

# The Declaration

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## The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development - A Progress Report

By Wynn Calder

The initial response to the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD), 2005-2014, has been broad and varied. Regional and sub-regional launches of the Decade have occurred this year for Europe/North America, the Commonwealth of Independent States, Asia/Pacific, Latin America, the Arab region, and the Caribbean.<sup>1</sup> At least 13 national and sub-national launches have already occurred or are planned for later this year. To date two regional strategies for the DESD have been prepared, for Europe/North America<sup>2</sup> and Asia/Pacific.<sup>3</sup> But it is efforts and strategies at the national and local levels that present real possibilities for progress. This article will discuss the scope and challenges of the DESD globally, give examples of organizational responses, and then look specifically at several countries where the Decade is taking tangible shape.

### Background and Purpose of the Decade

The UN practice of declaring international decades devoted to critical global concerns in order to foster broad international action started in 1985. The resolution to put in place a Decade of Education for Sustainable De-

velopment was adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 2002 and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was designated lead agency for the promotion of the De-



cade. As such, UNESCO was called upon to develop an International Implementation Scheme (IIS) to guide countries, regions, institutions, partnerships and others in fulfilling the promise of the Decade. UNESCO is also required to provide specific recommendations to governments on strengthening teaching, learning and training for sustainable development at all levels.

The DESD provides several opportunities. Perhaps most fundamentally, it provides an opportunity to progress more quickly in our efforts to make sustainable development a focus of education around the world. It is an encouragement to educators, practitioners, and policy makers to form partnerships and work together for a global imperative. For some the Decade is an opportunity to join an international movement, and to organize around a common set of principles and priorities. For others it provides a vehicle for increasing public awareness of sustainable development within their own local or regional contexts. The Decade invites us to celebrate our achievements to date, and it calls on us to look forward 10 years, to envision what we hope to achieve, and to create a strategy for getting there.

Responsibility for the DESD within UNESCO is housed in the Division for the Promotion of Quality Education, but other offices, such as the Divisions of Basic Education, Higher Education, and Secondary, Technical and Vocational Education are involved. Several drafts of the implementation scheme have been developed in consultation with other UN agencies, governments, NGOs, etc. The latest version was approved at the UNESCO Executive Board session in September 2005. The official draft IIS: (a) links the DESD with existing and related educational and development initiatives (namely, the Education for All initiative, the UN Literacy Decade, and the Millennium Development Goals); (b) describes key elements and characteristics of ESD; (c) promotes a partnership/alliance approach to ESD at community, national, and regional levels; and (d) offers guidelines for implementation.<sup>4</sup>

An informative DESD website in English, French and Spanish, albeit always in

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progress, offers updates on national and international events and strategies pertaining to the Decade, background information, recommendations, and links to many other pertinent documents and websites. Staff members within the Division for the Promotion of Quality Education have been bombarded with inquiries on the Decade every day for at least two years and they are doing all they can to answer questions, offer guidance, and collect and organize the information coming in. It is up to the rest of us – government officials, educators, leaders and practitioners in all sectors – to make of the Decade what we can and to keep in mind the larger task of building a more sustainable world.

As stated by UNESCO:

“The overall goal of the UN Decade on Education for Sustainable Development is to integrate the values inherent in sustainable development into all aspects of learning to encourage changes in behavior that allow for a more sustainable and just society for all.

The basic vision of the DESD is a world where everyone has the opportunity to benefit from education and learn the values, behaviour and lifestyles required for a sustainable future and for positive societal transformation. This translates into four objectives, to:

1. Facilitate networking, linkages, exchange and interaction among stakeholders in ESD;
2. Foster an increased quality of teaching and learning in education for sustainable development;
3. Help countries make progress towards and attain Millennium Development Goals through ESD efforts;
4. Provide countries with new opportunities to incorporate ESD into education reform efforts.”<sup>5</sup>

The IIS reiterates as foundational to the Decade the four major thrusts of education for sustainability first articulated in Chapter 36 of Agenda 21: (a) Improve access to quality education; (b) Reorient existing education programmes; (c) Develop public understanding and awareness of sustainability; and (d) Provide practical training.<sup>6</sup> Fundamentally, the IIS calls for strategies that engage all sectors and players in building partnerships within countries and across borders to raise awareness about ESD and to move all levels

of education toward more practical learning for a sustainable future.

### Challenges

UNESCO faces numerous challenges in its position as the lead agency for the Decade. First, there is very limited funding available for Decade related activities, and yet demand is high for support for local, regional, and national initiatives in many parts of the world. Second, and according to one UNESCO official, the task of bringing all interest groups to the table, building effective collaboration and engagement between sectors and institutions, and instilling a collective sense of ownership and responsibility, is immense. This would be true of almost any global initiative, but is compounded by the fact that education for sustainable development touches on so many dimensions of society.

Confusing for some is UNESCO’s claim that the DESD is and should be inextricably linked with the ongoing Education for All (EFA) initiative, the UN Literacy Decade (UNLD) 2003-2012, and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).<sup>7</sup> UNESCO is the lead agency for all but the MDGs, which are being coordinated by the UN Development Programme. These four initiatives are indeed related and complementary: the MDGs provide concrete development goals, centered on the reduction of poverty, with education as a “significant input and indicator;” EFA focuses on providing quality basic education for all; the UNLD promotes education for adults and literacy as a basis for learning; and the DESD promotes “a set of basic values, processes and behaviors” as a part of all learning.<sup>8</sup> But each initiative has its own form and structure, and will depend upon legions of agencies, organizations, and individuals to carry it out. How can such large endeavors work together, collaborate, or even remain aware of what each is doing at any given time? This will surely be an ongoing challenge.

The IIS takes some debatable perspectives, such as asserting that ESD should not be equated with environmental education, but rather encompass it and go beyond it, or that ESD cannot be taught as an independent subject, but should be infused throughout the curriculum and the disciplines. Environmental educators around the world may take issue with the first idea, seeing it as working against our common goals. Many educators,

in general, take issue with the second idea. Others are concerned that as “environmental” education becomes diminished within the context of the DESD, and as linkages with the other education initiatives are emphasized, social and economic development priorities will overshadow the environmental aspects of ESD. Nevertheless, UNESCO sees itself more as a partner and stimulator than as the espouser of truth in the global pursuit of ESD. Debates on the nature of ESD will and should continue.

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### Organizational Responses

Many programs, institutions and NGOs around the world, working in cooperation with UNESCO, are helping to define, support, and provide expertise for the Decade. The UN Environment Programme (UNEP), for example, is deeply engaged in the DESD. Sustainable development and education have always been integral to UNEP’s mission. The director generals of both UNESCO and UNEP recently signed a joint statement on the DESD. At least two UNEP projects coming out of the Nairobi office will contribute directly to the goals of the DESD, one focused on mainstreaming environmental learning and research in African universities, the other producing resources to help teachers integrate sustainability into their classes.<sup>9</sup>

The World Conservation Union (IUCN) Commission on Education and Communication has been closely monitoring progress on ESD for years, giving considerable attention recently to the Decade on their website, and providing a suggested action plan for countries interested in committing to the Decade.<sup>10</sup> IUCN plans to contribute directly to the DESD with three long-term strategies: the World Conservation Learning Network, which is designed to stimulate academic work on conservation and sustainable development in partnership with universities; communication and public awareness concerning major environmental conventions, regional agreements, and the Decade; and em-

powerment of IUCN global and regional programmes to develop greater capacity in environmental and sustainable development education.<sup>11</sup>

United Nations University (UNU) has also taken a special interest in the Decade, which was launched for the Asia Pacific region at the UNU-UNESCO Conference on Globalization and Education for Sustainable Development in June 2005 in Japan. UNU-Institute of Advanced Studies (UNU-IAS), for example, is coordinating the development of Regional Centres of Expertise (RCEs). Representing small regions within and between countries around the world, RCEs promote collaboration among primary, secondary, and tertiary educational systems, local governments, and other regional stakeholders, linking formal and non-formal sectors of the education community, to support ESD and sustainable community development. Seven RCEs were launched at the UNU-UNESCO conference, with the anticipation that many more would follow throughout the Decade of ESD.<sup>12</sup> “RCEs might be identified in a comparable way to the monuments on the cultural heritage list,” said Hans van Ginkel, Rector of UNU. “Thus local and regional conditions can be fully taken into account. The visible output at the end of the Decade would be a global network of RCEs.”<sup>13</sup>

The Global Higher Education for Sustainability Partnership (GHESP), which includes ULSF, UNESCO, COPERNICUS-CAMPUS, and the International Association of Universities (IAU), has launched a Resource Project, whose purpose is to advance higher education for sustainable development (HESD) worldwide by building international and regional networks, conducting research on HESD, and providing regionally relevant resources to scholars and change agents at colleges and universities. Since 2003, GHESP has supported and sponsored consultations with higher education representatives in different regions of the world to assess progress in HESD and identify resource needs. The project is meant to contribute actively to the DESD as well as UNU’s emerging RCEs.<sup>14</sup>

### National Responses

From the perspective of UNESCO, Germany has taken the most official path to making the Decade a significant force for German education. Following UNESCO recommendations, the German Commission for UNESCO established a National Committee for the Decade (NatCom) in May 2004. This body brings together thirty experts and institutions to represent the full spectrum of sustainability, including representatives from Federal Ministries (such as the Education, Development and Environment ministries), Parliament, the States (or Länder), NGOs, the media and private enterprise. Additionally, the German Parliament has asked the Federal Government to provide sufficient funds for the National Committee’s coordinating activities. NatCom has developed a national plan of action in cooperation with many stakeholders in the field (ministries, NGOs, individual experts, etc.), specifying four strategic objectives:

1. Further develop the concept of ESD and ensure wide dissemination of ESD practices;
2. Establish better links between the different stakeholders;
3. Increase public awareness for matters of ESD; and
4. Initiate and support international cooperation in the field of ESD.

An implementation plan is currently under development to assign the responsibility of each objective to specific stakeholders, with mechanisms to monitor progress regularly throughout the Decade.<sup>15</sup> In September 2005,

some 100 ESD projects and initiatives were recognized as official German contributions to the Decade.

Leveraging the Decade in Germany has had two great benefits, says Alexander Leicht, head of the German secretariat for the DESD. First, it has fostered “broad political support and tremendous interest from all sectors of the education community;” second, it has created “the opportunity for promoting ESD as an overarching theme that gives much more political weight to players than they had before.” Decade activities have also raised significant challenges including, says Leicht, “the difficulty of bringing very diverse play-

ers together and having them agree on specific objectives;” and establishing “a clear definition of ESD that is not so broad that it is in danger of meaning anything and nothing.”<sup>16</sup>

Compared with Germany, Japan offers a different approach to the Decade. The Japan Council on the UN Decade of ESD (ESD-J), which was founded in 2003, is a networking organization committed to promoting education for a sustainable society. ESD-J includes NGOs and individuals focused on a variety of development issues such as the environment, human rights, and peace, working together on advancing ESD.<sup>17</sup> The Council sees itself as a counterpart to the Japanese government, collaborating on policy development to make it easier for citizens and NGOs to work with local and national government representatives, and for educational institutions to improve teaching and learning for sustainability. It is also focused on international partnerships and policy development.

ESD-J holds national ESD meetings and “exchange workshops” to encourage action and coordination across sectors within Japan. It also coordinates networking sessions at international conferences and publishes reports and pamphlets in numerous languages. Most recently, ESD-J held a symposium in September 2005 to share ESD initiatives and good practice examples with neighboring Asian countries and to work on the development of an Asian Network for the promotion of ESD.

Similar to the Japan model, the United States Partnership for the Decade of ESD (USP), also founded in 2003, is a cross-sectoral network of individuals, educational institutions, NGOs, and others with a common interest in making ESD a U.S. priority. However, where ESD-J works in collaboration with a sympathetic Japanese government, the USP is a grass roots movement working outside of federal government policy and priorities. Notably, the visions of the DESD and the U.S. Partnership are in accord with many local and state government initiatives currently underway.<sup>18</sup>

The USP sees itself as a convener, catalyst and communicator in support of the “full integration of sustainable development into education and learning in the United States.” It is managed by an executive team, and built on the work of action teams (including mar-

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keting, outreach, fundraising, etc.), sector teams (including higher education, K12, faith community, youth, and living institutions), and U.S. regional teams. Nearly 300 organizations and educational institutions have registered as partners or collaborators to date.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the Partnership's continued reliance on volunteer efforts, it has created an informative website; hosted, co-sponsored, or facilitated numerous ESD events; linked isolated efforts in ESD; and formed partnerships with youth groups, federal government representatives, living institutions, faith communities, and several mainstream higher education associations. In order to sustain itself over the long-term, the USP is formalizing its organizational structure and increasing its efforts to raise money.

In South Africa the Decade was launched for the Western Cape region at a conference in June 2005. The Department of Environmental Affairs and Development Planning, which hosted the conference, is playing a coordination role within the provincial government to ensure that ESD is embedded in future development. The event brought environmental educators and sustainable development advocates together to discuss recommendations for provincial SD strategies, ensuring that educational concerns remained a part of all theme-based discussions (which included sustainable human settlements, tourism & trade, water & waste management, energy & climate change, biodiversity, and sustainable development indicators).<sup>20</sup>

In terms of local action, the DESD inspired the first Youth Environmental Symposium for the City of Cape Town, where 21 schools from informal settlements to high-income suburbs came together to discuss sustainable living and present projects on local sustainable development. The symposium proved so successful that there are plans to make it an annual event, and the Western Cape Education Department wants to expand it to include the whole province. With a growing network of EcoSchools in South Africa, it is anticipated that the country will soon host a National Youth Environmental Symposium.

The Australian government, in partnership with universities and NGOs, is using the Decade to elevate and promote their ongoing commitment to ESD. In January 2005

government representatives met to consider opportunities for capacity building and mainstreaming education for sustainability in the context of the DESD. Four basic strategies were proposed:



1. develop and expand existing Australian Government priorities and programs;
2. promote and share successful Australian initiatives and expertise in education for sustainability;
3. invite national and international partnerships to strengthen and reorient policies and programs, and
4. undertake a gap analysis and evaluation of work to date.

Examples of programs targeted for promotion and expansion include:

- The National Sustainable Schools Initiative, which has so far received \$2 million from the Australian government. This initiative supports sustainable resource management and operations projects for school facilities staff, and access to professional development in environmental education for teachers. The initiative will be expanded across the States and Territories.<sup>21</sup>
- The Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability (ARIES), based at Macquarie University, which has received \$2.3 million over three years from the government to support research on individual and organizational change toward sustainability. Macquarie was contracted by the Department of Environment and Heritage (DEH) to establish ARIES. ARIES released several reports in 2005, including a review of sustainable schools initiatives internationally, an assessment of environmental education in Australia, and an analysis of Australia's top business schools to identify opportunities for incorporating ESD outcomes into MBA programs.<sup>22</sup>

The Australian government will not take responsibility for coordinating a national program of Decade related activities, though several agencies, such as the DEH, are involved directly in ongoing initiatives. Instead, government representatives, educational institutions and NGOs are working together to increase opportunities for partnership building and information sharing, consistent with the Decade's aim of fostering broad awareness and understanding of ESD. The government position is to support strategic initiatives designed for long-lasting impact based on monitoring and evaluation throughout the Decade.

Mexico launched the Decade in March 2005 at an event attended by President Vicente Fox, and the Secretaries of Education and Environment. Following this event, a meeting was called to begin work on a National Strategy of Environmental Education, which is to include ESD and a strategy consistent with the vision of the Decade. A series of workshops are being held for representatives from every state to provide feedback on a working document. Serving as a basis and inspiration for the national strategy are the Planes Estatales de Educación Ambiental (State Plans of Environmental Education), which were developed as part of a major initiative started several years ago. Unique to the draft national strategy is a call for stronger links between NGOs, the education sector, and the government, which is strongly recommended in UNESCO's implementation scheme.

In higher education, a consortium of Mexican universities called *Complexus*, which includes 12 institutions with sustainability oriented environmental programs, is very active with the Decade.<sup>23</sup> Consortium representatives see it as an opportunity to improve the introduction of environmental and sustainability issues into university curricula. Most of the member institutions have hosted or intend to hold a major event to discuss and raise awareness about the Decade. In Mexico, environmental education includes ESD, and the Decade may be helpful in the larger task of making environmental education a part of all formal and informal education.

## Conclusion

It is still early to tell how the Decade will play out in different countries and regions of the world. Progress has been highly variable to date. For the most part, we have only



ambitious plans of action. Relatively few in number are local examples of ESD in action inspired by the Decade. A fundamental challenge for every Decade related national or local initiative will be obtaining financial support. Unless governments make ESD a priority by endorsing new education policies, funding will always be in short supply. UNESCO also must begin to deal with the huge task of monitoring and evaluation. Without these structures in place, states the IIS, "it will be impossible to know if the Decade is making a difference and what that difference is."<sup>24</sup> UNESCO is urging all groups engaged in DESD related activities to monitor their progress, but UNESCO will also take responsibility for this critical task.

Dr. Derek Elias, ESD Coordinator at UNESCO Bangkok, sees the Decade from the broadest perspective: "It encourages the incorporation of social and economic considerations (from gender equality, indigenous knowledge and HIV education to corporate responsibility and consumption patterns) in the formulation of educational policies across all sectors, as well as the cultural aspects underpinning them. We want people to start thinking: what are the key issues of ESD? How do they relate to me (or my organization) and what is my role in relation to them?" In response to the fear that the Decade could fail to resonate with people and end up as "just another initiative," Elias warns that we cannot overwhelm people with generic information that is not relevant to their context. "We need to make a conscious effort to match people with ideas. For example, in a region as geographically dispersed and diverse as Asia-Pacific, it is unthinkable to apply the same messages universally."<sup>25</sup>

The challenges of communication, awareness-raising, and responsibility for ESD in different parts of the world are indeed significant. In Southern countries, versus Northern, there seems to be far less distinction made between environmental education (EE), which has always been about development, and education for sustainable development. In many countries it is the ministry of environment, rather than the ministry of education, that has assumed responsibility for ESD and the Decade. One representative of the Mexican consortium Complexus claims that knowledge of the Decade is good among environmental educators from the NGO community in Mexico, who work in various sec-

tors on both formal and informal education; but knowledge is relatively weak among professors, teachers and students in schools and universities.<sup>26</sup>

The time is right to dedicate a decade to education for sustainable development. Despite the ambitious action plans outlined in Agenda 21 in 1992, the intervening years have seen deterioration in most environmental, social and economic indicators. However, the theoretical framework and practical models for building a more sustainable world are

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becoming clearer; the knowledge, skills, and sensibilities are emerging around the globe. A comprehensive approach to education for sustainable development is needed, and the Decade can, if supported, serve as a catalyst for action at many levels and across diverse sectors of society.

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Specific events include: the High-Level Meeting of Environment and Education Ministries in Vilnius, Lithuania, on 17-18 March for the Europe/North America region; the CIS Education Minister's Conference in Minsk, Belarus, on 5-6 April for the Commonwealth of Independent States region; the United Nations University (UNU) / UNESCO International Conference in Nagoya, Japan, on 28 June for the Asia/Pacific region; the Ibero-American Conference on Sustainable Development, in Rio de Janeiro, on 31 May – 2 June for the Latin American region; an event in Bahrain on 17-18 September for the Arab region; and a conference on education for sustainable development in Kingston, Jamaica on 18-20 October for the Caribbean region.

<sup>2</sup> See [www.unece.org/env/esd/HLmeet/March12005.htm](http://www.unece.org/env/esd/HLmeet/March12005.htm).

<sup>3</sup> See [www2.unescobkk.org/elib/publications/esd\\_working\\_paper](http://www2.unescobkk.org/elib/publications/esd_working_paper).

<sup>4</sup> See <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/>

0014/001403/140372e.pdf.

<sup>5</sup> Draft International Implementation Scheme for the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005-2014 (IIS), August 2005, p.1. Also see "Highlights on Progress to Date", UNESCO, DESD, September 2005, p.2.

<sup>6</sup> See [www.un.org/esa/sustdev/documents/agenda21/index.htm](http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/documents/agenda21/index.htm).

<sup>7</sup> UNESCO, "UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development: Links between the Global Initiatives in Education," Education for Sustainable Development in Action, Technical Paper No. 1, September 2005. [www.unesco.org/education/desd](http://www.unesco.org/education/desd).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.12.

<sup>9</sup> See [www.unep.org/](http://www.unep.org/).

<sup>10</sup> See [www.iucn.org/themes/cec/education/decade\\_actions.htm](http://www.iucn.org/themes/cec/education/decade_actions.htm).

<sup>11</sup> Tilbury, Daniella and David Wortman, Engaging People in Sustainability, Commission on Education and Communication, IUCN, 2004, p. vii.

<sup>12</sup> These include: Barcelona, Spain; Greater Sendai Region, Japan; Okayama, Japan; Pacific Island Countries, University of South Pacific, Fiji; Penang, Malaysia; Rhine-Meuse region, Netherlands/Belgium/Germany; and Toronto, Canada.

<sup>13</sup> See [www.ias.unu.edu/news/details.cfm/articleID/686](http://www.ias.unu.edu/news/details.cfm/articleID/686).

<sup>14</sup> See [www.ghesprp.org](http://www.ghesprp.org).

<sup>15</sup> See [www.dekade.org](http://www.dekade.org).

<sup>16</sup> Email correspondence: from Alexander Leicht to Wynn Calder, 4 February 2005.

<sup>17</sup> See [www.esd-j.org/en/](http://www.esd-j.org/en/).

<sup>18</sup> For example, the governors in the states of Washington, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina have issued executive orders directing state agencies to develop sustainability plans. The U.S. Council of Mayors has endorsed a comprehensive code of ethics for sustainable development.

<sup>19</sup> See [www.uspartnership.org](http://www.uspartnership.org).

<sup>20</sup> Email correspondence: from Ally Ashwell to Wynn Calder, 9 June 2005.

<sup>21</sup> See [www.deh.gov.au/education/sustainable-schools/](http://www.deh.gov.au/education/sustainable-schools/).

<sup>22</sup> See [www.aries.mq.edu.au/](http://www.aries.mq.edu.au/).

<sup>23</sup> See [www.ambiental.ws/complexus](http://www.ambiental.ws/complexus).

<sup>24</sup> IIS, Annex I, p.15.

<sup>25</sup> Davidson, Steve, "Transforming Thinking," ECOS (Jan-Mar, 2005), 11.

<sup>26</sup> Email correspondence: from Shafia Súcar to Wynn Calder, 24 October 2005. ■