

## **Keynote Speech**

### **ESD in the Asia-Pacific Region – Current Situation and Challenges**

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#### **Abstract**

In order to understand Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and its implementation in the Asia-Pacific, one must form an opinion of what sustainable development is, if and how it is relevant to the region, and what role education can play in addressing the process to approach such development.

Sustainable development is not exactly a new concept – it is inherent in many cultures' thinking as a primary means of self preservation. Indigenous North Americans once concluded they had to consider the impacts of all actions on the seventh generation after them. More recent definitions include the report of the world commission on environment and development which stresses the need to preserve the prerequisites for wellbeing of future generations while securing a good standard of living for all living in the present. All approaches tend to emphasize learning from past generations and experiences and building on these, rather than looking ahead only. Traditional knowledge and ways of living are, at least in theory, making a comeback of sorts.

Sustainable development in the Asia-Pacific is a complex issue to say the least. We have highly developed industrialised countries like Japan, Australia, New Zealand and the Republic of Korea. These countries have huge challenges to maintain their high standards of living by means that tackle burning issues such as carbon emissions causing imminent concern in the face of our changing climate. The region is also home to some of the poorest countries in the world and prone in the extreme to the devastating effects of disasters, frequent in the region. In spite of significant progress made in past decades, India alone accounts for 230 million undernourished people, and 50 % of child deaths there are related to hunger or malnourishment.<sup>1</sup> Some of our Central Asian Member States are struggling with the disruptive challenge of illegal drug use and an HIV/AIDS epidemic, and we all know of the grave security concerns in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The small island states of the Pacific

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<sup>1</sup> Times of India 27 September, 2009

Ocean are among the first facing the very tangible effects of global climate change – a phenomenon which the countries themselves had nothing to do with. Biodiversity and the cultural riches of indigenous populations are rapidly declining, and much needed economic progress in many corners of the region has translated into inhabitable environments and affronts to human dignity through violations of human rights.

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is an endeavour to integrate the principles, values and practices of sustainable development into education. This means a change in the way we approach teaching and learning – traditional “top-down” education does not help one understand sustainable development. It teaches compliance, respect for authority and to not seek alternative views. In many cases, the education system is built around the concept of “teaching to the test”. ESD offers another point of view, where learning is a function of (controlled) interaction between students, project based, geared towards enhancing the natural abilities of the learner and perhaps above all, to have a critical mind apt for seeking out and analysing information. This sounds acceptable to most people, but the implications are neither few nor easy to implement. In reality, the changes reach to education policies and budgeting, training of teachers, curricular reforms, materials production and school management. The urgency of ESD follows from the need to address the many challenges of sustainable development and secure a better future for all, but also from the apparent failures of education systems worldwide, even in the ones we tend to call quality ones. Two examples to back this assertion: the average amount of education received and the size of ecological footprint have a significant correlation. In other words, globally speaking, the more education we get, the worse we get for our planet. An oft-heard counterargument is that there should be more emphasis on research and development to fix such problems. Granted, further technological advancement is for the benefit of all of us, but we do need a rethinking of the underlying principles here as well. For unfortunately and perhaps unsurprisingly the correlation between innovation and ecological footprint is just as strong. The sources of this relationship are open to debate, but the one which can be identified with ease is certainly cause for alarm. Innovation, it appears, is at present fuelled mainly by economic development which in turn is based on wasteful practices and extensive use of carbon, and innovation leads to further positive economic development, with disastrous impacts our efforts to achieve more sustainable development.

ESD in the Asia-Pacific is as diverse as the region. UNESCO Member States in the Asia Pacific are moving towards further integration of sustainable development into education, but one can question the rate of progress this is being done with, given the magnitude of the challenges. Noteworthy examples include Japan, whose efforts appear to be centred around expanding the network of UNESCO ASPnet schools as exemplary best practice providers, while at the same time supporting efforts in higher education and research in ESD. Recently,

discussions with China show potential in moving rapidly towards mainstreaming the principles of Sustainable Development into formal education through a system of accreditation and promotion via the so-called "Sustainable Schools" system. India is in the process of setting up a regional UNESCO Institute on the theme of peace and sustainable development and individual countries such as the Philippines are making valuable efforts to integrate disaster risk reduction into education at all levels.

UNESCO's strategy is to give general support to Member States in national ESD coordination and in the overlapping fields of climate change education and disaster risk reduction. The UN Decade of ESD 2005-2014, for which UNESCO has been designated lead agency, directs attention equally to formal, informal and nonformal education. The ESD Unit in UNESCO Bangkok has in the year 2010 adjusted its focus to include emerging issues of sustainable business models and health issues related to early childhood cognitive development.

The future can unfold in various ways and it is for ESD to equip learners of all age with a hope that where there is a will, there is a way. UNESCO seeks to do this not in the spirit of false hopes of a brighter future, but through the promise of real efforts and hard work leading to real change and a chance for the better.

### **Short Biography**

Mikko Cantell is currently Programme Specialist for ESD and Chief, a.i., of the ESD Unit at UNESCO Bangkok where he has worked since January, 2008. Previously he has worked at the International Department of the Finnish Ministry of Education and for the Finnish National Commission for UNESCO and he is an author of a number of ESD articles in Finnish and International publications. His past volunteer work includes Board membership of the Finnish Section of Amnesty International as well as membership in Crisis Management Initiative (CMI).

Mr Cantell holds a Master of Social Sciences from the University of Helsinki in International Relations/World Politics.