



United Nations University

“Advancing knowledge for human security and development”

Regional Centers of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development

Concept Paper

Objectives of the concept paper

“Regional Center of Expertise (RCE)” is an emerging concept. Greater elaboration is needed to develop this idea into a guiding instrument for actors around the world to promote education for sustainable development (ESD). Thus, the following concept paper has two objectives. First, it aims at providing readers with a set of initial ideas behind the RCE concept. Second, it seeks input from readers to refine the idea and to further consolidation of actions for establishment of a pilot group of RCEs. The paper is not a finished product but a basis for discussion.

Education for Sustainable Development

Since the Earth Summit in 1992, sustainable development has been high on the political agenda. However, education was not well reflected in the strategies towards SD and education was not defined as one of the stakeholder groups. During the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg in 2002, education and educators were recognised as essential elements of the progress towards SD. Several partnerships, including the Global Higher Education for Sustainability Partnership (GHESP)¹ and the Global Virtual University² for sustainable development were formed. The Japanese and Swedish governments have identified ESD as a spearhead for their contributions and at their proposal. The United Nations General Assembly, at its 57th Session, adopted the resolution to start the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) from January 2005, following the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation. UNESCO was appointed as the lead agency for the DESD.

During WSSD in Johannesburg in 2002, eleven of the foremost educational and scientific organizations in the world signed the Ubuntu Declaration with a goal to strengthen collaboration between science and technology researchers and educators, better integrate

¹ GHESP was officially established in 2000 and acknowledged as a Type II Partnership in Johannesburg in 2002. See http://www.unesco.org/iau/sd/sd_ghesp.html for further information.

² The agreement establishing the Global Virtual University was signed in Johannesburg in 2002. The GVU, however, is not an official Type II Partnership. See <http://www.gvu.unu.edu> for further information.

science and technology into educational programmes for SD (all subjects - all levels) and to strengthen cooperation between formal and non-formal education. The signatories of the Ubuntu Declaration have worked closely with UNESCO to promote the DESD, and have contributed to the draft framework of the International Implementation Scheme for the DESD. ESD covers not only environment and natural resources management but much broader topics such as poverty alleviation, gender inequality, peace and dispute settlement, inter-cultural understanding etc.

Box 1. The Ubuntu Declaration

The Ubuntu Declaration strives to ensure that educators and learners from primary to the highest levels of education, taking part in both formal and non-formal education, are aware of the imperatives of sustainable development. Through the focused work of this network of networks it is anticipated that more people worldwide will come to practice, in their work and life habits, the values and principles of sustainability.

The signatories will jointly be working towards:

- strengthening the role of educators in the Commission on Sustainable Development process as one of the major stakeholders;
- promoting communication and collaboration among scientific, technological and educational organizations by frequent exchange of information and views on their activities;
- facilitating the review and revision process of educational programmes and curricula at all levels of education for integrating the latest scientific and technological knowledge for sustainable development into educational programmes and curricula, and to developing mechanisms to continuously inform teachers and update programmes;
- promoting efforts to attract young people to the teaching profession;
- emphasizing the importance of ethical issues in education for building a sustainable and peaceful global society in the 21st century;
- promoting knowledge transfers in innovative ways to speed up the process of bridging gaps and inequalities in knowledge; and
- working towards a new global learning space on education and sustainability that promotes cooperation and exchange between education at all levels and among all sectors of society.

The need for Regional Centers of Expertise

ESD is not a topic that can be taught in a few weeks or at a certain age. Rather it should be given attention in all sectors and at all levels of education in relation to relevant, already existing subjects in an integrated manner. In this way ESD gives orientation and meaning to Education for All (EfA). EfA and ESD are two sides of the same coin.

In spite of multiple efforts in the past to strengthen ESD, many challenges remain. In particular, there is a need

- ✚ to integrate adequately science, technology and other SD components, such as traditional knowledge, ethics and values etc., into educational curricula;
- ✚ to strengthen communication, coordination and collaboration among different stakeholders who have been conducting their activities on ESD separately without good communication with each other; and

✚ to mitigate gaps in accessibility to latest information and knowledge in different parts of the world.

In order to attain these objectives, there is a necessity to create an enabling environment for strengthened collaboration among various partners working for ESD at the regional and local levels. Regional centers of expertise on education for sustainable development (RCEs) would serve, through close cooperation between different institutions, as the major engines for exchange of knowledge and information as well as joint development of innovative programmes towards ESD. They would also facilitate integration of knowledge and information as well as serve as links between sectors that could jointly contribute to the promotion of ESD.

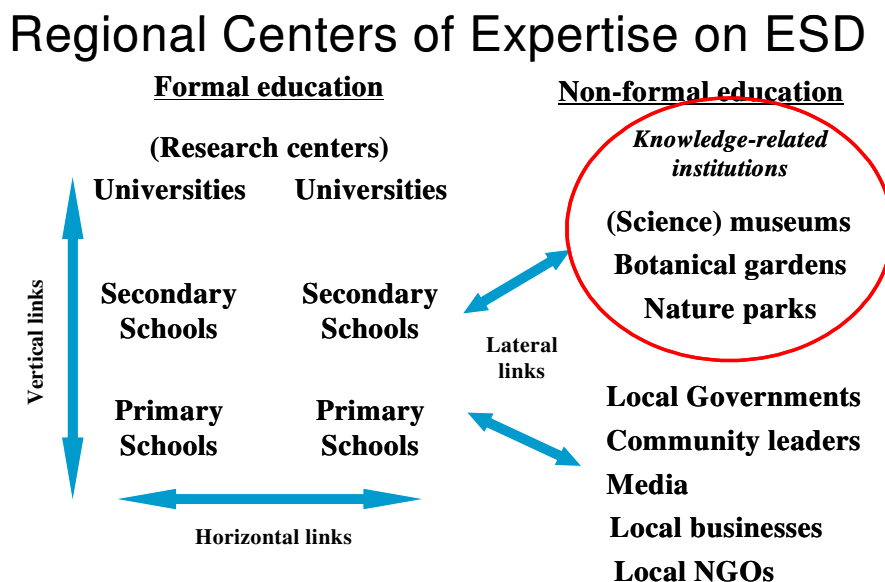
Creation of the RCEs would fulfill two needs: a) it would give a further stimulus to those actors that are already developing RCE-type activities and b) it would provide models of cooperation and for joint projects to those who are looking for these.

The expected role of Regional Centers of Expertise

RCEs are expected to strengthen three kinds of links among partners:

1. between different levels of educational institutions (refers to the Vertical Links in the Figure 1);
2. between educational organizations of the same level, for example, schools in a community (refers to the Horizontal Links in the Figure 1);
3. between educational organizations and organizations that, while not being part of the formal education, contribute to the promotion of ESD (refers to the Lateral Links in the Figure 1).

Figure 1. Collaborative links of Regional Centers of Expertise



It is important to differentiate conceptually between the vertical, horizontal, and lateral links. Each of the categories emphasises importance of a particular kind of collaboration and, therefore, guides the collaborative actions. For example, the concept of horizontal links draw attention to the importance of experiences of similar organisations in the same locality while lateral links stress significance of experience exchange between different types of organisations. Building relations between similar and different organisations might require different kinds of efforts .

The mission of RCEs is to bring into positive contacts, in various ways, the scientists and educators in both institutions of formal and non-formal education. In this capacity, the scientists, including experts in research institutions and museums, would become providers of state-of-the-knowledge to inform innovative study programmes and help to address local concerns. Educators, in a broad sense, will become main actors in a process to develop and disseminate state-of-the-art knowledge relevant to SD. They will work with other actors in the society, e.g. representatives of local governments, NGOs, etc.

What is a Regional Centers of Expertise?

In contrast to the concept of formal organisation, a RCE is thought as a network that is designed to strengthen the collaboration for ESD among regional and local actors. The localized network is voluntary, flexible and inclusive. “Regions” are seen as the scale of a part of a country, like Bretagne, Tohoku or Catalunya. An RCE may be created in an area where people have solidarity in economic, social, cultural and environmental terms, and can get together in a relatively easy manner. A local focus is considered essential for addressing relevant SD issues for a particular region through educational activities. Although the RCEs are based on cooperation of institutions, it is the people working in these institutions who are crucial for the quality of the work.

School teachers at elementary and secondary schools, university professors, researchers, experts in museums, local government officials, relevant NGOs, community-based organizations (CBOs) working for ESD, representatives of local enterprises, media people, etc. through their expertise and enthusiasm will be decisive for the work and success of RCEs. Experts in museums, botanical gardens, science parks, zoos, etc. would be encouraged to contribute.

RCEs could vary in size, affiliations and functions dependent on regional conditions and experiences, in particular the kind and number of the institutions present and ready to cooperate for this high cause (ESD). An RCE should, however, be able to identify local concerns and address them in an integrated manner. In this context, however, it must be understood that no region stands alone. In our highly interconnected and dynamic world we must always relate the different levels of geographical scale to each other and thus must local concerns be related to the national, continental and global levels.

Activities and functions of Regional Centers of Expertise

Activities of RCEs will be defined by the regional (local) conditions. In general, activities of RCEs could serve to

- ✚ Promote development and exchange of information and experience and facilitate collaboration among organisations providing different levels of education and with other organisations relevant to ESD, with a view to develop challenging, state-of-the-art, innovative learning programmes;

An illustration of such activities could be the introduction of environmental education programs at elementary schools, community-based waste reduce, reuse, recycling activities or NGOs nature observation activities at tourism sites. Through such sharing of information and experiences, actors will improve their activities and coordinate with each other to avoid unnecessary duplication. For example, it is expected to carry out in Japan higher level education on river functions at secondary schools, based on river observation education at elementary schools. In such cases lectures at these schools could be given by experts in universities, research institutions or community leaders who have been actually engaged in some environmental activities on site or these experts might contribute their experience and knowledge to educators developing new learning materials.

- ✚ Assistance in SD curricula development and implementation;

RCEs could create ideal conditions to introduce the best of available knowledge in a “natural” way into the learning programmes and contribute to creative SD curricular design.

- ✚ Facilitation of efficient and effective use of limited resources;

Establishment of RCEs could coordinate use of resources used by various organisations in the area of ESD. Effectiveness of resource use might permit a bigger scale of ESD actions or longer duration of ESD projects.

- ✚ Raising an awareness about importance of educators and ESD among public at large and decision-makers in particular;

In order to make education a critical component for the future, ESD should be developed, implemented, monitored and reviewed at international as well as national, regional and local levels in a way that meets local conditions and needs. These challenges place a special challenge to the educators as designers and promoters of future reforms in ESD. Responsibilities should be accompanied by the conditions that permit complex undertakings of the educators. The crucial role of educators in carrying out the educational reform through DESD should be emphasized.

- ✚ Facilitation of the collaborative projects to straighten ESD activities

For instance, new ESD projects at community level may be developed in collaboration with the Chamber of Commerce or local enterprises.

RCEs as means to promote the Global Learning Space for Sustainable Development

Through their activities, RCEs would develop innovative ways of collaboration among scientists, educators and other stakeholders of the region. Together, internationally

cooperating RCEs would constitute the Global Learning Space for Sustainable Development that would be an important contribution to the successful implementation of the DESD. Among other facilitating means, the Global Learning Space would be assisted through international portals, developed to share ideas and experience. The Resource Project to be developed by the Global Higher Education for Sustainability Partnership (GHESP) could be an example of such a portal³. In turn, the Portals will inform RCEs about good practices in other RCEs or elsewhere. The Global Learning Space enables locally based RCEs to tap into various experiences and types of knowledge assembled beyond their region or network. The Global Learning Space would further enable ESD through provision of resources at the local, regional, national and international levels. Most importantly, it will enable individual learners, making use of modern ICT, to profit from all relevant knowledge available in the Global Learning Space (network), by entering it through any convenient RCE they may choose.

The way forward: First steps

UNU is planning to support the development of a few demonstration projects on RCEs in several regions in different parts of our world, starting with the Asia-Pacific, as the first step to promote RCEs and their networking at the global level. In order to fully take into account the local, regional conditions and initiatives, RCEs might be acknowledged in a comparable way to the monuments on the cultural heritage list or probably the bio-reserves. In the process, it would be possible to mobilize many diverse actors and institutions, learn from their creative ideas, build on their diversity and, thus, promote international cooperation in ESD.

Although ESD covers not only environment and natural resources management but also much broader topics, one cannot address all these themes simultaneously. RCEs may wish to cover some specific high priority environment and development topics in the region at its initial stage and gradually expand its scope over time. For example, in Japan, many entities have been accumulating valuable experience on environmental education. In areas where people have serious concern about environment and/or development issues, RCEs may begin focusing their activities mainly on specific issues given priority in their own region. It is essential, however, to envision the ways for gradual broadening of RCEs' agenda taking into account the regional needs and experiences.

³ See <http://www.ulsf.org/toolkit> for more information on the project and to view a draft homepage.

Box 2. Education for Sustainable Development (EfSD) programme of Institute of Advanced Studies of United Nations University (UNU-IAS)

United Nations University (UNU) is an organization which mission is "to contribute, through research and capacity building, to efforts to resolve the pressing global problems that are the concern of the United Nations, its Peoples and Member States". UNU plays five key roles: it represents an international community of scholars; it serves as a bridge between the United Nations and the international academic community and a think-tank for the United Nations system; it builds capacities, particularly in developing countries; and it serves as a platform for dialogue and creating new ideas.

The goal of the Education for Sustainable Development (EfSD) programme of UNU-IAS is to increase capacity of the public at large and of decision makers in particular to promote sustainable development to integrate SD components into national development planning and implementation by the end of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD).

To promote the DESD, UNU-IAS will undertake the following activities in the coming several years:

- Development and implementation of the International Implementation Scheme for the DESD;
- Awareness raising among public and policy makers in particular;
- Promotion of regional centers of expertise on education for sustainable development (RCEs);
- Support of and active participation in the GHESP Recourse project;
- Promotion of distance on-line learning through information and communication technology (ICT); and
- Implementation of and support to trainers' training

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