

Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference

(8–10 June 2016, Batumi, Georgia, Sheraton Hotel)

High-level meeting of Education and Environment Ministries

8 June 2016, Batumi, Georgia, Sheraton Hotel

KEYNOTE ADDRESS OF THE NETHERLANDS

MINISTER OF ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Sharon Dijksma

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

When I was preparing for this conference, a song came to mind: ‘We’ve only just begun’ by The Carpenters. They recorded it in 1970, the year before I was born.

It came to mind because a few weeks ago I had the honour of signing the Paris Agreement on climate change, both on behalf of the Netherlands and the EU. Because my country is currently the EU Presidency holder.

I realised that – when it comes to climate – we have an enormous and complex task ahead of us in the decades to come.

Climate is, of course, linked to many other sustainability challenges, like water management, biodiversity and food production.

Indeed, we’ve only just begun.

The way we use Planet Earth right now isn’t sustainable enough to support the world’s growing population, especially when it hits 10 billion. Ten billion people all wanting to live a healthy and prosperous life.

Things must change. And that goes beyond our basic goals of clean air, water and soil.

Of course, these remain important objectives. But addressing these things alone won't help us make the transition that's so desperately needed.

The urgency for a fundamental and universal change is growing.

A change that needs to address broader transitions concerning the way we live, work, produce and consume. New concepts like green growth, the circular economy and many other issues are being put on the agendas of businesses, governments and society at large.

But there's an underlying question that needs to be answered first.

And that's the question of how to deal with these kinds of complex, uncertain issues.

Doing so requires knowledge and skills that are sometimes referred to as 21st century skills.

Our recent knowledge and technical innovations have brought us economic growth and prosperity. But these aren't sustainable in the long term.

The truth is: we have no blueprint for a sustainable future. All we can do is learn what isn't sustainable as we go along and respond accordingly.

I'm here today as Minister for the Environment.

But I've also been the Minister of Education and State Secretary for Agriculture.

Education for Sustainable Development has been a common thread in all three of these jobs.

It's shown me one crucial thing:

These are interrelated challenges that require effort from people in many different policy fields. And cooperation between governments, businesses, NGOs and many other stakeholders.

Education in its broadest sense – as a learning process – is a helpful and necessary tool for the changes we need to make.

Education and knowledge have a prominent place in the Sustainable Development Goals, especially goal number 4, which is all about education.

We need education, not only to help us understand the environmental challenges of today, but also to prepare ourselves for the deep transitions we will need to make in the future.

Transitions to a sustainable food chain that will feed the world. And to a water and energy system that can help us overcome – or at least reduce – the risks of climate change.

Education for Sustainable Development brings us awareness and knowledge. And the right mindset and competences for change.

What we need is education that equips us to deal with complexity, uncertainty and different values. By building on our hope, our skills and our belief in a sustainable future.

And it must go beyond formal education. If we're to solve problems in the future, we need to involve everyone, not only the younger generation.

We also need to provide tailor-made forms of non-formal and informal learning to activate all stakeholders in local communities and in the business world. And we need to build bridges between people and organisations, as well as look for new governance models that will enable us to learn and work together.

In our formal education systems we need to address Education for Sustainable Development in a way that transcends topical issues. So that we can fundamentally improve the quality of education. Of course, I realise that the role of curriculums differs from country to country. But whatever the country, I believe that Education for Sustainable Development can only be successful if it comes from inside the education system itself. When it springs from the well-informed and well-understood responsibility of teachers and educators.

In this light, I welcome the work being done by the Expert Group on ESD Competences. And we've seen other good examples too, like the UNECE Strategy on ESD, the Johannesburg Challenge and the UNESCO 'Decade of ESD'.

In many countries, Education for Sustainable Development has given a big boost to collaboration between government ministries.

And I encourage my colleagues to work together with staff from other ministries too.

But it has to go deeper than that: people from many other fields of interest and responsibility must join forces too. National reports on ESD indicators show that some countries still mainly

focus on formal education and traditional issues – like nature protection and the simpler environmental challenges.

But let me warn you: this is not enough!

It's just the beginning of something more complex and urgent.

Take Technical and Vocational Education and Training, for instance.

This form of education and training has the strongest links with the business world and workforce. It's an area that spawns new and sustainable innovations and where new business models are always needed.

New models for a more circular and robust ecosystem of interdependence between natural and human systems.

I have high expectations for this part of the education system.

As Minister for Agriculture, I've noticed that a responsive and adaptive education and knowledge system has been critical in our efforts to develop a climate-smart agricultural system that addresses food security and safety for all.

Institutions of higher professional education and universities also play a key role. They prepare people for leadership, hold debates on values and foster innovation.

Still, real innovation comes from learning and doing. And it happens wherever individuals, organisations and multi-stakeholder groups take the responsibility to 'unlearn' unsustainable practices.

It's not just about formal education.

The Regional Environmental Centers represented here today have already shown that they can play a pivotal role in this process.

Enhancing informal learning arenas requires new learning arrangements in which all stakeholders work together to co-create, and to co-finance their mutual interest in learning, innovation and knowledge valorisation. Civil society, NGOs, businesses, universities and schools all need to connect with each other and form coalitions.

As part of our focus on our country's leading economic sectors, we've introduced Human Capital Agendas, mutual learning in Green Deals and a national ESD strategy called 'Learning for Sustainable Development'.

In our approach we address fundamental environmental issues, like water, food, energy, biodiversity and resources.

As well as more system-related issues, like climate change, the circular economy and new governance models.

And forms of learning that embrace a holistic and systemic approach, critical reflection, multi-stakeholder perspectives, values and transition skills.

In all of this, ESD also draws on energy from society itself, promoting a more eco-friendly way of living, with sustainable consumption and production.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I call on all countries to step up their ESD efforts and seek a more complete learning repertoire for a sustainable future. Because the urgency and complexity of our policy challenges will demand more action from us in the years ahead.

Between 2017 and 2020, UNESCO's Global Action Plan for ESD will serve as an umbrella for all, but our own UNECE region can also set the stage for working together.

As The Carpenters said: we've only just begun:

Sharing horizons that are new to us,

Watching the signs along the way,

Talking it over just the two of us,

Working together day to day

Together.

Thank you.