

## P r o g r e s s

# Transforming thinking

Over the next 10 years, millions of people in both developed and developing nations are likely to gain a greater knowledge of sustainability through education initiatives under the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, or DESD, (2005–2014). Its global objectives are ambitious and uplifting.

Steve Davidson reports.

‘The vision of education for sustainable development is a world where everyone has the opportunity to benefit from quality education and learn the values, behaviour and lifestyles required for a sustainable future and for positive societal transformation.’ (UNESCO, October 2004.)

The United Nations (UN) practice of designating International Decades to draw attention to major issues and to encourage international action on questions of global importance began in 1985. With the world facing a multitude of ongoing problems and challenges, it seems timely to have a decade in which the global community will focus on sustainability and, in particular, on education for sustainable development.

As the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the designated international lead agency for the Decade, states in its draft International Implementation Scheme, the

vision sets ‘a sustainable future’ at the heart of our common human endeavour.

So what is the Decade all about, can it really make a difference, and how?

## The evolution of education

The World Conservation Union (IUCN) points out that, unlike most education movements, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) did not begin with the education community. Its main thrust came from international political and economic forums, such as the UN and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The concept of ESD was crystallised when world leaders agreed that sustainable development should be actively pursued as a global goal.

Sustainable development was endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1987 and, since then, the parallel concept of education supporting sustainable devel-

opment has been explored too. A series of important UN conferences helped to further refine the concept of sustainable development during the 1990s.

ESD is an evolving concept that has especially developed since the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Among the historical documents signed at Rio was *Agenda 21*, in which countries committed themselves to promoting sustainability through a variety of means, including education.

The recommendation for a UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development was endorsed at the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, South Africa, in September 2002. This confirmed the importance of education for sustainable development and recommended that the UN General Assembly ‘consider adopting a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development starting in 2005’.

It was on 20 December 2002 that the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution establishing a UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014), emphasising that education is an indispensable element in achieving sustainable development. UNESCO is promoting the Decade and providing a clear framework for implementation, following consultation with the UN and other international organisations, governments, non-government organisations, and others. It will mobilise and ‘shepherd’ action over the 10 years. The draft Implementation Scheme was released in October 2004.

## The Decade’s objectives

The basic vision of the DESD translates into five objectives to:

- give an enhanced profile to the central role of education and learning in the common pursuit of sustainable development;
- facilitate links and networking, exchange and interaction among stakeholders in ESD;
- provide a space and opportunity for refining and promoting the vision of, and transition to sustainable development – through all forms of learning and public awareness;
- foster increased quality of teaching and learning in education for sustainable development; and
- develop strategies at every level to strengthen capacity in ESD.

The Decade focuses on ESD in all parts of the world and UNESCO says it ‘provides



China is one of many countries with education programmes for sustainability already underway. WWF China



Women across the developing world will benefit from the Decade's new initiatives and energy. Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend

an opportunity for developing countries to define for themselves the kind of path they wish to follow. From the perspective of sustainable development, it is clear that models derived from the industrialised countries are neither appropriate nor desirable, given the need for those countries themselves to adopt more sustainable lifestyles.' So developing countries have a chance to develop viable, alternative approaches to sustainability.

**Defining ESD**

The draft Implementation Scheme emphasises that education for sustainable development should not be equated with environmental education. It should, however, encompass it, setting it in the broader context of 'socio-cultural factors and the socio-political issues of equity, poverty, democracy and quality of life.' UNESCO also argues that sustainable development must be integrated into other disciplines and cannot, because of its scope, be taught as a discrete subject.

Education for sustainable development will aim to demonstrate the following features:

- *interdisciplinary and holistic:* learning for sustainable development embedded in the whole curriculum, not as a

separate subject.

- *values-driven:* it is critical that the assumed norms – the shared values and principles underpinning sustainable development – are made explicit so that that can be examined, debated, tested and applied.
- *critical thinking and problem solving:* leading to confidence in addressing the dilemmas and challenges of sustainable development
- *multi-method:* word, art, drama, debate, experience ... different pedagogies which model the processes. Teachers and learners work together to acquire knowledge and play a role in shaping the environment of their educational institutions.
- *participatory decision-making:* learners participate in decisions on how they are to learn.
- *locally relevant:* addressing local as well as global issues, and using the language(s) which learners most commonly use. Concepts of sustainable development must be carefully expressed in other languages.

The IUCN, in its document *Education and Sustainability: Responding to the Global Challenge* (2002), states that: 'The future of ESD will depend on how the concept is

perceived in the next few years. If ESD is seen as yet another isolated social issue to be squeezed into the curriculum, or yet another topic to be given as an elective, then little progress will be made.'

Dr Derek Elias, ESD Coordinator at UNESCO Bangkok, says 'Many people continue to equate sustainable development with raising awareness of environmental issues, but the Decade calls for a much broader view. It encourages the incorporation of social and economic considerations (from gender equality, indigenous knowledge and HIV education to corporate responsibility and consumption patterns) in the formulation of educational policies across all sectors, as well as the cultural aspects underpinning them.

'We want people to start thinking: what are the key issues of ESD? How do they relate to me (or my organisation) and what is my role in relation to them?'

In response to the fear that the Decade could fail to resonate with people and end up as 'just another initiative', Elias warns that we cannot overwhelm people with generic information that is not relevant to their context.

'We need to make a conscious effort to match people with ideas,' says Elias. 'For example, in a region as geographically



## Progress

dispersed and diverse as Asia-Pacific, it is unthinkable to apply the same messages universally.'

### Three priorities

The publication also identified three priorities. Firstly, *basic education must be improved*. Research shows that basic education is the key to a nation's ability to develop and achieve sustainability targets. Education can improve agricultural productivity, reduce population rates, enhance environmental protection and generally raise the standard of living. In many countries, the current level of education is too low, severely hindering national plans for a sustainable future.

The second priority identified by the IUCN is to *re-orient existing education towards sustainable development*. Simply increasing basic literacy is not enough. For example, take the most educated nations, which have the highest per capita rates of consumption and leave the deepest ecological footprints.

An appropriately re-oriented basic education includes more principles, skills, perspectives, and values related to sustainability than currently covered in most education systems. Each community should identify relevant principles to

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include in their ESD programs. ESD encompasses a vision that integrates the environment, economy, and society. It will guide and motivate people to lead sustainable livelihoods, to participate in a democratic society, and to live in a sustainable manner.

The IUCN's third ESD priority is *public understanding, awareness and training*. The world needs a literate yet environmentally aware citizenry and workforce to help guide nations to implement their national sustainability plans.

The UNESCO plan highlights the role of science and technology because science provides people with ways to understand the world and their role in it. 'ESD needs to provide a scientific understanding of



**The Decade heralds a greater role for practical learning. While UNESCO's plan highlights the importance of science and technology in learning about sustainability, the IUCN advocates more emphasis on participatory and citizen action.**

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sustainability together with an understanding of the values, principles and lifestyles that will lead to the transition to sustainable development.'

The plan suggests that ESD is for everyone, at whatever stage of life they find themselves. It is life-long learning, whether formal or informal and from childhood to adult life. Education systems will need reorientation and re-shaping and teacher education will need to prepare teachers for active and interactive learning processes, rather than a one-way transfer of knowledge.

### Monitoring progress

How will anyone know if the Decade is actually making any difference and what that difference is? The draft Scheme prepared by UNESCO says an initiative as long and as complex as the Decade must put in place adequate processes of monitoring and evaluation, right from the start. This means relevant and measurable indicators at every level – local, national, regional and international – and for each initiative and program. This will be no mean feat.

The results of such monitoring and evaluation will be used to assess and re-orient programs during the course of the Decade. This should ensure ongoing relevance and effectiveness. A report aimed at a broad audience will be published every two years.

As a starting point, UNESCO has produced a table that lists the expected Decade outcomes and shows the potential

monitoring and evaluation indicators and the kinds of data that could be used for their verification. However, each initiative at each level will have to develop its own outcomes and indicators.

Internationally, UNESCO, as the lead agency, will establish a database of indicators and means of verification. It will also work with countries to help with their monitoring and evaluation. It will combine closely with other international monitoring initiatives already in place.

The draft Implementation Scheme also presents a timeline – charts which give an idea of the timing of forums, activities and events of the DESD. More detail is provided for the first five years than for later years, and activities in the second half of the decade will naturally depend largely on what occurs (or does not occur) during the first half. To carry the Decade forward, the timeline is arranged around five 'poles of activity': advocacy and vision building; partnerships and networks; capacity building and training; research and innovation; and monitoring and evaluation.

For visibility and momentum, UNESCO proposes a specific theme for each year, around which various events can be organised. These could include: sustainable consumption; cultural diversity; health and quality of life; water and energy; world heritage sites as places of learning; ESD in the knowledge society; poverty reduction and sustainable development projects; and so on.

So it remains to be seen how the next decade will unfold with its new and unprecedented focus on sustainability. If the Decade achieves its anticipated outcomes, UNESCO predicts we will witness a transformation in the lives of thousands of communities and millions of individuals as new attitudes and values inspire decisions and actions to help make sustainable development an attainable ideal.

### More information:

UNESCO (2004) *Draft International Implementation Scheme*, United Nations Decade for Sustainable Development. UNESCO, Education for Sustainable Development:

[http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=27234&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=27234&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)

Tilbury D., Stevenson R.B., Fien J. and Schreuder D. (eds) (2002) *Education and Sustainability: Responding to the Global Challenge*, Commission on Education and Communication, IUCN, Gland, Switzerland and Cambridge, UK.