

# **Supporting the United Nations Decade on Education for Sustainable Development**

**2005-2015**

**IUCN COMMISSION IN EDUCATION AND  
COMMUNICATION**

**'Education for Sustainable Development is an investment in our future... each respective country should ensure that appropriate resources are made available for its development'**

*World Summit on Sustainable Development: Plan of Implementation (2002)*

## **1. The global commitment to sustainable development**

Governments with support of civil society have made numerous legal commitments and agreements including amongst others to the Conventions on Biological Diversity, Ramsar – Wetlands, Climate Change, Combat Desertification, Aarhus Convention on information, public participation and access to justice, Human Rights, and the Rights of the Child. Along with civil society governments agreed to *Agenda 21*, the *World Summit on Sustainable Development Plan of Implementation* and to achieve the UN Millennium Development Goals by 2015. These (and more) agreements commit governments to take responsibility with the support of other social actors to a suite of actions to change and move society towards sustainable development.

Such progress to sustainable development depends on actions by people in all walks of life, requiring changes in the way of thinking, living and working. Recognizing the changes required by society, all these agreements call for actions to facilitate participation, awareness, education and to develop capacity.

To make a shift to sustainable development the world needs to magnify the number of people who reflect upon the environmental and social consequences of their actions, are able, motivated and active to work towards sustainable development.

To enhance this effort towards social change, the United Nations has resolved to make 2005-2015 the Decade for Education for Sustainable Development.

## **2. What is Education for Sustainable Development ESD?**

**'Emphasizing that education apart from being a human right is a prerequisite for achieving sustainable development and an essential tool for good governance'**

*Statement by the Ministers of the Environment from the UNECE Region on Education for Sustainable Development (2002)*

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) motivates, equips and involves individuals, and social groups in reflecting on how we currently live and work, in making informed decisions and creating ways to work towards a more sustainable world. ESD is about learning for change amongst adults as much as with youth.

Education for Sustainable Development has crystallised as a result of international agreements and the global call to actively pursue sustainable development. Originally perceived as education *about* sustainability it is being increasingly recognised, through

the influence of Agenda 21 and the more recent World Summit on Sustainable Development at Johannesburg, as more than the dissemination of knowledge. It is now understood that sustainable development is a process of adaptive management and systems thinking, requiring creativity, flexibility and critical reflection. Through team work – stakeholder dialogue and decision making - and working across disciplines, social groups learn from each other as they consider options and the consequences of these options to the future. Critical to education for sustainable development is learning to access and influence systems for public participation for decision-making.

#### **The Scope of Education for Sustainable Development**

The main thrusts of Education for Sustainable Development, originally identified in Chapter 36 of Agenda 21, have been expanded upon in the Work Programme of the UN Commission of Sustainable Development (CSD), reports of the major UN Conferences of the 1990's such as the conference on Women in Beijing, and Population in Cairo, The World Education Forum in Dakar.

(1) *Public understanding of the principles behind sustainability.* ESD has a major role in furthering the discussion of sustainability itself and the evolution of the concept from a vision to its practical application in culturally appropriate and locally relevant forms.

(2) *Mainstreaming ESD.* This social process needs to be mainstreamed into all sectors including business, agriculture, tourism, natural resource management, local government and mass media, adding value to program development and implementation.

(3) *Lifelong-learning for all.* Society has to adapt to a phenomenal rate of change in knowledge – a university degree is current for some 5 years – so the know how and capacity of individuals and organisations to be able to continuously learn is a most precious asset for the future. Therefore quality life-long education and learning opportunities are required for all peoples regardless of their occupation or circumstances. Without access to not only basic education but also higher education, nations will find development of any kind, let alone the much preferred sustainable development, very difficult. This education must also reflect the local culture and societal needs.

(4) *ESD is relevant to all nations.* The realization that it is our most highly educated countries that create some of the greatest threats to a sustainable future for the planet, the reorienting of existing education programs in all nations to address the social, environmental, and economic knowledge, skills, perspectives, and values inherent in sustainability is also a major thrust of ESD.

(5) *Specialised Training Programs.* The development of specialized training programs to ensure that all sectors of society have the skills necessary to perform their world in a sustainable manner.

### **3. Why a UN Decade for ESD?**

Despite recognition of the critical role that education for sustainable development must play in achieving sustainable development, the full potential of ESD has not been realised even ten years after Rio. It is time to draw increased attention to this issue to mobilise and magnify the impact of the many actions that have been undertaken. It is time to heat up society – to get a critical mass active and on board.

Rio called for all countries to develop and implement an Education for Sustainable Development Strategy by 2002. To date, only a handful of nations have drafted strategic frameworks for advancing this process at the national level. As a matter of priority, the UN Decade in Education for Sustainable Development should promote the development and implementation of national ESD strategies – or at least shared action plans - which provide strategic direction and support the efforts of all engaged in ESD. Countries

should address the issues raised in the Commission on Sustainable Development work programme.

ESD provides an umbrella to place all the demands of the various Conventions in a synergistic way. The Conventions call for knowledge sharing between countries as does the Commission on Sustainable Development work programme on ESD. Without engaging our societies, the progress to sustainable development will be halting. It is time to engage more than a small circle in this issue under the umbrella of the Decade.

The societies of the future are going to be learning societies, valuing and drawing on the creativity of their people in businesses, local government, agriculture, transport, energy and tourism. They will be built on sharing knowledge and learning.

#### **Examples of ESD initiatives**

- The government of the **Netherlands** has pooled funds from 6 Ministries and set up an institution to share knowledge and facilitate ESD
  - In **China**, the Ministry for Basic Education in partnership with WWF and BP have supported a program to assist to develop an education for sustainability program across in teacher education institutions across China – [www.wwfchina.org/english](http://www.wwfchina.org/english)
  - The government of **Australia** has funded an action research program which aims to integrate education for sustainability across the graduate disciplines at the University- [www.ea.gov.au/education/nap/update/aaee2002](http://www.ea.gov.au/education/nap/update/aaee2002).
  - The government of **Spain** held a wide consultative process to develop its White paper on Environmental Ed Education with a strong focus on sustainability and involvement of all Major Groups - [www.mma.es/educ/form\\_amb/index.htm](http://www.mma.es/educ/form_amb/index.htm)
  - Danish Cooperation for Environment and Development funded the research and development of education resources through the Learning for Sustainability which aims to contribute to educational transformation in **South Africa** and make a contribution to more sustainable living patterns - [www.ibis.dk/ee/resources/learning/index.php?menuid=5](http://www.ibis.dk/ee/resources/learning/index.php?menuid=5)
- US** government funds Project S.U.S.T.A.I.N, to develop, implement, evaluate, and disseminate a model of educational improvement based on sustainability education. [www.co.washtenaw.mi.us/depts/eis/susted/susted.html](http://www.co.washtenaw.mi.us/depts/eis/susted/susted.html)

## **4. What actions can be taken for the Decade on Education for Sustainable Development?**

- Set up a high level Task Force to oversee national plans for the UN Decade, or add this task to existing structures;
- Initiate a dialogue on the UN ESD DECADE at the national level including NGOs and major groups to identify a plan of action to magnify current effort;
- Invite all sectors to consider how to mainstream ESD into their work in recognition of the Decade, reaching out to all Major Groups including those which have not been the focus of ESD initiatives to come up with a plan;

- Develop a national policy with social groups to facilitate the integration of education for SD;
- Establish a national fund to facilitate innovation in ESD;
- Provide (national or regional) coordination of ESD efforts and promote networking;
- Set up an internet portal to link the activities being undertaken in ESD in the country and to make experience available to other countries;
- Draw up and share criteria, methods and approaches for effective ESD that draws on modern ways of learning that are less oriented to content to be taught than to a process that engages people in working on solutions and actions;
- Reflect on and document the experiences and lessons learnt in ESD over the past ten years with a view of consolidating the learning and sharing this nationally and internationally;
- Explore ways to magnify the impacts of ESD – moving pilot projects to scale;
- Address inequalities in ESD, particularly in respect of provisioning and quality of education;
- Integrate sustainable consumption education into ESD in developed countries;.
- Integrate ESD into basic education in working towards the Millennium Development Goals;
- Address the education of women in sustainable development as part of the Millennium goals on empowerment;
- Invite bilateral and multi-lateral donors to support the process where required

The IUCN Commission on Education and Communication, an international network of education and communication experts, is convinced that co-operation in ESD can contribute to mutual understanding, strengthen trust between nations and respect for cultural values and contribute to peace and security. For further information about IUCN CEC see [www.iucn.cec.org](http://www.iucn.cec.org)

UNESCO, as the lead agency of the *UN Decade in Education for Sustainable Development*, is currently engaged in developing concrete planning for the Decade. In the meantime, the UN General Assembly has invited governments to include necessary concrete measures to implement the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development starting from 2005. The plans for the UN Decade will be discussed at the fifty-eighth session of the UN General Assembly in 2003.

The IUCN Commission on Education and Communication CEC seeks your support in endorsing and actioning the *UN Decade in Education for Sustainable Development*. The IUCN Commission in Education and Communication champions this initiative as a means to raise this important instrument higher on the global agenda and to focus attention on the process of education as a tool for changes towards sustainable development. The Commission emphasises the importance of focusing attention on adult and community education, of mobilising action by all UN Major Groups to educate their constituencies, besides that of educating children. The world's adults, the decision-makers of today, must be part of the process now to activate – or heat up -society.

*This Statement was drafted by Daniella Tilbury and Wendy Goldstein (2003) in response to contributions made by the members of the Education for Sustainable Development Group of the IUCN Commission in Education and Communication. Special thanks go to Dr Jinie Dela for collating the comments and to Marta Andelman Charles Hopkins, Ramy Inocencio, Dieter Gross, Douwe Jan Joustra, Yukio Kamino, Heila Lotz-Sisitka, Peter Martin, Jean Perras, Pam Puntenney , Danie Schreuder John Smyth, Liu Yunhua for comments on the initial drafts.*