



**Economic and Social
Council**

Distr.
GENERAL

CEP/AC.13/2005/2
2 May 2005

Original: ENGLISH

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

High-level meeting of Environment and Education Ministries
Vilnius, 17-18 March 2005

REPORT OF THE MEETING

1. The High-level meeting of Environment and Education Ministries took place in Vilnius from 17 (afternoon) to 18 March 2005.
2. The meeting was attended by delegates from Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Ukraine and the United Kingdom. Representatives of the Commission of the European Communities also attended.
3. Representatives from the following organizations of the United Nations system participated: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).
4. The following intergovernmental organizations were represented: Council of Europe, Nordic Council of Ministers and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).
5. The Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC-CEE), the Regional Environmental Center for Central Asia (CAREC), the Regional Environmental Center for the Caucasus, the Regional Environmental Center for the Russian Federation and the Regional Environmental Center for the Republic of Moldova were represented.

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6. The following academic and research institutions attended: Global/General Education – University Association (GEDUC) and Stockholm Environment Institute, as did the European ECO-Forum, a coalition that was represented by a number of non-governmental organizations. The private sector was represented by Toyota Motor Europe.

I. OPENING, ELECTION OF OFFICERS AND ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA

7. The meeting was opened by Ms. Brigita Schmögnerová, UNECE Executive Secretary, who introduced Mr. Antanas Zenonas Kaminskas, Permanent Secretary of the Government of Lithuania, and Mr. Abdul Waheed Khan, Assistant for Communication and Information to the Director-General of UNESCO.

8. Mr. Kaminskas delivered a welcome speech. He underlined the key role of educators in transmitting knowledge and skills, and the complex nature of education, which should be carefully taken into account in the implementation process. He also stressed the importance of education in relation to implementing international treaties, such as the Lisbon Strategy, the Kyoto Protocol and the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. Mr. Kaminskas appreciated the fact that the meeting was taking place in Lithuania and wished the participants fruitful deliberations and a pleasant stay in Vilnius.

9. Mr. Khan delivered a keynote address on behalf of the Director-General of UNESCO in which he expressed appreciation for the work on education for sustainable development undertaken within the UNECE region and welcomed the UNECE Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) as a substantive regional contribution to the United Nations Decade of ESD. He confirmed that the document was in line with the Framework for a draft implementation scheme for the Decade developed by UNESCO. Moreover, the Strategy was being used by UNESCO as a model instrument for other regions. Mr. Khan valued the work between UNECE and UNESCO on this initiative as a successful example of cooperation within the United Nations family.

10. Ms. Schmögnerová delivered an introductory message. She appreciated that the meeting brought together representatives of both sectors, environment and education, and a wide range of stakeholders. Ms. Schmögnerová extended a particularly warm welcome to UNESCO, as a key partner. She underlined that developing a strategy for ESD showed that the region was committed to sustainable development. She noted that the UNECE region had a good basis for implementing ESD, but at the same time there were still serious challenges ahead. The key one was that the education systems were not flexible enough for the integrative nature of ESD. The cooperation between both sectors in the drafting process had been very encouraging, but after the adoption of the Strategy its application would constitute the real litmus test of countries' readiness to cooperate. Ms. Schmögnerová confirmed that UNECE was prepared to continue to support this process in open and close cooperation with all relevant partners.

11. The Meeting elected Ms. Lena Sommestad, Minister for the Environment of Sweden, as its Chair and Mr. Vladimir Fridlyanov, Deputy Minister of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, as its Vice-Chair.

12. The Meeting adopted its agenda as contained in the document CEP/AC.13/2005/1.

II. FROM GOODWILL TO PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN IMPLEMENTING EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE UNECE REGION

13. The Chair delivered an introductory speech, in which she outlined the milestones in the UNECE process on ESD. She also stressed some of the challenges in the region for implementing sustainable development, such as the ageing of the population, unsustainable consumption and production, threats and degradation to the natural resource base, and rapid urbanization. She noted education as one of the key instruments that could help resolve problems of unsustainable development.

14. The Chair invited delegates to focus the discussion on the content and the role of the Strategy and on its implementation. She emphasized that the discussion was expected to address what the Strategy means for the development of ESD and how it can be of practical use in the countries. In order to structure the discussion, delegates were provided with a list of questions.

A. The UNECE Strategy for ESD

15. Mr. Jon Kahn, Chair of the Task Force, introduced the draft UNECE strategy for ESD (CEP/AC.13/2005/3). He reported that it had been developed in a participatory and inclusive manner, taking into account comments provided by member States and stakeholders. The document was meant to serve as a flexible framework and its implementation could be adapted to each country's priorities, specific needs and circumstances. It was based on a general consensus.

16. Delegates unanimously welcomed and strongly supported the Strategy. They provided a number of reflections on the draft (see Chair's summary, CEP/AC.13/2005/5). The inclusive and operative nature of the document, its recommendations on interdepartmental and multi-stakeholder cooperation, the recognition of the importance of educators as well as the principles and approaches that it addressed were highlighted. Comments were also made on a number of other issues, including the importance of behaviour and roles of such personalities as sportsmen, artists and writers in implementing ESD. Some delegations also noted that not only should schools teach sustainable development, but ESD should help the educational systems to reach its objectives in terms of quality, subject matter, development of values, systemic thinking and interdisciplinarity, as well as the treatment of daily problems.

17. Delegates noted the progress made in the region in implementing ESD. Some member States had adapted the institutional and policy frameworks to the needs of education for sustainable development. Others used councils on sustainable development as coordinators, but some had already established new mechanisms, such as task forces and platforms.

B. The Framework for implementing the Strategy

18. Mr. Nikolay Kasimov, Vice-Chair of the Task Force, introduced the draft Vilnius framework for the implementation of the Strategy (CEP/AC.13/2005/4 and Add.1). The document was prepared on the basis of the considerations expressed by the Task Force and taking into account comments provided by the UNECE Committee in Environmental Policy. It suggests activities to

facilitate the start of the implementation of phase I and, in some cases, beyond. These activities are focused on coordination; sharing experience and good practices; capacity-building; raising public awareness; and strengthening subregional cooperation. It also suggests developing a set of indicators to measure the effectiveness of the implementation.

19. Mr. Stephen Sterling (United Kingdom), independent expert, made a presentation in which he addressed the role of ESD in overcoming environmental, social and economic problems, and provided reflections on the role of the Strategy in this regard.

20. Among key the challenges for implementation delegates mentioned: strengthening interdepartmental cooperation to improve education systems as a whole and adapting them to the integrative nature of ESD; introducing a bottom-up approach; developing the competence of educators and administrators; developing instruction materials; and ensuring the involvement of stakeholders, in particular the media. Mobilizing the necessary resources was noted as a major task in many countries with economies in transition.

21. Delegates also discussed possible tools to facilitate the Strategy's implementation, including sharing information and good practices, raising public awareness and capacity-building. Delegates welcomed proposals to develop a compilation of good practices. The organization of subregional thematic workshops oriented to the needs of a given subregion was considered useful. In this context, the delegation of Greece reported that it planned to organize a workshop for the Mediterranean region this year. Delegates also noted that private-public partnerships might serve as a flexible mechanism to facilitate implementation.

22. Delegates were informed of some successful subregional activities, including the Central Asian intergovernmental process on environmental education (EE) and ESD, the Programme Baltic 21-education for sustainable development, and the Mediterranean process on EE and ESD. Furthermore, a number of good examples of work on ESD were presented by OSCE, the Council of Europe, the Nordic Council of Ministers, the regional environmental centres, European Eco-Forum, GEDUC and Toyota Motor Europe.

23. The Meeting strongly supported the development of indicators to measure the effectiveness of the implementation of the Strategy and it decided to set up an expert group to prepare these. It was stressed that the group should be small and comprise representatives with relevant expertise. It was also recommended that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) should be invited to take part in the expert group.

24. The Meeting discussed the coordination and review of the implementation of the Strategy. It decided to establish a steering committee to oversee and promote the implementation. The "Environment for Europe" process could be used as a platform for the high-level promotion of the implementation. Many delegations stressed that Education Ministries should have an equal role in possible ESD-related sessions at the "Environment for Europe" conferences. In this respect, a special segment on ESD was proposed for the next Conference in Belgrade in 2007.

25. The Meeting discussed interlinkages and possible mutual benefits of the UNECE process and other ESD processes. In this context, it recommended that UNECE and UNESCO should streamline work on ESD, in particular on the reporting on ESD and using the UNESCO web portal. The

Meeting welcomed a proposal to include in the environmental performance reviews of both OECD and UNECE an assessment of the implementation of policies for education for sustainable development. It also underlined that the Strategy for ESD could help to further the respective objectives of the Environment Strategy for Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. It also recommended that the Strategy for ESD should be taken into account in relevant documents by the European Union and, in particular, in its future environmental action programmes and in the framework programmes for research and development. Another proposal was that UNECE should also provide a regional input to the work of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, with respect to both aspects contribution to the United Nations Decade for ESD and review in each cycle implementation of ESD as a cross-cutting issue. In order to communicate the UNECE experience to other regions and globally, the Meeting requested that the Strategy should be translated into other official languages of the United Nations and sent to all United Nations regional commissions. It was also suggested that the UNECE process on ESD should be communicated to the European Union's Bologna process, in particular to the upcoming conference of the European Ministers responsible for higher education in Bergen (Norway) on 19-20 May 2005.

III. ADOPTION OF THE STRATEGY AND OF THE FRAMEWORK FOR ITS IMPLEMENTATION

26. The Meeting unanimously adopted the Strategy, as amended. It also adopted the Vilnius Framework for its implementation. By 1 June 2005, UNECE member States were requested to submit to the secretariat their candidates for the Steering Committee representing both sectors, environment and education. These would also serve as national focal points. Interested stakeholders, including international organizations, regional environmental centres, NGOs and business were invited to take part in the work of the Steering Committee as observers. UNESCO was invited to be a permanent observer. It was proposed to hold the first meeting of the Steering Committee in December 2005 back to back with the UNECE regional implementation forum for sustainable development. Interested member States were also invited to submit to the secretariat candidates for the expert group on indicators before 1 June 2005. The delegation of the Netherlands offered to lead this exercise. The delegation of the Russian Federation proposed to host the first meeting in Moscow.

27. A number of delegations expressed their commitment to the process in the future, including pledging financial support and contributions in kind.

IV. LAUNCHING OF THE UNITED NATIONS DECADE OF ESD IN THE UNECE REGION

28. Mr. Fridlyanov chaired the session and delivered introductory remarks in which he stressed the importance of the launching event. The Meeting formally launched the United Nations Decade of ESD in the UNECE region. The launching event was introduced by Mr. Remigijus Motuzas, Minister of Education and Science of Lithuania, and accompanied by a musical performance organized by the Government of Lithuania. The event was followed by statements by Mr. Carl Lindberg on behalf of UNESCO and by Mr. Kaj Bärlund on behalf of the UNECE.

V. OTHER BUSINESS

30. The delegation of Austria provided information about the upcoming conference on ESD “Building capacity and empowerment” that would take place on 19-22 May 2005 in Esbjerg (Denmark). It also made an announcement of a conference that it would organize in March 2006 in the framework of the Austrian EU presidency. The delegation of Italy reported that it would host the third World Environmental Education Congress taking place in Turin on 2-6 October 2005.

31. The Chair closed the high-level meeting.
