

## A Letter from the Future: UNESCO and the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development

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### Abstract

This paper begins with a letter of thanks from future generations for the wisdom our generation has shown in initiating a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. It describes the overall goals of the Decade and focuses on the Action Plan being developed by UNESCO to guide its contributions as the international lead agency for the Decade. These are shown to be two-fold. The first is one of leadership, catalysing, coordinating and supporting activities around the world, especially supporting the re-orientation of national education systems and policies in support of sustainable development and encouraging civil society, the private sector and the media to participate. The second is as a substantive implementer of Education for Sustainable Development, itself, helping to create an enabling environment for the achievement of the objectives of the Decade.

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What if future generations were able to talk to us? Just what would they say if they could? If they had a voice today, what would they ask us to do for them?

Would they be concerned about the many depressing reports we read in our newspapers and see on televisions everyday? Escalating conflict and war? Growing misunderstanding and conflict between cultural, ethnic and religious groups? Desperate poverty, malnutrition and starvation? Flourishing multibillionaires and fashion shows while millions live on less than a dollar a day? Continued oppression of women, refugees and children in an age that is supposed to be becoming more democratic? Increasing incidences of floods and hurricanes due to global warming? The destruction of tropical forests? Encroaching deserts? Millions more species lost? Cities choking, water courses trickling and vast dead oceans heaving with oil and other pollutants left behind by the human race?

Or would they see that we are really trying to do our best, that we are making great strides in improving environmental quality, reducing global poverty, caring for the unfortunate, and seeking to build the conditions for peace not war?

Just what would they say to us today? Would they thank us for seeking to live our lives in ways that ensure that our descendants – our future generations – have a clean and safe environment and access to all the resources they need to have a good quality of life?

A letter from the future has come to us:

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Thank you for listening to this message from future generations—those of us who will inhabit this lovely planet for many decades to come. Our voices are usually overlooked by your generations, so we are very appreciative of your willingness to listen to our perspective.

Even though we live in a century very different from yours, we too work, play, talk, eat, laugh, hope, cry, sing, learn, worship, think, and wonder.

You are alive at a pivotal moment in humanity's development. You are making some of the most important choices in human history. Your era is marked by positive and negative potentials of such newness and magnitude that you can hardly understand them.

Through your public policies and daily lives, the people of your era have tremendous power to influence the future course of humanity's story. We strongly care about your choices, of course, since we benefit or suffer from them quite directly. We live downstream from you in time; whatever you put into the stream flows on to our era.

This is why we are very pleased that you care so deeply about the well-being of future generations. That is what we want most from you: your caring for us, your concern for our well-being, your willingness to take our needs as seriously as you take your own needs.

We admire and thank you for taking our needs seriously. We treasure our past and our predecessors as well as our future. We respect and love you. We hope that you and the children currently in your schools will continue to care about us and will treat us with respect.

It is also true that we occasionally feel frustrated and angry with you for taking enormous risks that could severely damage our prospects, and for sometimes treating us in thoughtless, selfish, uncaring ways. At a deeper level, though, we feel a strong kinship bond with you, because all of us participate in the same never-ending procession of generations that stretches over the centuries. And all of us share a love for our home - that vibrant planet called Earth with its richly diverse geography and life.

It is our hope and trust that early 21<sup>st</sup> Century society does everything possible to help people feel a deep bonding or connectedness with all of humankind, with the planet and its diverse forms of life, and with future generations.

This is why we are pleased that the United Nations has made 2005 – 2014 a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, and why we are happy that so many teachers are teaching for a sustainable future.

Source: This letter is adapted from a brief section in Allen Tough's on-line book *A Message From Future Generations*. See <http://www.ieti.org/fg.html> for a copy of the full letter.

The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, which began in 2005 and runs to 2014, has been established to help build commitment and skills across the world's education system so that human society can develop an enhanced

understanding of what it means to work for a sustainable future, a sense of responsibility for future generations, and a spirit of optimism and hope for a sustainable future.

However, despite the progress being made on many fronts – and the optimism expressed in the Letter from Future Generations – there are still many pressing issues and concerns that need to be addressed. For example, people in many parts of the world are suffering from the effects of ecosystem decline. Examples of this include: water shortages in Australia, India and the Middle East; unsafe water in many towns and cities in Africa; collapsed fisheries off the coast of Canada; landslides on the deforested slopes of Honduras; forest fires in Indonesia; spreading deserts in north Africa ... the list is almost endless.

As a result of these environmental conditions and trends, GEO3 concludes that:

Degradation of natural resources such as land, fresh and marine waters, forests and biodiversity threatens the livelihood of many people but especially the poor. The “sink” function of the environment operates through such processes as nutrient recycling, decomposition, and the natural purification and filtering of air and water. When these functions are impaired or overburdened, health can be jeopardized by contaminated water supplies including groundwater, and by urban air pollution and agrochemical pollution. Human health is increasingly determined by environmental conditions. For example:

- \* Deteriorating environmental conditions are a major contributory factor to poor health and a reduced quality of life;
- \* Poor environmental quality is directly responsible for some 25 per cent of all preventable ill-health, with diarrhoeal diseases and acute respiratory infections heading the list;
- \* Air pollution is a major contributor to a number of diseases; and
- \* Globally, 7 per cent of all deaths and diseases are due to inadequate or unsafe water, sanitation and hygiene. Approximately 5 per cent are attributable to air pollution.

UNEP (2003) on-line at <http://www.unep.org/geo/geo3/english/overview/014.htm>

Thus, from the perspective of education for international understanding, we must also note that living conditions for a great many people in the world are far from good. Even though total global economic production around the world is huge, much of it is distributed very unequally. For example, the top 20 percent of the world's income earners - those living in the North - are generally doing well while the vast majority of people are living in conditions of great poverty in many of the countries of the South. In fact, the three richest billionaires in the world have more assets than the combined annual production of the world's 600 million poorest people! (Christian Aid, 2000, p. 1)

Many sustainable development challenges face us today. Across the world we see unacceptable levels of deprivation in people's lives. There are just over 6 billion people in the world, and 4.6 billion live in the developing countries of the South. Of these, more than 850 million cannot read and write, nearly a billion lack access to improved water sources, and 2.4 billion lack access to basic sanitation. Nearly 325 million boys and girls are out of school. And 11 million children under the age of five die each year from preventable causes—equivalent to more than 30,000 a day. Around 1.2 billion people live on less than \$1 a day and 2.8 billion on less than \$2 a day. That is two-thirds of the world's population! However, poverty is not limited to the South. In the industrial countries of the North, more than 130 million people are income poor, 34 million are unemployed, and adult functional illiteracy rates average 15%. These figures are developed further in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Serious deprivations in many aspects of life

<b>The South</b>
<b>Health</b>
968 million people without access to improved water sources (1998)
2.4 billion people without access to basic sanitation (1998)
34 million people living with HIV/AIDS (end of 2000)
2.2 million people dying annually from indoor air pollution (1996)
<b>Education</b>
854 million illiterate adults, 543 million of them women (2000)
325 million children out of school at the primary and secondary levels, 183 million of them girls (2000)
<b>Income poverty</b>
1.2 billion people living on less than \$1 a day (1993 PPP US\$)
2.8 billion on less than \$2 a day (1998)
<b>Children</b>
163 million underweight children under age five (1998)
11 million children under five dying annually from preventable causes (1998)
<b>The North</b>
15% of adults lacking functional literacy skills (1994-98)
130 million people in income poverty (with less than 50% of median income) (1999)
8 million undernourished people (1996-98)
1.5 million people living with HIV/AIDS (2000)

United Nations Development Programme (2001, p. 9)

### The United Nations Decade

The basic vision of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development is a world free from horrors such as these and where education plays a leading role in giving people the opportunity to learn the values, behaviour and lifestyles required for a sustainable future. The aim of the Decade is for education to be integrated into national education plans at all levels and across all sectors, and in order to achieve this, the Decade has five key objectives:

1. To give an enhanced profile to the central role of education and learning in the common pursuit of sustainable development;
2. To facilitate links and networking, exchange and interaction among stakeholders in ESD;
3. To 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;
4. To foster increased quality of teaching and learning in education for sustainable development; and

5. To develop strategies at every level to strengthen capacity in ESD. (UNESCO, 2004).

The International Implementation Scheme for the Decade is based upon three key dimensions of sustainable development – society, environment and economy with culture as an underlying dimension. Emphasising the importance of culture, UNESCO (2005a) states:

The values, diversity, knowledge, languages and worldviews associated with culture predetermine the way issues of education for sustainable development are dealt with in specific national contexts. In this sense, culture is just not a collection of particular manifestations (song, dance, dress, ...), but a way of being, relating, behaving, believing and acting which people live out in their lives and which is in a constant process of change and exchange with other cultures. (p.1)

This emphasis not only points to the importance of grounding education in studies of culture, including indigenous and multi-faith values and beliefs. It also highlights the fact that education for sustainable development is not a global imposition on countries and education systems but an invitation for them to explore the themes and issues, the objectives and the pedagogies that can make education locally relevant and culturally appropriate in the search for a better world for all.

### **UNESCO's Roles and Approaches**

The International Implementation Scheme recommended a Partnership/Alliance approach, which defined the roles of Member States and International Agencies in the planning and implementation of programmes and activities aimed at achieving the objectives of the DESD. This was to ensure that all stakeholders – governments at national, provincial and local levels, business and industry, the media, civil society groups and regional and international agencies - can identify clear roles and responsibilities in the development of a diverse and comprehensive programme of activities during the DESD. But what is UNESCO's role as international Lead Agency for the Decade?

UNESCO has two related roles to play. The first is one of leadership: to catalyse, coordinate and support the global processes initiated under the IIS, especially supporting the re-orientation of national education systems and policies in support of sustainable development and encouraging civil society, the private sector and the media to respond to the imperatives of sustainable development. The second is as the substantive implementer of the Decade, helping to create an enabling environment for the achievement of the five objectives of the DESD through supporting the review and redevelopment of education policies, the sharing of experiences, knowledge building and management, mobilising partners, and capacity development. UNESCO has prepared a broad-based intersectoral strategy to guide its work in developing programmes that support Member States and other stakeholders in their efforts to integrate sustainable development issues and practices into education systems at all levels as a basis for a more sustainable human society. This Action Plan was formulated as a set of strategic activities that matched:

... the Organization's functions as a laboratory of ideas, standard-setter, clearinghouse, capacity-builder and promoter of international cooperation. UNESCO will be proactive, and all of the parts of the Organization will work together in an intersectoral manner so that it plays the strong leadership and coordination role at the international level as well as to ensure the success of the Decade. The Organization will use its DESD coordination role to:

- fulfil its strategic role with regard to ESD;
- catalyse new partnerships with the private sector, with youth, and with media groups;
- encourage monitoring and evaluation;
- encourage a research agenda and serve as forum for relevant research on ESD;
- serve as a forum for bringing together important stakeholders in the Decade such as: representatives of key multinationals, faith-based institutions, youth associations, indigenous people, etc;
- share good ESD practices;
- link Member States that have put in place ESD curricula, policies, research, etc., with those Member States that are requesting help; and
- convene flexible working groups on particular topics. (UNESCO, 2005b, p. 2)

Figure 1 illustrates the organisational model for the coordinated implementation of the Action Plan, focusing upon the relationships between UNESCO Sectors and field offices in support of Member States as well as with international partners. There are four key principles for implementation in this model:

- An Intersectoral Working Group is responsible for the scope, management and review of all programmes and activities conducted by UNESCO in the DESD. This is supported by a DESD Secretariat for the day-to-day coordination of UNESCO's DESD programmes and activities;
- UNESCO chairs an Interagency Committee for the DESD that mobilises funds and resources to coordinate strategic interventions at all levels;
- UNESCO works in partnerships with, and catalyses, the contributions of NGOs, private sector groups and media organisations to DESD activities at the international and regional levels and with Member States; and
- The primary points of contact for Member States are Regional, Country and Cluster Offices and UNESCO Institutes, Centre and Networks, all of whom are responsible for catalyzing the commitment of Member States and assisting them with processes for policy reorientation, capacity building and the development of the ESD support resources necessary for them to achieve the objectives of the DESD.

These principles determined the direction and focus of the following elements in the Action Plan:

- A clear and agreed vision and mission;
- Key audiences or thrusts of Education for Sustainable Development;
- Objectives that UNESCO will help Member States to achieve through this Action Plan;
- Principles to guide the development and implementation of programmes under the Action Plan;
- Thematic Programmes through which UNESCO will help create the enabling environment and capacity for Member States and other stakeholders to achieve the objectives of the DESD;
- Targets derived from the objectives and thrusts of the DESD International Implementation Scheme;
- Milestones specified at a biennial level to guide work programme planning in C5s;
- Organisational structures to catalyze coordination and collaboration;
- A diverse range of partners who will participate in and support DESD Thematic Programme;

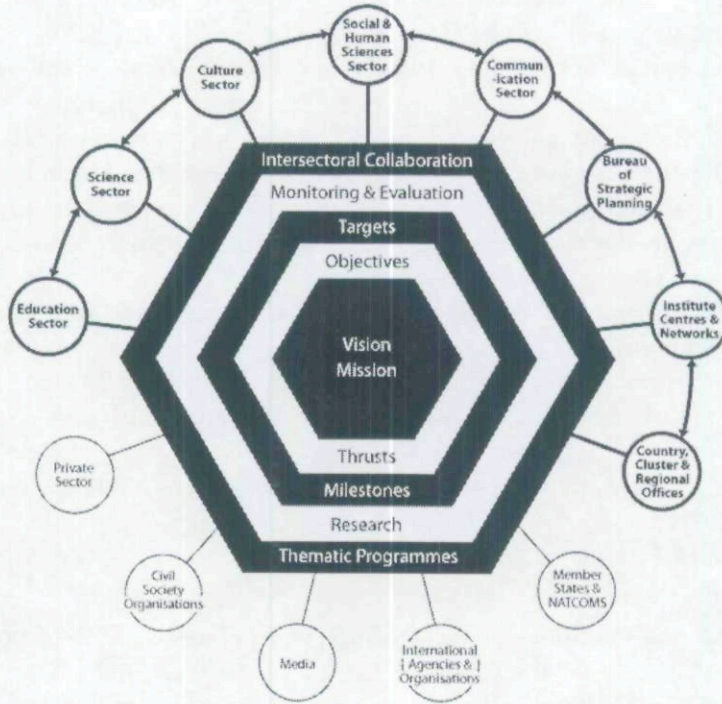


FIGURE 1: Structure of the DESD Action Plan

- Research to provide the knowledge upon which continued programme planning can take place; and
- Indicator-based monitoring and evaluation as a continuous process throughout the DESD, with a focus on a mid-Decade review in 2009-2010 and a final evaluation in 2014.

The heart of the Action Plan is a set of nine Thematic Programmes with each one related to a specific objective, thrust and/or theme of the DESD.

1. International Leadership and Advocacy of the DESD;
2. Integrating ESD into Basic Education;
3. Reorienting General Secondary Education for ESD;
4. Integrating ESD into TVET;
5. Integrating ESD into Higher Education;
6. Teacher Education for ESD;
7. Education for Cultural Diversity;
8. Education for Sustainable Water Management; and
9. Education for Sustainable Ecosystems and Livelihoods.

Each of these programmes has a sequence of common key tasks and milestones across the five biennia of the Decade to guide UNESCO in the implementation of the Action Plan (See Table 1). At the present time, UNESCO is developing international and regional partnerships and detailed activity plans for each Thematic Programme. These activities include:

- Research and documentation of innovative and effective practice in the various aspects and thrusts of ESD;
- The development of “Briefing Papers” on aspects of excellent practice, and preparation of annotated lists of related key resources and manuals;
- The preparation of guidelines, manuals and training opportunities to build capacity building for the widespread adoption and scaling up of excellent practice on three levels – (i) senior education decision makers and planners, (ii) curriculum and syllabus development officers, and (iii) teacher education institutions and providers of continuing professional development;
- Developing processes for monitoring, evaluation and continuous quality improvement;
- Supporting regional and international networks to provide on-going support and advice and through which innovations can be trialled through demonstration projects; and
- Processes for the sharing of experience, knowledge building and knowledge management.

### Conclusion

This paper has outlined the strategies being put in place by UNESCO to guide it in its role as lead agency for the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. Its success in fulfilling this role will go a long way to supporting and catalysing national, provincial/state and local governments in their work in mobilising all levels of the education sector, the media, civil society and business in using the Decade as a lens for critically examining and reorienting their activities so that the letter from the future that introduced this paper rings true.

*Keywords:* education for sustainable development; UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development.

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