

Hans van Ginkel, Japan. A project descriptive essay on the Ubuntu Declaration as it relates to Principle 8 on advancing sustainability education and knowledge

## The Ubuntu Alliance: Mobilizing Knowledge for Sustainable Development



### Hans van Ginkel

started his career as a teacher in secondary school, became a teacher trainer, curriculum developer and formulator of

national examination programmes. He became the longest serving university rector in the history of The Netherlands at Utrecht University, 1986-97. Now he is the Rector of the United Nations University, Tokyo. Dr. van Ginkel is also vice-chair of the Board of Trustees of the Asian Institute of Technology, Bangkok. He was the treasurer of the Netherlands Foundation for International Cooperation in Higher Education, board member and vice-president, of the European Association of Universities and board member, vice-president, and president of the International Association of Universities. He was one of the initiators of CRE-Copernicus, IAU's Kyoto Declaration, and the Ubuntu Alliance. He has received many distinctions and awards, including Knight in the Order of the Netherlands' Lion, which he received from Queen Beatrix in 1994.

**E**ducation for Sustainable Development means what it says: it is not just environmental education or even sustainable development education, but education for sustainable development. It is not a topic that can be taught in a few weeks just at a certain age, but should rather be given attention in all sectors of education, and at all levels in

relation to relevant, already existing subjects in an integrated manner. In this way Education for Sustainable Development gives orientation and meaning to education for all. Education for All and Education for Sustainable Development are two sides of the same coin. To develop the curricula and courseware needed – and regularly update these – and to inform teacher training and re-training in effective ways is a primary goal of a consortia of eleven of the foremost educational and scientific organizations – the Ubuntu Alliance<sup>1</sup>.

The Alliance members signed the Ubuntu Declaration at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg in 2002. The Declaration strives to ensure that educators and learners from primary to the highest levels of education, taking part in both formal and non-formal education, are aware of the imperatives of sustainable development. The Alliance aims at an inclusive and flexible process, mobilizing all who have something to contribute in primary, secondary, and tertiary (including higher) education. Specific attention will be given to online learning and the contributions of the media. The Johannesburg Plan of Implementation will give guidance with regard to the issues to focus on, in particular, such as water, energy, health, agriculture, and biodiversity (WEHAB) and, of course, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The Earth Charter gives important perspectives and concepts to build upon

while constructing curricula and training teachers. The Ubuntu Alliance is also working hard to tailor existing knowledge in science and technology to the very different conditions and needs of the different parts of our mega-diverse planet, as well as to develop knowledge on new themes like access and benefit-sharing and bio-diplomacy. Indeed, the Ubuntu Alliance has endorsed the Earth Charter and put it at the heart of our vision.

The United Nations has designated 2005 as the Year and 2005-2014 as the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). The process of the year and decade must be inclusive and flexible, the framework challenging and enabling, not limiting and harnessing. The challenge that might mobilize many and serve to give focus to their contributions might be to create jointly a Global Learning Space for Sustainable Development (GLSSD), based on Regional Centres of Expertise (RCEs). Regions are seen here – as in common language – as parts of countries like Bretagne, France; Tohoku, Japan; or Catalunya, Spain. The regional centres should include institutions of primary, secondary, and tertiary education; research institutions; science museums; non-formal education; zoos/parks; and others. As it is important to mobilize many, initially, prizes could be awarded for innovative, joint projects of two or more institutions from different sectors. The RCEs might be identified in a comparable way to the monuments on the world cultural heritage list. This would have the

Principle 8. Advance the study of ecological sustainability and promote the open exchange and wide application of the knowledge acquired.

advantage that local/regional conditions can be fully taken into account. The DESD would in this way have as a visible output a global network of such regional centres of expertise. In the process, it would be possible to mobilize many, learn from their creative ideas, build on diversity, and promote international cooperation in education for sustainable development. The regional centres of expertise together, and their mutual relations, would form the Global Learning Space for Sustainable Development.

Education serves as a powerful tool for moving nations, communities, and households towards a more sustainable future. For over fifteen years now, institutions of higher education have been rethinking their roles, among others, to find new ways to respond to the challenges of sustainability and prepare future generations to deal with sustainability issues in their careers and lives. Higher education institutions play a vital role, not only in shaping the future by educating the professionals of tomorrow, but also by creating a research base for sustainability efforts, and by providing outreach and service to communities and nations. They are extremely well-placed to help achieve Principle 8 of the Earth Charter. At the same time, the Earth Charter is well-designed in order to inspire the people working and studying in higher education institutions to contribute to sustainable development. The commitment of individual academics to the Earth Charter will be crucial for moving the education for sustainable development (ESD) initiative forward.

Education for sustainable development builds the capacity of nations to create, broaden, and implement sustainability plans. ESD improves sustainable economic development by improving the quality and skills of the workforce while addressing the overarching need for true democracy, environmental integrity, and social justice. ESD also creates an informed public that can support enlightened environmental,

social, and economic policy and legislation, and raises the quality of life for all members of society. ESD has four major goals: improve access to quality basic education; reorient existing education to address sustainable development; develop public understanding and awareness; and provide training programs for all sectors of private and civil society.

The RCEs, proposed by United Nations University and promoted by the Ubuntu Alliance, will assist with the vertical alignment of curriculum from primary through university and with linking formal and non-formal sectors of the education community. This alignment and linkage is essential to the success of a holistic ESD programme for all citizens in the region. Institutions of higher education are central to the development of such an integrated regional approach in bringing the best of knowledge from the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities together and integrating this knowledge with the best of educational practice of their community and regional partners, and in doing so, to promote the principles of the Earth Charter. The RCEs will be crucial in promoting informed international cooperation in ESD. This sharing and cooperation will be made possible, and efficient, through the use of integrated computer technologies and facilitated by the RCE-Global Service Centre. This service centre will, among others, house the Global Higher Education for Sustainability Partnership Resource Project.

At the United Nations University-UNESCO conference on "Globalization and Education for Sustainable Development" held in Nagoya, 28-29 June 2005, the programme to promote the development of RCEs and GLSSD was launched. Five initiatives were presented, based in Toronto, Canada; Heerlen, Netherlands; Sendai, Japan; Suva, Fiji; and Kumasi, Ghana. The aim is to have twenty strong RCE initiatives by the end of 2006. At the end of the United Nations Decade of Education for

Sustainable Development in 2014, a partnership for ESD, created through the RCE effort, will flourish around the globe. Indeed, the Regional Centres of Expertise and Global Learning Space for Sustainable Development will likely be the most tangible and stimulating outcome of the Decade, providing an excellent base to achieve Principle 8 of the Earth Charter. ●

#### Note

1 For the full Ubuntu Declaration and list of signatories see [www.unesco.org/iau/tfsd\\_ubuntu.html](http://www.unesco.org/iau/tfsd_ubuntu.html)