

# The 10-year challenge

As Chair of Education for Sustainable Development at the World Conservation Union (IUCN) Commission on Education and Communication, Daniella Tilbury is playing a leading role in the development of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. Here she outlines her view of the challenges and great opportunities ahead, and considers Australia's chance to develop initiatives.



Active participation and practical work should form a key part of education for sustainability. IUCN

Moving towards sustainability will require changing the way we think, live and work. The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014) aims to provide a platform for people from all walks of life to share experiences and learn about the implications of sustainable development for their lives. There will be an emphasis not only on strengthening knowledge in sustainable development across stakeholder groups, but also on challenging mental models that lead us to unsustainability.<sup>1</sup>

## How does the UN interpret Education for Sustainable Development?

In essence, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is about learning for change. It motivates, equips and involves people in making informed decisions. Originally perceived as education *about* sustainability, it is being increasingly recognised that the ESD process goes beyond dissemination of knowledge to widening people's capacity to take action and make practical changes.

ESD is not confined to educating people about ecology, nor is it only about

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educating people for economic development, although they are both inextricably linked to this process of social change. It promotes an integrated assessment of economic goals, social needs, and ecological responsibility.

There are some key features of the ESD process that encourage people to explore the complexity of these areas and consider change. Recent research<sup>2</sup> argues that learning for sustainable development requires:

- A focus on the future and ability to create a sustainable future – more than just focusing on problem-solving our way out of our current situation.
- Less emphasis on science and technology solutions and more on participatory and citizen action.
- Less emphasis on seeing people as the problem and more on seeing people as agents of change.
- Less emphasis on awareness-raising approaches and more emphasis on critical reflection, systemic thinking and values clarification approaches.
- A focus on individuals influencing structural change – not just on individual environmental actions.
- More focus on changing mental models that influence decisions and actions rather than solely changing individual attitudes.

The May 2003 Kiev Ministerial Declaration (under the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)) reminds us that the overall aim of ESD is to empower citizens to act for positive change, point to a process-oriented, participatory and action-oriented learning approach. This has implications for not only *what* we learn but also *how* we learn – something that ESD researchers have been arguing for some time.

The interpretation of Education for Sustainable Development put forward by the United Nations Educational, Scientific

1. UNESCO (2002). *Education for Sustainability: From Rio to Johannesburg – Lessons Learnt from a Decade of Commitment*. UNESCO, Paris.  
2. Sterling, S.R. (2001). *Sustainable Education: Re-envisioning Learning and Change*. Schumacher Briefing No. 6, Green Books, Dartington; Fien, J. Tilbury, D. Stevenson, R. and Schreuder, D. (2002) *Education and Sustainability: Responding to the Global Challenge*. IUCN, Gland, Switzerland; Van Rensburg, E.J. and Lotz Sistiika, H. (2000). *Learning for Sustainability*, DANCED. UNESCO, Johannesburg; Tilbury, D. and Wortman, D. (2004). *Engaging People in Sustainability*. IUCN, Gland, Switzerland.

## Progress

and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in its draft Implementation Scheme for the Decade reflects these innovative approaches to education, also aligned to those recently promoted by the National Environmental Education Action Plan in Australia.<sup>3</sup>

### What can be achieved through the ESD Decade in Australia?

UNESCO has thrown up a 10-year challenge to countries such as Australia – but what can be realistically achieved through a Decade of ESD? Changing unsustainable models of thinking and acting is the ultimate outcome. In 10 years, it is possible to embed ESD within our education, government and socio-economic systems. A national strategy for ESD in Australia would be a significant step in this direction. Many countries such as the Netherlands, USA, England, Japan and China have developed strategic frameworks in ESD which will guide national plans, investment and actions towards sustainability through education. Sowing the seeds for change within our systems would be a good, and realistic, outcome for Australia.

UNESCO does emphasise that the effectiveness of the Decade will ultimately be judged not just by the degree of change in the lives of communities and individuals at the local level, but the changing patterns of development and progress towards more sustainable models of living. The focus on systemic (rather than individual) change is an important component of actions for the Decade.

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What indicators would help us assess whether systemic change is occurring? In its International Implementation Scheme, UNESCO identifies a few examples<sup>4</sup>:



**Daniella Tilbury is internationally recognised for her research and publications in education as a process to engage people in change towards sustainability.** IUCN

- integration of education into sustainable development strategies and plans of action;
- cooperation and a growing consensus on the strategic importance of ESD as a tool for social change;
- ESD-specific approaches increasingly adopted in learning situations of all kinds; and
- ESD as a core component of training of educators at all levels.

### IUCN-UNESCO indicators

IUCN-UNESCO has committed to developing a three-year project that engages stakeholders in selected countries in a process of defining indicators for assessing national progress towards sustainability through education.

Frameworks of indicators are to be constructed that will help establish progress and map achievements in ESD over the period of the Decade at the national level. The project was launched in Bangkok at the IUCN World Conservation Congress in November 2004.<sup>5</sup>

Although the specific UN Decade activities are yet to be defined, the

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international framework presented by UNESCO, and the approaches it advocates, provide an incredible opportunity for strengthening our contribution towards sustainable development.

There are a few international groups (such as the IUCN Commission on Education and Communication and the UN Education Caucus) and Australian networks (the AAEE Significant Interest Group on the UN Decade, and the Sustainability Educators e-network) who will provide support to those keen to make the most of the opportunity the Decade provides: ultimately to strengthen education’s contribution to quality-of-life issues here and internationally. It is also a chance for Australia to lead by example and initiative.

### More information:

UNESCO (2004) United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005–2014: Draft International Implementation Scheme (October), UNESCO, Paris  
 Tilbury, D. and Wortman, D. (2004) *Engaging People in Sustainability*. Commission on Education and Communication, IUCN, Gland, Switzerland and Cambridge, UK.  
 IUCN CEC (2003) Supporting the United Nations Decade on Education for Sustainable Development 2005–2015. IUCN Commission in Education and Communication.

These documents can be downloaded from [www.aries.mq.edu.au](http://www.aries.mq.edu.au).

For information regarding the Decade of ESD see the IUCN Commission on Education and Communication (CEC) website: [www.iucn.org/themes/cec/education/decade.htm](http://www.iucn.org/themes/cec/education/decade.htm)

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3. Environment Australia (2000). Environmental Education for a Sustainable Future: National Action Plan. Australian Government, Canberra.

4. UNESCO (October 2004). United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005–2014. Unpublished.

5. For more information visit the IUCN CEC website: [www.iucn.org/cec](http://www.iucn.org/cec)