

The Scope and Political Background of the Athens Conference of the the Official Launching of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development in the Mediterranean Region

Athens, 26-27 November 2005

The Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has roots back to the first UN Conference on the Human Environment (1972). It is known that Chapter 36 of the Rio Declaration (1992) recognized Education as the prerequisite for Sustainable Development and described the needed provisions for such education.

In 1995 a major UNESCO International Workshop was held in Athens on “Reorienting of Environmental Education (EE) to Sustainable Development” which recommended the organization of an International Conference to examine the issue on the occasion of the 20 years of Tbilisi (1977) which had formally introduced EE and 5 years after Rio Earth Summit (1992). Indeed the Conference “Environment and Society: Education and Public Awareness for Sustainability” took place in Thessaloniki in 1997 attended by 1 400 participants from 84 countries, the Director General of UNESCO and many ministers. The “Thessaloniki Declaration” is an important document cited frequently and to a large extent constitutes the basis of the recent developments.

In view of the Johannesburg World Summit (2002) several initiatives among which the Campaign ERA 21 (Education Re-affirmation for the 21st Century) led by MIO-ECSDE requested a new effort for appropriate education in order to promote sustainable development and reach the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). In Johannesburg, the UN Decade for Education for Sustainable Development (UN DESD) was decided to run from 2005 to 2014 and UNESCO was entrusted with its coordination and leadership.

Simultaneously, a major Type II Initiative to promote such education in the Mediterranean Region, MEdIES: Mediterranean Educational Initiative for Environment and Sustainability was launched by Greece, UNESCO, UNEP/MAP, GWP-MED and MIO-ECSDE. Since then Italy has joined its Core Group while most other Mediterranean countries and stakeholders participate in its Task Group.

During the Greek Presidency of the EU the UNECE Environment Ministries at their “Environment for Europe” Conference in Kiev (May 2003) asked a Drafting Group to prepare a Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development (SESD). The Strategy was finally adopted by the Ministries of Education and Ministries for Environment of

the 55 Countries of the region (including all European countries, Turkey, Israel, the Central Asian countries and also Canada and USA) in Vilnius, on March 2005.

Fifteen of the UNECE countries are Mediterranean. In the Mediterranean “eco-Region” which does not correspond to a single UN-region the only operational UN body existing is UNEP-MAP (UN Environment Programme-Mediterranean Action Plan) the Secretariat of the Barcelona Convention which celebrated this year its 30th anniversary.

Under the Barcelona Convention the Mediterranean Commission for Sustainable Development (MCSDD) operates. The latter has recommended to all the Mediterranean countries to agree on a Mediterranean Strategy of Sustainable Development (MSSD) which was finally adopted in Portoroz, Slovenia on 10 November 2005, together with a Declaration and recommendations for 2006-2007. In all these texts ESD is recognized as very important and action is recommended to be taken in the framework of the UN DESD.

In the Strategy (MSSD-under Objective 4) it is explicitly stated that *“Education and training particularly Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) are recognized as a prerequisite for improved Governance. In view of the adoption by 13 Contracting Parties of the Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development (SESD, Vilnius 2005) this could be used as a blueprint for concerted action.”*

Furthermore under 3.2. “Strengthening capacities, involve actors and mobilize financial resources (orientation and actions)” para. 3 reads:

“Introduce sustainable development into educational curricula, from primary school right up to universities and graduate schools and contribute to the implementation at Mediterranean level of the Thessaloniki UNESCO Conference Declaration (1997), the United Nations resolution on the Decade for Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) and the Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development (Vilnius 2005).”

The present (Athens 2005) Meeting is invited to formally launch the UN DESD in the Mediterranean Region raising the awareness and political will for the recognition and promotion of Education for Sustainable Development in the relevant countries and examine the possible ways in which the UNECE Strategy for ESD could best be utilized as a blueprint for a MEDITERRANEAN STRATEGY ON EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT for the entire Mediterranean region.