally responsible.

Children are also good messengers to spread information to adults. When they learn the importance of a climate-friendly practice, such as recycling glass, they are quick to point out to their parents that glass should be kept separate for recycling. Therefore it is very important to educate children and increasing their climate literacy.

Climate literacy is important because climate change can destroy the progress we have made to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Educating our children must be part of our mission to combat the destruction of our planet.

Therefore it is important to invest in quality education to combat climate change and achieve the SDGs. We all need to learn how to adapt to climate change and adopt mitigation strategies. This requires us to acquire new knowledge and skills and change our behaviour if we are to manage the risks of climate change.

According to the World Bank education is a powerful driver of development and one of the strongest instruments for reducing poverty and improving health, gender equality, peace and stability. It

points out that developing countries have made tremendous progress in getting children into the classroom with the majority of children worldwide now in primary school. Nevertheless, according to the World Bank some 260 million children are still not in school.

In this context, Delta Environmental Centre strives to strengthen the South African education system by providing valuable, hands-on practical learning activities to improve the experience of learning by learners in the schooling system by making it more fun and exciting.

All organisations and individuals should share the task of changing society's environmental behaviour. The DEC programmes all have the same overarching objectives to educate through awareness and training, develop and empower and raise people's capacity to respond to complex environmental issues. This can only be done by teaching relevant green skills knowledge.

In this way the Centre can not only influence environmental behaviour, but also career choices that learners make later in their lives. At the Delta Environmental Centre (DEC), we run programmes for children from grades R to 12 based on the revised CAPS curriculum requirements.

Here they learn more about animals and plants, habitats and biodiversity, the importance of natural resources, ecological relationships and how to deal with waste, conserve energy, save water. We also explore topics such as global warming and climate change. More than 20 000 children, ranging from the pre-school to matriculation level and beyond, visit the centre annually, including special needs students and those from less privileged communities.

Education and improved awareness can strengthen our response to climate change and that is what we are working to achieve at our centre: teaching our children how to be responsible citizens in the world of tomorrow.

*Malusi Vatsha is a Chief Executive Officer for Delta Environmental Centre*