

# **CARING FOR OUR FUTURE**

## **THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT STRATEGY FOR THE UNITED NATIONS DECADE OF EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, 2005-2014**

*"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." - World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission), 1987*

*"Our biggest challenge in this new century is to take an idea that seems abstract - sustainable development - and turn it ..... into a daily reality for all the world's people." - Kofi Annan, United Nations Secretary-General, 2001*

*"Development must be sustainable not only ecologically, but socially and economically, too. .... Governments, corporations, and individuals need to understand the links between these different kinds of sustainability." - Kofi Annan, United Nations Secretary-General, 2004*

### **Purpose**

This strategy outlines the Australian Government's approach to the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. It sets out a Vision, Goal and Strategies to foster sustainable development through education and learning over the years 2005-2014.

### **Background**

At its 57<sup>th</sup> session in December 2002, the United National General Assembly proclaimed the years from 2005 to 2014 the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. Governments around the world have been invited to strengthen their contribution to sustainability through a focus on education and learning.

The need to act comes in response to growing international concern about the social, economic and environmental challenges facing the world and the need for improved quality of life, ecological protection, social justice and economic equity. Education for sustainable development recognises the relationship between issues such as poverty, health, education, security, human rights, economic development, and environmental concerns such as climate change, natural resource management and water and energy consumption.

Australia has a role to play in meeting these challenges both domestically to serve its own interests and internationally as a member of the global community.

The *International Implementation Scheme* for the Decade, developed by UNESCO, emphasises improving the basic standard of education, reorienting existing education policies and programmes, developing public understanding and awareness, and providing training, with a particular emphasis on responding to the culture and national needs of individual countries in relation to sustainable development. The *International Implementation Scheme* is closely aligned with other international initiatives such as the *Millennium Development Goals* and *Education for All*.

## Australian Context

Australia is unique in many ways. Our rich indigenous heritage stretches back many thousands of years. Our current quality of life, while not without its challenges, has much to offer both current and future generations.

Environmentally Australia is one of 17 mega-diverse countries with many of its species found nowhere else in the world. Australia has 16 World Heritage areas, one of which, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, is the largest of all of the 812 properties on the World Heritage List.

Australia's democratic institutions, social cohesion and economic prosperity are on a par with all but the most prosperous countries in the world, and above the level of many.

In Australia the commitment to strengthen and provide greater integration of the environmental, social and economic pillars underpinning sustainable development is supported by Australian Government initiatives such as:

- the National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development (1992);
- the enactment of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*;
- the \$8.3 billion *Backing Australia's Ability* package to enhance Australia's innovation capability and build sustainable competitive advantage;
- the declaration of *An Environmentally Sustainable Australia* and *Promoting and Maintaining Good Health* as whole-of-government national research priorities;
- the teaching resources produced to complement the report *Sustainable Development – A cornerstone of public health in promoting ecologically sustainable development and health in public health education in Australia (2002)*;
- the initiatives and short and long term policy considerations emanating from the *Intergenerational Report* of the Treasury;
- the Sustainable Regions Programme, the major initiative under the *Stronger Regions, A Stronger Australia* statement;
- national environmental programmes such as the \$3 billion Natural Heritage Trust, \$1.4 billion National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality, and \$2 billion Australian Government Water Fund;
- the inclusion of sustainable development and sustainability as key themes of the 2003 Tourism Whitepaper *A Medium to Long Term Strategy for Tourism* and the 2004 Energy Whitepaper *Securing Australia's Energy Future*;
- the establishment of the Sustainable Environment Committee of Cabinet; and
- the establishment of the Business Roundtable for Sustainable Development.

In addition to these broader measures, Australia has been quick to recognise the role of education and learning in achieving sustainable development. It is one of the few countries to have already developed and implemented a national policy on environmental education, or “education for sustainability” and “education for sustainable development” (ESD) as it is increasingly known. The National Action Plan - *Environmental Education for a Sustainable Future* - was released in July 2000. All of the major structural initiatives of the plan are now in place, providing a firm foundation for further action.

## **The Challenge Ahead**

To address unsustainable practices and promote sustainable development, new ways of living and working across all sectors of the Australian community are required. At the broadest level this will require informed and involved citizens who are able to engage with complex issues and understand the need to balance competing interests.

The size of the change needed necessitates the adoption of a comprehensive approach encompassing coordinated action and all of the factors required to involve, motivate and equip individuals and organisations to contribute to the goal of sustainable development. A range of measures used to influence behaviour and practices, including financial and other incentives, regulation, removal of barriers and appropriate policy settings and goals, need to be applied. Education and lifelong learning are key elements of the required approach however.

## **Principles of ESD**

The ability to embrace change and adapt to new circumstances is critical to securing Australia's future. Education for sustainable development aims to equip individuals, organisations and communities to deal effectively with the complex and inter-related social, economic and environmental challenges they encounter in their personal and working lives, in a way that protects the interests of future generations.

Best practice education for sustainable development incorporates several key components including:

- futures thinking;
- the importance of good process (including transparency; identifying foreseeable costs and benefits);
- building capacity for individual and organisational change;
- critical thinking and reflection;
- innovation;
- mentoring and facilitation;
- genuine participation in decision making;
- the formation of partnerships for change; and
- lifelong learning.

Australia's approach to the Decade will seek to utilise these concepts to achieve its vision and goal.

## **Vision**

At the end of the Decade the Australian community will have the understanding, knowledge, skills and capacity to contribute to sustainable development and will embrace the intrinsic value of sustainability as a national aspiration.

Our ultimate vision is a sustainable Australia.

## **Goal**

To mainstream sustainability across the community through education and lifelong learning.

## Strategies

The focus of Australian Government activity during the Decade will be on practical actions aligned with national priorities and on achieving real change in support of sustainable development.

A programme of specific activities and targets will be developed in support of the strategy as part of the process of developing a new National Action Plan for Education for Sustainable Development (formerly Environmental Education) and in creating partnerships between government and non-government organisations.

The approach will complement, reinforce and strengthen existing measures of the Australian Government to balance competing short and long term social, economic and environmental interests and enhance public understanding and support for these.

### 1. *Communicating the Concepts*

#### 1.1 *Build national awareness and understanding of the principles and goals of education for sustainable development.*

Initiatives aimed at communicating in simple terms what sustainable development and education for sustainable development mean, including communication campaigns, public forums and learning and development initiatives, will be developed.

Greater community understanding of the concepts and principles involved in sustainable development, including an appreciation of our indigenous heritage in caring for the land, is a first step to gaining acceptance of the value of sustainable development as a national aspiration.

#### 1.2 *Show national leadership through the promotion of education for sustainable development*

The Australian Government will continue to promote the importance of education for sustainable development through existing mechanisms such as the National Environmental Education Council, the Business Roundtable for Sustainable Development, National Environmental Education Network, and the Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability. ESD will be embedded in formal schooling through the National Environmental Education Statement for Australian Schools, the Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative, the National Goals for Schooling and National Statements of Learning, as well as collaboration with the further and higher education sectors.

In addition new approaches will be jointly developed with other levels of government and non-government bodies in a range of sectors across industry, business and the community. Initiatives will include formal and non-formal education and embrace the principle of lifelong learning.

#### 1.3 *Develop education for sustainable development training and professional development initiatives for specific sectors*

Targeted training and professional development initiatives will be developed to assist in equipping educators and key decision-makers in government, industry and the community with the necessary knowledge, skills and values to facilitate sustainable development within their spheres of influence. All stakeholders should have an understanding of how to progress the aims and objectives of sustainable development in specific contexts.

#### 1.4 Share knowledge and experiences

Sharing knowledge on successful approaches to education for sustainable development and their underlying principles will assist in motivating and catalysing action across the community. Carefully targeted case studies will be developed and promoted to provide meaningful guidance to others involved in programme design.

In communicating the concepts of education for sustainable development it is important to highlight what has worked and not worked as well as the achievements of Australia's existing initiatives in this area. The promotion of best practice will help to avoid duplication, identify gaps and provide greater overall coordination.

### **2. Basing our approach on sound research**

#### 2.1 Develop and implement a national ESD research programme aligned with national priorities

Effective ESD initiatives need to incorporate, inter alia, an understanding of the barriers and opportunities that exist in different sectors, and the most appropriate delivery mechanisms for the particular target audiences. Sound research is fundamental to ensuring that the resources available are directed to the areas of greatest need and to areas where initiatives will have the greatest impact.

Broad areas of research needs and priorities include how best to communicate the concepts, identification of needs in different sectors, practical demonstration or "how to" studies, monitoring and evaluation guidelines and performance indicators to measure ongoing progress, and, given sustainable development is a global problem, comparative studies between countries. In particular there is a need to examine how best to clarify, in simple terms, what sustainable development and education for sustainable development mean in different contexts, particularly for key decision-makers in government, industry and the community, and for educators.

### **3. Ensuring momentum**

#### 3.1 Develop a new short to medium term National Action Plan outlining specific initiatives that will be progressed in the next three-five year period

The development of a new National Action Plan for Education for Sustainable Development will be a central aspect of the Australian Government's contribution to sustainability in the initial period of the Decade. The new National Action Plan will operationalise this UNDESD strategy by identifying specific short and medium term actions consistent with the achievement of the strategy's longer term vision and goal. Broad community and government consultation will be integral to the process.

The new plan will build on what the current National Action Plan for Environmental Education has achieved and encompass the aims and objectives of the UNDESD, Australia's own particular sustainable development needs and the broader dimensions of education for sustainable development, as it has evolved out of environmental education.

#### 3.2 Consolidate gains under earlier initiatives and target new areas

The Australian Government is already well positioned to respond to the environmental dimensions of the Decade with a range of initiatives in place under the banner of the National Action Plan for Environmental Education. Since its inception in 2000 initiatives such as the National

Environmental Education Council, National Environmental Education Network and Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability have provided a focal point for assessing and advancing the aims of environmental education in Australia. The Plan has also given impetus to initiatives such as the National Environmental Education Statement for Australian Schools and Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative which are beginning to deliver demonstrable, tangible social, economic and environmental outcomes.

Achievements to date have been greatest in the schools sector. Given that efforts in schools are crucial to providing longer term societal change, initiatives in this area will continue to be pursued and be aligned with the Australian Government's broader education agenda, including values education and quality teaching.

With the knowledge gained however, there is an opportunity to extend and build on the successes to date. In recognition of the contribution to sustainability made by all sectors of the Australian community increased attention will be paid to other sectors. New initiatives targeting industry, further and higher education and community education generally, based on best practice and quality research, will be developed.

#### **4. Promoting a whole-of-government approach**

##### *4.1 Promote a whole-of-government approach to education for sustainable development at the Australian, State/Territory and Local Government levels.*

*“Ecologically Sustainable Development implementation is largely about good practice policy making ..... and is about all short and long terms costs and benefits – economic, social and environmental.” - The Productivity Commission 1999 Inquiry into the implementation of Ecologically Sustainable Development by Australian Government Departments.*

Sustainable development provides a range of challenges for governments in pursuing competing policy goals and balancing the interests of present and future generations. Active engagement within and between government agencies, and the resulting learning, can play a key role in assisting government agencies at all levels to understand the impact of their legislation, policies, programmes and operations on sustainable development. It can also embed a culture of sustainability across government operations. A coordinated, holistic approach would improve the effectiveness and efficiency of policy and programme delivery, reduce duplication of expenditure and improve sustainability outcomes.

A research project looking at sustainability in Australian Government agencies is currently underway. The project complements the Greening of Government programme and involves participation from a number of portfolios. Using an action research model the project is investigating the concepts of leadership, organisational learning and change for sustainability within government agencies, as well as the dynamics, characteristics, systems and structures that promote cooperation between organisations and strengthen the relationships that support change. The learnings from the project will be reviewed with a view to facilitating a stronger approach to sustainable development across government at all levels, including the development of common principles and guidelines for policy making in support of sustainability.

Various policies and processes are already in place at Australian Government level to facilitate integrated whole of government decision making. These include the concept of joined-up government, the establishment of sub-committees of Cabinet and inter-departmental taskforces

which look at issues impacting on several portfolios, as well as the requirement for new Australian Government regulation to be subjected to Regulation Impact Statements which examine the full range of costs and benefits involved. Under s516A of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* all Australian Government agencies are required to report annually on the application of the principles of ecologically sustainable development in their activities.

There is also a range of liaison arrangements that exist between the Australian Government and State/Territory Governments and Local Government bodies, including the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministerial bodies.

Within the Australian Government the synergies between different areas of responsibility are already evident and will be built upon. Existing examples include the common interest that the Transport and Regional Services, Health, and Environment and Heritage portfolios have in fuel efficient, non-polluting transport systems; the Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry portfolio and the Environment and Heritage portfolio in effective natural resource management; and the relevance to all portfolios of the Education, Science and Training portfolio's focus on education which equips young people to cope with the challenges of a complex world.

All of these policies, processes and synergies provide opportunities to engage with sustainable development in a coordinated way across government.

## **5. *Building partnerships***

### *5.1 Foster the development of partnerships to identify and support new opportunities and initiatives.*

A continued focus on partnerships will be central to initiatives utilising education to promote sustainable development.

Partnerships and high degrees of stakeholder involvement are a key feature of successful sustainable development implementation models. Partnerships provide both formal and informal opportunities for learning and should be fostered within and between government, non-government, business and industry and other organisations. Effective partnerships value diversity and the new perspectives and opportunities they provide. This in turn can lead to reflection, development of understanding, questioning modes of operation, innovation and subsequently change in line with sustainable development.

New initiatives will be developed which build on the strong commitment to working within and across government, and in partnership between governments, industry and communities, for improved social, economic and environmental outcomes. Existing initiatives which reflect this commitment include the Sustainable Regions Programme, offering a planned, integrated approach to regions facing economic, social and environmental change; the integrated regional approach to natural resource management entailed in the Natural Heritage Trust and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality; the Basin-wide strategic approach to water over-allocation in the Murray-Darling Basin agreed at COAG, the Greening of Government programme and the National Water Initiative.

Partnerships at national, state and territory government level which have produced innovative education programmes - such as the Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative, which takes sustainability issues beyond the curriculum to involve a whole of school and community approach - serve as models for developing future projects in a range of sectors.

Given the global nature of sustainable development, and Australia's capacity to assist the efforts of other countries, international collaboration will also continue to be an important element of the Australian Government's approach in this area. A particular emphasis will be given to collaboration with countries in the Asia Pacific region.

## **6. Monitoring and Evaluation**

### 6.1 Develop a system for monitoring and evaluating ESD activities, including progress against the goal of this strategy, to measure progress at the national level.

Research will be carried out into the most appropriate mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the success of initiatives and the development of key indicators for the UNDESD. To ensure broader learning and encourage coordination of activities, the results of these processes, and the outcome of case studies, will be disseminated to relevant stakeholders. Where appropriate, benchmarking studies, supported by longitudinal studies, of the sustainability knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of various sectors of the community will be developed to establish the success of ESD activities over the longer term.

Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of initiatives is essential to ensuring progress in a complex and emerging discipline such as ESD. The *International Implementation Scheme* for the UNDESD highlights the key role of national governments in the development of a comprehensive approach to monitoring and evaluation.

## **Conclusion**

The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) provides an opportunity to build upon existing activities at all levels of government in Australia and across all sectors, and further expand the use of education and learning as tools for change in support of more sustainable lifestyles.

Ultimately the success of this strategy rests on the ability and willingness of people across all walks of life to make informed decisions at work and in their homes and to take responsibility for their impact on the quality of life of other people locally and globally. The challenge ahead will be to find new and innovative ways to engage all Australians in the common task of "Caring for our Future."