

Viewpoint

Government support for development education and education for sustainable development

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Both development education (DE) and education for sustainable development (ESD) place strong emphasis on promoting behaviour and actions for a socially just and ecologically sustainable world. In order to develop public awareness and produce this behaviour, DE and ESD practitioners and organisations need government support for their work and recognition of their contribution to education. This support can take the form of resources or access to decision-makers, but it must also include policy frameworks to scaffold their work. While the relationship can be fraught at times, government support for DE and ESD is essential given the former's role in managing the education system and contributing to international policy-making.

In December 2002, the United Nations (UN) designated 2005-2014 as the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) was designated as the lead agency and from 31 March – 2 April 2009 they will host the mid-term review of the Decade in Bonn, Germany. Ireland states in official documentation that support for a rules-based international order is a key element to national foreign policy. Indeed, Ireland has a solid track record within the UN which has included: regular participation in peace-keeping activities since 1958; holding a Security Council seat from 2001-2002; and the prestigious role held by the former Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dermot Ahern TD, when Special Envoy for UN Reform in 2005 (Department of Foreign Affairs, no date given).

In January 2009, Margaret Kelly of the Department of Education and Science stated that Ireland's much anticipated National Strategy for DESD would be finalised by the date of the Bonn conference and available in a downloadable format from their website. The level of anticipation surrounding this document has been heightened due to the extended consultation process led by the government on the Strategy. The National Steering

Committee on Education for Sustainable Development was established in 2005, with cross-departmental representation from the Department of Education and Science (who have overall responsibility for the process), the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department Environment, Heritage and Local Government. The National Steering Committee also has representatives from COMHAR-Sustainable Development Council, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee (CDVEC) Curriculum Development Unit, ECO-UNESCO, along with varied and expert academic inputs. The National Steering Committee commissioned ECO-UNESCO to carry out research on current good practice in education and training for sustainable development in Ireland as part of the consultation process, which included regional focus groups. This was followed by the 'Have Your Say' Conference held in Croke Park on December 2007, where departmental representatives, academics, NGOs and others provided extensive feedback and review of the draft Strategy (ECO-UNESCO, 2007). This extensive level of consultation built considerable hope for the Strategy and government support for DE and ESD.

However since this intensive level of activity it appears that the Strategy has languished - even the project website (<http://www.esdireland.ie>) has disappeared! While recognising that staff changes have occurred, as well as other administrative headaches, it is now five years since the beginning of the Decade, and the midterm review of DESD is due. The momentum and hope built around the Strategy has dissipated. For those of us working within the DE and ESD sectors, the need for greater government recognition and support is overdue. We encounter cynicism from learners and audiences, dismissal of our work as political and leftist, and questioning of our motivations, in addition to being under-resourced and marginalised. In my work within the Ubuntu Network, I regularly meet student teachers full of passion and outrage at global injustices, but yet they are unable to address these issues in their practice due to factors such as conservative school authorities and exam-focused class planning. Having a statutory framed Strategy as a point of reference would be a strong bulwark for our work. The cynicism and frustration that has emerged on the back of the stalled strategic planning process can be mitigated by greater government support to practitioners in a policy framework that will enable us to build greater public awareness and engagement with development and global issues.

The draft Strategy had four broad objectives, which will presumably be retained in the final document. The objectives cover essential areas of work within educational practice and policy-making, as well as at

organisational and institutional level with a view to:

- Embed education for sustainable development at every level of the education system;
- Promote public awareness of ESD, using methodologies designed to provide the knowledge, skills, and values to encourage individuals, businesses and organisations to take action in support of a sustainable and just society, care for the environment, and responsible global citizenship;
- Promote capacity building in support of ESD;
- Promote high standards of environmental management in education institutions.

While the Strategy may have flaws or be criticised by some, it is nonetheless a welcome development in policy-making for DE and ESD practitioners. The Strategy will provide a national policy framework for our audiences, place ESD on a statutory basis within the Irish education system, increase DE and ESD visibility and meet our UN commitment to the Decade for ESD. It is much anticipated, long overdue and badly needed. The Department of Education and Science has promised the publication of the finalised Strategy in March 2009 and we hope that this latest deadline is adhered to.

To access further information on the United Nations Decade for Sustainable Development visit: <http://www.unesco.org/education/esd/en/ev>

References

Department of Foreign Affairs (n.d.), accessed 26 January 2009: <http://www.dfa.ie/home/index.aspx?id=309>.

ECO-UNESCO (2007) *Developing a National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland*, discussion paper, accessed 13 January 2009: <http://www.ecounesco.ie/pdf/ESDDiscussionPaper.pdf>.

UNESCO (2009) *World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development - Moving into the Second Half of the UN Decade*, accessed 26 January 2009: <http://www.esd-world-conference-2009.org>.

Mags Liddy works with the Ubuntu Network, based at the University of Limerick. The Network aims to integrate

development education and education for sustainable development into initial post-primary teacher education, utilising an action research methodology. For more information, see <http://www.ubuntu.ie>.