



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
14 March 2001

Original: English

**Commission on Sustainable Development acting
as the preparatory committee for the World
Summit on Sustainable Development**
Organizational session
30 April-2 May 2001

Education and public awareness for sustainable development*

Report of the Secretary-General

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* The report was prepared by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization as task manager for chapter 36 of Agenda 21, with contributions from other United Nations agencies and international organizations. The report is a brief factual overview, which is intended to inform the Commission on Sustainable Development on key developments in the subject area.



I. Introduction

1. Agenda 21 recognizes education in all its forms (including public awareness and training) as an essential means for achieving progress towards sustainable development and for the implementation of all chapters of the Agenda. Education is no longer seen as an end in itself but rather as a key instrument for bringing about the changes in knowledge, values, behaviour and lifestyles required to achieve sustainability. Moreover, education is considered a fundamental human right. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “everyone has the right to education”.

2. The importance given to education and public awareness in Agenda 21 and the other outcomes of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development was reinforced by the agreements and resolutions adopted at all the other major conferences organized by the United Nations in the 1990s. It should be noted that the goal to enrol all children in primary school is among the seven goals for international development that the United Nations, the World Bank Group, the International Monetary Fund and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development are using as a common framework to guide their policies and programmes and to assess the effectiveness of their organizations.¹

3. The present report reviews accomplishments and constraints in promoting education and public awareness for sustainable development and presents issues for further consideration.

II. Education for all: the foundation

4. The World Conference on Education for All (Jomtien, Thailand, 5-9 March 1990) marked a renewed start in the global quest to make basic education universal and eradicate illiteracy. The Jomtien Conference also marked the beginning of a broader vision of basic education, one that encompasses all forms of organized education and training which meet the basic learning needs of individuals, including literacy and numeracy as well as the general knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that they require to survive, develop their capacities, live and work in dignity, improve the quality of their lives, make informed decisions and continue learning. Recognizing the essential role of the “Education for All” (EFA) goals and targets for achieving progress in sustainable development, chapter 36 of Agenda 21 encouraged all countries to endorse the recommendations of the Jomtien Conference and to implement its Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs.

5. At Jomtien, commitments were made and directions set for a decade of large-scale and sustained efforts. Six “target dimensions” were agreed upon, and countries were invited to set their own specific targets within those areas. Agreements were entered into by countries, intergovernmental organizations, and non-governmental organizations to work together throughout the decade. The EFA Forum, consisting of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the World Bank and later the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), was established to guide and coordinate the work, to monitor progress and to assess achievements.

6. Ten years after the Jomtien Conference, the EFA 2000 Assessment was undertaken, the most in-depth evaluation ever of basic education. The current status of basic education in more than 180 countries was examined through national assessments, sample surveys, case studies, a series of 14 thematic studies, and data from participating countries on 18 statistical indicators that quantify progress towards the goal of EFA.

Box 1

Jomtien Framework for Action: six target dimensions

1. Expansion of early childhood care and developmental activities.
2. Universal access to, and completion of, primary school, or of whatever level of education is considered “basic”, by the year 2000.
3. Improvement of learning such that an agreed percentage of an age cohort attains or surpasses a defined level of achievement.
4. Reduction of the adult illiteracy rate to one half its 1990 level by the year 2000, with sufficient emphasis on female literacy to reduce significantly the current disparity between male and female literacy rates.
5. Expansion of the provision of basic education and training in other essential skills required by youth and adults, with programme effectiveness assessed in terms of behavioural change and impact on health, employment and productivity.
6. Increased acquisition by individuals and families of the knowledge, skills and values required for better living and sound and sustainable development, made available through all education channels, including the mass media, other forms of modern and traditional communication, and social action, with effectiveness assessed in terms of behavioural change.

Note: The Jomtien Framework for Action invited countries to set their own targets with reference to these dimensions; it was not assumed that all the numerical targets could be met within a decade.

Source: International Consultative Forum on Education for All, *Education for All 2000 Assessment: Global Synthesis* (Paris, UNESCO, 2000).

7. The EFA 2000 Assessment revealed that none of the specific EFA targets set at Jomtien had been met in its entirety, even the fundamental goal of achieving “universal access to, and completion of” basic education by 2000. There is, however, general consensus about several major gains made in the course of the decade. There is broad agreement on five major issues requiring further attention in a very large number of countries and action by the international community: access and equity; quality, relevance and effectiveness; sharing responsibility; mobilizing resources; towards a new knowledge base.

8. The major findings of the EFA 2000 Assessment² were as follows:

(a) The number of children enrolled in school rose from an estimated 599 million in 1990 to 681 million in 1998, nearly doubling the average increase during

the preceding decade. Eastern Asia and the Pacific and Latin America and the Caribbean are now close to achieving universal primary education. China and India have also made substantial progress towards that goal. Developing countries as a whole have achieved a net enrolment ratio in primary education in excess of 80 per cent;

(b) Understanding of the importance of the early years is now firmly placed on the global agenda, and the idea that education begins at birth has taken root in many societies. As a result, the number of children in pre-school education rose by 5 per cent over the past decade;

(c) More people are now entering secondary education, and the rate at which populations complete upper secondary education is rising steeply with each successive age group. Enrolment in secondary education worldwide expanded 10-fold over the past 50 years, from 40 million in 1950 to more than 400 million today. Over the same period, enrolments in tertiary education increased nearly 14-fold, from 6.5 million in 1950 to 88.2 million in 1997;

(d) The number of children not enrolled in school decreased from an estimated 127 million in 1990 to 113 million in 1998;

(e) The number of literate adults grew significantly over the past decade, from an estimated 2.7 billion in 1990 to 3.3 billion in 1998. The overall global adult literacy rate now stands at 85 per cent for men and 74 per cent for women. More than 50 per cent of the world's adult population has now attended primary school. But adult illiteracy remains a major problem. An estimated 880 million adults cannot read or write, and in the least developed countries one out of two individuals falls into this category. Two thirds of illiterate adults are women — exactly the same proportion as 10 years ago;

(f) A few countries have made progress in reducing disparities in the distribution of educational opportunity, as reflected by gender, disability, ethnicity, urban versus rural location and working children. Nevertheless, positive trends in primary education mask disparity of access both between and within many countries, and disparities in educational quality can remain even when access rates are high. People in poor, rural and remote communities, ethnic minorities, and indigenous populations have shown little or no progress over the past decade. And the gender gap persists;

(g) Many countries continue to be constrained by the availability of resources and the efficiency of the systems that exist to allocate them. Today, an estimated 63 per cent of the education costs worldwide are met by Governments. But the private sector is becoming increasingly more important and accounts on average for 35 per cent of education funding. The last 2 per cent comes from overseas aid programmes. Between 1990 and 1997 aid to education from bilateral sources fell from \$3.64 billion to \$3.55 billion in cash terms. Over the same period, the contribution to educational development from the World Bank dropped by nearly 40 per cent, from \$1,487 million to \$880 million. Average levels of spending on education worldwide have hovered around 5 per cent of GNP for more developed countries and 4 per cent for less developed countries in the period between 1980 and 1997.

9. The World Education Forum, held in Dakar, Senegal, in April 2000, to review progress 10 years after Jomtien approved the Dakar Framework for Action which

confirms the World Declaration on Education for All, approved at Jomtien.³ The Dakar Framework represents a collective commitment to achieve education for all by 2015, according to six goals set for the future (see box 2) and at an estimated annual cost of \$8 billion. A commitment was made that no country with strong political will and a serious EFA plan should be thwarted in the achievement of the goals because of lack of resources. Making clear the link with sustainable development, the Framework states that education is “the key to sustainable development and peace and stability within and among countries, and thus an indispensable means for effective participation in the societies and economies of the twenty-first century”.

Box 2

Dakar Framework for Action: six goals for the future

1. Expand and improve comprehensive early childhood care and education.
2. Ensure that by 2015 all children have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality.
3. Ensure that the learning needs of all young people are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes.
4. Achieve a 50-per-cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for adults.
5. Eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 and achieve gender equality by 2015.
6. Improve all aspects of the quality of education and ensure excellence of all.

Source: UNESCO, The Dakar Framework for Action. Education for All: Meeting Our Collective Commitments (Paris, UNESCO, 2000).

III. Beyond basic education to education for sustainable development

10. While chapter 36 of Agenda 21 is grounded in the fundamental challenges and requirements of education for all, it sees education as embracing all of the ways in which people learn about the world around them, develop values and lifestyles that reflect an understanding of global realities, and assume their responsibilities as global citizens to prepare for the future. The concerns of chapter 36 therefore are relevant for people of all ages and in all countries. After the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, that broad scope posed a problem. In 1996 the Commission on Sustainable Development initiated a special work programme on education which was instrumental in establishing priorities and focusing efforts.

11. Since then, much progress has been made in advancing the new vision of education, public awareness and training as key instruments for achieving sustainable development. This has been a fundamental achievement in that an entire conceptual framework had to be created. However, there still remains considerable confusion about the concept. Of particular concern is the continuing misconception that sustainable development is mostly about the environment and that “education for sustainable development” is therefore simply a new twist to the notion of “environmental education”.

12. The implications of the new vision of education for sustainable development for formal educational systems are major, and they coincide with a broad rethinking in many countries, where formal educational systems are no longer considered adequate to meeting the needs of society and the workplace. Traditionally, education was designed to pass on existing knowledge, skills and values. The new vision reorients it in terms of how to prepare people for life — for job security; for the demands of a rapidly changing society; for technological changes that affect every part of life; and, ultimately, for the quest for happiness, well-being and quality of life. Education is being redefined as a lifelong process that needs to be not merely readjusted but also restructured and reformed.

13. Since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, there has been increasing recognition that a curriculum oriented towards sustainability would place good citizenship among its primary objectives. Many existing curricula are being revised with that objective in mind. Efforts are being made to develop teaching, learning and assessment processes that emphasize values, ethical motivation and the ability to work with others to help build a sustainable future. Increased attention is being given to the humanities and social sciences. For the most part, what has been achieved is relatively isolated, serving to indicate in which direction curriculum reform needs to move.

14. Reorienting the curriculum towards sustainable development means that at least two major structural reforms must be undertaken. One is to re-examine the centralized mandating of courses and textbooks, to allow for locally relevant learning programmes. The other is to develop new ways to assess the processes and outcomes of learning. Some efforts along these lines have been attempted, but for the time being, change at a significant scale is still lacking.

15. There are approximately 60 million teachers in the world, each a potential agent of change in support of sustainable development. Therefore, teacher education has become a priority within chapter 36. Major initiatives include:

- (a) Developing international guidelines for reorienting teacher education;
- (b) Establishing an international network of some 50 teacher education institutions, each of which is conducting a project to reorient all or part of its pre-service curriculum according to the directions laid down in chapter 36;
- (c) Developing a multimedia teacher education programme, entitled Teaching and Learning for a Sustainable Future.⁴ A pilot version of this programme has been published, consisting of 25 modules, totalling about 100 hours of professional development for both pre-service and in-service teachers.

16. Since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, many higher education institutions, organizations, governmental agencies and individuals

worldwide have made significant efforts to incorporate sustainable development into academic programmes, operations and community outreach. Two areas of university life have emerged as particularly crucial for sustainable development: the area of lifelong learning, in which the productive sector often draws closer to the university, and the management of the university, where the capacity to foster changes in attitudes and procedures is highest. Progress has been made in introducing an interdisciplinary approach into teaching and research. Major research projects, such as that on climate change, support working across disciplines. However, the frontiers between academic disciplines remain staunchly defended by professional bodies, career structures and criteria for promotion and advancement. Some progress has been made in including appropriate materials on sustainable development in the programmes of study of journalists, engineers, managers, doctors, lawyers, scientists, economists, administrators and numerous other professionals, and in special programmes for teachers, senior managers, local politicians and leaders. Partnering and networking have improved, for example, through such bodies as University Leaders for a Sustainable Future, International Association of Universities, and UNESCO.

17. Since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, there has been increasing recognition of the critical role of education in promoting sustainable consumption and production patterns in order to change the attitudes and behaviour of people as consumers and producers and as citizens carrying out their collective responsibilities and duties. But this field is still in its infancy. Some progress has been made through activities with the advertising industry, youth surveys and in the development of teacher education materials.⁵

18. Education is chronically under-financed. An undetermined — but insufficient — amount of money has been invested since the Conference in supporting the specific sustainable development components of education falling within the purview of chapter 36. In addition to increasing amounts of funding, there is need for greater clarity, coordination and — where possible and appropriate — cohesion of funding for education at the national level, from all sources and for all aspects of development.

19. Non-formal education (including public awareness) is presented in chapter 36 as a key instrument. Formal educational systems are notoriously slow to change. Non-formal channels are capable of delivering new information and tapping new approaches and methods for teaching and learning more easily. In professional educational circles, it is the promise of the non-formal sector which is being seen increasingly as a complement to formal education for the future, making the role of non-governmental organizations and associations of all kinds, as well as the media and the arts, ever more important. A great deal of work is also being done with respect to public awareness in support of the articles concerning education in each of the environmental conventions, such as the Global Biodiversity Initiative.

20. The role and importance of major groups in implementing chapter 36 has increased significantly since the Conference. The UNESCO NGO Liaison Committee, representing about 350 professional non-governmental organizations in the field of education, has set up a special commission to mobilize its members in support of the World Summit on Sustainable Development. The education and youth caucuses of the Commission on Sustainable Development have attempted to work with all the other caucuses to make education a cross-cutting theme. The CONGO

Committee on Sustainable Development and the newly formed Committee on Education are also engaged in supporting education for sustainable development.

21. Since the Conference, there have been numerous regional initiatives on education for sustainable development. The Multinational Project on Education for Citizenship and Sustainability in Multi-cultural Societies is sponsored by the Organization of American States and UNESCO in the context of the follow-up to the second Summit of the Americas (1998) and the subsequent meeting of Ministers of Education of the Americas (1998). The European Commission organized a Conference on Environmental Education and Training in Europe (1999), which was instrumental in creating new networks within the European Union. Canada organized the Planet ERE Conference for 50 Francophone countries (1996). France is organizing Planet ERE 2 in Paris in November 2001. These last two major efforts have played an important role in galvanizing action and new partnerships in the countries in question. The meeting on education for sustainable consumption, organized by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), played an important role in defining that aspect of chapter 36.

IV. Issues for further consideration

22. Reorienting educational systems is an undertaking which will bear fruit only in the long term. Non-formal education, including public awareness, may deliver results in a shorter time-frame. Both are essential for preparing a sustainable future. Within this vast challenge, certain issues should receive particular attention.

23. In formal education, efforts should focus in the future on:

(a) Promoting education for all as a fundamental human right and in meeting the international targets that have been set;

(b) Reforming secondary and higher education, in terms of both curricula and teaching methods;

(c) Reorienting teacher education in order to improve the quality of education.

24. With regard to non-formal education (including public awareness), priority should be given to:

(a) Developing education for sustainable consumption;

(b) Promoting greater and more targeted action by the educational community, non-governmental organizations, youth and other major groups at national and community levels.

25. It would also be opportune to explore further the linkages between the various relevant international action plans and legal instruments as they relate to education and public awareness, especially at the national level, taking into account not only United Nations conferences but also more specialized international conferences organized by the United Nations system. Efforts could be made to:

(a) Avoid dispersion of efforts or overlap among the various frameworks for action;

(b) Improve coordination of the United Nations system at the national level;

- (c) Ensure that education and public awareness are integral parts of national sustainable development strategies and other relevant national development plans;
- (d) Fully involve major groups and the educational community.

Notes

- ¹ International Monetary Fund, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, United Nations, World Bank Group, *2000: A Better World For All* (Washington, D.C. and London, 2000).
 - ² See International Consultative Forum on Education for All, *Education for All 2000 Assessment: Global Synthesis* (Paris, UNESCO, 2000); UNESCO, Institute for Statistics, *Facts and Figures, 2000* (Paris, UNESCO, 2000).
 - ³ For information about the World Education Forum and its preparation, consult <http://www.unesco.org/education>.
 - ⁴ Version 1 was published in March 2001 by UNESCO on its web site (www.unesco.org/education/tlsf) and as an Internet CD-ROM. Version 2 will be published in late 2001, free of charge in several languages, after extensive evaluation by non-governmental organizations and networks representing teachers and teacher-training institutions.
 - ⁵ One module in the UNESCO multimedia programme Teaching and Learning for a Sustainable Future concerns sustainable consumption.
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