

SPECIAL ADDRESS OF
DR. ARVIND BOAZ , DIRECTOR GENERAL,
SOUTH ASIA COOPERATIVE ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME (SACEP)
AT THE VALEDICTION OF THE
4TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION
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HE Mr Kochiro Mastuura, Director General UNESCO, Hon' Prof M. S. Swaminathan, Mr. Kartikeya Sarabhai, Director CEE and the main force behind this august gathering, Prof Charles Hopkins, Chair, International Advisory Committee 4th ICEE and UNESCO Chair in Reorienting Teachers Education for Sustainability, Ms Alspezi Ogbuigwe from UNEP, Nairobi, Ms Minja Yang, Director, UNESCO, New Delhi, delegates and participants from around the globe from various organizations and Institutions, Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the very outset, I feel extremely privileged to address this eminent gathering of Educationists, environmental scientists, policy makers, professionals, NGOs and other stakeholders at this **4th International Conference on Environmental Education here in this historic city**. It is my great pleasure to be present here on the invitation of the Government of India Ms Minja Yang and Kartikeyabhai to attend this important event.

As we all know Sustainable development is a socio-ecological process characterized by the fulfilment of human needs while maintaining the quality of the natural environment in perpetuity. Humanity is passing through a phase of rapid development that has led to the inevitable consequences of environmental degradation. Burning problems such as unsustainable development, poverty, bulging populations, destructive production and consumption patterns and gender discrimination have been progressively recognised as being linked to environmental deterioration. The gravity of the deterioration cannot be lessened without effective use of environmental education. This was first recognised at the

1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) and then reinforced at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg. Environmental education has been identified as the key factor for reversing this deterioration. The recently developed concept of education, i.e., education for sustainable development (ESD), maintains that environmental education (EE) is, in fact, the predecessor of ESD. And only by broadening the scope of environmental education, can we realise the goal of a “sustainable society.” In the true sense, it can be said that the problem concerned with unsustainable environmental management cannot be tackled at all without promoting environmental education.

The goal of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014, DESD), is to integrate the principles, values, and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning. This educational effort will encourage changes in behaviour that will create a more [sustainable future in terms of](#) environmental integrity, economic viability, and a just society for present and future generations.

To make today’s development process sustainable, we must integrate environmental stewardship, economic development and the well-being of all people—not just for today but for countless generations to come. It must conserve the cultural and natural biodiversity of the region and must anchor in deep spiritual outlook of ‘live and let live’.

I think we have chosen a very appropriate place for this conference for this is the land of the Father of the Indian Nation, Mahatama Gandhi, who taught us the biggest lesson in sustainability –to limit our wants and work for the general welfare of Humanity so that all will learn to live in harmony both with each other and with the environment they live in.

The issue of environmental degradation is complex and transboundary in nature and requires holistic education that deals with the environment, the economy,

and social equity. SACEP being an intergovernmental organization has come a long way since its inception, by the governments of South Asia in 1982, to promote and support protection, management and enhancement of the environment in the region. SACEP supports national government's efforts for environmental protection and sustainable development. SACEP is also an appropriate forum for action on transboundary environmental issues. These are issues where the geographical scope or impact extends beyond national boundaries. It also aims on Strengthening regional information network and promoting exchange of expertise on environmental education programmes

Adaptation to Climate Change is a priority issue in SACEP's Work Programme and we have initiated several programmes to address this issue. SACEP' in its 25 year history of work has been working extensively on the subject areas such as Environmental Education, Climate Change, Waste Management and have targeted the younger generation, which is our most precious resource.

As a part of our 25th Year Celebrations, SACEP conducted a school Environment Awareness Programme and a Panel discussion on "Adaptation to sea level Rise in South Asia" and under that a series of Children's Environmental Education Competitions (essays, paintings, posters and photographs) were conducted. This was done in collaboration with the CEE, India SAYEN, and Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources and the Ministry of Education of the Government of Sri Lanka. We also conduct the Coastal Cleanup campaign each year in the region to educate the masses on the importance of Clean beaches and management of marine litter.

SACEP has also launched the South Asia Coral Reef Task Force (SACRTF) on 27th July 2007. This is only the second task force to be established in the world for conservation & Development of Coral Reefs.

SACEP also conducted several training camps for the post graduate students and researchers for the CHM on CBD issues with the help of the CBD Secretariat and the Government of Belgium.

The concerns of Environmental Education are extremely relevant in the context of South Asia. If we take a look at the South Asian region with an area of 4,126,820 Sq Km and a population of 1.3 billion that is still mainly dependent on Agriculture and has a very low per capita income of US \$1.2 per day. It has a high incidence of poverty with 450 million living below the poverty line. The population growth rate is still very high -1.9- that is threatening the carrying capacity of the region. In spite of the high population of the region, it still has 18.6% land area under forest cover and 15.6% of the Biodiversity of the world's flora and 12% of its fauna, 7.8% of the Mangroves of the world and houses 3 of the 18 Biodiversity hotspots of the world. But with rapid development of the region, there is a dire need to awaken to the needs of environmental education at all levels and all stakeholders in this region. Over the years I have come to realize that rapid strides have been made in the field of agriculture, thanks to the yeomen service given to this sector by illustrious people like Dr Swaminathan who has been gracious enough to be present here today but I sincerely think that we need to put more emphasis to arrest the rapid degradation of the forest cover and loss of Biodiversity in the region.

If we go into the history of efforts in forest and Biodiversity Conservation Post-Rio, we can see a gradual decline in the emphasis that has been laid on this issue. Whereas, there were references made to forests 285 times in nearly 50% of the 40 chapters of the Agenda 21 agreed at Rio and great emphasis emerged after the meeting on this vital issue, it gradually lost its sheen and gradually in subsequent meetings, forests and forestry are now in decline as is evident from various meetings like the G8, other ministerial declarations, government and other multilateral organization meetings, ODA Agencies support and Universities agendas. Even in the national agendas of most countries forests and biodiversity have not been able to build a place in the political agenda and this is quite

evident from the financial allocations of 1-1.5% of GDP to this sector in South Asia inspite of such a great discussions about forest and biodiversity degradation ultimately leading to land degradation and affecting the livelihood security of the huge dependent population on 18.6% of the land area of this region.

I think the role of environmental education is crucial if we talk of sustainable development as without putting in wholehearted efforts to arrest this forest and biodiversity degradation, we will be unable to arrest the impact that forests have on nearly all vital areas of development like water, energy and land management, arresting erosion, maintaining soil fertility and serving as safety nets to a large human population in our region.

I think that environmental education should now try to focus on this issue of mainstreaming forestry into National development issues and not only talk of educating the masses for sustainable development but also lay greater emphasis on environmental education for the policy and law makers and other stakeholders to educate them about the environmental services of the forests and biodiversity and divert adequate resources for their conservation and development. I think the time has also come to develop mechanisms to educate bureaucrats and lawmakers to not only put market based instruments in place to generate funds for the sustainability of the natural resources but also establish mechanisms to make such funds available for utilization for the development of this sector.

I am convinced that the time is now ripe for us to take a fresh look at the whole approach to sustainable development and mainstream the 18.6% forest area in the development agenda as this area is the most productive renewable resource that can not only provide sustainable livelihoods to the dependent rural population but can also be a highly productive area for supply of various natural renewable resources that are being exploited on an unsustainable basis without due investments from the endusers in these areas.

Thus, in the end I would wish to emphasis that in the changing context of the new millennium, environmental education has to play a much wider role than being limited to educating the masses, the youth and the communities for sustainable development and achievement of the MDG goals. They have to balance the

present approach to development so that the poor who are living mostly in or near the fringe forest areas are not left behind and the dreams of the great Mahatama are realized and not only the rich biodiversity of our region is maintained but it is preserved and developed to serve as a source of livelihood security to the masses. For this environmental education will have to focus on developing high level political support and political status for National and International institutions engaged in environment, forestry and Biodiversity conservation. It will also be necessary to reinvent the custodians of the forestry sector in this region who hold the reins to this resource and make them aware that forestry is now a cross-sectoral issue that they have also to teach the powers that be so that they realize the multiple benefits from these vast areas in this new emerging global issue of Climate Change and give it the due place in national budgeting and development. Environmental education will also have to ensure private sector engagement in this sector and ensure that all sectors compensate for environmental services and benefits. Environmental educationists will have to ensure that all stakeholders actively and visibly engage in and influence broader societal issues and mobilize support from all sectors to save, conserve and develop the renewable resource for the benefit of mankind and Humanity as a whole and that nobody owns a problem but shares a solution and as *Harcharik* rightly said ***“Nobody should Claim Leadership, but earn it”***.