

Environmental/Sustainability Education and the Universities

Mario Salomone – Speech at the Launch of “Platform for Sustainable Performance in Education” – Green Room – UNEP Governing Council, Nairobi, 20 February 2013

First of all, **I would like to thank** UNEP for inviting me to this event to launch the “Platform for Sustainable Performance in Education”.

My greetings to all the participants at this meeting and **my apologies** for not being able to attend.

I hope that the “**Platform for Sustainable Performance in Education**” is a great success and

I invite you all to attend the **Seventh World Environmental Education Congress**, on **9-14 June 2013** in **Marrakech, Morocco**.

The Congress will be held under the royal patronage of His Majesty King Mohammed VI, and under the presidency of Her Royal Highness Princess Lalla Hasnaa, President of the Mohammed VI Foundation for Environmental Protection. It is the first time that a congress is held in a country of Arab-Muslim culture.

In Marrakech, it will also be our pleasure to host **two important “side events”** of the UNEP Environmental Education and Training Unit:

- The side event that has as partners the more than 120 universities belonging to the **Global Universities Partnership on Environment and Sustainability** (GUPES)
- The side event that has as partners the Association of African Universities and the more than 80 universities involved in “**Mainstreaming Environment and Sustainability in African Universities**”.

It is with great pleasure that we welcome the commitment of United Nations agencies, of a number of international and regional organizations and of our many colleagues around the world. Universities play a key role.

Fittingly, the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative and the Global Universities Partnership on Environment and Sustainability (GUPES) were launched during the Conference in Rio.

And fittingly the “Platform for Sustainable Performance in Education” aims to promote innovation, assessment and reporting systems and the integration of environment and sustainability concerns into Higher Education.

In short, in Marrakech at the 7th congress we will be able to meet and continue the work that you are carrying forward.

The **World Environmental Education Congresses** have taken place periodically since 2003.

Therefore, this year, with the 7th WEEC, **we celebrate 10 years of Congresses** that have always had broad participation from all continents.

We are already working on the Congresses for the years ahead and we hope to continue to be useful and better able to contribute to the growing effectiveness of formal, non-formal, and informal educational systems as regards the themes of the environment and sustainability.

The focus of the 7th Congress is “Environmental Education in Cities and Rural Areas: Seeking Greater Harmony”.

The scale and pace of migration is rising at an unprecedented rate. Migrants are fleeing poverty, hunger, cultural intolerance, conflict, and the effects of environmental deterioration. The theme is **highly transversal** because, as we know, the urban/rural relationship has a huge environmental and social value and is totally dependent on the power relations (urban-rural, northern-southern classes, articulation of the economic power groups) and on the pattern of production and consumption.

Moreover, the theme also brings into play urban planning, lifestyles, the relation between humankind and nature, and so on.

As always, along with the title theme of the congress, various other arguments relevant to environmental education will be dealt with (divided into 11 thematic areas).

In fact, building a *culture of fair, equitable and ecological sustainability* is **an enormous and transversal/cross-cutting challenge**: “Culture” includes the arts or other manifestations of human intellectual achievement as well many societal aspects and behaviours (attitudes, beliefs and way of life, language, customs, values, norms, mores, rules, tools, technologies, products, organizations, and institutions).

Consequently, the aim of the WEECs is to encourage **discussion amongst everyone** involved in environmental education and sustainability:

universities,
public institutions,
local communities,
non-governmental organizations,
schools,
parks,
thematic or territorial networks on various scales (local, regional, world-wide),
professional associations,
institutes and research centres,
mass media,
businesses, etc.

The topics of environment and sustainability are still not integrated enough into teaching and university research, just as the environment and sustainability have not yet sufficiently penetrated into the practice of the political class throughout the world, into the media, and into the economy, where neoclassical economic theory is still the "mainstream" view.

Initiatives such as the one you are launching in Nairobi and all those that are in progress are, in short, absolutely valuable and to be supported.

There is a lot of environmental training and/or education for sustainability and these programs are growing.

And we have increasing need of them.

Nevertheless, there is the risk that economists, engineers, lawyers, sociologists, agronomists, architects etc. talk about environment and sustainability

- without **closely examining** the epistemological bases, educational framework, and common languages and
- without carefully sharing their experiences and views.

Scientific literacy may be inadequate, but on the other hand the **view of science** is generally still positivist, non-holistic, and deterministic.

Environmental education finds itself working in an “unsustainable” society in which there is dramatically little attention paid to how human actions affect the planet. It is a society in which there is still need of a sufficiently clear and above all a shared social model of eco-compatible lifestyles, hierarchies of values, and criteria for understanding the world. The very concept of “sustainability” itself is in evolution and it can be defined in a number of ways. And the theoretical references, methodologies, applied sciences and real practices of environmental education are also evolving.

It is becoming ever more obvious to our international community of experience and research that environmental education is seeking new ways to interpret human action, the impact this action has on various spheres of life, and the collective choices that determine this impact.

Environmental education faces the challenge of having to clarify the modern socio-environmental and socio-political stakes in order to help provide more adequate and responsible solutions to the problems mankind has created for itself and for the finite planet all humans belong to.

This **very great challenge** must be discussed more and more.

So continue your great work and my thanks again for this occasion.

See you in Marrakech!

Thank you for your attention.