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Addressing Sustainable Consumption through Education for Sustainable Development

Excerpt from the Report of the Fourth Meeting of the UNECE Steering Committee on Education for Sustainable Development
(ECE/CEP/AC.13/2009/2, paras 42-28)

1. In view of the next cycle of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (2010–2011) and the increasing urgency of dealing with the issue of SCP, the Committee discussed how this complex and challenging issue should be addressed through ESD. Education was a cross-cutting issue playing a crucial role in addressing production and consumption patterns. In the context of the Marrakech process, a Task Force on Education for Sustainable Consumption had been established under the chairmanship of Italy. This Task Force, with support from UNEP and in collaboration with the United Nations Decade on ESD and Hedmark University College, had developed a set of draft Recommendations and Guidelines (“Here and now: education for sustainable consumption”). This comprehensive document served as the basis for a discussion by the meeting of how sustainable consumption could be addressed through ESD in various countries. In addition, relevant feedback from the compilation of answers to the questionnaire (information paper no.1), which included questions related to ESD and SCP, helped facilitate an interactive discussion.
2. Representatives of Italy (Mr. Andrea Innamorati) and of UNEP (Ms. Isabella Marras) presented the draft Recommendations and Guidelines on Education for Sustainable Consumption. In developing the Recommendations and Guidelines, the Task Force had defined education for sustainable consumption as consisting of “the acquisition of knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary for functioning in today’s society. Incorporating the concept of responsible consumption into daily actions is a process and must be developed and modified over time”. The document consisted of three parts. The first, “addressing the challenges”, targeted policymakers by providing (a) an instrument to understand the importance of education for sustainable consumption in supporting other policy goals (citizenship and democratic participation, environmental protection, energy and climate change policies, etc.) and (b) guidance on how to integrate education for sustainable consumption into existing educational and SD strategies. The second, “optimizing opportunities”, targeted educators by providing them with tools and instruments to include education for sustainable consumption in curricula, teaching practices and activities. The third, “relevant resources”, comprised an overview of resources and teaching materials, references to theoretical research and practical materials, and web links. Both the presentations and the Recommendations and Guidelines (parts one and two) were available on the UNECE website

(<http://www.unece.org/env/esd/SC.Meet.htm#4thMtg>). The entire document could be found at: <http://www.unep.fr/scp/marrakech/taskforces/education.htm>.

3. The Committee focused the interactive discussion on:

(a) Progress made vis-à-vis this issue – i.e. whether and how is sustainable consumption addressed through education systems at the national level? (based on general approaches, methodology and contents);

(b) Challenges encountered and lessons learned;

(c) The way forward with this issue (e.g. to consider using the already developed Recommendations and Guidelines to address this issue at the national level);

(d) The possible contribution to the fourth regional implementation meeting on sustainable development.

4. Ms. Linn briefed the meeting about the preparation for the fourth regional implementation meeting on sustainable development. The two-day meeting would review the implementation of Agenda 21 and of the Johannesburg Summit¹ outcomes in specific clusters of sustainable development. The thematic cluster for the regional implementation meeting comprised the following issues: transport, chemicals, waste management, mining and a 10-year framework of programmes on SCP patterns. Education was a cross-cutting issue; therefore, the results from this meeting, including the answers to the questionnaire and the envisaged collection of good practices, would serve as a valuable input into the regional implementation meeting. The regional implementation meeting would be prepared by the UNECE in cooperation with relevant partners. The provisional agenda and other documents would be considered and approved by the UNECE Executive Committee.

5. During the interactive discussion, participants stressed that SCP issues varied considerably from country to country. Despite the urgency of dealing with SCP, the issue was insufficiently addressed; therefore, more efforts should be made to find efficient means to address it. Some countries had developed national strategies for SCP or had incorporated SCP in existing strategies such as on sustainable development and/or on ESD. Some had developed specific teaching tools to help educators integrate SCP into their teaching. In a few countries, projects on SCP were being carried out. However, a number of challenges remain ahead. The biggest was to identify appropriate and find feasible ways to reorient individual and societal attitudes and values towards sustainable lifestyles. In addition, nowadays emphasis was mostly put on the individual consumer choice and responsibility, while public, community or collective choice and responsibility was underestimated. The roles of the public sector and of Government vis-à-vis SCP needed to be identified, in particular the role of Government in terms of investment (e.g. sustainable transportation), regulation (e.g. on usage of plastics) and taxation (e.g. a tax on carbon emissions). At the policy level, other relevant ministries (e.g. those dealing with social affairs, labour and consumer protection) should be involved in the work of addressing SCP through ESD. Adequate resources, both financial and human, were lacking to enhance the development of SCP and ESD. In the education sector, the low salaries of teachers in many countries constituted a further problem hindering good progress in ESD.

¹ World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, South Africa (2002).

6. The meeting also discussed possible approaches to addressing SCP. Fair trade, both on the regional and global levels, was one tool that could lead to a more balanced approach to consumption. Another important aspect was that many countries were still struggling with the eradication of poverty and social imbalance; therefore different perspectives from different parts of the world should be taken into account. SCP offered an excellent opportunity to bridge these gaps, as it focused on the economic and social dimensions of sustainable development. ESD was crucial to addressing SCP, as SCP, peacebuilding, sustainable transportation, water and climate change were among the issues it encompassed. Besides developing the theoretical background and policy instruments for SCP, work should focus to a large extent on the concrete implementation of SCP provisions. The best way to highlight the importance of SCP was to provide relevant tools to address all these issues (e.g. SCP, peacebuilding, climate change, water) through ESD and the UNECE Strategy for ESD. NGOs had much experience in promoting SCP, in particular in organizing activities and developing awareness-raising materials and methodological tools that could reorient people towards sustainable consumption. Targeting young people was an efficient approach, as they were typically ahead of adults in their learning/assimilation of such issues. For instance, teaching about the consequences of unsustainable consumption had resulted in children beginning to act in sustainable ways. Teachers should be encouraged to talk about SCP in their classes and to address it with parents. The school environment was very important for promoting the need for sustainable lifestyles and minimizing the ecological footprint. A further aspect to consider was payments for ecosystems services.

7. The Committee agreed that while more efforts were needed to integrate SCP into ESD, with a particular emphasis on teaching approaches and methodology, the draft Recommendations and Guidelines on education for sustainable consumption developed under the Marrakech process were a useful tool to facilitate countries' activities in this regard. The Committee recommended revising the title of the draft Recommendations and Guidelines to reflect that SCP was a component of ESD. It also recommended avoiding the tendency to develop sectoral education initiatives – e.g. education for climate change, education for water, education for SCP – but to channel all efforts, resources and activities, with a view to addressing these issues in an integrative way through ESD. The meeting also agreed that sharing good practices for addressing SCP through ESD was a very efficient means to promote SCP.