The evolution of humankind is largely dependent on the quality of the environment and the resources it provides, with the natural environment playing a vital role in ensuring the survival of present and future generations. Our obligation as a society is to leave behind a better world for our children. At the UN Environment Programme, we believe that the best way to ensure a better, healthier planet is to equip today’s youth with the knowledge and leadership skills to meet tomorrow’s environmental challenges.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations member states in 2015, provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) underscore that improving health and education, reducing inequality, and spurring economic growth go hand in hand with tackling climate change and preserving our oceans, ecosystems and forests. It has become undoubtedly apparent that a vital aspect of this drive for a sustainable and prosperous future lies in the integration of environment and sustainability at all levels of education.

SDG 4 (Quality Education) stipulates that obtaining a quality education is the foundation to creating sustainable development and environmental security. In addition to improving quality of life, access to inclusive education can equip people with the tools required to develop innovative solutions to the world’s greatest problems. With a world population of 7.5 billion and limited natural resources, we, as individuals and societies, need to learn to live together sustainably. We need to take action responsibly, based on the understanding that what we do today can have implications on the lives of people and the planet in the future.

Education on environment and sustainability empowers people to change the way they think and work towards a sustainable future. There is growing international recognition of environmental education being an integral element of quality education and as a key enabler for sustainable development. This can be seen in SDG Target 4.7, which commits that by 2030 “all learners shall 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”.

Moreover, SDG 12.8 aims to “ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature”.

The environmental legacy of today’s youth will be determined by the lifestyle choices they go on to make. This means that it is imperative that starting from a young age, Arab youth are encouraged to adopt behavioural changes through the integration of environment and sustainability into their education. This can be done by raising awareness on food waste reduction, the impact that single-use plastics have on our ecosystems, and the benefits of sustainable consumption and production. Importantly, this education needs to not only inspire a behavioural shift, but should enable it by teaching youth what to do and how to get there.

Some countries in the Arab region have already adopted the above approach in a multi-dimensional manner, allowing environmental education to benefit their economies and inspire their people. The United Arab Emirates, for example, recently announced a new program aimed at raising public awareness on preserving the local environment, with the joint objectives of ensuring the sustainability of its biological diversity and natural resources, whilst creating new economic growth by positioning the UAE as an important ecotourism destination globally. Additionally, UN Environment Programme worked with the government of Bahrain to integrate climate change and environmental education into the elementary level school curriculum. This was done in response to public opinion polls that found that 85 percent of the population believed climate change was a severe issue that deserved to be addressed, and that there was not enough public awareness on the phenomenon.

The integration of environmental education into school
curricula will highly impact the growing youth population. One out of every five persons in the Arab region is between 15 and 24 years old, and more than half of the population is below the age of 25. This represents an important wealth for the region, especially if these young people can be equipped with the skills to engage with the growing green economy. UNEP has estimated that up to 60 million new jobs in the green economy could be created by 2030. Renewable energy generation, building and energy efficiency, roll out of electric vehicles and other low-carbon industries open up the potential for 24 million jobs for 2030. Opportunities in these sectors are predicted to offset job losses of 6 million in sectors like oil drilling and coal mining, creating a net gain of 18 million. On top of this figure, a further six million jobs are expected to result from the growth of the Circular Economy.

The promotion of environment and sustainability in tertiary educational institutions in the Arab region can provide an opportunity to address the youth employment challenge whilst simultaneously preserving the environment and increasing climate resilience. But a sustained and determined push is needed to achieve this goal. The quality of higher education in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region is amongst the lowest in the world. Only three Arab universities are on the list of the top 500 universities in the world, and none are in the top 200. Employers in the region complain that university graduates lack the skills needed to work in the global marketplace. As such, it is imperative that universities adapt and offer curricula that will prepare the future workforce with the skills and knowledge needed to pursue green jobs and boost the green economy through the integration of environment and sustainability into education.

UN Environment Programme has been working towards the integration of environment and sustainability into tertiary education systems for 30 years and has created a Global University Alliance, linking and supporting over 800 universities around the world. The Alliance creates and offers educational content, courses and materials that can be shared with student populations and technical staff. Regionally, the Youth and Education Alliance (YEAI), formerly known as GUPES, was launched in 2016 and offers great potential. The program, which aims to promote the integration of environment and sustainability concerns into teaching, research, community engagement, the management of universities, and the greening of university infrastructure and operations, was developed in such a way as to allow regionally-specific thematic areas become priorities in implementation. For the Arab region, for instance, one of the core pillars within YEAI is ‘Greening University Curricula’. It entails the coordination of environment and sustainability seminars for universities, business and industry communities with the aim of inspiring curriculum review and realignment towards sustainable development in response to job market demands for green skills. The tools are therefore available for the integration of environment and sustainability in education. What appears to be lacking in the Arab region is the sustained drive to make these changes.

Education on environment and sustainability is core to the United Nation’s holistic approach to ensure a better and more prosperous future for all. Whilst the current trends displayed by policy makers and leaders within the Arab region are positive, the integration of environment and sustainability into education at all levels needs to be acted upon as an operational priority, with the understanding that the benefits it produces not only contribute to the global fight against environment degradation and climate change, but can also be felt at home with shrinking youth unemployment and growing national economies.