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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 intends 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 essential means for achieving progress towards sustainable development and for the implementation of all chapters of Agenda 21. Education is no longer seen as an end in itself, but as a key instrument for bringing about the changes in knowledge, values, behavior 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 (UNCED) was reinforced by the agreements and resolutions of each of the major post-UNCED conferences organized by the United Nations in the 1990s. It should also be noted that the goal to enroll 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 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development are actively using as a common framework to guide their policies and programmes and to assess the effectiveness of their organizations.ⁱ

3. The 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 new start in the global quest to universalize basic education and eradicate illiteracy. The Jomtien Conference also marked the beginning of a broader vision of basic education to encompass all forms of organized education and training that 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 these areas. Agreements were entered into by countries, inter-governmental organizations, and NGOs to work together throughout the decade. The EFA Forum, consisting of UNESCO, UNDP, UNICEF, the World Bank and later UNFPA, was established to guide and coordinate the work, to monitor progress and to assess achievements.

6. At the end of the “Jomtien Decade, 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 fourteen thematic studies, and data from participating countries on eighteen Statistical Indicators that quantify progress towards the goal of EFA.¹

Box 1

The Jomtien Framework of Action: The Six Dimensions of the EFA Targets

1. Expansion of early childhood care and developmental activities;
2. Universal access to, and completion of, primary (or whatever higher level of education is considered as “basic”) by the year 2000;
3. Improvement of learning achievement such that an agreed percentage of an age cohort attains or surpasses a defined level of necessary learning achievement;
4. Reduction of the adult illiteracy rate to, say, one half its 1990 level by the year 2000, with sufficient emphasis on female literacy to significantly reduce 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 behavioral 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 behavioral change.

Note: The Jomtien Framework of 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. 2000. *Education for All 2000 Assessment: Global Synthesis*, UNESCO, Paris.

7. The EFA 2000 Assessment revealed that none of the specific EFA targets set at Jomtien were met in their entirety, most notably 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 Jomtien 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 Assessment were as follows²:

- (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.

¹ For information about the World Education Forum and its preparation, consult <http://www.unesco.org/education/>

² Sources:

1. International Consultative Forum on Education for All. 2000. *Education for All 2000 Assessment: Global Synthesis*, UNESCO, Paris.
2. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. 2000. *Facts and Figures 2000*. UNESCO, Paris.

Eastern Asia and the Pacific, as well as Latin America and the Caribbean are now close to achieving universal primary education. China and India have made substantial progress towards achieving universal primary education. 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 in 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 has expanded ten-fold over the past fifty years from 40 million in 1950 to more than 400 million today. Over the same period, enrolments in tertiary education increased nearly fourteen 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 last 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 % 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 ten 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, as well as 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% of education costs worldwide are met by governments. But the private sector is becoming increasingly more important and accounts on average for 35 % of education funding. The last 2% 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% from \$1,487 million to \$880 million. Average levels of spending on education worldwide have hovered around 5% of GNP for more developed countries and 4% for less developed countries in the period between 1980 and 1997.

9. The World Education Forum was held in Dakar in April 2000 to review progress ten years after Jomtien. The Forum approved the “Dakar Framework for Action”, which confirms the World Declaration on EFA approved at Jomtien and includes six regional frameworks of action. It represents a collective commitment to achieve Education for All by 2015, according to six goals set for the future 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 this goal because of lack of resources. Making clearly 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

The Dakar Framework of 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 as well as 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, 2000. *The Dakar Framework of Action. Education for All: Meeting our Collective Commitments*. UNESCO, Paris.

III. Beyond basic education to education for sustainable development

10. While chapter 36 is grounded in the fundamental challenge and requirements of education for all, it embraces all ways in which people learn about the world around them, develop values and lifestyles that reflect and understanding of the 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, just as they form an integral part of all the other chapters of Agenda 21. Following UNCED the broad scope of chapter 36 was itself a problem. The fact that the CSD initiated in 1996 a special work programme on education was instrumental in establishing priorities and focussing efforts.

11. Since UNCED, 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 a whole new conceptual framework needed to be developed to implement chapter 36. Despite progress made, however, there still remains considerable confusion about the concept. Of particular concern is that there is a continuing misconception that sustainable development is mostly about the environment, and therefore that

“education for sustainable development” is simply a new twist to the notion of “environmental education”.

12. The implications of the new vision of ESD for formal education systems are major, and coincide with a broad rethinking within many countries of formal education systems which are no longer considered adequate to meeting the needs of society and the workplace. Traditionally, education has been designed largely to pass on existing knowledge, skills and values. Ten years after Rio, there is substantial but still far too little progress towards the reorientation of educational systems in terms of how to prepare people for life: for job security; for the demands of a rapidly changing society; for technological changes that now directly or indirectly affect every part of life; and, ultimately, for the quest for happiness, well-being and quality of life. Progress has also been made in redefining education as a lifelong process that needs to be not merely readjusted but restructured and reformed according to new requirements for the future.

13. Since Rio, there has been increasing recognition that a curriculum oriented towards sustainability would place the notion of citizenship among its primary objectives. Many existing curricula are being revised along these lines. Efforts are being made to develop objectives and content themes, and teaching, learning and assessment processes that emphasize values, ethical motivation and ability to work with others to help build a sustainable future. Increased attention is being given to the humanities and social sciences in the curriculum. For the most part, however, what has been achieved remains relatively isolated, serving to show the new direction in which curriculum reform needs to move in the future.

14. Reorienting the curriculum towards sustainable development requires at least two major structural reforms in education. The first is to reexamine the centralized mandating of courses and textbooks in order to allow for locally relevant learning programmes. The second is the development of 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 of which is a potential agent of change in support of sustainable development. Therefore teacher education has become a priority within chapter 36. Major initiatives in this area include: (a) developing international guidelines for reorienting teacher education; (b) establishing an international network of teacher education institutions comprising some 50 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 of Agenda 21; and (c) developing a multimedia teacher education programme entitled “Teaching and Learning for a Sustainable Future”³. A pilot version of this programme has been published, consisting of 25 modules totaling about 100 hours of professional development for both pre-service and in-service teachers.

16. Since UNCED, many higher education institutions, organizations, government agencies and individuals worldwide have made significant efforts to incorporate sustainable development

³ 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 in partnership with NGOs and networks representing teachers and teacher training institutions.

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 professions, as well as in special programmes for teachers, senior managers, local politicians and leaders. Partnering and networking has improved, for example through the forming of the Global Higher Education for Sustainability Partnership by CRE-COPERICUS, University Leaders for a Sustainable Future, International Association of Universities and UNESCO.

17. Since Rio, there has been increasing recognition of the critical role of education in promoting sustainable consumption and production patterns in order to change attitudes and behavior of people as individuals, including as producers and consumers, 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.⁴

18. Education is chronically under financed. An undetermined – but insufficient - amount of money has been invested since Rio 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 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 education 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 education 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 - becomes 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 Rio. The UNESCO NGO Liaison Committee, representing about 350 professional NGOs in the field of education, has set up a special commission to mobilize its members in support of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002. The CSD

⁴ One module in the UNESCO multimedia programme “Teaching and Learning for a Sustainable Future” concerns sustainable consumption.

Education and Youth Caucuses have attempted to work with all the other caucuses on education as 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 Rio, 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 America (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 in 1999, which was instrumental in creating new networks within the European Union. In 1996 Canada organized the Planet ERE Conference for 50 Francophone countries. France is organizing Planet ERE 2 in Paris in November 2001. These two major efforts have played an important role in galvanizing action and new partnerships in these countries. The OECD organized a meeting on education for sustainable consumption which has played an important role in defining this 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, can 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 in the future.

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 education 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 among the various international action plans and legal instruments as they relate to education and public awareness, with emphasis on national level, and taking into account not only United Nations conferences but also more specialized international conferences organized by the United Nations system. In this regard, efforts could be made to: (a) avoid dispersion of efforts or overlap among these various frameworks for action, (b) improve coordination of the United Nations system at 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 education community .

ⁱ International Monetary Fund, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, United Nations, World Bank Group, 2000: A Better World For All. Washington DC., London, 2000.