Environment and Education

This key sheet is part of a series of awareness raising tools developed by Irish Aid to accompany its Environment Policy for Sustainable Development.

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Irish Aid
Department of Foreign Affairs
An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha

1. Introduction

This key sheet is part of a series of awareness raising tools developed by Irish Aid to accompany its Environment Policy for Sustainable Development. Key strategies for implementing the policy are:

i)   mainstreaming, where the environment is recognised as a critical part of sustainable development and is taken into account in all policies, programmes, activities and funding decisions; and

ii)   partnership, where Irish Aid works with national governments, multilateral organisations, international agencies and civil society organisations to contribute to sustainable development.

The first step in environment mainstreaming is to understand how the environment is linked to the development challenge or sector YOU are responsible for. In this key sheet, we describe how environmental governance is significant for development, and suggest sources of additional information. We will produce more detailed guidelines on mainstreaming environment and development at a later date.

Environmental governance matters to education because:

> Degraded environments contribute to absenteeism. More time spent collecting firewood and water means less time for school.

> The construction of schools and school facilities can damage the environment through deforestation and pollution.

> Clean water and safe sanitation are vital to student attendance and student and teacher health.

> Learning about the environment can develop life skills which future generations can use to protect the environment.

Women wait to have their babies screened at a food distribution centre in Barmou, Tahoua village, Niger.

2. The framework for addressing environment in education

Education equips peoples and societies with the skills, knowledge and perspectives to live in an ever-changing world. Improving access to quality education is a key element of poverty reduction and a central focus of Irish Aid's development programme. Irish Aid is committed to Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). EFA is based on the consensus that education is a key element in combating poverty, empowering women, promoting human rights and democracy, protecting the environment and controlling population growth[1]. Receiving an education is one of the surest means by which individuals can improve both their livelihood and well-being

The UN Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 recognised the importance of education in achieving sustainable development and a whole chapter of the accompanying action plan called Agenda 21 was dedicated to improving the capacity of people to address environment and development issues. The 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable development reaffirmed the educational objectives of the Millennium Development Goals and the EFA Dakar Framework for Action and declared the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005-2014.

The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development aims to promote education as a basis for a more sustainable human society and to integrate sustainable development into education systems at all levels. A gender-sensitive education system at all levels (primary to third level and adult education) and of all types (formal, non-formal and informal) is a critical component of sustainable development (see the Environment and Gender Equality key sheet for information on the links between gender equality and the environment).

> ↘ Key concept – Education for Sustainable Development
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> Education for Sustainable Development is a vision of education that seeks to balance human and economic well-being with cultural traditions and respect for the earth's natural resources. The overall aim of ESD is to empower citizens to act for positive environmental and social change, implying a participatory and action-oriented approach[2].

3. Linking the environment and education

Environmental issues have a direct impact on our ability to reduce poverty and meet the MDGs. The success of **MDG 3: Achieve Universal Primary Education and Target 3: Ensure that by 2015 children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling** are dependant on environmental sustainability.

3.1 Degraded environments

As an environment becomes degraded young girls have to walk further to collect water and firewood and young boys travel greater distances to find grazing for small livestock. This leaves less time for school as families struggle to make a living from a declining natural resource base. Soil erosion, deforestation and declining water supplies mean that women spend more time providing for their families' needs and have fewer opportunities to take-up adult education than men.

> ↘ How can the environment help to achieve Universal Primary Education?
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> In Lesotho, soil degradation has reduced the productivity of the land to such an extent that young boys have to spend their days searching for fodder for their families' livestock rather than attending school. In Northern Ethiopia, Integrated Watershed Management has helped to replenish the water table allowing new wells to be dug. This reduces the distance young girls travel to collect water allowing them more time for schooling.

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1 Education for All, Dakar Framework for Action 2000
2 UNESCO website

3.2 Environmental health

Indoor and outdoor air pollution, poor sanitation and unsafe drinking water are major causes of child disease and mortality, meaning that many children do not complete their primary education due to absenteeism. With up to 30% of the total disease burden in developing countries due to environmental risk[4]. Illness related to poor environmental conditions (water and air quality, pollution, toxic substances) prevents untold numbers of children from attending school. Even if children are not affected directly, they may have to stay away from school to care for a sick family member or to do the work of a sick adult. A clean and safe environment and good health are critical to achieving the goal of Education For All.

3.3 School Construction

Other links between the environment and education have to do with school construction and management. Schools are frequently built in an unsustainable manner using scarce resources form the local area and with little thought for the impact of the construction on the environment. For example, classrooms may be constructed using trees growing in the local area and contribute to deforestation. This has a direct effect on the environment and sets a bad example for the next generation of farmers and decision makers. Likewise, schools may be sited in unsafe locations such as on steep slopes or new seasonal watercourses which place student at risk.

3.4 Water and sanitation

The facilities provided at schools and the quality of the school environment also have an impact on both attendance and learning. All too often schools do not have access to safe drinking water and sanitation is either absent or insufficient. The quality of the environment in which children learn has a direct impact on how they learn. As a school pupil in Ethiopia remarked, 'How can we clean our schools, let alone the latrines, when there not even any water to drink?'. Poor sanitation can act as a serious deterrent to attendance, especially by girls, who already experience the greatest difficulties in attending school (see the example below).

3.5 Environmental education

Getting children to school is the first challenge, the second is to ensure good quality education that equips them with the tools to ensure their well-being and make a positive contribution to society. Knowledge, life skills and values related to the social, cultural, environmental and economic aspects of life are vital components of education. The challenge facing many developing countries is to incorporate these aspects of sustainable development into curricula in an effective way. This involves training for teachers as well as formal education through primary, secondary and third level institutions.

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3 EFA Global Monitoring Report (2005)
4 PEP, Linking Poverty and Environmental Management, 2002.

3.6 Education and resource rights

A well-educated society is critical for effective governance. As power is decentralised to local level, communities need to be educated to know their rights and to allow them to influence decision-making. Natural resource and environment related issues tend to come to the fore at local rather than national level. It is at local level that people determine their access rights to natural resources and make decisions about their management. It is also at local level that conflicts over resources can be prevented and resolved. Local management of natural resources presents opportunities for improved environmental sustainability if the local population have the education to take part in and to make informed decisions about the environment.

⭲ Universal primary education – and environmental challenge in Uganda

The introduction of Universal Primary education in Uganda has resulted in an increase in the number of children attending primary school for 2.6 million in 1997 to 7.3 million in 2002. The increase in student numbers has led to serious environmental health issues due to a shortage of sanitary facilities. The ratio of children to a stance (equivalent to 5 latrines) rose from 328:1 in 1995 to 700:1 in 2000 far above the recommended ratio of 40:1.

The Ministry of Education, with support from donors including Irish Aid, is addressing this problem by ensuring that all new classrooms have adequate sanitation for girls and boys. In addition, an inter-ministerial working group comprising the ministries of education, health , water and environment is piloting ecological sanitation through the introduction of ECO-SAN toilets in schools.

⭲ Greening the Curriculum

In 2002 Zambia reformed the curriculum for Basic Level Education, (Grades 1-9), in line with the revised education policy called 'Educating Our Future'. The restructuring organised the 14 school subjects into 5 Learning Areas, and added a sixth learning area called Localised Curriculum/Community Studies. The Localised Curriculum constitutes 20% of the National Curriculum and focuses primarily on Environmental Education, Indigenous Knowledge and Survival Skills. Each school allows the local community to contribute ideas and suggestions of particular relevance to the local curriculum. The teaching approaches and materials used are also linked to the local environment.

⭲ Education for Sustainable Natural Resource Management

In Tanzania Irish Aid supports a programme in cooperation with Oxfam Ireland, the Government of Tanzania and local NGOs to increase awareness of the land law. Securtity of tenure is critical in encouraging people to invest in the long-term management of their resources. Only by being able to read and understand information provided in the new law can people understand their rights and act accordingly. Minority groups such as pastoralists often experience the greatest difficulties in accessing information and understanding their rights due to high levels of illiteracy and poor access to appropriate education.

4. Opportunities for positive action on environment and education

4.1 A global perspective – Development Education

Education for Sustainable Development doesn't just apply to developing countries. Irish Aid believes that our efforts to tackle poverty and injustice, to promote peace and democracy and to safeguard human rights require action at local and global levels. People in Ireland can contribute to global poverty reduction by challenging policies that perpetuate poverty, by making changes to unsustainable lifestyles and through supporting national and international efforts to promote sustainable development.

Irish Aid's **Development Education Strategy Plan 2003-2005** has sustainable development as a guiding principle and is concerned with understanding issues which relate to global poverty and underdevelopment. Experience has shown that environmental issues are effective in engaging the public in the global dimensions of poverty and development. Issues such as climate change and illegal logging make clear links between the developed and developing countries and highlight the ability of the individual to make a difference.

Irish Aid supports Just Forests, an Irish organisation which carries out education for sustainable development projects with a focus on forest management and the wise use of wood resources. The 'Wood of Life' exhibition brings messages about globally sustainable wood production to schools through a multimedia-travelling exhibition. Just Forests has also produced the 'Good Wood Policy Guide' for those involved in the timber industry in Ireland and has provided training for architects on sourcing and using sustainable timber.

4.2 Positive actions to mainstream the environment into the education sector.

Until now, many of the actions undertaken to mainstream the environment have been in the context of projects. As such the focus has been on reducing the environmental impacts of school construction and on providing adequate waste, water and sanitation facilities. There have also been some environmental education activities such as the setting up of an environmental information service in Lesotho in the mid nineties and environmental education programmes as part of the Tanga Coastal Zone Conservation and Development Programme in Tanzania.

The transition from projects to a more programmatic approach with new aid modalitites such as Sector Wide Approaches and Budget Support opens up new opportunities for mainstreaming the environment.

Mainstreaming environmental sustainability into the education sector is a critical first step. Irish Aid staff, especially education advisers have a key role to play in ensuring that environmental sustainability is taken into account in all aspects of sector planning and budgeting in order to:

> Safeguard the environment:

> Raise awareness of the importance of the environment for sustainable livelihoods: and

> Ensure education for sustainable development.

4.3 Opportunities for Irish Aid to mainstream the environment in the education sector include:

> Engaging in dialogue with other donors and government on the importance of the environment in the education sector.

> Understanding and raising awareness of environmental issues which affect school attendance and recommend actions to government.

> Introducing environmental issues into the curricula, school design and facilities.

> Supporting efforts to include quality environmental education in teacher training curricula.

> Making sure that schools have appropriate sanitation and water facilities for boys and girls.

> Making sure that schools are built in an environmentally sensitive way and encourage the inclusion of wild areas and natural spaces for learning.

> Encouraging the use of the environment and natural resources as educational tools to increase awareness of the value of the environment/ecosystem services.

References

Irish Aid's Development Education Strategy Plan 2003-2005.

UNESCO Education for Sustainable Development home page with links to other websites, resource materials etc.

http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=27234&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

UNESCO material on environmental education-
http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=8084&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

Useful Websites

→ Education for All **www.unesco.org/education/efa/index/shtml**

→ Education for All, Global Monitoring Report, 2005.
http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=35874&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

→ Just Forests **www.justforests.org**