

## Spotlight Issues II.3

### Challenges facing the Arab region in education for sustainable development<sup>1</sup>

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#### INTRODUCTION

The following text is an extract from the *Regional Guiding Framework of Education for Sustainable Development in the Arab Region*, a document prepared by a group of programme specialists and experts from UNESCO, UN Organizations and Arab States, as part of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). The Regional Guiding provides a general reference point of the activities that could be implemented by any of the partners such as education and training institutions, production and services, international and regional organizations, civil society and NGOs.

#### CHALLENGES FACING THE ARAB REGION IN EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

During the period 2006–2007, the UNESCO

Regional Bureau for Education in the Arab States (Beirut) designed, in cooperation with a small group of experts and specialists in the Arab region, a questionnaire to explore member state opinion regarding priorities and mechanisms to be adopted in order to achieve ESD/DESD objectives in the region.

After the discussion and adoption of the draft questionnaires/forms, these were distributed to the National Commissions for UNESCO in the Arab region, to ensure its completion by ministries of education and higher education, universities, and research and development centres, as well as other partners concerned with sustainable development, in order to identify national and regional plans of action.

Fourteen Arab countries completed the questionnaires/forms and nominated a National

Focal Point. The Focal Point will ensure coordination and exchange of experiences among institutions at the national and regional levels. The analysis of questionnaires allowed the identification of challenges that are facing sustainable development in the Arab region, and that are consequently generating challenges to the achievement of ESD.

Challenges facing SD in the Arab region as stated in the questionnaires/forms can be classified as follows:

#### 1. Challenges at the Economic Dimension:

- Poverty, unemployment and brain drain (the biggest challenge at the three levels)
- Role of women in the workplace and in the production sector
- Desertification, agriculture and water scarcity

- Scarcity of resources in general and the need to develop these resources and to rationalize their use

## 2. Challenges at the Social Dimension:

- Political, security and demographic stability and sustainability of development efforts
- Weakness of the role played by youth in social life
- Weakness of women's participation in social life
- Need to develop management and organizational patterns and methods in private and public sectors
- Lack of health awareness, especially as regards infectious and communicable diseases such as AIDS

## 3. Challenges at the Environment Dimension:

- Lack of environmental awareness, lack of environmental conservation and environmental depletion in a number of cases
- Increase of environmental pollution rate in all its forms
- Existence of biodiversity requiring the establishment of multiple systems to preserve it
- Outbreak of several resources unfair consumption patterns

Education systems in the region are facing common challenges that are negatively influencing their capacity to achieve the desired success. Among these challenges are: the failure to reach the required rates in order to achieve Education for All (EFA) goals; the failure to provide the necessary resources for education development plans and, more particularly, human resources; and the irrelevance of methods used for the provision of appropriate educational materials.

At the same time, ESD/DESD in the Arab region is facing specific challenges that can be summarized as follows:

- The understanding by all parties of *the wide concept of education for sustainable development* and of its nature.
- *The complex nature of education for sustainable development* represents a great challenge to its integration in school materials, making ESD/DESD overlap with other educational materials and activities.

- The consideration of the Arab States' *values and traditions* when planning and implementing ESD. These values and traditions are not used enough in the preparation of ESD curricula and teaching materials.
- The fact that many Arab countries have recently finished completing the development of their policies in the education sector, since it is difficult for citizens to accept the idea of amending these policies after starting their implementation.
- The issue of *regional and subregional cooperation*, due to the lack of previous experience in this field in the Arab region. It is hoped that participating international organizations will assist in the enhancement of such cooperation.
- The provision of the *necessary funding* and training and the promotion of the principle of equal partnership.
- Wars and conflicts still constitute a burden thus constituting a challenge not only for ESD but also for development itself and for the sustainability of large segments of human beings.

In light of the limited available funds and the multiple challenges facing the states of the region, in addition to the fact that the major part of the budgets allocated to education fall under the article related to salaries, the financing issue still constitutes the main obstacle to the achievement of the UN DESD in the Arab region.

## BASIS OF THE REGIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE ARAB REGION

The Regional Guiding Framework of Education for Sustainable Development is developed according to a set of bases related to the concept of sustainable development in the region, and the approaches to achieve goals of ESD/DESD:

1. Efforts focus on the achievement of a *quantum leap* aimed at triggering change in the behaviour and orientations of individuals, with the participation of all members of society as well as of all public and grassroots institutions.
2. Priority is given to the harmonious and integrated orientation of efforts towards education for sustainable development *through a holistic approach not as an additional component*

3. *Education for sustainable development efforts are complementary to the existing initiatives* – such as Education for All, the Literacy Decade, the MDGs, and so on.
4. By recognizing that it is impossible for one unique party to achieve the ESD objectives by itself, the Framework of Action is based on the hypothesis that *all social categories and institutions should play a role* in the achievement of the objectives.
5. Efforts aimed at achieving the objectives of the Decade put both genders on an equal footing, as well as racial and religious groups, rural and urban areas, and social and economic levels, and so on.
6. Efforts take advantage of *information and communication technologies (ICTs)* in reaching all social categories and in achieving the objectives of the Decade.
7. *Public and grassroots bodies cooperate to provide the necessary funding* to achieve this quantum leap in learning and the international community and organizations contribute whenever needed.

## TIMETABLE FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ACTIVITIES

Extensive discussions between specialists have resulted in a proposal suggesting the classification of UN DESD activities and events in the Arab Region into three phases:

### Phase One (2005–2007): Launching of Activities and Planning

- It was necessary to raise awareness on the DESD and in developing Arab capacities and expertise. A number of regional activities and training sessions have been organized during this period in addition to the elaboration and dissemination of national and subregional studies.

### Phase Two (2008–2011): Commitment and Construction

- This phase concerns the building of activities and programmes for ESD in the Arab region as well as in other regions of the world as planned in Phase One.

### Phase Three (2012–2014): Support, Follow-up and Evaluation

- The answers provided by educational institutions in the Arab region to the questionnaire included a limited number

of proposed projects and programmes of action for Phase Three.

### NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

ESD is characterized by the breadth of its concept and content and by the fact that it exceeds knowledge to target behaviours. It has hence become impossible for a party, institution or ministry successfully to achieve the DESD objectives by itself.

At the regional level, UNESCO will seek to establish an inter-agency regional consultative team to ensure communication and coordination of joint programmes of action. At the national level, it is necessary to select a coordination body that would be entrusted with the management of the Decade, and at the international level, UNESCO's efforts are aimed to coordinate the efforts of the proposed consultative committee gathering representatives of UN organizations.

### MONITORING, EVALUATION AND FOLLOW-UP

The linkage between monitoring and assessment and the planning process related to

the implementation of the DESD is of utmost necessity. The achievement of these objectives requires all participating parties to designate responsibility for monitoring, assessment and follow-up and to establish appropriate mechanisms that take the special characteristics of each country as well as the diversity of cultures into account. Considering the diversity of partners, it would be better if each one establishes its own indicators. It is also normal for each country to forge its own appropriate indicators.

UNESCO offices in the region will also seek to ensure maximum integration and coordination between the efforts of UN agencies, international organizations, technical cooperation bodies and NGOs, and to support cooperation and exchange of experiences among Arab States themselves and between the latter and other regions of the world.

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### SELECTED WEBSITES

www.unesco.org/education/desd

www.unesco.org

www.unesco.org/beirut

www.unescobkk.org/esd

www.unep.org

www.icarda.org

www.fao.org

www.esd.org.uk/esdtoolkit

## NOTE

- 1 This piece is an adaptation made by GUNi of the *Regional Guiding Framework of Education for Sustainable Development in the Arab Region* available at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0016/001619/161944m.pdf>