

# MESSAGE TO THE 2009 WORLD CONFERENCE ON EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

*University professors, partner organisations, students, and university policy makers (over 200 people from 40 countries) working in the **Mainstreaming Environment and Sustainability into African Universities Partnership** endorsed the following statement in Nairobi, Kenya, on 28 November 2008 to accelerate and deepen implementation of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) and to inform deliberations at the 2009 World Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Conference.*

## **ESD should contribute to all of education and to achieving quality education**

Complex issues such as climate change, loss of ecosystem services, and unsustainable human development patterns affect all communities, and require holistic responses. These issues are central to the relevance and quality of both formal and informal education. Discipline-centred approaches to education are not adequate for supporting the learning needed for addressing sustainable development challenges. Hence, trans-, multi- and inter-disciplinary approaches, using systems thinking, need to be promoted. In this context, trans-disciplinarity includes the integration of different methods and different kinds of knowledge and ways of knowing. Traditional and local knowledge and local practices and challenges need to be included in teaching and research if they are to give adequate answers to sustainable development challenges. Participatory methods in which learners are actively engaged in the teaching-learning process need to be promoted as sustainable development issues require more than knowledge transfer through unilateral ways of communication. Such learning and teaching should promote culturally sensitive knowledge sharing, gained through genuine dialogue. Capability centred approaches should be strengthened so that learners are able to apply their learning to enhance quality of life and sustainable livelihoods. Capability centred approaches can contribute to the quality of educational processes and outcomes as they give meaning to education. Theory and practice need to be brought closer together. ESD needs to promote positive actions and solution-centred approaches that are relevant to communities, and that enhance educational quality and relevance. ESD, when practiced in this way, will bring about changes in methods and approaches currently used in education systems, contributing to achieving quality education.

## **Promotion of international ESD exchange is needed to strengthen local ESD**

Global challenges require international exchange of knowledge and mutual learning. Although contributing the least to global warming, the African continent is set to be most adversely affected by the consequences of climate change. Communities in Africa are also most at risk from degradation and loss of ecosystem services. Therefore, international partnerships are needed to build capacity for addressing climate change issues in Africa which will help to strengthen African strategies and innovations for adapting to climate change impacts. Research partnerships are needed that link research to practical community needs. Cooperation with Africa needs to confront the power relations and political economies that exist and underpin North-South and other forms of partnership and exchange. Sound monitoring is needed to assess the quality and outcomes of partnerships. Moreover, cooperation programmes in ESD need to be planned in such a way that they lead to sustainable outcomes. Strategies should be sought to address the current pattern of brain drain to Northern countries, by strengthening the capacity of African universities to provide the education and training needed on the continent. Partnerships involving South-East, South-West, South-North, and South-South should be strengthened and extended. The international community needs to work towards dialogue processes on ESD that recognise the expertise of all partners involved, and integrate the notions of ethics, values, cultural and historical diversity. The MESA Universities Partnership represents a successful model of networking and knowledge exchange amongst members of the academic community in Africa and ESD partners, including government, communities and the private sector. This partnership which includes a strong South-South dialogue as well as dialogue and partnerships with other parts of the world could inspire Higher Education systems worldwide. Regional networks and partnerships, such as the MESA Universities Partnership, as well as other sub-regional networks and partnerships should be strengthened and extended.

## **Implementation of the DESD**

Since 2004, through the MESA Universities Partnership, a regional network of over 100 academics from 77 African universities in 32 African countries, involving 29 regional and international partners has been created to mainstream environment and sustainability into African universities. Since then, at least 65 university courses have been revised and re-oriented towards sustainable development in African universities, within a broader mainstreaming orientation. New courses, research programmes, policy initiatives, networks and student activities have been

initiated and a MESA students action plan has been produced by students in MESA. Experiences from the MESA Universities Partnership so far indicate that Higher Education is an important sector to engage in the UNDES, as it has far reaching influence on society (e.g. it influences the education of all teachers, policy makers and business leaders), and it provides scientific results and knowledge required by societies to face local and global challenges (e.g. climate change). For the DESD to be a success however, other groups in society should also be engaged with ESD, including business leaders, communities, politicians, law makers, land use planners, and professionals such as engineers etc. There is an urgent need to involve decision makers at all levels of society in the DESD. Engagement with these groups should be strengthened in the DESD, and DESD implementation should not only be limited to formal education contexts and structures. Involvement of the media, journalists, NGOs and CBOs is also crucial. The MESA experience shows that networks that share and build knowledge and change practices are an important mechanism for strengthening the implementation of the DESD. Change oriented networks should be strengthened in a wider range of sectors to support change practices. Further exemplary instances of positive change initiatives in MESA include knowledge and materials development to address environment and development issues; new curriculum and community innovation practices; and leadership and youth participation.

## **Strategies for the way ahead for educational policy makers, leaders and practitioners**

Based on the experience in African countries and in light of the problems faced by the continent, strategies for the way ahead with ESD in general, and the Decade in particular, need to:

*At a general level:*

- Encourage educators to engage in debate and actions that focus on Africa's development path, in the light of environment, social, economic and climate change challenges confronting the continent. Such debates should also take account of current needs and opportunities and the needs and opportunities of future generations.
- Foreground values and ethics and local, traditional and contextual knowledge in the educational process.
- Develop approaches to teaching and research that are community engaged and that have community level outcomes.
- Give special attention to the most vulnerable groups (e.g. women, children, etc.).
- On the African continent, address the question 'how to live with climate change' (i.e. focus on learning how to build capabilities for adaptation and transformability, and mitigation of risk).

*At a sectoral level:*

- Consider the scope of the generic capabilities that are required to drive society forward through building trust and mutual exchange, critical and creative thinking, and adaptation and resilience capability.
- Focus on teacher education (as teachers educate the world's children).
- Focus on professional learning opportunities for university lecturers, managers and policy makers to make an impact in the education system so that they take ownership of ESD objectives.
- Extend and drive capacity building strategies amongst leaders, law makers, implementers, education department officials, women's groups, the corporate sector and civil society groups to promote an ESD that is centred on adaptation capabilities, risk mitigation and positive solutions to environment and development challenges, and climate change.
- Efforts should be made to build capacity and mainstream ESD into the legal training system to advance the development and implementation of legal instruments to mitigate climate change and fast track adaptation practices.
- Efforts should be made to influence the education and training of professionals in the corporate sector, NGO and amongst community based organisations to develop green jobs in response to climate change and other environment and development issues.

*At an institutional level:*

- Consider the issue of institutional restructuring to enhance ESD; and improve educational impacts on society and development.
- Request universities and policy institutions to openly confront the controversies around the debate on sustainable development and not to leave this task to social activists.
- Develop green universities and education institutions that create the change they would like to see in the world, and be an example to students.
- Capture best practices, and help share them more widely, with emphasis on mainstreaming *learning* from these practices to strengthen the emergence of ESD practice.
- Work with practical and applied learning support materials in support of ESD.
- Establish networks to reduce political barriers that impede institutional change and innovation.
- Ensure capacity building opportunities for staff to strengthen ESD and widen participation in ESD.