UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address
by
Mr Federico Mayor

Director-General
of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

at the opening of the World Congress for
Education and Communication on
Environment and Development
(ECO-ED)

Education for Sustainable Development :
Taking up the Challenge of Rio

Toronto, Ontario, 17 October 1992
Mr Speaker of the House of Commons,
Madam Governor General of Barbados,
Mr Chairperson,
Dear Colleagues,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I said yesterday at the opening ceremony, ECO-ED is a world congress for education and communication on environment and development. It is the first important follow-up of the Rio de Janeiro summit.

It may be the case that the UN Conference on Environment and Development did not achieve as much as many of us would have liked, or some had expected. Yet UNCED is a turning point – a timid step perhaps but in the right direction. Moreover, it did succeed in welding together two aspects of global awareness that had previously tended to be dissociated. It is now almost universally recognized that global environmental challenges cannot be separated from the whole nexus of problems affecting the underdeveloped world any more than from the "overconsumption - environmental degradation" syndrome characteristic of the industrialized world. To have wrung such a consensus from a meeting of all the countries in the world and a galaxy of NGOs, and to have expressed it in a declaration of principle and a detailed programme of action, is an achievement of the highest significance. The task of ECO-ED is to explore how, in accordance with Agenda 21, education in the very broadest sense of the term can best be made to serve the overarching goal of sustainable development.

We do not, of course, have to start from first base. Within the framework provided by the recommendations of the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment, the International Environmental Education Programme (IEEP) launched by UNESCO and UNEP in 1975, the recommendations of the 1977 Tbilissi Intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education, and the Framework for Action of the 1990 World Conference on Education for All, a very great deal has been done in the way of research and practical application in the field of environmental education over the last two decades. Indeed, environmental education as incorporated into the education systems of a large majority of countries today must take some of the credit for the new environmental awareness that found expression at Rio. However, it is clear that the approach pursued up to now is no longer deep or broad enough to meet present needs. The urgency and scale of the problems highlighted at Rio require that education should be reoriented to sustainable development and that the educational process should for this purpose be conceived as a lifelong and "lifewide" phenomenon, ramifying into all areas of social activity.

Let me develop this point by indicating what I see as the main challenges concerning education for sustainable development in this post-UNCED period.
(1) The **first** and most essential task will be to ensure that sustainable development is placed at the very centre of all educational concerns in the countries of the North and South alike. Education is indeed the key to achieving sustainable development whether from the point of view of shaping intellectual and social awareness or from the standpoint of developing human resources.

**Awareness-building** is a vital educational function since the construction of a sustainable future will depend to an important extent on the contribution of active and knowledgeable citizens to the achievement of a delicate balance between competing interests and needs. Sustainability will be achieved not so much by prescription from above as through the empowerment of individuals "literate" in matters relating to the environment and development. In this context, the goal of education for sustainable development should be not only to instil a sound intellectual and factual grasp of the relevant issues but also to develop values and skills favouring democratic participation and decision-making. Education must indeed go far beyond mere awareness-building and become a basis for action by citizens, whose lifestyles, behaviour in the workplace and democratic involvement have an enormous cumulative impact.

Education is similarly vital to developing human resources, to fostering the knowledge, skills and creativity on which sustainable development depends. In this connection, a huge effort has to be made at the national and international levels to promote literacy and universal access to basic education, particularly among girls and women who represent almost two-thirds of the world's estimated one billion illiterates. At the same time, it will be necessary in countries with educational deficits to develop all the other levels of education, research and training if a sustainable development dynamic is to be attained. Education in this context will need to combine the characteristics of awareness-building, training for sustainable development tasks and general education and will have to be backed by practical international solidarity in the form of knowledge transfer, poverty reduction, debt alleviation, the liberalization of world trade and a general reversal of the current flow of human and financial capital against the gradient of equity from the poorer to the richer countries. Education for sustainable development -as we see- necessarily leads us into all the other dimensions of an interdependent world.

**Incorporating sustainable development concerns into educational processes will clearly imply new educational content and structures.** Education for sustainable development is essentially a cross-cutting approach, informing other subjects and disciplines with its values and emphases rather than constituting a discipline in its own right. To this extent it will require programmes to be organized along new lines. Its interdisciplinary content will need to be geared to the different target-groups, moving - for example - from a simple appreciation of nature and other cultures towards a progressively more
cognitive and problem-solving approach. Typically, and in accordance with the precept of "acting locally and thinking globally", it will seek to avoid abstraction, taking local sustainable development problems as the point of departure for more general analyses and commitments. By the same token, it will favour an action-oriented approach, with a view to prompting initiatives and social participation. More than in the case of environmental education, it will embody a cultural dimension, reflecting the need to define culture-specific ways of achieving common developmental ends. In this way, education for sustainable development will be able to take account of the experience of among others - indigenous peoples and minority cultures, who often have an important and original contribution to make to human sustainable development.

(2) The second challenge for education for sustainable development flows from the first: if education is to serve the needs of sustainable development, then all forces of society will necessarily have to be involved. Educational processes need to be rethought to take maximum advantage of all the potential educational resources of society and to involve all possible participants. For this purpose, new alliances have to be forged between the State, the private sector and social organizations, and closer links have to be established between education, the media and the world of work. Business and industry in particular should become much more involved in education, including education for sustainable development. Of course, co-operation must be improved in the UN family too, particularly the relationship between the financing institutions and the Specialized Agencies. If education for sustainable development and this should be a concrete conclusion of this World Congress does not receive direct support from the Global Environment Facility and from the new UNDP fund "Capacity 21", there will again be a divorce between objectives and resources, which will adversely affect the effectiveness of our joint venture.

It must in fact become everybody's business to ensure that people of all ages, in all sectors and at all levels acquire the knowledge together with the analytical, problem-solving and decision-making skills required to contribute directly or indirectly to the drive for human sustainable development. And providing this kind of education will call for an enhanced involvement of certain actors who have so far not been regarded as concerned by such problems.

(3) The third challenge for ESD concerns the quality of the information received through the various education and communication channels. All too often this information is scientifically inaccurate, out-of-date or biased towards a particular disciplinary, national, regional or cultural point of view. Teachers, journalists and other educator/communicators need to draw on the best available knowledge, which is often located in the research community and within industry with which they have little direct interaction. Much more needs to be done to ensure that scientifically sound information reaches those
responsible for its communication to decision-makers and to the public at large.

(4) The fourth challenge I would highlight is that of "educating the educators". It is estimated that there are some 47 million teachers throughout the world in the formal sector alone, of which over 30 million are in the developing countries. This figure gives an immediate sense of the vastness of the problem. Most educators have received little if any adequate training in environmental and development matters and are therefore ill-prepared to help create a dynamic towards sustainable development. The challenge here is part of the larger problem of devising more effective and less costly ways of ensuring quality teacher training in the developing countries.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I should like to say a few words about how UNESCO - with a mandate that spans education, science, culture and communication - is active and will develop its action in the spheres I have mentioned.

In co-operation with its UN partners, notably UNEP and UNDP, UNESCO will promote the integration of education for sustainable development in the policies and plans of its Member States, encourage the creation of national advisory bodies, help build national capacities and strategies for the training of teachers and other key personnel in the field of sustainable development, devise workplans to promote formal and non-formal education at national and regional levels, and organize international forums on environment and development. It will also consider the possibility of organizing a survey with a view to the development of international and regional strategies on education for sustainable development. Major inputs to its work in this field may be expected from its two recently created high-level commissions - the International Commission on Education and Learning for the 21st Century under the chairmanship of Mr Jacques Delors, and the World Commission on Culture and Development chaired by Mr Javier Perez de Cuéllar. Through its international Man and the Biosphere (MAB) programme - whose Canadian branch is one of the organizers of ECO-ED - UNESCO will continue to promote research relevant for policy-making in the ecology field and to develop its unique international network of biosphere reserves as sites for conservation, research and management. Other relevant UNESCO activities will include the promotion of science education in the developing countries, the creation of UNESCO Chairs (two such chairs in sustainable development were recently established at Laval University and the University of Quebec in Montreal) to foster the rapid transfer of knowledge in fields related to sustainable development, the preparation of information materials for decision-makers in government and industry, and encouragement for the popularization of science.
I hope that in the coming days you will have the opportunity to learn more about UNESCO's activities by visiting the two UNESCO exhibitions and by seeing what we produce in this field at our stand in the Curriculum and Resources Fair, as well as by attending the UNESCO Panel on reshaping education for sustainable development, where you will be able to have further details of how UNESCO plans to take account of Agenda 21 in the educational sphere.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Much of UNESCO's work in implementation of Agenda 21 will be undertaken through governments. Governments have an essential role to play in promoting the kind of educational changes we are here discussing; and it is to be hoped that the example set by Canada with its comprehensive Green Plan and its pioneering National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy will be emulated by other countries. However, the necessary changes cannot be worked by governments alone and will require partnerships involving all sectors of society. The partnership that has linked us with the International Chamber of Commerce and UNEP in the sponsorship of this Congress, and with the major non-governemental professional organizations that are hosting it, is particularly gratifying since it is consistent with the need for maximum co-operation and synergy in the pursuit of our shared goals.

Education for sustainable development is indeed the concern of all of us; it is nothing less than taking responsibility for the shaping of our common destiny. No task can be more urgent or compelling. Rio has focused minds, forged alliances and laid down guidelines for action. With quality, innovation, interdisciplinarity and partnership as our watchwords, it is now for us to show ourselves equal to the challenge. Development - let us remember - is not given, is not bestowed. It is an endogenous process that calls for access to knowledge, the transfer of knowledge and the sharing of knowledge.

Dear friends,

The need for change is pressing. We must know and dare to speak out. Risk without knowledge is dangerous, knowledge without risk is useless. We must as a matter of urgency dare to know, and know to dare. Future generations will judge us very severely if we lack the courage and resolve to do so.