PRESS RELEASE

Learning about sustainability: the future starts right now

“Sustainable development” has become a catchword of the 21st Century. A simple Google search recently produced over 65 million hits, a mind boggling statistic even after discounting duplications. Another search for “education for sustainable development” showed a more manageable number of over 400,000 hits. Even then, who has the time and luxury to follow up every lead?

So what is sustainable development and what has education got to do with it?

Put very simply, sustainable development is “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” and education for sustainable development (ESD) is a “vision of education that seeks to empower all people to assume responsibility for creating a sustainable future”, recognizing that although there is no single route to sustainable development, ESD must incorporate social, economic, environmental and cultural considerations.

Some people have questioned whether education is the best medium to attain a sustainable future given the problems that beset the educational systems in many countries which are struggling to provide universal primary education, ensure gender equality, increase literacy rates and reduce poverty in accordance to the numerous international initiatives, such as the Millennium Development Goals, Education for All, and the United Nations Literacy Decade.

However, growing concerns about the changing values of society, continuing depletion and degradation of our natural resources, and ongoing religious and ethnic conflicts have convinced the United Nations that education is a key approach to help us address these issues, especially when sustainability is not just about conserving our environment but also about living in respectful relationships with each other and our world.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has been charged to lead the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) to promote education as a sound foundation for teaching and learning about sustainable ways of life. Efforts will be made to integrate the principles of ESD into schools, colleges, universities and other non-formal educational systems. Above all, the Decade will attempt to promote lifestyles, values and behaviours that will support sustainable development by establishing partnerships with multiple collaborators and stakeholders.

UNESCO’s Regional Bureau for Education in Bangkok is hosting an international conference, Learning Together for Tomorrow: Education for Sustainable Development on 6-8 December 2006 at the Imperial Queen’s Park Hotel for about 400 representatives from governments, educational institutions, non-government organizations, the private sector and local communities from the Asia-Pacific region to discuss a broad range of ESD-related issues.
Over three days, participants may choose, for example, to explore how values can be taught and changed to ensure sustainable development through the experiences of the UNESCO-supported Living Values Education approach and award-winning materials used in about 80 countries. The participants may also examine the role of ESD in a world of religious conflicts and confrontations, or the role of the media and inclusion of media education into the school curriculum.

Governments and educational institutions facing increasing operational costs may be interested in learning about how their schools can be sustainable from the “self-sufficient school” model in providing hands-on practical training for students and financing vocational programmes. The “Keeping it Cool: A Teacher’s Guide to Climate Change” project by the British Council of Thailand will share the project’s user-friendly and practical resources for Thai Science teachers in empowering their students to both learn about and take action on climate change. Taking a different approach, the Thai Education Foundation has implemented a project with 50 schools in four provinces of Thailand to create community awareness on the importance of the farmland bio-diversities and to conserve species that are important to farmers’ livelihoods.

These inspiring examples do not belie the difficulties ahead for ESD. The very concept of ESD challenges the way most people think about the world today and the traditional view of the purpose of education. Another challenge is monitoring and evaluating the impact of ESD, as well as ensuring the sustainability of ESD after the end of the Decade.

“To talk about the future is useful only if it leads to action now”, as pointed out by Schumacher in his book, Small is Beautiful. Together with many partners, UNESCO has launched many activities in Asia and the Pacific, and the Learning Together for Tomorrow Conference is a case in point. The Conference aims to increase the participants’ understanding of the role of education in addressing sustainability from “ESD in Action” examples and models in the first instance. The Conference also provides opportunities for participants to network and find potential partners for future collaboration.

Participants will be officially welcomed by Dr. Sheldon Shaeffer, Director of the UNESCO Bangkok office, and Dr. Vichit Srisa-an, Minister of Education, Thailand, will deliver the opening address. For more information and details about the Conference, please visit http://www.unescobkk.org/education/ap eid/conference.

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