

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL HIGH-LEVEL SEGMENT



Special Policy Dialogue

“Education for Sustainable Development”

Tuesday, 5 July 2011

12:00 pm – 1:00 pm

Background

The decade 2005-2014 has been designated the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. The challenge of the decade, in the words of former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, is “to take an idea that seems abstract – sustainable development – and turn it into a reality for all the world’s people”. Ideally, education for sustainable development begins even before formal education and continues throughout life. This panel examines two important approaches of such education: the generalist approach, beginning in the early grades and involving different channels of learning, in promoting dialogue and exchange of knowledge and information on sustainable development, in shaping values and lifestyles, and in molding good citizens of planet Earth; the specialist approach, in developing the specific skill-sets needed to guide and if necessary transform human societies’ relationship with the natural world in a sustainable direction.

The Rationale of Education for Sustainable Development

Shared Vision: to build a world where everyone has the opportunity to benefit from education and learn the values, behavior and lifestyles required for a sustainable future and for positive societal transformation. The vision also includes preparing people of all walks of life to plan for, cope with, and find solutions for issues that threaten the sustainability of our planet.

Two Parallel Approaches to Education for Sustainable Development

Educating earth-citizens - a generalist approach: Educating responsible earth-citizens begins from early childhood. The values instilled through education from an early age help shape later life and career choices. It is a generation since the adoption of Agenda 21 in Rio 1992, which states that “formal education and non-formal education are ... critical for achieving environmental and ethical awareness, values and attitudes, skills and behaviour consistent with sustainable development and for effective public participation in decision-making” (ch36). The young people of today are the first post-Rio generation, and also the so-called “Generation Y” who grow up with the Internet and who spend a generous amount of time on social networking websites. As Rio+20 approaches, it is time to ask how effective are our education systems, at all levels, in shaping the sustainable development thinkers, innovators and practitioners of the future. Are we utilizing the right communication channels and how effective are new media versus traditional media in encouraging public discussion and debate on important public policy and societal challenges like sustainable development?

Educating professionals - green design and corporate sustainability: It requires training to foster sustainable principles and practices in a certain profession. Green design and urban planning is a vital field of sustainable development practice especially as the cities of the developing world look ahead to rapid growth in coming decades. Schools of architecture and urban planning have formative roles to play in shaping sustainable built environments. Likewise, business schools are crucibles in which the business leaders of the future are formed. Their role in training environmentally and socially responsible leaders is crucial. Meanwhile, social learning is important to sustainable practices where formal education plays only a limited role, as for example with farmers in developing countries.

Objective

The key objective of the policy dialogue is to stimulate substantive discussion among key stakeholders, i.e. governments, civil society and private sector actors on the present challenges and opportunities in the area of education and sustainable development.

Conceptual framework

The substantive framework for the speaker presentations in the thematic panel will be developed around the three overarching themes outlined above:

- The Shared Vision of Education for Sustainable Development
- Educating earth-citizens - a generalist approach
- Educating professionals - green design and corporate sustainability

Format

The policy dialogue will follow a format in which well-known policy-makers and academics are invited as panelists to give lead presentations on the three overarching themes (8-10 minutes each), followed by an open discussion led by a moderator. A country case study (7 minutes) will complement these presentations.

Outputs

The thematic panel has the potential to generate several outputs:

- Policy content to the High-level Segment, leading up to 2011 Ministerial Declaration;
- An informal summary, which to be circulated following the deliberations in ECOSOC. This report would provide a succinct synthesis of views expressed in the thematic panel with recommendations on possible ways forward;
- A policy brief, following the proposed substantive architecture of the panel discussion