



**Sustainable Service in DS, a European training project to improve the social inclusion of persons with Down syndrome through their active participation in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.**

Our planet Earth and the societies that live on it, are constantly facing challenges that call into question our way of life and the way in which we relate and live. Among these challenges, the need to take care of our environment and to live in more egalitarian and fair societies has become one of the most important in recent years.

One of the concepts or approaches that tries to deal with this challenge is that of Sustainable Development, which by definition speaks about the need for a *“development that meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”* (WCED, 1987:8). Although this report originally was focused on the environmental factor and concerns, the concept of sustainable development has evolved through time including the social factor to achieve a balanced sustainable development.

On 25<sup>th</sup> September 2015, the 193 member states of the UNITED NATIONS (UN) approved the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, an ambitious plan set out to achieve prosperity that is respectful of the planet and its inhabitants. This Agenda is made up of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to be met by 2030 with the intention of *“leaving no-one behind”*. Therefore, it is an ambitious plan of action towards a peaceful and prosperous world, where dignity of individuals and equality among all is applied as a fundamental principle. From this point of view stated by UN, it is critical to ensure the full and equal participation of persons with disabilities in all spheres of society and

create enabling environments by, for and with persons with disabilities, in line with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

In 2018 the United Nations launched a first-ever UN flagship report on disability and the Sustainable Development Goals named *UN Disability and Development Report – Realizing the SDGs by, for and with persons with disabilities*. The report shows that persons with disabilities are at disadvantage regarding most Sustainable Development Goals and declares that concrete action is needed to include the world’s one billion persons with disabilities – 15% of the world population – as both agents and beneficiaries of development. According to this report, *“persons with disabilities are not yet sufficiently included in the implementation of the SDGs where sustainable development for all can only be attained if persons with intellectual disabilities are equally included as both agents and beneficiaries”*. The success of the 2030 Agenda requires a participatory and inclusive approach in which all stakeholders, including people with intellectual disabilities, are engaged. In fact, reviewing some of the SDGs, it seems clear that these persons have been included as beneficiaries of them and their targets, however, people with disabilities in general and people with Down syndrome, in particular, have the right and the capabilities in order to become agents of change who are directly involved in the design and development of initiatives and projects related to the SDGs that seek to generate positive impacts on their stakeholders, communities and societies in terms of sustainable development.



For persons with Down syndrome and with other intellectual disabilities to become active agents of change to achieve sustainable development, among other actions, education and training is needed.

Down Syndrome is a chromosomal disorder, occurring at the rate of 1 in 600/1000 births. The world's population of people with Down Syndrome is over 6 million. The medical condition and cognitive development of these people are affected. For people with Down syndrome, life-long learning is not only about learning new skills or vocational training; it is about being included in society, according to Article 3 of "Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities".

The now well-established approach of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) settled in UNESCO's report "*Education for Sustainable Development Goals. Learning Objectives*" (UNESCO, 2017), empowers learners to take informed decisions and responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society for present and future generations. As stated in this report, "*To create a more sustainable world and to engage with sustainability-related issues as described in the SDGs, individuals must become sustainability change-makers. They require the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that empower them to contribute to sustainable development. Education, formal and informal, and lifelong learning, is crucial for the achievement of sustainable development*".

ESD is about empowering and motivating learners to become active sustainability citizens who are capable of critical thinking and able to participate in shaping a sustainable future. Within the pedagogical approaches that are adequate to this aim we find action-oriented learning where learners engage in action and reflect on their experiences in terms of the intended learning process and personal development.

Among the most well-known action-oriented learning methods we find, Service-Learning, that has been defined in different and complementary ways, as a special approach to teaching that connects concepts with current real needs and problems in the (local) community and society; as a teaching method that encourages active learning; as an experiential learning model; as a pedagogical approach that integrates

the study program and commitment to communities; and last, but certainly not the least, as a movement for social change.

Taking into account diversity and particularity of learning contexts for people with Down syndrome and other intellectual disabilities, we can define service-learning as an educational approach that combines learning objectives with community service in order to provide a meaningful, pragmatic and progressive learning experience while meeting societal needs.



Our project, *“Involving persons with Down syndrome in the implementation of sustainable development goals through service learning”* (Sustainable Service in DS), a project that has been funded within the Erasmus+ program of the European Union, collects all these needs and knowledge to try to achieve the objective of developing a training program for *increasing the competences of persons with Down Syndrome and their Supports regarding the implementation of the SDG through Service-Learning, while increasing their social inclusion*. Therefore, the specific objectives of this project are:

To achieve this objective, over almost two years, period of duration of the project, the different partners that make up this consortium have been working on developing the following results,



1. A training scheme developed with the direct participation of Persons with Down Syndrome and other End Users.
2. A set of training activities for trainers based on the Service-Learning methodology.
3. A set of Training Materials to be used by trainees along the implementation of the training or learning activities.
4. A multilingual e-Training Platform for enhancing the training process.
5. A Transnational Training/Learning Activity, during 5 days in Valencia, Spain, for trainees with Down Syndrome and other intellectual disabilities aiming to empower, to acknowledge and to open new perspectives for them.

Before writing this article, between the months of June and September 2022, different validation pilot training courses have been developed by partners in Romania, Croatia, Portugal and Spain engaging more than 120 trainees and experts. In these pilot courses, trainees have been able to test the training materials, the training activities and the e-training platform, providing us with extremely valuable information about the potential improvements that we can implement before the project ends on the 31st of October 2022.

For more information about this project please visit, <https://sustainable-serviceinds.eu/>

The Sustainable Service in DS Consortium

