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COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

UNECE Steering Committee on Education for Sustainable Development

Fourth meeting

Geneva, 19–20 February 2009

CONTRIBUTION TO THE UNESCO WORLD CONFERENCE ON EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (Bonn, 31 March – 2 April 2009)

CONTRIBUTION TO THE CONFERENCE DECLARATION: UNECE STRATEGY FOR EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

1. Pursuant to the adoption of the UNECE Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and the framework for its implementation, the High-level Meeting of Environment and Education Ministries (Vilnius, 17–18 March 2005) established a UNECE Steering Committee on ESD, as a governing body, to decide on the Strategy's implementation and review its progress in the UNECE region*. The Steering Committee is composed of representatives of the environment and education sectors to ensure equal opportunity for participation and input from both sectors. Key stakeholders have been invited to participate as observers.
2. At its fourth meeting held in Geneva on 19 and 20 February 2009, the Steering Committee considered and approved the document with the proposed contribution to the UNESCO World Conference on ESD. Consequently, this document is submitted to the secretariat of the UNESCO World Conference on ESD as a contribution to the Conference Declaration.
3. The text is structured following the four objectives of the Conference and is based on ESD-related UNECE documents. The input to the Declaration is included in the four boxes only. Additional text serves as background information.
4. ESD-relevant outcomes of the Sixth Ministerial Conference "Environment for Europe" (Belgrade, 10-12 October 2007), providing findings and commitments made by the ministers of education and of the environment in relation to ESD in the region, should be taken into account by the Bonn Conference on ESD. These include the Conference Ministerial Declaration (ECE/BELGRADE.CONF/2007/8, paras.11 and 12), the Joint Statement on ESD (ECE/BELGRADE.CONF/2007/4/Add.1) and the Chair's Summary of the joint session on ESD (ECE/BELGRADE.CONF/2007/4/Add.3).

* The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) was set up in 1947 by ECOSOC. It is one of five regional commissions of the United Nations. UNECE has 56 member States located in the European Union, non-EU Western and Eastern Europe, South-East Europe and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and North America.

Contribution to the Conference Declaration

I. To highlight the essential contribution of education for sustainable development to all of education and to achieving quality education

“Why is ESD relevant?”

Text to be included in the Conference Declaration:

In terms of facing the new challenges of the global crisis and exploring new approaches to sustainable development, education is an essential prerequisite for empowering society to make the transition to a sustainable future. ESD is crucial for good governance, informed public decision-making and the promotion of democracy, and plays a fundamental role in overcoming social, economic and environmental challenges. The UNECE region encompasses 56 countries with a rich cultural diversity and with different socio-economic and political conditions. UNECE countries have taken an important step by adopting the UNECE Strategy for ESD¹, thereby placing ESD high on the international political agenda. The development and the implementation of the Strategy, as a whole, including its monitoring and assessment tools, serve as a valuable regional good practice in ESD.

5. There is a widespread concern that our current model of development is unsustainable and that our education systems reflect and support this model to a large extent. We are faced with a dual challenge of (a) recasting our model of development while (b) preparing our society for survival in a rapidly changing world. Education alone cannot solve the world's problems, but it is an essential prerequisite for empowering society to make the transition to a sustainable future. ESD is crucial for good governance, informed public decision-making and the promotion of democracy, and plays a fundamental role in overcoming social, economic and environmental challenges.

6. The UNECE Strategy for ESD, adopted in March 2005 as a practical instrument to facilitate ESD in the region, involves Governments and other stakeholders in efforts to integrate ESD into all forms of education. Work under the Strategy is pursuing a set of related goals: ensuring that policies support ESD; promoting sustainable development through all forms of learning, equipping the education sector with the competences to engage in ESD, developing ESD tools and materials, promoting research and development of ESD, and strengthening cooperation on ESD in the UNECE region. Most countries in the UNECE region have education systems with skilled educators, provide access to basic education, grant equal rights to education for all, and have achieved high levels of literacy and scientific knowledge. But many challenges still need to be met to implement ESD effectively. Education systems need to support the interdisciplinary nature of ESD, civil society needs to be more involved and institutional and material resources need to be mobilized.

7. In their joint Statement on ESD the ministers of education and of the environment confirmed in Belgrade their vision for the future: a region that embraces common values of solidarity, equality and mutual respect between people, countries and generations, and reaffirmed the importance of ESD as a capacity-building tool that enables people to make this vision a reality. Ministers also acknowledged with satisfaction that regional work on ESD is furthering the outcomes of the World Summit on Sustainable Development and contributes substantively to achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and the United Nations Decade of ESD.

¹ UNECE Strategy for ESD, as a practical instrument to facilitate ESD in the region, involving Governments and other stakeholders in efforts to integrate ESD into all forms of education, was adopted in March 2005 in Vilnius. (Lithuania), following a decision by Ministers at the Fifth Ministerial Conference “Environment for Europe” (Kiev, May 2003).

II. To promote international exchange on education for sustainable development

“What can we learn from each other?”

Text to be included in the Conference Declaration:

ESD is an interdisciplinary and evolving concept; thus sharing experiences at international level is crucial to learn from each other how to organize policies and institutions, which issues to promote and what methodologies to apply. This exchange should ultimately help to advance ESD implementation around the globe. The UNECE Steering Committee on ESD proved to be an effective forum for Governments and stakeholders to share their knowledge and for shaping strategies for the future.

8. ESD is still developing as a broad concept that encompasses interrelated environmental, economic and social issues. Although achieving ESD is strongly linked to the national and local priorities, needs and traditions, the international exchange is crucial. In this regard, a Steering Committee on ESD was established to decide on the Strategy's implementation and review its progress in the UNECE region. It also provides a forum for exchanging experiences, in particular at the policy and institutions levels, and is an efficient mechanism for ESD implementation. It is comprised of representatives from the education and environment sectors, as well as has key ESD stakeholders participating as observers. The sharing of knowledge and good practices among the Strategy stakeholders supports, inter alia, bilateral and multilateral activities, case studies, twinning projects, and workshops at the subregional, regional and national levels. Participating countries recognize the importance of “learning from each other”.

III. To carry out a stock-taking of United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development implementation

“What have we achieved so far, what are the lessons learnt?”

Text to be included in the Conference Declaration:

In the UNECE region, most countries are committed to establishing specific policies and institutions and have taken practical actions to implement ESD. Some have already developed national action plans, while others are working on developing them as well as on integrating ESD in existing strategies and policy frameworks and developing activities and projects on ESD. The key lessons learned² for advancing ESD are: (a) tomorrow's decision makers (those in kindergarten or in primary school today) require special attention; (b) authorities and stakeholders need to engage in stronger partnerships; (c) the lack of competence in ESD, as well as of adequate ESD materials, are bottlenecks; (d) the concept of ESD should be further developed to better integrate socio-economic perspectives; (e) the use of indigenous and other traditional and local knowledge needs to be enhanced; and (f) ESD should be used to promote sustainability not only to certain groups, but to the society as a whole.

9. To monitor, review and identify countries' needs vis-à-vis implementation of the Strategy, a reporting mechanism and a reporting format have been elaborated, based on indicators developed for this purpose. The first reporting exercise concluded³, on the basis of 36 national implementation reports, that the implementation had been successful thus far. Most countries were committed to

² Based on 36 national implementation reports and the collection of good practices in ESD in the UNECE region.

³ Learning from each other: achievements, challenges and the way forward. Report on progress in the implementation of the UNECE Strategy for ESD (ECE/BELGRADE.CONF/2007/INF/3 - ECE/CEP/AC.13/2007/2).

establishing the policies and institutional and administration structures. In particular, the countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia had made evident progress. The countries of South-Eastern Europe had a number of challenges ahead: many were still taking the prerequisite measures to support ESD. Other countries had progressed significantly. The report also showed that a decentralized governing structure was not an obstacle, and that countries with a federal structure had made good progress.

10. The report includes detailed findings and highlights the key role of educators. Major challenges include: (a) giving a special attention to those in kindergarten or in primary school today, who are tomorrow's decision-makers; (b) building a stronger partnership between authorities and stakeholders, a precondition; (c) developing competences in ESD; (d) capacity-building for decision makers and other stakeholders; (e) a more integrative conceptualization of sustainable development (SD) emerging to allow for socio-economic perspectives to enter ESD; (f) development of adequate ESD materials at all levels; (g) enhancing the use of indigenous and other traditional and local knowledge; and (h) making sustainability attractive not only to certain groups, but to the society as a whole. In the global context, the problems posed by climate change are a leading example where ESD could be applied to daily life, as climate change affects everyone. ESD offers an essential way to shape knowledge and attitudes, and hence can help address these problems.

11. Another valuable support to assessing progress in ESD is the collection of good ESD practices (<http://www.unece.org/env/esd/GoodPractices/index.html>). Such a collection was undertaken by UNECE and UNESCO and resulted in a first publication of good ESD practices in formal, non-formal and informal education. Such collections are a key tool for promoting ESD in the region and worldwide.

IV. To develop strategies for the way ahead

“Where do we want to go from here?”

Text to be included in the Conference Declaration:

Implementation should be needs-driven and respond to country-specific challenges. Next steps should focus on: (a) developing and implementing national action plans for ESD; (b) giving special attention to the development of competences in ESD, in particular among educators⁴; (c) being supportive of educators while ensuring they have the competences required; (d) building support in ESD among administrators at the education institution level; (e) promoting stronger links with economic issues, including through exploring economic incentives and “greening” procurement; (f) further enhancing partnerships with the private sector, in particular with local businesses; and (g) raising awareness of the potential contribution of indigenous and other traditional and local knowledge with respect to sustainability.

12. ESD implementation should focus not only on further strengthening of policy and institutional mechanisms and tools, but also on developing competences, content, teaching tools and materials. A more integrative conceptualization is needed to better integrate SD with the environmental education. This could only be achieved with the promotion of stronger multi-stakeholder partnerships with both the education and environment sectors. One priority activity for countries should be initiating their national action plans.

⁴ The Belgrade Ministerial Conference reaffirmed the importance of competences in ESD among educators - one of the Strategy's objectives.

13. ESD should be promoted through capacity-building, disseminating of good practices and exchanging positive experiences. Implementation should be needs-driven and respond to country-specific challenges. Partnerships with the private sector, in particular with local businesses, should be further enhanced. Stronger links with economic issues, including through exploring economic incentives and “greening” procurement, should be promoted. Raising awareness of the potential contribution of indigenous and other traditional and local knowledge with respect to sustainability should also be given attention.

14. To orient education towards ESD, a corresponding shift in the competences of educators themselves is demanded. Some of these competences are already recognised while others will require an innovative approach. It is expected that this new combination of competences will provide the necessary educational setting for effective ESD to emerge. The UNECE Strategy for ESD calls specifically⁵ for the development of educators’ competences to engage in ESD. The joint session on ESD held at the Belgrade Ministerial Conference recognized educators’ competence as a frequent bottleneck vis-à-vis improving the quality of education and agreed that developing competences in ESD should be a priority. The first reporting exercise clearly identified the need to further define the nature of ESD competences and the ways in which these might be developed. Furthermore, an enabling policy environment for this work needs to be supported and applied in each member State, and made a priority in the region’s ESD activities.

⁵ CEP/AC.13/2005/3/Rev.1, paras. 54–55.