



September 2002

World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD)

Draft Director-General's speech at the launching of the new FAO/UNESCO Flagship Programme on "Education for Rural People"

Johannesburg, 3 September 2002



1. Opening remarks

I welcome this opportunity to speak on behalf of FAO, the 800 million or more people who are food insecure, and the millions of undernourished children (180), illiterate youth and adults (880), and out-of-school children (130). The majority of these people live in rural areas and suffer from inequitable access to schools, health care, roads, technology, institutional support and markets. Addressing the educational needs of this "neglected majority" that plays a critical role in sustainable development directly contributes to achieving the first two Millennium Development Goals - eradicating extreme poverty and hunger and achieving universal primary education.

2. The Main Challenge: Education for Rural People and Sustainable Development

Although Education is linked to virtually all areas covered by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED, Rio 1992), the new Education for All (EFA) flagship we are officially launching today calls for special efforts on a crucial challenge for sustainable development - educating large numbers of people in the rural areas.

The Education for All Declaration and Plan of Action led by UNESCO in Jomtien (Thailand) in 1990 and reconfirmed in Dakar (Senegal) in 2000, the World Food Summit (WFS) Declaration and Plan of Action of 1996, and the World Food Summit: five years later held in Rome in June this year provide both the political framework and a set of concrete actions to achieve the commitment made by Heads of State and Government to reduce the number of illiterate and undernourished people to half their present level no later than 2015, thus alleviating poverty worldwide. We believe that in order to meet these targets, it is crucial to focus on the basic educational needs of the rural poor with a multi-sectoral and multidisciplinary approach and to work together: this is what the FAO/UNESCO Flagship is all about.

The flagship aims at reducing the education gap among the rural and urban populations. Although education is universally acknowledged as a human right in itself and a prerequisite to build a food secure world, educational opportunities are not equitably distributed. As you know,

- the gap between urban and rural illiteracy is widening, and in several countries, rural illiteracy is two or three times higher than urban illiteracy;
- curricula and textbooks in primary and secondary schools are often urban-biased, irrelevant to the needs of rural people, and seldom focus on crucial skills for life in the rural areas;
- Ministries of education, agriculture, health, finance and others as well as universities and research institutions often lack awareness and coordination in targeting the needs of rural people.

To address these problems, the new FAO/UNESCO initiative on Education for Rural People will focus its efforts on:

- building awareness of the importance of education for rural people;
- encouraging countries to adopt specific plans of action addressing basic educational needs of rural people as part of the national plans for EFA;

- supporting exchange of good practices and knowledge on education for rural people;
- building on the comparative advantage of partner institutions to better address education for rural people.

Building partnerships is crucial for such an endeavour, and we are both pleased to note that although the flagship is a new initiative, a significant number of partners have already confirmed their commitment to support education for rural people, thus forging an important network including governments, international organizations, UN agencies and civil society.

3. Next steps as follow-up to WSSD

As a follow-up to the World Summit on Sustainable development, the Education for Rural People Flagship Programme will reinvigorate its efforts to assist member countries and other partners, focusing on:

- Developing common views about the importance of dealing with education for sustainable rural development as a crucial component of Education For All strategies;
- Supporting a common approach to bringing about needed changes to promote education of the rural people;
- Encouraging dialogue between education ministries or departments and other key rural stakeholders such as ministries of agriculture and natural resources, health, infrastructure, finance, the private sector, NGOs and civil society; and
- Supporting countries in analysing their existing education approaches in order to meet the needs of rural people and, as appropriate, formulate interventions that incorporate such processes within Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRS).

As for FAO's specific commitment to the flagship, beyond our coordinating role, we will continue to provide technical assistance to Member Countries in their efforts to emphasise education for rural people within their National Plans of Education for All.

4. Concluding remarks

In conclusion, I wish to emphasise the main features of the Education for Rural People challenge.

First, **place education of rural people at the core of National Plans of Education for All and strengthen institutional capacity to do so**. Efforts aimed at reducing poverty and hunger should therefore be accompanied by good education policies addressing education of rural people as a crucial aspect of such plans. This can be achieved if the educational needs of rural communities are given due consideration at every level of governance, including planning and finance.

Second, **expand access** to, and increase attendance and completion at, schools in rural areas by promoting or supporting initiatives that aim at improving children's nutrition and capacity to learn. These include: school canteens and gardens, information and communication technology, distance education, education of rural girls and women, life long education, and flexible school calendars to accommodate the needs of local agricultural production cycles.

Third, **improve relevance** of education to rural livelihoods' needs and interests. This can be achieved by supporting participatory curriculum development, teacher training, skills for life in a rural environment, nutrition education, and education for HIV/AIDS prevention and mitigation.

Fourth, **forging partnerships** is crucial to the success of the Flagship Initiative. It is our hope that the international community involved in supporting educational systems in developing countries can turn the spotlight on this problem, work with national authorities that are committed to change, and begin the process of improving the lives of large numbers of rural men, women and children.

FAO stands ready to help transform these and other opportunities into reality.

Thank you.