

*ADG/ED Remarks – DESD Conference, Bonn, 31 March 2009*

1) On behalf of UNESCO, allow me to echo the Director-General by once again thanking the Government of Germany for hosting this World Conference on ESD here in Bonn and for providing generous support. Let me also personally welcome and thank all participants who have travelled considerable distances to be here today and to all those who are contributing actively to ensure that this Conference is a success.

2) Let me briefly frame this Conference in the international context and share a few reflections on its importance. Just over two decades ago, the World Commission on Environment and Development made an appeal for a “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” In a nutshell, this captures the essence of sustainability – a long-term vision that speaks to our sense of responsibility for the present and future. A world characterized by poverty, high rates of infant mortality, large inequalities between and within countries, illiteracy and environmental degradation is by definition, not sustainable.

3) These concerns underpin the eight Millennium Development Goals endorsed by the majority of the world’s countries in 2000. They aim to alleviate extreme poverty and hunger, improve child and maternal health, combat HIV and AIDS, achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality and environmental sustainability. Education is imperative for reaching these goals, which are all about fulfilling basic human rights and achieving more sustainable human development.

5) It is fortuitous that Member States unanimously declared 2002-2014 as the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. By doing so, they recognized the formidable potential of education to contribute to building more sustainable societies. As we will be hearing, the Decade is encouraging and challenging countries to rethink the aims and purposes of education, curriculum content and teaching and learning processes, at all levels and in both formal and non-formal settings. Although progress is very uneven, we will be learning more about how all regions have developed strategies for implementing DESD. We are also witnessing a myriad of initiatives and projects that are putting ESD into practice in schools and extra-curricular settings. They are helping children and youth gain the knowledge, values, skills and competencies necessary to have a positive influence on their surroundings. ESD is a vibrant and innovative

field: UNESCO's Associated Schools, for example, has just published a collection of good practices in ESD from around the world that shows a how much can be done when students, teachers, schools and communities mobilize to address social and environmental challenges.

6) Education for All, UNESCO's top priority, is about ensuring that every child, youth and adult benefits from quality learning opportunities. Real gains have been made in the past eight years in terms of access to education. There are more children in school than ever before, enrolments are increasing at all levels in developing regions and many governments have enacted policies that are enabling some of the most marginalized children to go to school. But we face enormous challenges: 75 million children of primary school age are out of school and close to 800 million adults are illiterate. The quality of education is a major concern: too many children are leaving school too early, without basic skills and knowledge to continue to learn, to find decent employment and participate in their societies. Poor education quality reinforces a cycle of exclusion.

7) This is where ESD makes a significant contribution. It can guide policy makers, curriculum developers, teachers, principals and educationists in questioning the purpose of education, in improving its relevance and bringing about changes in values and attitudes, skills, behaviours and lifestyles consistent with sustainable development.

What does this encompass? First an interdisciplinary approach that integrates the social, environmental, economic and cultural dimensions of development and generates awareness of our interdependence - with others, with the world around us, and with nature. Second, ESD imparts skills such as critical thinking, decision-making and problem-solving to address such issues as environmental protection, biodiversity and human rights. Third and fundamentally, ESD promotes values such as peace, equality and respect for others and the wider natural and social environment. ESD is about empowering learners with the knowledge, skills and values to become real agents of change.

8) Let me underline the essential role of teachers and teacher training in promoting ESD. The world lacks qualified teachers and faces a large teacher shortage. UNESCO is engaged in a number of initiatives to help countries address these gaps. As countries rethink teacher training and professional development, it is crucial to integrate the principles of ESD into what teachers learn and how they teach. These principles can be an impetus to renew teaching learning processes by encouraging more dialogue, team work and initiative.

9) In the first half of this Decade, UNESCO has put much effort into promoting awareness of ESD and setting up coordinating mechanisms. To better integrate ESD's multidisciplinary perspective, we have established a platform that brings together all UNESCO's sectors – education, sciences, culture and communications – to act in a more coordinated and mutually supportive way to assist Member States.

10) I am confident that this Conference will identify strategic directions and priorities for the second half of this Decade. There is clearly, as witnessed by the number of ministers attending this Conference, shared understanding of ESD's crucial importance. Now we have to work together to ensure that ESD becomes a guiding principle for improving the relevance of quality of education, through appropriate engagement with policy-makers, teacher training institutions, universities and other key partners. Finally we must take every opportunity to stress the centrality of education for sustainable development.

The financial and economic crisis makes this injunction more timely than ever. We will not succeed in reducing poverty and building more inclusive, peaceful and sustainable societies without empowering individuals at all ages with the knowledge, skills and values to make responsible and informed choices. Quality education that promotes awareness, openness, solidarity and responsibility must be part of any response to today's global crisis.

11) Now our real work begins! My colleague Mark Richmond, Director of the Division of UN Priorities in Education, will present the key findings of the draft DESD Global Monitoring and Evaluation Report that gives insights into how countries are implementing ESD into educational policy. Then Walter Hirche, president of the German National Commission for UNESCO, will guide us through the Conference programme before we break for lunch.

I am looking forward to our deliberations and thank you in advance for your participation.