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Ad Hoc Preparatory Working Group of Senior Officials
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(Item 5 of the provisional agenda)

BACKGROUND PAPER ON GUIDELINES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION¹

Introduction

1. During the preparations for the Kiev Conference, considerable interest has been shown, both by Governments and non-governmental organizations, in improving environmental education. Education is viewed as an effective tool for changing patterns of social and economic behaviour as it affects the environment; for providing the foundation for research and development in technologies that may improve the environment; and for integrating the environment into people's mindset, starting from a young age.
2. Environmental education also received attention at the Regional Ministerial Meeting for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (24-25 September 2001, Geneva), which called for initiatives in these areas. Specifically, the Ministers “agreed to improve education systems and the design of learning programmes on sustainable development to increase the general understanding of how to implement and promote sustainable development in practice.”
3. Environmental education is a multidisciplinary topic, with the potential to integrate environment into all sectors at the different stages of learning. It may involve a number of actors and it may reach different target groups. This paper provides background information on efforts to address environmental education and suggests ways in which the Working Group of Senior Officials could proceed in this matter should it so decide.

¹ This document was not formally edited.

Target groups

4. Environmental education has been addressed differently in a number of international meetings. It may, for example, be geared toward students (New Delhi, 1997; Paris, 1998; Zurich, Switzerland, 1999; Linz, Austria, 1998) or adults (Hamburg, Germany, 1997); it may take a gender approach (Cairo, 1994; Dakar, 2000); or it may be directed toward decision makers (Brussels, 1999). Environmental education may also be either formal or informal, depending largely on the target group.

Main actors

5. Considerable work in this area has already been undertaken by a number of international, regional and national actors.

6. Within the United Nations system of organizations, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is considered to be the lead agency, but other organizations also carry out relevant activities. These include the United Nations Division for Sustainable Development; the United Nations Development Programme; and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

7. In addition, the European Union,² the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the Interstate Environmental Council of the newly independent States, through its Working Group on Environmental Education, have also contributed to an understanding and implementation of environmental education, including education on sustainable consumption.

8. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been deeply involved in the issue of environmental education, and European EcoForum is one of the main proponents of moving environmental education to the Kiev agenda. NGOs are one of the main messengers of informal education.

9. At the national level, many member States of UNECE have been integrating environment into both formal and informal education.

10. Overall, a significant number of documents on environmental education³ have been drafted and adopted. However, despite the international interest and wide range of activities in environmental education, the issue has not been consistently pursued within the UNECE region. There is as yet neither a consensus on priorities nor an international framework for environmental education within the region.

² Resolution on Environmental Education of the Council and the Ministers of Education (1988; 88/c 177/03), Resolution on Environmental Education of the European Parliament (1993; 17.12.93. OJ c 20/94, 24.1.94), the European Working Party on Environmental Education and Training (1988; on the basis of 88/c 177/03) and the Sixth Environmental Action Programme with awareness raising as one of the main objectives (2001-2010).

³ Belgrade Charter, UNESCO-UNEP, 1975; Tbilisi Declaration, UNESCO-UNEP, 1977; Moscow Declaration, UNESCO-UNEP, 1987; Rio Declaration, UN, 1992; Thessaloniki Declaration, UNESCO, 1997; Earth Council and Green Cross International, the Earth Charter, 2000; UNESCO, Santiago de Compostela expert proposals, 2000; UN, Agenda 21, 1992; UNESCO, Dakar Action Framework, 2000; and the Sixth Environmental Action Programme of EU, 2001-2010.

11. What has not been done is to view all of this work comprehensively; assess progress and problems; synthesize the most important elements; develop guidelines for action at the national level; and place the discussion in the context of the UNECE region.

Discussion during the Executive Committee

12. Environmental education is both complex and cross-sectoral. It necessarily integrates a number of sectors and, therefore, a number of ministries as well. Decision-making at the international level requires participation from both environment and education ministries as a minimum.

13. Environmental education has been implicit throughout the “Environment for Europe” process, but it has not to date been addressed as a major issue in and of itself.

14. The Fifth Ministerial Conference “Environment for Europe” may provide a good opportunity for reviewing this issue and developing a flexible and practical instrument for environmental education, suitable for all UNECE member States.

15. The Executive Committee of the Working Group of Senior Officials, at its fourth meeting (1-2 March, 2002, Kiev) reviewed this issue and concluded that environmental education was an interesting possible topic for Kiev, especially should it include an emphasis on newly independent States.

16. Proposals for further action ranged from the preparation of guidelines to development of a strategic action plan that could be a magnet for donor financing. Between the options for action proposed in the paper, support appeared to be strongest for the preparation of a synthesis report that could contain concrete suggestions for further actions as a follow-up to the Kiev Conference. The Executive Committee also stressed the importance of involving Ministries of Education as well as Ministries of Environment in this process.

17. Subsequent to the meeting of the Executive Committee, the Bureau of the UNECE Committee on Environmental Policy, at its meeting of 8 March, discussed proposals for further action in this area, with particular concern for identifying a country or countries to lead the process.

18. The Working Group of Senior Officials may wish to continue this discussion with a view to clarifying the following:

- The interest of member States in placing Environmental Education on the agenda for Kiev;
- The objectives of any activities in this area (e.g., guidelines for environmental education; an action programme; support to projects);
- Identification of a lead country or countries and of the resources available to support the process;
- A work plan for environmental education from the present until the Kiev Conference and, if relevant, beyond the Conference;
- The role of Ministries of Education in the process.