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ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

**High-level meeting of Environment and Education Ministries**

Vilnius, 17-18 March 2005

**CHAIR'S SUMMARY**

By Ms. Lena Sommestad, Minister for the Environment, Sweden,  
Chair of the UNECE High-Level Meeting of Environment and Education Ministries

**I. DECISIONS**

1. In Vilnius on 17-18 March 2005, UNECE Ministers, Vice-Ministers and other representatives of Environment and Education Ministries adopted the UNECE Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development. They also adopted the Vilnius Framework for Implementation, setting up a steering committee and an expert group on indicators in order to facilitate the coordination and review of the Strategy's implementation. They also debated progress in implementing education for sustainable development (ESD) as well as good practices in the region and identified the key challenges ahead. They discussed the role of the UNECE region in implementing ESD in a global context and its cooperation with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

**II. IMPLEMENTING GLOBAL AGREEMENTS:  
LOCAL ACTION NEEDED FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

2. The Meeting supported the long-term strategic approach for the entire region that was set out in the Strategy.

3. In many countries education for sustainable development was still perceived as mainly environmental education (EE). However, participants agreed that there was a need to continue with

environmental education and at the same time address the wider concept of education for sustainable development. In some countries ESD was covered by laws and regulatory instruments on education, while others had already developed specific instruments on environmental education and ESD.

4. Many delegates made references to obstacles and challenges, as well as to some of the steps taken in their countries and through subregional cooperation to address them. Delegates also recognized that education for sustainable development was of equal importance for rich and poor, and that closer cooperation among all stakeholders was needed. Participants stressed the importance of sharing experiences both of successes and of mistakes, and of building networks between governments, schools and universities and between people active in the education sector. Building networks with industry was also mentioned. This would help to make the changes that were needed to make education an efficient tool for attaining sustainable development. Another general conclusion was that implementation was very challenging but that progress could be made through a long-term commitment from all relevant levels of society.

5. The UNECE region was very diverse, politically, economically and socially. In some parts of the region poverty and underdevelopment had a negative impact on the overall quality of education. At the same time, even the poorest countries of the region had strong traditions in education. The need to address unsustainable production and consumption patterns in education was also stressed as a major item of national and subregional programmes.

6. Despite of differences, the region as a whole had a good basis for implementing ESD. Most countries had established well-functioning education systems and ensured access to basic education and equal rights to education for all. However, education systems must become more flexible in view of the cross cutting nature of education for sustainable development.

7. Some member States had already adapted institutional and policy frameworks to the needs of education for sustainable development. Many countries had national strategies for sustainable development with ESD an important element. In addition many States had already started developing action plans or special strategies for ESD.

8. Many countries were drawing up curricula and learning programmes in an integrative approach in order to incorporate key themes of sustainable development.

9. Some countries used councils on sustainable development as a coordination body, while others had already established new consultative mechanisms, such as boards and platforms. The national policy documents that usually addressed education for sustainable development and/or environmental education were strategic programmes on sustainable development, programmes for poverty eradication, action plans and Local Agendas 21.

### **III. MAJOR CHALLENGES AND NEEDS**

10. The major challenges and needs to carry out the Strategy identified by the Meeting were:

- Increasing conflicts between economic and environmental priorities;
- How to resist promotion by the media of unsustainable consumption and production patterns;

- How to deal with the issue of genetically modified organisms, including the ethical aspect;
- How to broaden environmental education to ESD in practice;
- How to attract stakeholders;
- How to win the hearts of young people and to make students remember skills and knowledge once they leave school;
- How to adopt a bottom-up approach;
- Needs of vulnerable groups should not be forgotten;
- A multi-stakeholder approach to implementation should be ensured, including contributions from business and the media;
- How to develop key tools to facilitate the Strategy's implementation, including efficient communication, sharing information and good practices, raising public awareness and capacity-building;
- How to develop the competence of educators;
- Ensuring appropriate instruction materials is a key task for administrations;
- How to succeed in all parts of the UNECE region, having regard in particular to the fact that sufficient capacity for implementation was still a concern in some countries.

#### **IV. KEY POINTS ON REGIONAL IMPLEMENTATION**

11. The Meeting discussed the regional implementation of the Strategy and identified the following key issues:

- Developing indicators, using as much as possible existing experience;
- Streamlining reporting to UNECE, UNESCO and other relevant international forums on the implementation of ESD;
- Assessment and reflection were important;
- Mobilizing resources by appropriate budget allocation, as well as by involving and encouraging private sector and international partnership programmes;
- Focusing on priorities and on learning from each other;
- Strengthening interdepartmental cooperation in order to improve the education system as a whole;
- UNECE should cooperate with UNESCO in order to optimize the UNESCO web portal on ESD.

#### **V. GOOD PRACTICES AS A TOOL**

12. Subregional cooperation, including through the organization of subregional and thematic workshops and the collection and sharing of good practices, was stressed as essential. There were several successful examples of subregional cooperation in the region reported to the Meeting, including the Central Asian intergovernmental process on environmental education, the Mediterranean subregional process on EE and ESD and the Programme Baltic 21-Education as part of the Agenda 21 for the Baltic Sea Region (Baltic 21).

## VI. THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

13. The Strategy's implementation could be facilitated by links to the global work. Participants stressed that UNECE should make use of its role in the regional preparation for the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (UN CSD). The need for a regional input to UN CSD with a view to contributing to the success of the United Nations Decade on ESD was stressed by several delegations.

14. Multi-stakeholder partnerships, bringing together the business community and civil society, could also play a fundamental role in promoting sustainable development and be complementary to the activities undertaken by the wider international community.

15. The possibility of communicating the UNECE process on ESD to the European Union's Bologna process and thereby adding value to both should also be explored.

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