Le texte qui suit expose comment le souci actuel du développement durable et de l'éducation pour l'environnement a ses origines dans l'action pionnière et le travail effectué pour l'IEEP de 1975 à 1996.

In the decades following the end of the Second World War, there was already a widespread feeling in the international scientific and intellectual community that, contrary to what had been supposed earlier, massive economic development based on the unprecedented progress that science and technology had known in the present century would not, by itself, lead to the weal of humanity. Worse, there was increasing evidence that such a development, making uncontrolled use of the natural resources of the planet was doomed not only to be short-lived but also to be self-defeating in that it was bound to generate more expectations than it could ever hope to fulfill and be crushed by its own weight. The darkest side of the picture, however, was that the natural resources on which it was ultimately founded were being depleted at a rate far beyond the regenerative capacity of the planet and the increasing use of new technologies on which it depended had alarming, noxious side effects, such as atmospheric pollution, global warming, desertification, loss of biodiversity etc. In short, a situation that presaged a bleak future for coming generations eventually threatening to compromise the very life of the planet.

Together with the urgency of the situation was the consciousness of the « globality » of the issues involved, the realisation that their scale was such as to largely surpass any isolated initiatives, however well organised, not to mention the proportions that the problem would take if concerted international action were to be delayed any further.

It was in this context that the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was held in Sweden in 1972. Recognising implicitly the need to mobilise public opinion and the fact that education, by fostering suitable values and attitudes constituted a key element in effectively spreading awareness and changing mentalities, the Conference made an explicit appeal to Unesco in Recommendation 96, to take the lead in organizing an international effort to finding answers to the problem:

« It is recommended that the Secretary-General, the organization of the United Nations system, especially the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, and other international agencies concerned, should, after consultation and agreement, take the necessary steps to establish an international programme in environmental education, interdisciplinary in approach, in school and out of school, encompassing all levels of education and directed towards the general public, in particular the ordinary citizen, li-
ving in rural and urban areas, youth and adult alike, with view to educating him as to the simple steps he might take, within his means, to manage and control his environment.

The recommendation went on further to outline the orientations of the programme in view of the needs: preparation of an inventory of the existing situation; exchange of information; training of professionals; formation of experts and the development of new and adequate materials.

Establishment of the International Environmental Education Programme (IEEP)

In pursuance of this recommendation, in 1975, Unesco launched the International Environmental Education Programme (IEEP) jointly with the newly established United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) to promote reflection and action, as well as international cooperation in this field. Its principal long-term objectives were:

• to facilitate coordination, joint planning and programming of activities
• to promote international exchange of ideas and information on environmental education (EE).
• to co-ordinate research for a better understanding of the various phenomena involved in teaching and learning of EE.
• to formulate and evaluate new methods, materials and programmes
• train personnel to adequately staff EE programmes provide advisory services to Member States relating to EE.

On the operational level IEEP activities were organized in four complementary channels:

1. International cooperation
2. Exchange of Information
3. Research and Training

Notable IEEP actions in the twenty years of its existence were as follows:

International Cooperation

IEEP’s efforts in the matter of international cooperation was centred on providing assistance to Member States, in adding an environmental dimension to national development strategies and educational policies as well in fund raising activities.

The initial phase of the IEEP was devoted mainly to awareness raising about the necessity of EE and an inventory of the needs and priorities of Unesco’s Member states. One of the first major actions of this Programme was the organization of an International Workshop on EE, Belgrade, Yugoslavia, in October 1975, in order to define a global framework for EE. The result was the historic Belgrade Charter which made an inventory of the existing world situation in EE and for the first time clearly outlined its goals, objectives, audiences as well as the guiding principles of EE programmes.

Following a series of regional sub-regional expert meetings to assess the international situation and needs concerning EE, IEEP organised the Intergovernmental Conference on EE, Tbilisi, USSR, 14-26 September 1977. This epoch-making ministerial level conference was attended by representatives of 66 Member States as well as numerous international NGOs and UN agencies and its Declaration and Recommendations established the nature, objectives and principles of EE as well as the main lines which its development should follow both nationally and internationally. Indeed, the Tbilisi Conference considered that EE should be incorporated into all educational processes and cater to all sections of society: the general public, the socio-professional groups whose activities have important effects on the environment, and the scientists and technicians whose fields of study are related to the environment and who need specialised training.

Ten years later, IEEP organized the International Congress on EE and Training,
Moscow, 17-21 August 1987, to take stock of the international situation of EE in view of the implementation of the Tbilisi recommendations and also to point the way for future activities. This Congress was attended by representatives of 4 Member States as well as UN agencies, IGOs and NGOs and resulted in the International Strategy for Action in the Field of Environmental Education and Training for the 1990s.

In 1995, following the recommendations of the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992, IEEP organized an Inter-Regional Workshop on Re-orienting EE for Sustainable Development (Athens, Greece, 26-30 June 1995) which was attended by EE experts from the five regions of the world.

Exchange of Information

In line with its policy of providing regular information to raise international awareness of EE, Connect, the international quarterly newsletter of IEEP was launched in 1976, in English and French. Over the years it was also published in Spanish, Russian, Arabic, Chinese, Hindi and Ukrainian and distributed to over 25,000 individuals and institutions actively concerned in the promotion and development of EE and training. Several regional and international meetings were organized with the aim of promoting the exchange of ideas and information on such subjects as interdisciplinarity and the incorporation of the environmental dimension into social science teaching, general university education and technical and vocational education at the intermediate level. A major IEEP effort to stimulate networking was the preparation in English, French and Spanish of an international Directory of Institutions Active in the Field of EE listing over 1,500 specialised institutions, an Annotated Bibliography on EE as well as a Glossary of EE terms in English and Russian.

Research and Training

The clarification of concepts and methodologies in EE at the national, regional and international levels was another field in which IEEP made a major contribution. The work of IEEP in this respect consisted mainly in carrying out studies and organizing seminars, research and experimental projects which made it possible to clarify the nature of EE as a dimension which should be incorporated into all disciplines and subjects in the educational process and which should take account of the social as well as the natural aspects of the environment. Emphasis was also laid on the interdisciplinary nature of EE as well as the need to reach all sections of the society through formal as well as nonformal education. In several countries, following IEEP supported meetings, training courses or pilot projects, inter institutional committees were established to help concerned countries incorporate an environmental dimension into national education systems.

A particularly significant aspect of IEEP’s contribution is the training of key educational personnel. Concerning the latter, IEEP organised a series of regional and sub-regional seminars worldwide since 1978 to develop awareness on the part of educational administrators and those in charge of study programmes. These seminars were particularly concerned with the formulation of national EE policies, the methodology of pre- and in-service training for teachers and the policies to be followed in the preparation of educational materials. IEEP also undertook or sponsored the organization of over 130 national training seminars and workshops for teachers and curriculum developers on the concept and development of EE.
Development of Materials

The development of adequate materials for use by educators and specialists was a pioneering activity of IEEP which carried out over 20 research and experimental projects leading to the production of an integrated series of educational materials including methodological guides, thematic modules and manuals for general education and for the initial training and retraining of teachers. These were published in the « Environmental Education series » in English, French, Spanish and Arabic and included 45 titles. The 90 odd pilot projects conducted by IEEP in several member states not only made it possible to mobilise national institutions concerned with EE but also made it possible to train groups of educators at the national level and to prepare curricula and educational materials adapted to local conditions.

Impact of IEEP

Besides playing a catalytic role in the promotion of EE at the national level, more significantly, IEEP succeeded in creating a multiplier effect at the international level. From the start, IEEP endeavoured to work in conjunction with UN agencies and other intergovernmental and international non-governmental organisations concerned with EE. Both formal and informal meetings were held in furtherance of this aim with the result that a number of international, regional and subregional organisations are giving EE an important place in their action programmes.

The achievements of IEEP can be examined at three complementary levels: developing a general awareness of environmental problems and the need for EE; devising of guiding principles, concepts and methodological approaches in this field; and incorporating an environmental dimension into the development and educational processes of Member States which together with the other two aspects formed the core of the permanent functions of IEEP. More than 150 countries from all regions of the world were directly associated in the activities carried out by IEEP. They involved several tens of thousands of teachers at different levels of school and out-of-school education, many thousand primary and secondary schools, several hundred universities worldwide, and a couple of hundred institutions concerned with training and educational research.

Such was the impact of the work accomplished by IEEP since its inception that Agenda 21 stated explicitly:

«The Unesco-Unep International Environmental Education Programme should, in cooperation with the appropriate bodies of the United Nations system, Governments, non-governmental organizations and others, establish a programme within two years to integrate the decisions of the Conference into the existing United Nation framework adapted to the needs of educators at different levels and circumstances.» Chapter 36.5 (g).

UNCED also underlined the complexity of the environmental problem and its inextricable links with other global concerns such as population and social and economic development. UNESCO thus launched in the following year a new project encompassing these global concerns, entitled « Environment and Population Education for Human Development (EPD) » which included IEEP. Unfortunately, following severe financial reductions affecting the entire UN system, UNEP decided to stop its financial contribution to IEEP (1 January 1996), starting its own programme entitled "Global Environmental Citizenship."
Currently in the post-IEEP phase, EE at UNESCO is being looked after by a number of projects and programmes, notably: the Project on Education for Sustainable Development (EPD), together with the Associated Schools Project, the Section for Primary Education, the Section for Science and Technology Education as well as the Section for Inter-University Cooperation which are handling EE projects at their specific levels in the Education Sector. In the Science Sector, the Man and the Biosphere Programme (MAB), the International Hydrological Programme (IHP), the International Oceanographic Commission (IOC), as well as the Unit on Coastal Areas and Small Islands are continuing their activities in EE as before.

Finally, it should not be forgotten that the current concern about sustainable development on the international level as well as the crucial role of education in achieving it has its roots in the pioneering work done by IEEP in the short span of its existence. Long before UNCED and succeeding world conferences put these ideas forcefully before the world public, IEEP had been engaged in the spade work that led to their formulation and acceptance by the world at large. For many countries, notably in the developing world, the work of IEEP still continues to be a valuable reference in EE. So that though IEEP has formally ceased to exist, the flame that it lit will continue to burn.

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Select References: