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12th PLENARY SESSION
of the Chamber of Regions

Strasbourg, 28 April 2005

CPR (12) 3
Part II

TWELFTH SESSION

(Strasbourg, 31 May – 2 June 2005)

Youth education for sustainable development: the role of the regions

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EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM

In accordance with the terms of reference given it by the Bureau of the Congress, the Committee on Sustainable Development of the Chamber of Regions has produced a report on the role to be played by Europe's regions in the education of young people for the sustainable development of the European continent.

The initiative is one of a series of recent activities conducted by the Committee: these include the Turnu Magurele Conference (Romania), the report on the protection and integrated management of river basins and the initiatives of the Teleorman Region in Romania to involve young people in addressing the challenges of sustainable development. The very real interest shown by young people on such occasions has confirmed the need already perceived by the Committee for a reference work on education for sustainable development with particular reference to the education of young people.

The present report has chosen environmental education as its focus, both because of the wealth of material generated recently in the field of environmental education and because environmental protection is perceived by young people as constituting a vital part of their future and as an essential component of sustainability.

The rapporteur wishes to thank Professor Giovanni Prestini for the important contribution given to the preparation of the report.

The Committee on Sustainable Development of the Chamber of Regions adopted the preliminary draft Recommendation and Resolution during its meeting in Strasbourg on 16 March 2005.

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Towards new concepts and practices in sustainable development education/training

If the notion of sustainable development education is understood in the noblest sense as education for good citizenship, it is important to highlight how education for sustainability can serve as a tool in the promotion of a broad-based and valuable process of education for civic awareness, peace, solidarity, equality and participation.

If the education process takes as its starting point, as indeed it should, the ways in which human society has evolved over time, concentrating on its slow but gradual development down the ages, young people can be given the mental and educational tools they need to understand the most important development processes and take the measure of human development, while at the same time resisting the dangerous trend towards pessimism. Young people are thus enabled to put their heritage in a historical perspective, understanding their entry on the scene as the point which we have reached.

Heritage is to be understood in the widest sense, since the principle of sustainable development is predicated on the knowledge that if the conditions of development are indeed to prevail, then the whole gamut of human, civilisational, cultural, entrepreneurial and environmental values that make up the legacy of past generations and the heritage of future generations must be rooted in the individual.

Sensitising our societies to the needs of sustainable development must begin in schools. It is by teaching young people to adopt new, more global and interdisciplinary approaches to the major problems of today that we can hope to contribute to the creation of a more just society in the future. For individuals, organisations and society at large, education is a key factor in social evolution. However, if change is to prove compatible from a social, environmental and health perspective, then knowledge, education, research and technology must be geared to the needs of sustainable development and made to bear upon it.

It is significant that schools themselves are playing an active role in this process throughout Europe, engaging actively with it each time it is set in motion by education authorities.

Strengthening awareness of one's individual and community identity is also an important part of the sustainable development education process, and a vital prerequisite for guaranteeing peaceful coexistence between individuals and groups based on social justice and mutual recognition and therefore on contributions from a variety of sources.

To change reality, sustainable development education processes must operate at two levels simultaneously:

- a) at the level of education and training establishments, permeating all subjects and age-groups and helping young people to adapt their thought processes; access to education as the common foundation of future society must therefore be as broad as possible;
- b) at the territorial level, creating a general climate of operational awareness among citizens, entrepreneurs, workers in the voluntary and social sectors, educators and in particular administrators and persons enjoying decision-making powers.

Educating young people in values that are not shared or not applied in contexts where their lives unfold would lead to renunciation, cynicism and justified rebellion. It is important to underline therefore that all persons enjoying political, administrative, economic and scientific decision-making powers need to participate in this social research, education and creation process aimed at identifying ways of life that hold out prospects for the future.

Similarly, research findings must be put to decision-makers in a clear and comprehensible manner and gradually form an integral part of the dialogue with the public and be incorporated in teaching aimed at young people.

Sustainable development education should not remain confined to educational establishments only, but should enable young people to contextualise it during voluntary work in the social and environmental sectors, training programmes, apprenticeships and exchange programmes in order to convince young people of its universal relevance and strengthen a culture of participation.

Accordingly, it is suggested that facilities be made available to young people to enable them to learn about and actively experience sustainable development in the form of a network for peace. In such centres, many of which already exist, educators and young people can meet, learn from one another and gain first-hand experience of life with others in relation to the environment as a first step towards the establishment of sustainability units scattered across all countries.

The role of central or local government in youth education for sustainable development no longer consists in inculcating environmental information or concepts, but rather in ensuring a general receptiveness to the notion of world citizenship, and therefore global responsibility, turning young people into caring and informed citizens and, more importantly, into people capable of taking positive action to ensure that today's heritage is preserved for future generations.

As far as possible, persons in positions of responsibility in local government should embody such an approach at the level most readily associated with "the human dimension", helping to educate people who will both want and be able to act in an informed and intelligent manner in the world of tomorrow.

As Agenda 21 has taught us, it is essential for the regions to operate and maintain permanent strategies for networking, involving exchanges, dialogue and privileged channels of communication, by means of which even separate realities can discover common interests and concerns, creating a kind of European "cultural footprint" on the subject of sustainable development.

And last but not least, we must use all the tools the new information and communication technologies have placed at our disposal to educate young people in the scope for building a sustainable future.

Experience gained in the field of environmental education

In the past, environmental education has given us the tools needed to decipher and understand the environment and its importance so that the current depletion and exploitation of existing natural resources may lead to a better husbanding of those resources by man to ensure their continuing availability and integrity.

Knowledge of the finite nature of natural and environmental resources and the consequent espousal of the idea of resource vulnerability and the risk that beyond a certain critical point those resources would be irreversibly impaired, make it essential to disseminate and promote a collective awareness of the solutions to acute environmental problems and to the contribution to be made by environmental sciences in the form of a new, more ecologically oriented paradigm than that which has governed their development until now.

The international community initiated a series of conferences on environmental education some time ago in order to promote its principles and to alert governments and public opinion to the need to develop a culture and awareness of environmental issues. The ultimate and agreed aim being pursued through environmental education is the improvement of the quality of the environment and of the lives of all by raising public awareness of the critical features of our methods of production and the needs of sustainable development and encouraging public participation in the search for solutions, appealing to a personal sense of responsibility in the management of the conflict between socio-economic development and the integrity of the natural environment.

One of the principal aims of environmental education is therefore to develop the ability of individuals to plan and make responsible choices in relation to the environment as part of a process that grapples with the complexities of the man/environment interface in a constantly changing and systemic rather than linear arrangement. It puts forward genuine and effective alternatives and proposals for change and provides tools for reconciling the economic interest of the individual with the collective interest being pursued through environmental protection and planning.

Any educational approach to environmental protection must therefore begin by identifying first principles and ethical values and standards. The aim is to develop new behavioural models through such instruments as information, knowledge and experience in order to convey the realisation that we are all part of a single system of action and interaction where each negative action, sooner or later, can lead to a negative reaction on the part of the person having triggered it.

This implies introducing the notion that improvements in the environment do not depend solely on solutions to the major global issues, but also on adopting a set of everyday attitudes and approaches prompted by individual awareness. Implicit in the notion of environmental education is the aim not only of learning about the environment and acting upon it, but also, and especially, of protecting it.

Environmental education seeks therefore not only to promote instruction in and experience of the environment, but more particularly its protection through education, in other words educational activity in favour of the environment.

Above all, environmental education encompasses genuine and effective alternatives and proposals for change in our approach to environmental management and planning. Essentially, a good environmental education project will leave visible signs of positive change:

- ❖ in the participants in the educational process
- ❖ on the organisation of life in general
- ❖ in the environment itself.

We may sum up the different stages of environmental education as follows:

- ❖ Study of the environment – the teaching of environmental sciences, essentially the knowledge of elements, mechanisms and relationships; here the logical, cognitive and systematic approach prevails.
- ❖ Field activities – experience gained in the field with teaching laboratories, hands-on activities, with emphasis on the experimental and the sensory approaches, whereby the individual becomes an actor in the decision-making process through awareness of the issues involved in the exploitation and use of natural resources; alongside problem-solving skills, motivation and the ability of form judgments and take decisions need developing; issues are approached from a multidisciplinary angle.
- ❖ Action in support of the environment – initiatives that seek to convey environmentally-compatible values and forms of behaviour and increase quality levels (eg. separate recovery of toxic waste products for safe disposal or recycling).

The levels referred to above are to be understood not as progressive stages as much as successive levels of development, from the first level of rational knowledge, through direct experience to the reelaboration and transmission of ethical values that find expression in environmentally compatible forms of behaviour. These latter, in turn, alter levels of attention and the ability to effect choices through the acquisition of cognitive elements and greater awareness, thus underpinning the ethical and civic significance of ecological choices.

Studies in environmental psychology have shown that “ecological” behaviour can generally be associated with “pro-social” attitudes of attention and sensitivity towards others. Respect and a positive attitude towards other people generally connote individuals with a keen sense of responsibility for the natural environment and a greater propensity to consistently act in an environmentally-friendly way. Civic awareness and respect for one’s fellow citizens and for the wider world are intertwined with more or less codified behavioural norms that have been reinforced by social customs.

It is important to underscore the social dimension of environmental education, which contributes to the restoration of a sense of identity and of belonging on the part of both individuals and groups, the development of civic-mindedness and responsibility towards the “res publica”, to the growth of a culture of participation and concern for the quality of one’s own environment, creating an affective relationship between individuals, communities and the contexts in which their lives unfold.

As for the European Union, it took up the issue of environmental education in the Resolution of 24 May 1988, identifying the mainstreaming of environmental education across the curriculum and the improvement of training and educational tools among its priorities. The Fifth Programme of Policy and Action in relation to the Environment and Sustainable Development of 1992 picks up the 1988 resolution, adding to it the need to include environmental issues in curricula throughout primary and secondary schools and recalling the need to use all available means to promote sustainable, environmentally-friendly development through information to the public, education and vocational training. In 1993, the European Parliament adopted a new resolution on environmental education in which it invited member states to define together, on the basis of a Triennial Regional Environmental Education Plan, a suitable legal instrument, such as a multi-annual action programme, the principles of a genuine European environmental education policy, and in particular:

- ❖ to include the environmental dimension in all aspects of education and at all levels;
- ❖ to concentrate efforts on teacher training programmes;
- ❖ to define a minimum common curriculum content;
- ❖ to promote adult education on the subject of the environment;
- ❖ to promote the development of interdisciplinary training and research centres in the field of environmental education.

The same text further underlines the fundamental role to be played by schools and their teachers in the definition and implementation of such a policy and the need to develop an exchange network among the various people working in the sector. The different initiatives proposed include educational activities in schools, the organisation of national environmental education weeks based on projects and work done by young people and awareness-raising activities organised by works councils at the workplace.

Finally, in 1997 the working group of the European Commission produced a text entitled "Environmental Education in the European Union", a kind of guide to what had already been done in the countries of the European Union, with information on the methodologies used and how environmental education is incorporated within national education systems.

The main aim being pursued through environmental education is a general change in public attitudes towards consumption and certain types of behaviour, drawing on the notions of "thrift" and "sharing" in efforts to create an ethically-oriented society. For the real problems, those that cause irreparable loss and harm to the environment, are the result of present-day consumer and behavioural models. It is a highly complex enterprise and one that calls for a considerable degree of commitment if effective and stable results are to be achieved over time, but it is also an enterprise that in terms of its impact guarantees long-lasting benefits.

Educating citizens to care for their environment and protect it against potential harm has primarily ethical implications since it affects people's understanding that as human beings they are part of an ecosystem and can contribute to protecting the species by improving the conditions needed for its survival. Sensitive citizens become the main champions of environmental protection by acting appropriately themselves and controlling the actions of other individuals and groups. In addition, such a strategy can lead to indirect results and contribute to their successful propagation. For education affects the knowledge, abilities and attitudes of individuals, as a result enabling them, when faced with a given situation, to make choices and take appropriate action. There is every likelihood that such action, if it proves positive and effective, will serve as a model for others, whose interaction will in turn serve to "educate" others. We are all capable of being influenced, but that influence is all the more incisive in situations such as the parent/child or pupil/teacher relationship or in situations where the individual interacts within a group or association.

One can safely say, in the light of all this, that education represents one of the best investments for the preservation of the integrity of the environment. That is amply born out when one looks at the current situation of environmental education, where we are seeing an explosion in the number of initiatives being taken. The funds being made available, especially by the EU, have convinced institutes, foundations, authorities, enterprises and agencies to invest in the sector, in particular on the educational front.

However, it should be emphasised that although there is a broad consensus behind the idea that the protection of the environment is not a new content, but rather a new mindset, one that is shaped through the elaboration and implementation of educational and training paths, the starting point of educational activity in support of the environment is often a blind faith in some form of automaticity between the development of knowledge and the emergence of an environmental awareness.

We must avoid an overly technical and static approach to problems of the environment as it leaves no room for the ethical and behavioural aspects that are so crucial to the formation of an "ecological" outlook, which is the much-needed link between the elaboration of complex knowledge and the development of alternative cultural models (values, attitudes, individual and collective behaviour). It is no longer enough to advocate technical solutions to environmental problems; rather we must involve the community in the decision-making process, setting aside the search for a consensus as we aspire to a culture of shared responsibilities.

We need therefore to identify the conceptual and methodological nexuses which characterise an environmental education initiative, setting it apart from other similar educational initiatives, and to devise, both in respect of education and vocational training, educational paths that comply with precise quality criteria in relation to the fostering of an ecosystem-based culture that seeks to pursue the aims of awareness-raising, information and dissemination.

Hence the desirability of conducting environmental education projects in various fora (schools, the family, the workplace, etc) and of devising training courses for professionals who are in a position to reorient the labour market and open up new employment opportunities in ecologically-compatible production sectors.

Some conclusions on educational strategies

Generally speaking, the aim of any education project is to bring about a lasting change in behaviour. In the field of environmental education that idea translates into projects that enhance a culture of concern and respect for the environment capable of motivating people to adopt “ecological” forms of behaviour.

The educational input can be provided in one of a variety of different ways according to the different cost-effectiveness ratio awaited. They include:

- ❖ one-off or targeted information;
- ❖ educational presentations on environmental subjects;
- ❖ dissemination and publication of statistical data;
- ❖ stock-taking reports on the state of the environment;
- ❖ the promotion of cultural initiatives at community level;
- ❖ the scientific treatment of environmental problems;
- ❖ identification of new professional profiles in relation to the environment and relevant training;
- ❖ interdisciplinary teaching of environmental issues.

To sum up, an *educational strategy* is comprised of a *sequence* of inputs occurring at different *stages* and of *educational activities* tailored to the needs of different publics and different objectives with the aim of enhancing awareness – the principal goal of education – and promoting the shouldering of individual responsibility in relation to the environment.

It is for these reasons that the Congress Resolution proposes that the regions, in so far as they enjoy such authority, and with a view to establishing a common foundation and a shared culture among young people at European level:

- a) form a working group to draw up, on the basis of practical experienceguiding principles for training courses in sustainable development and to determine the content of such courses and devise activities for them;
- b) establish a standing conference on training in sustainable development to devise course content, put forward proposals, serve as a forum for debate and the pooling of experience, act as a think tank and provide a development opportunity for all the regions of Council of Europe member states.

The guidelines produced at European level need to be taken on board at local level and local authorities thereby given a greater say in the way in which they are implemented.

All regions could therefore enter into an immediate dialogue on these issues with all those involved with training and education, in the widest sense of the word, working together with schools providing compulsory education, regional education authorities, training centres, universities, non-formal education bodies and the voluntary sector in order to disseminate these principles, and assess how they can best be tailored to different situations. A common starting point could be the implementation of common training courses specifically targeting trainers.