UNESCO’s role, vision and challenges for the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014)

The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014, DESD) was proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in December 2002 in resolution 57/254. In the following year, UNESCO, designated coordinator of the Decade, initiated wide ranging consultations in order to prepare an international implementation scheme for the Decade (v. Connect, vol. xxx, no. 1-2 and vol.xxviii, no. 1-2)

Guiding the Decade: the DESD International Implementation Scheme

Given the scale of implementation of the Decade - local, national, regional and international, as well as the large number of stakeholders involved, in order to ensure success, a framework had to be devised enabling all stakeholders to make their contribution. The International Implementation Scheme is thus designed not only to facilitate collective ownership of the Decade, it also invites us to build bridges between various global initiatives to promote education.

The Scheme also meets two concerns of the United Nations General Assembly, namely how to encourage governments to give life to the Decade and to build public awareness so that everyone will contribute to the Decade.

Vision of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development

The basic vision of the Decade is a world where everyone has the opportunity to benefit from education and learn the values, behaviours and lifestyles required for a sustainable future and for positive societal transformation. This translates into four objectives:

- facilitate networking, linkages, exchange and interaction among stakeholders in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD);
- foster an increased quality of teaching and learning in ESD;
- help countries to make progress towards and attain the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs);
- provide countries with new opportunities to incorporate ESD into education reform efforts.

This vision is reinforced by the 2003 General Conference 32 C/Resolution 17 reaffirming UNESCO's support to the Earth Charter and recognizing it as an important ethical framework for sustainable development.

Creating synergies with other earlier international initiatives is also an important feature of the Decade because the DESD; MDGs, which are geared to poverty reduction; Education for All (EFA), which focuses on universal access to education; and the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD), which is devoted to adult education, all share a common vision: education is the key to sustainable development.

Meeting the objectives of the Decade: Quality education

To meet the objectives of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, quality education is a crucial element. It is a prerequisite for education for sustainable development. ESD has come to be seen as a process of learning how to make decisions that consider the long-term future of the economy, ecology and equity of all communities. Building the capacity for such futures-oriented thinking is a key task of education. UNESCO believes that key to the success of the Decade is the acceptance
of a wider vision of what is meant by quality education. For it is through the application of learnt knowledge, skills, values and behaviours - all outcomes of quality education, that we can change the way we and others live to ensure a sustainable present and future. The understanding of what constitutes a quality education is evolving. There is a demand, however, for education to reflect upon its relevance to the modern world. While in the past much of the emphasis on education related to cognitive understanding and development, now there is a need to also address the social and other dimensions of learning. Education is expected to make a contribution to addressing sustainable human development, peace and security, and the quality of life at individual, family, societal and global levels.

UNESCO promotes quality education as a human right and supports a rights based approach to the implementation of all educational activities. Its work is based on a number of international instruments that identify education as a human right. Several of these international instruments indicate the desired nature or quality of this education. When we look at these instruments together and interpret them we go far beyond single articles to a web of commitments that speak to the depth and breadth of how we must begin to understand educational quality.

**Linking the Decade to other global education objectives**

As the UN agency with the education mandate, UNESCO is committed to ensuring that the three key global education movements — EFA, UNLD and DESD, work in concert in support of the MDGs. It will do this with the following understanding of the purposes of each. The eight goals and eighteen targets of the MDG provide a framework for international development cooperation. Both developing and industrialised countries have committed themselves to the MDGs, and the focus is on tackling poverty in its many aspects. Provision of primary education, and gender equality in education are the two areas where the MDGs overlap with the EFA agenda. Other aspects of education, such as literacy, quality, or non-formal education, are not an explicit part of the MDGs.

The six EFA goals* are concerned with extending basic education to every child and adult – it should be available to both females and males, to learners of all ages, offering relevant learning and life skills and striving to increase quality. Basic education should have a positive impact on the quality of life and on poverty, but the goals do not specify the underlying purposes of education. The UNLD contributes directly to EFA and DESD as a thread through all the six EFA goals. It is a key instrument of learning and must be part of all forms and stages of education. In some respects, UNLD goes beyond education, by demonstrating strategic links to other aspects of life – learning and using literacy has an impact on mother and child health, on fertility rates, on income levels, as well as increasing self-confidence, initiative, participatory citizenship and cultural self-esteem.

What is the place of the DESD in relation to these significant international initiatives? ESD is a vision of education that seeks to balance human and economic well-being with cultural traditions and respect for the earth's natural resources. It emphasises aspects of learning that enhance the transition towards sustainability including futures education; citizenship education; education for a culture of peace; gender equality and respect for human rights; health education; population education; education for protecting and managing natural resources; and education for sustainable consumption. Pursuing sustainable development through education requires educators and learners to reflect critically on their own communities. DESD promotes a set of basic values, processes and behaviours that should be part of learning in all circumstances.

**Contribution to the Millennium Development Goals**

UNESCO is committed to environmental sustainability as a key element in attaining the MDGs. It does this primarily through the work of its Science Sector and through its leadership of the DESD.

The DESD is one of the outcomes of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, 2002) and it is a world programme to reorient education around the three pillars of sustainable development - economic, social, and environmental. It is clear that there can be no long-term economic or social development on a depleted planet. Education to develop the widespread understanding of the interdependence and fragility of planetary life support systems, and the natural resource base upon which human well-being depends lies at the core of education for sustainable development.

Building on more than 30 years of experience in environmental education, ESD must continue to highlight the importance of addressing the issues of natural resources (water, energy, agriculture, housing, biodiversity, for example) as part of its broad agenda. In particular, the links with social and economic considerations will enable learners to adopt new behaviours in the protection and use of the world's natural resources, which are essential for human development, and, indeed, survival.

---

*1. Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children;
2. Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to a complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality;
3. Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes;
4. Achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults;
5. Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls’ full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality;
6. Improving all aspects of the quality of education, and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy, and essential life skill
A key challenge, however, is to ensure that the emphasis on environmental sustainability is no longer limited to environmental concepts alone - we have learned that it is the complex interactions among environment, society, and economy that have brought us to this unsustainable state in the world and we must work from an understanding of these interactions to learn how to live sustainably.

To learn to ensure environmental sustainability, within this larger framework, will require a reorientation of education systems, defined broadly. UNESCO is promoting educational reforms in all modalities of education, including formal and nonformal approaches, the media, teacher education, and at all levels from early childhood through higher education and lifelong learning. UNESCO also recognizes that this reorientation is essentially about the content, processes, and environments of education - about the quality of education.

Building the Decade on partnerships and synergies

The Decade of Education for Sustainable Development proposes to promote values education at all levels and in all forms to ensure that the concept is amalgamated into existing work and education becomes part of an essential ethos for sustainable human development.

ESD requires the active participation and support of all governments to engage civil society if we are to meet the challenge of ensuring the development of thriving, inclusive and sustainable communities in all parts of the world. Education, broadly understood, is therefore inextricably linked to well-balanced development, which takes into consideration the social, environmental and economic dimensions of an improved quality of life for present and future generations. Of vital importance, therefore, is the involvement of people themselves. Our various partners are well positioned to play a major role in encouraging and facilitating this participation through capacity building and outreach conducted through information, education and communication (IEC) activities. The Decade will be a success if and only if all of us - governments, international organizations, associations, communities, educators, the private sector and citizens - contribute to it together, for no institution, no organization, no government will succeed on its own in making sustainable development a reality.

Each of us therefore has responsibility at the local, national, regional or international level for the implementation of the Decade. Throughout the Decade, ESD will contribute to enabling citizens to face the challenges of the present and future and leaders to make relevant decisions for a viable world.

UNESCO’s role

As lead agency, UNESCO will be proactive, and all parts of the Organization will work together in an intersectoral manner to ensure the success of the Decade. UNESCO’s role, through its offices, institutes, National Commissions and other bodies, is more specifically to:

- catalyse new partnerships with the private sector, youth and media groups;
- promote monitoring and evaluation;
- encourage a research programme and serve as a forum for ESD research;
- serve as forum for bringing together key stakeholders, such as multi-nationals, faith-based institutions, youth associations, indigenous people, etc.;
- share good ESD practices;
- link its Member States that have put in place ESD curricula, policies and research with the States requesting help;
- convene flexible working groups on particular subjects.

UNESCO’s role and, in fact, the task of its Member States are defined by the four major thrusts of ESD:

1. promote and improve the quality of education: the aim will be to refocus lifelong education on the acquisition of knowledge, skills and values needed by citizens to improve their quality of life;
2. reorient the curricula: from preschool to university, education must be rethought and reformed to be a vehicle of knowledge, thought patterns and values needed to build a sustainable world;
3. raise public awareness of the concept of sustainable development: raising awareness will make it possible to develop enlightened, active and responsible citizenship locally, nationally and internationally;
4. train the workforce: continuing technical and vocational education of directors and workers, particularly those in trade and industry, will be enriched to enable them to adopt sustainable modes of production and consumption.

To facilitate the implementation of the Decade at the level of the Member States, the following actions may be adopted:

- implementation of plans and/or clearly identifiable activities in the Member States;
- designation in Member States of focal points responsible for reporting;
- formulation of regional, and possibly subregional, plans or strategies;
- definition of indicators on progress accomplished and of mechanisms to monitor such progress;
- identification of sources of technical assistance and of examples of good practices;
- sharing of information on relevant research and development and innovations;
- means of fostering partnerships;
- provision of advice in key areas;

Implementing the Decade: seven interlinked strategies

The implementation of the Decade can also draw on the seven strategies set out in the International Implementation Scheme.

1. Formulation of a common vision and mobilization: The success of the Decade rests on the formulation and sharing of a common vision of ESD and general mobilization in support of ESD. The media are a partner of choice for achieving such large-scale mobilization.
2. Consultation and ownership: Once defined, the common vision will be owned by all stakeholders - broad participation of stakeholders in defining the vision, formulating policies and planning their implementation will ensure such ownership. This
process will be the responsibility of governments.

3. Partnerships and networks: ESD is intended to be multidisciplinary and intersectoral. The establishment of partnerships and networks to create synergy and disseminate information on the implementation of the Decade is essential.

4. Capacity-building and training: All the skills of the partners will be needed to attain the goals of the Decade. Pooling such skills on the one hand and making them available for the training of stakeholders, in particular teacher trainers and pre-service and in-service teachers, on the other are challenges to be taken up.

5. Research, development and innovation: The application of research findings will make it possible to speed up the implementation of the Decade and ongoing activities must also be guided by research. Imagination is required to adapt ESD to the local context and to the wide variety of learning situations. Here is where innovation plays a part.

6. Use of information and communication technologies: During the Decade, information and communication technologies (ICTs) will be used to link up distant partners, store data and share information quickly.

7. Monitoring and evaluation: A key monitoring and evaluation feature will be the definition of adequate and relevant indicators at all levels – local, national, regional and international – and for each initiative and each programme.

Challenges

The DESD will be a success if we collectively manage to take up the following challenges:

One of the hardest challenges is to keep the focus on ESD – this decade is about education for sustainable development, not on just sustainable development. Hence, all stakeholders need to keep focusing on education because what needs to be done is to learn our way out of where we are.

It is important to work on the integration of the 3 pillars of sustainable development (environment, economy, society). Stakeholders of the Decade all come from different places and points of views. Some are educators, others are environmentalists, or economists. It is much easier to work on one single area, but from experience, it has been shown that all the pillars have to be brought together for a more just and decent life for everybody. Thus all these varied pieces must be pulled together to integrate them into a holistic vision for the future.

Once the focus is on education, and the 3 pillars are put together, how does one actually change education? All stakeholders must really become partners in education. Collectively, they have to expand education and take advantage of what is in the EFA movement, which is an expanded vision of education. It is not just about schools and schooling, but more important, learning. The big challenge is ultimately how to reorient education.

One must go beyond environmental education to reach ESD. The concept of sustainable development has been closely related to environmental protection. The Decade is not limited to environmental education, but also encompasses social and economic pillars. Developing adequate teaching approaches are, thus, an immediate challenge.

There is a need to learn from what already exists and build on it. Many countries have carried out ESD programmes or activities. Identifying these, evaluating the results, and disseminating information about them will allow for quicker integration of this new vision of education into national plans.

The media represent a powerful means of awareness-raising and dissemination. It has to be mobilized. Making the media an ally for transmitting quality information to citizens is a pledge of success.

Last but not least, partnerships have to be established and synergies created among initiatives and programmes. No institution, even at a global scale, can manage to achieve the goals of the DESD on its own. Only united, can stakeholders be sure to build a viable world for present and future generations.

Principles and ideas that UNESCO brings to the Decade

UNESCO understands that ESD is about values, principles and behaviours that we have to know, share and practice whenever and wherever. It is actually about different types of learning, skills, competences, values and attitudes. It is about the kind of things that normally do not get measured in education, so ways to start to learn how to measure these have to be established. UNESCO is concerned about the quality of education, and more particularly about what, where, when, why and how learners learn.

Sustainable development is not a fixed goal, but an ever-changing concept and horizon, a mechanism for balancing different values, priorities and opinions. Thus, ESD must achieve several things:

- Develop an awareness of the concept of sustainability;
- Ensure that the system is clear in its objectives by according to the question of why we learn (that is, what are the expected learning outcomes) the same importance as what we learn, how we learn, where we learn, and who learns;
- Enable learners to understand the importance of integrating disciplines and the nature of inter-disciplinarity;
- Allow students to develop the skills to understand both the global and local nature of the wide range of issues that are included in sustainable development and act on them;
- Instil in learners the ability and will to integrate sustainable living practices, for themselves and others, in their daily lives.

To achieve these goals, the Decade will promote five fundamental types of learning:

- Learning to know, so as to acquire a taste for learning throughout life and for understanding the world. This concerns cognitive skills and reasoning;
- Learning to do, so as to be able to deal with many situations, and be an actor as well as a thinker. This focuses on practical skills and knowing how to act;
- Learning to be, so as to better develop one’s personality and be able to act with greater autonomy, judgment and personal responsibility. This relates to personal skills and dignity;
- Learning to live together, so as to develop an understanding of other
Even Science Lovers do not want to become Scientists or Engineers:
Conclusions of a ROSE study in Japan

Based on the preliminary results of the international survey carried out under the ROSE project, Dr Svein Sjöberg reported in Connect, Vol.xxx, No.1-2, 2005, that many students in ‘rich’ countries neither want to become scientists nor work in technology related jobs. He also expressed serious concern about Japanese students’ negative responses on those points. In the analyses of Japanese data set of ROSE, we identified three major groups (Science Lovers, Science Haters and Hidden Science Lovers) categorized by their school science preference. Through the process of comparative analysis we have recently obtained simple but quite interesting findings: namely, that even within the Science Lovers category about two thirds do not want to become scientists or technology related professionals.

ROSE Survey and Data Analysis: The Japanese Case
Following the guidelines of the ROSE survey instrument which was translated into Japanese, 50 schools were selected randomly from among 11,203 lower secondary schools in Japan. Nineteen of those that accepted formed the Japanese sample comprising a total of 560 ninth graders (268 girls, 291 boys, and one unknown). An original analytical framework was developed in which students’ ‘absolute preference of school science’ and ‘relative preference of school science’ were cross-tabulated (Figure 1). This enabled us to classify students into four homogenous groups in terms of their school science preference:

1. **Science Lovers** showing positive attitudes towards school science in terms of both absolute and relative preference perspectives
2. **Hidden Science Lovers** showing positive attitudes toward school science from an absolute preference perspective, but negative attitudes from a relative preference perspective
3. **Science Haters** showing negative attitudes from both absolute and relative perspectives, and lastly
4. **Apparent Science Lovers** showing a rather unusual attitude, that is, negative absolute preference but positive relative preference.

**Figure 1: Framework for ‘School Science Preference’**

- **Loving School**
  - **Apparent Science**
  - **Science**
  - **No Interest**
  - **Hidden Science**
  - **Loving other Subjects**

Alina Bory-Adams, Chief, ED/PEQ/ESD, UNESCO, 7 Place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris, France.

E-mail: esd@unesco.org