



General Education, Values, and Character within the Framework of the Pillars of Sustainable Development in Indonesia

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Abstract: The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) constitute a global development agenda that emphasizes balance among the social, economic, and environmental pillars, reinforced by governance as a cross-cutting pillar. This article aims to critically and comprehensively examine the contribution of general education to the internalization of values and character formation in strengthening the social pillar of sustainable development, with particular reference to SDG 4 (Quality Education). Employing a literature review, this study analyzes peer-reviewed journals, academic books, and relevant policy documents through thematic analysis and conceptual synthesis. The findings indicate that quality education integrating values and character education contributes not only to improving learning outcomes but also to advancing SDG 4 by fostering inclusive, equitable, and sustainability-oriented education. General education that cultivates character traits such as mindfulness, curiosity, courage, resilience, ethics, and leadership plays a strategic role in developing socially responsible and environmentally conscious citizens. This review advances the understanding of education's role in sustainable development by positioning character education within general education as a key mechanism for strengthening the social pillar of the SDGs. The findings imply the need for holistic and contextual curriculum development and teaching practices to support the realization of a sustainable and just future in Indonesia.

Keywords: general education; social pillar; sustainable development goals.

Abstrak: Tujuan Pembangunan Berkelanjutan (SDGs) merupakan agenda pembangunan global yang menyinergikan keseimbangan antara pilar sosial, ekonomi, dan lingkungan, dengan tata kelola sebagai pilar penguat lintas sektoral. Artikel ini

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bertujuan mengkaji secara kritis dan komprehensif kontribusi pendidikan umum terhadap internalisasi nilai dan pembentukan karakter dalam memperkuat pilar sosial pembangunan berkelanjutan, khususnya merujuk pada SDG 4 (Pendidikan Berkualitas). Melalui metode tinjauan pustaka, studi ini menganalisis jurnal ilmiah bereputasi, buku akademik, dan dokumen kebijakan relevan menggunakan analisis tematik dan sintesis konseptual. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pendidikan berkualitas yang mengintegrasikan pendidikan nilai dan karakter tidak hanya meningkatkan capaian pembelajaran, tetapi juga mengakselerasi pencapaian SDG 4 dengan mewujudkan pendidikan yang inklusif, berkeadilan, dan berorientasi keberlanjutan. Pendidikan umum yang menanamkan karakter seperti kesadaran penuh (mindfulness), keingintahuan, keberanian, resiliensi, etika, dan kepemimpinan memegang peran strategis dalam membentuk warga negara yang memiliki tanggung jawab sosial dan wawasan lingkungan. Kajian ini memperluas pemahaman mengenai peran pendidikan dalam pembangunan berkelanjutan dengan menempatkan pendidikan karakter dalam pendidikan umum sebagai mekanisme kunci penguatan pilar sosial SDGs. Implikasi studi ini menekankan urgensi pengembangan kurikulum dan praktik pedagogi yang holistik serta kontekstual demi mewujudkan masa depan Indonesia yang berkelanjutan dan berkeadilan.

Kata kunci: *tujuan pembangunan berkelanjutan; pilar sosial; pendidikan umum.*

A. Introduction

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a global development agenda that emerged from a long process of global development thinking and practice (Chimhowu et al., 2019; Fukuda-Parr & Muchhala, 2020; Reynolds et al., 2018; Scholte & Söderbaum, 2017). The initial idea of sustainable development was first introduced internationally at the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment (Ashford & Hall, 2018; Mensah, 2019), which marked a growing global awareness of the limitations of natural resources and the negative impacts of uncontrolled development. The acceptance and implementation of the concept of sustainable development did not happen instantly. For several decades, development was still dominated by an economic growth paradigm that tended to ignore social and environmental aspects. It was only in 2015, through the official declaration of the SDGs by the United Nations, that sustainable development was affirmed as a universal, integrative global agenda involving all development sectors and all levels of society (Alisjahbana & Murniningtyas, 2018; Fayomi et al., 2018; Huck & Kurkin, 2018).

Sustainable development is defined in the Brundtland Report (1987) as development that is able to meet the needs of the present generation without

compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This definition emphasizes that development should not only be oriented towards short-term economic results, but must also consider ecological sustainability and social justice between generations. The main essence of sustainable development is the internalization of social and economic impacts on the environment (Hariram et al., 2023; Tarí et al., 2021). This means that every development activity is required to integrate ecological considerations, prevent environmental degradation, and maintain the balance of natural systems so that they remain capable of supporting human life in the long term (Alisjahbana & Murniningtyas, 2018).

Within the framework of the SDGs, sustainable development rests on three main pillars, namely the economic pillar, the social pillar, and the environmental pillar (Ghimire, 2023; Purvis et al., 2019; Vyas et al., 2019). These three pillars are interrelated and cannot be separated from one another. However, in development practices in various countries, including Indonesia, the economic pillar often becomes the main focus, while the social and environmental pillars tend to be positioned as supporting aspects (Arifin et al., 2024; Punpeng, 2020). Human activities in meeting economic needs through excessive exploitation of natural resources have caused various environmental problems, such as ecosystem damage, climate change, and a decline in the quality of life of communities. These impacts are not only ecological in nature but also have implications for social and cultural stability that could potentially threaten the sustainability of future generations (Widjajanti, 2014).

Sustainable development cannot be understood solely as economic development, but rather as a systematic effort to increase the capacity and awareness of the community in managing natural resources responsibly. The success of economic development should be measured by the extent to which communities have the capabilities, knowledge, and values that promote environmental protection and social justice (Hasan & Azis, 2018). In this case, education plays a strategic role as a means of social transformation that can shape the community's perspective, attitude, and behavior towards development and the environment.

The role of education in sustainable development is explicitly reflected in SDG 4 (Quality Education), which emphasizes the importance of quality, inclusive, and equitable education, as well as promoting lifelong learning (Elfert, 2019; Monaco, 2024; Webb et al., 2017). SDG 4 not only targets improving access to and quality of education in technical terms, but also emphasizes strengthening values, attitudes, and

character that support peace, social justice, equality, and environmental sustainability. This is where general education has a strategic position in strengthening the social pillars of sustainable development through the internalization of values and character building of students as responsible citizens.

Academic studies on sustainable development in Indonesia still show limitations in placing general education, values, and character as the main focus of analysis. Most studies focus more on economic and environmental aspects, such as natural resource management, green development policies, and sustainable economic growth (Asdlori, 2023; Faizah & Nugraheni, 2024; Simatupang, 2022). Meanwhile, the social dimension (particularly the role of education in shaping sustainable values and character) still receives relatively little attention.

Discussing education in the context of sustainable development tend to be normative and descriptive, and has not comprehensively linked general education to the SDG 4 framework as a pillar of sustainable development. Education is often positioned only as a complement to development policies, rather than as a fundamental foundation for building awareness, ethics, and character for sustainability (Faizah, 2020; Hilman et al., 2024; Ilham, 2024; Romadhon et al., 2025). This condition indicates a research gap that needs to be filled through a more systematic and critical study of the role of general education in sustainable development in Indonesia.

Based on this background and research gap, this article aims to critically and comprehensively examine the role of general education in internalizing values and shaping character that supports the social pillar of sustainable development in Indonesia, with specific reference to the SDG 4 framework. This study aims to answer questions about how general education contributes to instilling sustainability values, building environmentally and socially conscious character, and strengthening the role of education as the foundation of sustainable development. Thus, this article is expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of education and sustainable development studies, as well as practical contributions to the formulation of education policies and practices in line with the SDGs agenda in Indonesia.

B. Method

This article uses a literature review method with a qualitative-descriptive approach. A literature review was chosen because the purpose of this study is to build a conceptual understanding and theoretical framework regarding the role of general

education, values, and character within the framework of sustainable development pillars in Indonesia, particularly in relation to SDG 4. Through a literature review, the author attempts to synthesize various thoughts, findings, and concepts from previous studies in a systematic and critical manner (Creswell, 2019; Khoiri, 2018; Nazir, 2009).

The literature review process flow includes the following steps:

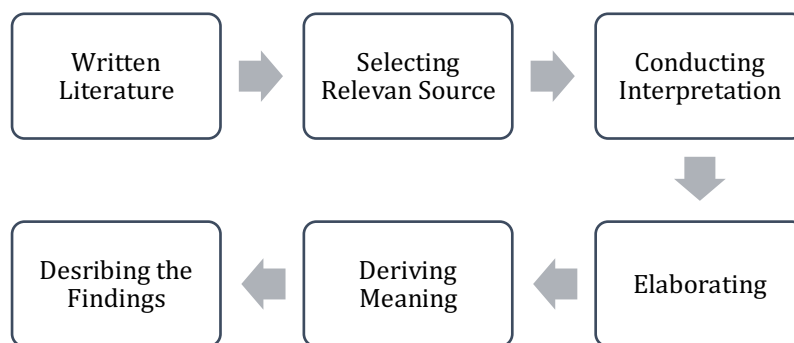


Figure 1. Literature review flow chart (Adapted from Putra et al., 2022)

The data sources in this study came from various relevant written literature, including national and international scientific journal articles, academic books, policy reports, and official documents related to sustainable development, education, values, and character. In addition, online sources (the internet) were also used selectively, particularly to access official documents such as SDGs reports and publications from credible international and national institutions.

1. Literature search and selection process

Literature searches were conducted using academic databases and online sources relevant to keywords such as sustainable development, Sustainable Development Goals, SDG 4, general education, values education, and character education. The literature obtained was then selected using inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure the relevance and quality of the sources.

The inclusion criteria in this study include: (1) literature that discusses sustainable development, particularly the social pillar; (2) literature that examines the role of education, general education, values, or character; (3) publications relevant to the Indonesian context or having conceptual relevance to the SDGs; and (4) sources from scientific journals, academic books, or official documents that are academically accountable. Meanwhile, the exclusion criteria include: (1) literature that has no direct connection with the theme of education and sustainable development; (2) sources that

are popular in nature without a clear academic basis; and (3) publications whose information is incomplete or difficult to verify.

2. Analysis and synthesis

The selected literature was analyzed through several stages. *First*, an initial screening was conducted to ensure the suitability of the topic and focus of the study. *Second*, an in-depth reading and interpretation of the literature was carried out to identify concepts, main ideas, and arguments relevant to the research theme. *Third*, thematic grouping is carried out, which is classifying the literature based on main issues such as the social pillars of sustainable development, the role of general education, internalization of values, and character building.

Next, the author conducts a critical analysis by comparing and linking various views and findings between the literature to find patterns, gaps, and contributions from each source. This stage is followed by conceptual synthesis, which is piecing together the results of the analysis into a complete and coherent framework of understanding of General Education, values, and character in the context of sustainable development in Indonesia.

3. Validity and accuracy of the study

To maintain accuracy and academic rigor, this study uses various sources from diverse authors and backgrounds and prioritizes peer-reviewed literature. In addition, the analysis process is carried out repeatedly to ensure consistency of interpretation and accuracy of concept synthesis. Thus, the results of this study are expected to provide a comprehensive and academically accountable overview.

Through these stages, the results of this literature study are systematically described as answers to the research focus, namely, to explain and conceptually examine the role of General Education, values, and character within the framework of sustainable development pillars in Indonesia, particularly in supporting the strengthening of social pillars and the achievement of SDG 4.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Three pillars of sustainable development and one reinforcing pillar

Based on various international declarations and agreements on sustainable development, sustainable development rests on three main pillars, namely the social pillar, the economic pillar, and the environmental pillar. These three pillars are

designed to ensure holistic development and sustainability by balancing human welfare, economic growth, and environmental sustainability. However, to ensure the integration and effectiveness of the implementation of these three pillars, a reinforcing pillar is needed to serve as an integrating mechanism. Therefore, a fourth pillar was developed, namely the pillar of law and good governance, which plays a role in ensuring policy consistency, accountability, and sustainability of development implementation.

The four pillars of sustainable development are then elaborated into 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which serve as global benchmarks for development planning and implementation in various countries, including Indonesia. The division of goals into four pillars, as shown in [Table 1](#), emphasizes that sustainable development cannot be achieved partially but requires interconnection and synergy between pillars.

Table 1. 4 Pillar sustainable development.
Source: SDGs Secretary in Alisjahbana & Murniningtyas (2018)

Social Development Pillar	Economic Development Pillar	Environmental Development Pillar	Legal and Governance Pillar
Goal 1. No Poverty	Goal 7. Affordable and Clean Energy	Goal 6. Clean Water and Sanitation	
Goal 2. Zero Hunger	Goal 8. Decent Work and Economic Growth	Goal 11. Sustainable Cities and Communities	
Goal 3. Good Health and Well-being	Goal 9. Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure	Goal 12. Responsible Consumption and Production	Goal 16. Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions
Goal 4. Quality Education	Goal 10. Reduced Inequalities	Goal 13. Climate Action	
Goal 5. Gender Equality	Goal 17. Partnerships for the Goals	Goal 14. Life Below Water Goal 15. Life on Land	

Based on [Table 1](#), education is explicitly positioned under Goal 4 (Quality Education) within the social development pillar. This placement indicates that education is regarded as the primary foundation for strengthening the social dimension of sustainable development. Education is not understood merely as an effort to enhance knowledge and technical skills, but also as a means of fostering holistic human development, encompassing values, attitudes, and character. Within the SDGs framework, Goal 4 emphasizes the importance of inclusive and equitable quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning, aimed at preparing individuals to participate actively and responsibly in sustainable development.

Table 2. Contribution of education to the pillars of sustainable development

Aspect of Educational Contribution	Summary of Key Findings	Strengthened Pillars of Sustainable Development	Sources
Strengthening individual capacity	Education equips individuals with critical thinking skills, creativity, and adaptive competencies required to respond to global change and the increasing complexity of the labor market.	Social, Economic	(Aldhaen, 2023; Benavot et al., 2024)
Development of sustainable human resources	Education contributes to the development of human resources who are not only technically competent but also possess ethical and social awareness in managing resources and utilizing technology sustainably.	Social, Economic, Environmental	(Adhikari & Shrestha, 2023; Bindawas, 2025)
Internalization of sustainability values and character	General education plays a key role in instilling values such as social responsibility, environmental awareness, justice, tolerance, and solidarity as fundamental elements of the social pillar of sustainable development.	Social	(Akçay et al., 2024)
Long-term sustainability of development outcomes	Strong character formation through education is a prerequisite for ensuring that achievements in the economic and environmental sectors are not short-term but sustainable in the long run.	Social as a reinforcing pillar	Synthesized from the literature
Poverty alleviation and reduction of social inequality	Quality education and equitable access to education increase employment opportunities, improve economic well-being, and enable equal participation in social life.	Social, Economic	(Edwards Jr et al., 2024; Saini et al., 2023)
Cross-cutting linkages among SDGs	Education (SDG 4) contributes directly to the achievement of SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).	Social and Economic	SDGs framework
Education as an instrument of social mobility	Education functions as a mechanism for social mobility and for building collective awareness of the importance of social justice and sustainability.	Social	Synthesized from the literature

A review of the literature shows that quality education has a strategic contribution in strengthening not only the social pillar, but also the economic and environmental pillars indirectly (Ebekozien et al., 2025; Monaco, 2024). Through education, individuals are equipped with critical thinking skills, creativity, and adaptive skills necessary to face the dynamics of global change and an increasingly complex world of work (Aldhaen, 2023; Benavot et al., 2024). Education plays a role in producing human resources who are not only technically competent but also have

ethical and social awareness in managing resources and utilizing technology sustainably (Adhikari & Shrestha, 2023; Bindawas, 2025).

General education has a key role in character building and the internalization of sustainability values, such as social responsibility, environmental awareness, justice, tolerance, and solidarity (Akçay et al., 2024). These values are fundamental elements in the social pillar of sustainable development. Without strong character building, the achievement of development goals in the economic and environmental fields has the potential to be short-term and unsustainable. Education serves as a bridge that connects the achievement of economic and environmental goals with long-term social sustainability.

Quality education is closely linked to poverty eradication and social inequality reduction efforts (Edwards Jr et al., 2024; Saini et al., 2023), as reflected in the interconnection between Goal 4 and Goal 1 (no poverty), Goal 8 (decent work and economic growth), and Goal 10 (reduced inequalities). Through fair and equitable access to education, individuals have greater opportunities to obtain decent work, improve their economic well-being, and participate equally in social life. Education serves as an instrument of social mobility, as well as a means of shaping collective awareness of the importance of social justice and sustainability.

This confirms that value- and character-oriented public education has a strategic position as a pillar of sustainable development. Education plays a role in developing individuals who are not only economically productive but also have good character, ethics, and concern for environmental sustainability and social life. Therefore, strengthening the role of education within the framework of SDG 4 is an important prerequisite for achieving synergy between the pillars of sustainable development in a holistic and sustainable manner in Indonesia.

2. General education, values, and character in the pillar of social development

Education that instills positive social values and character plays an important role in building a harmonious, inclusive, and socially just society, thereby supporting the achievement of the social pillar of sustainable development. Education in the context of Sustainable Development includes equipping students with knowledge and skills related to sustainable development, such as increasing the average level of schooling up to university, environmentally friendly behavior, responsibility towards nature, greater attention to disabled communities, and appreciation of culture and cultural contributions to Sustainable Development.

This is in line with Indonesia's highly diverse conditions and local cultural diversity, which are valuable assets for sustainable development. Education that respects cultural diversity and promotes social inclusiveness is key to building social cohesion and reducing conflict, thereby strengthening the social pillar of sustainable development (Ananda et al., 2024). The implementation plan can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Implementation plan for SDG 4: Quality education

Implementation Measures
4.a. Build and upgrade education facilities that are child-friendly, disability-friendly, and gender-sensitive, and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive, and effective learning environments for all.
4.b. By 2020, substantially expand the number of scholarships available to developing countries globally, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States, and African countries, for enrollment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering, and scientific programs, in developed countries and other developing countries.
4.c. By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing States.

Source: Alisjahbana & Murniningtyas (2018)

The main function of education is to develop outstanding individuals who are the hope of the nation, as stated in the National Education System Law (*Sisdiknas*). Outstanding individuals are those who optimize their potential in order to contribute to themselves, society, and the natural environment. In this case, education is not only viewed as the fulfillment of intelligence and skills, but also as a means of instilling good character.

The emphasis on character in the educational process, especially in the spirit of Sustainable Development, cannot be separated from the general education, values, and character program. General education is intended for all Indonesian people regardless of race, age, ethnicity, gender, and religion. General education in this perspective can be broken down into three meanings, namely:

- a. General education as a science. This implies that general education exists as a field of science consisting of two areas of study, namely Values Education and Personality Education.
- b. General education as an educational program. General education is a compulsory education program for all students at the elementary to secondary levels, to foster character and prepare students to become good citizens and well-rounded individuals. In this realm, general education manifests itself as subjects such as Religious Education, Civic Education, Language, Mathematics, Natural Sciences,

Social Sciences, Arts and Culture, Physical Education and Sports, Skills/Vocational Training, and Local Content.

- c. General education as a compulsory course program. General education is present as a Compulsory Curriculum Course (CCC) for all students at the higher education level from any scientific discipline. CCC consists of courses in Religious Education, Pancasila Education, Civics, and Indonesian Language.

Through the above description, the concept of General education includes values education to build good character. General education fosters skilled individuals, able to understand symbols and signs to communicate well, able to be creative, appreciate aesthetics, be disciplined in personal and interpersonal relationships, be wise, appreciate life, and have broad and integrated insights (Phenix, 2001).

3. General education, values, and character in supporting sustainable development

As previously explained, the essence of sustainable development lies in internalizing the impact of social and economic actions on the environment. Every human activity is required to consider ecological sustainability, prevent environmental damage, and maintain the carrying capacity of nature so that it can continue to support the lives of current and future generations (Cavender-Bares et al., 2024; Finlay, 2023; Said et al., 2024). Therefore, education oriented towards sustainable development should not only emphasize the mastery of cognitive knowledge, but also systematically integrate values and character learning through a contextual, participatory, and real-experience-oriented approach.

The concept of general education has strong relevance to sustainable development because it places humans as an integral part of social and ecological systems. General education emphasizes the interconnection between natural, social, and cultural phenomena and fosters awareness that every human action has reciprocal consequences for oneself, society, and the environment (Lickona, 2012). This perspective is in line with the spirit of sustainable development, which demands a change in the mindset and behavior of humans towards nature and their fellow human beings.

At the implementation level, general education that integrates values and character in supporting sustainable development needs to move away from traditional approaches that are one-sided and theoretical. Education should be implemented through active and contextual learning approaches, such as project-based learning,

problem-based learning, community-based learning, and role modeling by educators ([Education for Sustainable Development \(ESD\), 2021](#)). In Indonesia, this approach can be realized through learning projects that raise local issues, such as waste management in the school environment, water conservation, preservation of local wisdom, or strengthening social solidarity in the community.

To clarify the character qualities relevant to sustainable development, this study refers to the Character Qualities Framework developed by the Center for Curriculum Redesign (CCR), which includes six key character qualities: Mindfulness, Curiosity, Courage, Resilience, Ethics, and Leadership ([Bialik et al., 2015](#)). This framework provides conceptual and practical guidance for integrating character education into 21st-century learning.

- a. Mindfulness can be implemented through reflective learning that encourages students to recognize the connection between their daily actions and their impact on the environment and society. In the Indonesian context, mindfulness can be practiced through reflection activities after environmental projects, ethical discussions on local development issues, or cultivating an attitude of caring for the school environment and the surrounding community. This awareness helps students develop personal and social responsibility in decision-making.
- b. Curiosity can be developed through problem-based learning that raises real challenges of sustainable development, such as climate change, social inequality, or natural resource crises. Students are encouraged to explore, conduct simple research, and engage in interdisciplinary discussions. In Indonesia, this approach can be integrated into the curriculum through project assignments that examine local issues, so that students not only understand the concepts but are also encouraged to seek innovative, contextual solutions.
- c. Courage can be instilled through learning that gives students space to express their opinions, take ethical positions, and engage in responsible social action. For example, through debates on development issues, environmental campaigns, or involvement in community service programs. This courage is important so that students can become agents of change who dare to fight for sustainability and social justice, even in the face of pressure or resistance.
- d. Resilience can be developed through challenging and reflective learning experiences, where students are encouraged to face failure, uncertainty, and change. In the context of Indonesia, which is prone to natural disasters and social

change, simulation-based learning, disaster case studies, and collaborative projects can help students develop resilience, adaptability, and a never-give-up attitude in facing the challenges of sustainable development.

- e. Ethics is a key foundation for sustainable decision-making. Ethics education can be integrated through value discussions, moral dilemma case studies, and the habit of being honest, fair, and responsible in academic and social life. In the context of sustainable development, ethics education helps students understand that the exploitation of natural resources and social inequality are not only technical issues, but also moral issues that demand shared responsibility.
- f. Leadership can be developed through collaborative learning, student organization activities, and community-based projects that involve teamwork and joint decision-making. Education that fosters leadership will produce individuals who are able to motivate others, build cross-party collaboration, and initiate positive change in society. In the Indonesian context, strengthening leadership based on the values of cooperation and deliberation is relevant to supporting inclusive, sustainable development.

The integration of the CCR framework into General Education shows that character education is not separate from academic learning but is an integral part of the overall educational process. Through the internalization of values and character development oriented towards sustainability, General Education contributes to shaping individuals who are not only intellectually intelligent but also have social responsibility and environmental awareness. General Education, values, and character are strategic pillars in realizing equitable, inclusive, and sustainable development in Indonesia.

D. Conclusion

Character education integrated into general education is a strategic foundation for realizing inclusive, equitable, and long-term sustainable development. The results of this study confirm that strengthening character in the education process cannot be separated from the General Education, Values, and Character program, especially in the context of implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 on quality education. General education has an important position because it is universal and intended for all levels of Indonesian society without distinction based on race, age, ethnicity, gender, or religion.

Sustainable development requires strengthening the social dimension through the internalization of values of goodness, responsibility, and concern for the environment and others. General education plays a role in building awareness that human life, society, and the environment are an interconnected, integral, and non-partial unity. Through this approach, character education not only shapes individuals who are morally upright on a personal level, but also citizens who have ecological and social awareness as part of their collective responsibility.

The implications of this study show that education policy in Indonesia needs to more explicitly place sustainability-oriented character education at the core of national curriculum development. The curriculum should not only be directed at achieving academic competence and work skills, but also at strengthening values and character relevant to the challenges of sustainable development, such as environmental awareness, social justice, ethics, and leadership. The integration of these values can be done by strengthening graduate profiles, learning outcomes, and aligning education policies with SDG 4 targets, particularly target 4.7.

In terms of educational practice, the results of this study emphasize the need to develop contextual, participatory, and real-experience-based learning methods. Educators are encouraged to integrate values and character education into every subject through project-based learning, problem-solving, collaborative activities, and student involvement in social and environmental issues around them. Character education can be positioned as a separate subject, but also as an integral part of the overall learning process.

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