



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

## *Education Sector*

# *Quality Education, Equity and Sustainable Development: A holistic vision through UNESCO's four World Education Conferences 2008-2009*

*The purpose of this document is to highlight the common threads and synergies among the themes addressed by UNESCO's four education-related international conferences, in order to increase understanding of how the conferences tackle, each from a different angle, key challenges of today's world for which education can make a difference – provided that policies which are guided by a holistic vision of education systems, are developed.*

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# 1 Introduction

During this biennium, UNESCO is organising four major conferences on education:

- the **48<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Education**: *“Inclusive Education: the Way of the Future”* (25-28 November 2008, Geneva, Switzerland)
- the **World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development**: *“Moving into the Second Half of the UN Decade”* (31 March-2 April 2009, Bonn, Germany)
- the **Sixth International Conference on Adult Education-CONFINTEA VI**: *“Learning and Living for a Viable Future: the Power of Adult Learning”* (19-22 May 2009, Belém, Brazil); and
- the **2009 World Conference**: *“The New Dynamics of Higher Education and Research for Societal Change and Development”* (5-8 July 2009, Paris, France).<sup>1</sup>

Almost twenty regional and sub-regional conferences and meetings are being convened to prepare for these world conferences.

“Development and economic prosperity depend on the ability of countries to educate all members of their societies and offer them lifelong learning. An innovative society prepares its people not only to embrace and adapt to change but also to manage and influence it. Education enriches cultures, creates mutual understanding and underpins peaceful societies. UNESCO is guided by upholding education as a human right and as an essential element for the full development of human potential.”

UNESCO Medium Term Strategy 2008-2013 (Para. 32)

As any system, an education system is a complex whole, composed of many interrelated, interdependent, and interacting parts. They form a collective entity and what happens in one part interferes in the other parts. However, education systems often tend to be seen in a fragmented way. The four conferences offer a unique opportunity to further shape a holistic vision and to promote the discussion of how to improve education systems from different angles and perspectives, taking into consideration the various aspects that have an impact on their quality and equity.

<sup>1</sup> In 2010, a fifth conference, on *Early Childhood Care and Education*, will be organised by UNESCO, in cooperation with the City of Moscow and the Russian Federation.

## 2 Opportunities to learn at all ages and stages of life

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Global trends affect education, calling upon education systems to react, adapt, change and anticipate social and economic needs. Globalisation and migration represent two such closely related trends. Driven by technology, globalisation is leading to closer economic integration and, in many cases, to widening disparities and inequalities within and between countries. In search of employment and a better life, growing numbers of people are migrating. International migration, both voluntary and forced, is at record levels. In 2005, nearly 190 million people, about three percent of the world's population, lived outside their country, a situation that calls for new knowledge and skills, including inter-cultural competences. Urbanization is also changing the world's social fabric: more than half the world's population live in cities, nearly one-third of them in urban slums. Over 800 million people moved during the past 50 years from rural areas into cities. Such a shift calls for new ways of learning that foster social cohesion and understanding, and new partnerships.

As societies are faced with rapid change and become more integrated and knowledge-intensive, a premium is placed on their citizens' capacity to solve problems, to change, to adapt and to think critically. Increasingly, it is a country's level of education and skills that drives its development. Therefore, life-long learning for all must become a guiding and organizing principle of educational reform.

Education systems can foster inclusion of all infants, children, adolescents, young people and adults of all ages, in different ways, especially through providing equitable access to them at all educational stages and grades, as well as through providing open and flexible links and transitions between formal and non-formal education, and among different types of institutions and tracks. This means that coordinated efforts have to be made to ensure the participation of all members of the community and that, where necessary, appropriate support is available for vulnerable groups. It is therefore essential that partnerships are formed between key stakeholders who can support the transition process to life-long inclusive education. These include families and caretakers; teachers and other education professionals as well as those in other sectors (e.g. health, social services); academics, researchers and teacher trainers; national, local and school-level administrators and managers; the private sector; civil society; and members of minority groups at risk of exclusion.

Adult learning and education are important elements of lifelong learning, of which literacy is the foundation. They build skills and attitudes which promote personal and social well-being and active citizenship, which empower to make responsible choices for the future and which serve work-related technical needs, career change, and professional advancement.

In a "learning society", the family, the community, the world of work, leisure-time activities as well as the media and ICTs must be seen as sources for learning, as well as factors influencing the role of education systems. Life-long learning policies and practices can therefore only be successful if countries further progress in the recognition, validation and accreditation of competencies acquired in different educational settings, including through non-formal and informal education.

### 3 Education “for what”? Values, knowledge and skills for sustainable development

According to the *2007/8 Human Development Report*<sup>2</sup>, “there are still around 1 billion people living at the margins of survival on less than US\$1 a day, with 2.6 billion – 40 percent of the world’s population – living on less than US\$2 a day.” Quality education plays a central role in reducing poverty, improving livelihoods and empowering people. It is a keystone for building more just and sustainable societies.

Environmental concerns are now at the top of political agendas, spurred by evidence of global warming and climate change. But it is also clear that climate change and other sustainability issues – including those related to water, energy, agriculture, food, health and biodiversity – must be addressed as part of the broader agenda of sustainable development. They are inextricably related to social, cultural and economic issues such as widespread poverty, inequitable economic development, population growth, the loss of cultural and linguistic diversity and exclusion from educational opportunities.

The question “education for what?” is increasingly coming to the forefront, focusing on the quality and relevance of education, on its content and pedagogical methods, notably in the perspective of sustainable development. The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) led by UNESCO aims, among others, to transform the how and why of learning by encouraging countries to reorient their education systems. A holistic understanding of sustainable development has been developed around three key areas: society, environment and economy; with culture as an underlying dimension. On this basis, education for sustainable development (ESD) means learning throughout life to acquire values, knowledge and skills which help children, young people and adults find new solutions to social, economic and environmental issues which affect their lives.

Meaningful education content is wide-ranging, from ensuring an adequate knowledge of languages (including mother-tongue), mathematics and science, to imparting values of respect for human rights and for diversity, as well as social skills. While international, regional and a growing number of national assessments conducted since the mid-1990s show that poor learning outcomes in language, mathematics and other subjects still characterize many countries worldwide, more thinking and research are urgently needed about how all these important subjects can be addressed and taught in the formal education system without overloading the curriculum, as well as in non-formal and informal contexts, for learners of all ages and walks of life. Similarly, teaching practices and teachers’ roles must evolve: education can only change if teachers and educators change as well.

Over ten years after the publication of the report of UNESCO’s *International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century*<sup>3</sup> led by Jacques Delors, which emphasised the four “pillars of learning” (learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be), learning still tends to strongly focus on the development of cognitive skills and the assimilation of knowledge. This is essential, but at the same time, learning programmes and environments must better promote the **understanding of oneself, of others, and of the world around us.**

<sup>2</sup> *Human Development Report 2007/2008: “Fighting climate change: Human solidarity in a divided world”*, UNDP 2007, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2007-2008/>

<sup>3</sup> *Learning: The Treasure Within*, UNESCO, 1996

## 4 Inclusion: learning opportunities for all throughout life

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Education is a public good and a human right from which nobody can be excluded since it contributes to the development of people and society. UNESCO's holistic and rights-based approach calls for inclusive quality education which meets the basic learning needs and enriches the lives of all learners, regardless of their background and circumstances, with a particular focus on vulnerable and marginalized groups. These include children, youth and adults with special educational needs; migrants and nomads; ethnic, linguistic, religious or cultural minorities; street and working children and youth; illiterate adults; rural people; refugees or displaced people and those living in conflict or post-conflict and post-disaster areas; victims of violence; girls and women; children affected by HIV and AIDS and orphans.

There are thus many barriers to education and targeted policies are required to offset disadvantage and inequality. Schools and other learning environments must be transformed to cater for the needs of all the individuals of a community and respond to the diversity of the learners, regardless of their age, social origin, culture or individual characteristics in a perspective of sustainable development. This means that structures and modalities must be varied and flexible, and curricula, pedagogy and teaching practice adapted and improved to be relevant for learners, for instance by using mother tongue instruction in the early years; providing meals and health prevention measures to students where necessary; making schools and learning centres safe and accessible for all those who learn, teach and work in them; linking education and work; or promoting attitudes, learning materials and programmes that change gender socialization processes.

A key challenge is to ensure that the concept of inclusion is reflected in national policies so that children and young people who are not enrolled in the formal school system, as well as young and mature adults excluded from formal and non-formal learning opportunities, are actively sought out on the one hand, and that schools and other learning institutions, including at tertiary level, are equipped to handle diversity and provide possibilities for adjustment to individual needs on the other.

In the formal system, efforts to expand enrolment must be accompanied by policies to enhance educational quality at all levels, ensuring that excluded children and young people get into school and that they succeed there. This has implications for teaching, the content and curriculum, ways of interacting and relations between the schools and the community. Similar challenges exist in non-formal educational settings where appropriate responses to a broad spectrum of learning needs have to be developed. Finally, as already stated, linkages and bridges between formal and non-formal education must be sought and strengthened for more inclusive education. Higher education and research have a key role to play in the creation and dissemination of knowledge related to all these dimensions to inform policy-making for inclusion.

## 5 Higher Education and research for a sustainable future

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Higher education has steadily expanded over the past decade: worldwide, some 138 million students were enrolled in 2005, almost a 50% increase since 1999<sup>4</sup>, placing many systems under severe financial constraint. Despite this expansion, in several large developing regions, including sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia, a very small share of young people enjoys access to tertiary education. As such, promoting equity of access and inclusion is a major policy concern alongside quality assurance, especially in the context of a globalized society and the diversification of higher education provision, notably with the emergence of international and cross-border higher education.

Higher education is a driving force for cultural, social and economic development of nations and people, as an endogenous capacity-builder, as a promoter of human rights, international intellectual solidarity, sustainable development, democracy, peace and justice. Higher education institutions, as centres of research, teaching and intellectual debate, play a crucial role in producing and sharing knowledge and preparing students for a broad range of professions and responsibilities in society. In the context of rapid technological change, higher education institutions must endow their students with capacities, skills and opportunities enabling them to continuously adapt to the requirements of knowledge societies.

Higher education and basic education for all should not be regarded as distinct policy choices, whether in terms of social and economic development or funding allocations. Higher education and research institutions have a leading role to play in alleviating poverty, in promoting innovation in learning environments and pedagogies in different settings, in training teachers and more broadly, in furthering sustainable development and the achievement of international development goals through research and knowledge.

All the above raise questions with regard to *what* higher education institutions do, but also about *how* they do it – the ethical dimension of higher education and research and their social responsibility and commitment. Social responsibility is not solely linked to the community engagement of higher education institutions and to the development of inclusion policies to respond to the learning needs of marginalised and vulnerable young people and adults, but also to research and teaching principles and strategies. In this regard, higher education institutions should also promote ethical values and attitudes amongst students that strengthen their responsibility toward society and their sensitivity to local, national and global realities.

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<sup>4</sup> EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008, UNESCO 2007

## 6 Conclusions

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It is widely recognised that education is fundamental for *just, peaceful, adaptable societies without poverty*, and that none of the international development goals can be achieved without education. UNESCO must ensure that Education for All (EFA) remains a priority on the global agenda and support countries' efforts to meet the six EFA goals by 2015, with a specific emphasis on equity. But the Organization's actions in education stretch beyond this. With the ultimate goal of sustainable development, explicit attention must be paid to inclusion, social cohesion and social justice, to life-long learning and to the crucial role of higher education and research.

It is a particular challenge for UNESCO to organise four international – and a large number of preparatory regional - education conferences in a time span of less than a year. Making them all successful requires not only careful preparation and tremendous mobilization for each single one, but also a considerable effort to identify and show linkages and synergies among the issues and themes they are addressing. If they all contribute in a visible manner to shaping our vision of education in today's and tomorrow's world, by delivering the same messages and by highlighting coherent and mutually reinforcing policy options and approaches, UNESCO will be better equipped to accompany and support national education development in the coming years.

The shared vision which runs through the four conferences is one of education systems that encourage equity and inclusion, quality learning, flexibility and innovation. They are anchored in the conviction that education is a right, a foundation and prerequisite for sustainable development and that learning happens throughout life. They offer a unique opportunity for broad dialogue on educational priorities, and will provide guidance to policy-makers and other stakeholders on paths for transforming education systems.

Building on existing international, regional and sub-regional agreements and frameworks, the conferences should increase awareness of the need to rethink and reorient formal and non-formal education systems and encourage the development of concrete guidance to education policy-makers and other stakeholders at both national and international level. The irreplaceable role of teachers must receive special attention.

An innovative society prepares its people not only to embrace and adapt to change but also to manage and influence it. What do countries have to do to build education systems that are inclusive, equitable, of high quality and supportive of sustainable development – systems that promote access and quality for all learners, at every stage of their life? How can higher education and research respond to the expectations placed in them to induce change and progress in society? In situations of limited financial resources, what levels and forms of education deserve priority? There are no straightforward answers to these questions but one statement from the Delors report<sup>5</sup> can be held up as a mirror for assessing education: “Choosing a type of education means choosing a type of society.”

If societies are characterized by poverty, large inequalities, discrimination and exclusion, they are on the wrong path to development. If education systems are characterized by inequality, discrimination and exclusion, they contribute to increasing existing social and economic disparities and also deviate from the path of equitable and sustainable development which we must follow. Sustainable societies are based on the belief that everyone has the right to learn, the capacity to contribute and the commitment to ensure that others share in the benefits of development. UNESCO's conference cycle aims to encourage a dynamic and far-reaching reflection on the transformative power of education to serve this vision and to engage policymakers, researchers and a range of institutions in reorienting education systems - from early childhood to higher education, in formal and non-formal settings - to promote equity, lifelong learning, innovation and sustainable development.

The conferences can and must contribute to the political momentum, in the short time left to 2015 – the target date for the EFA goals, and maintain and accelerate progress if the right to education at every age is to be fulfilled.

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<sup>5</sup> *Learning : The Treasure Within, UNESCO, 1996*

# Annex 1 Conference Themes

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## **48th International Conference on Education:** *“Inclusive Education: the Way of the Future”*

### **Sub-themes:**

1. Approaches, scope and content (to broaden the understanding of the theory and the practice of inclusive education)
2. Public policies (to demonstrate the role of governments in the development and the implementation of policies on inclusive education)
3. Systems, links and transitions (to create inclusive education systems which offer opportunities for lifelong learning)
4. Learners and teachers (to foster a learning environment where teachers are equipped to meet the learners’ diverse expectations and needs)

## **World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development:** *“Moving into the Second Half of the UN Decade”*

### **Sub-themes**

- Relevance of ESD for key sustainable development challenges
- Building partnerships for ESD
- Building capacities for ESD
- ESD and the teaching-learning process

## **Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI):** *“Learning and Living for a Viable Future: the Power of Adult Learning”*

### **Sub-themes:**

1. Poverty eradication and sustainable development;
2. Inclusion and participation;
3. Quality of adult learning and education;
4. Policies, structures and financing for adult learning and education;
5. Literacy and key competencies.



**2009 World Conference on Higher Education:**  
*“The New Dynamics of Higher Education and Research for Societal Change and Development”*

**Major themes:**

- Internationalization, regionalization and globalization;
- Equity, access and quality;
- Learning, research and innovation.

**Each of these themes will be looked at from different angles, in particular:**

- public and private actors' roles and responsibilities;
- the emergence of new models and approaches;
- the possibilities offered by ICTs and open and distance learning (ODL), including open educational resources (OER);
- the implications in terms of funding and investment;
- the implications in terms of governance and management.

**Plenary Sessions on two overarching themes:**

1. Higher Education's role in addressing major global challenges (Sustainable development; EFA; Poverty Eradication)
2. Societal Commitment to Higher Education and Social Responsibility of Higher Education

**Special Focus: Revitalizing higher education in Africa**