Chapter 2
Advancing Social Sustainability Through Vocational Education and Training

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Abstract This chapter explores the implications for technical and vocational education of viewing sustainable development not only as a scientific goal but also as a culturally directed search for a dynamic balance in the relationships between social, economic, and natural systems. Such a balance would promote equity between the present and the future, and equity between countries, races, social classes, and genders. As a focus of learning and cultural change, sustainability requires a conscious commitment by all to reflect upon the values and principles that guide our actions. Such a view challenges technical and vocational educators to focus on their responsibilities in general education, especially in relation to learning for work as part of citizenship and sustainability. This approach would mean that programs provide opportunities for students to learn how to reflect upon their own values, how they affect workplace practices, lifestyle choices, and the social, economic, and environmental impacts that would result if everyone in the world believed and acted as they did. Such programs would also provide opportunities for learners to develop knowledge, skills, and values appropriate to help create a fairer and less troubled world for all.

Toward a Sustainable Future

The major challenge in the world today is to find ways of living and working sustainably, so that the reasonable needs and wants of people from all walks of life and in all countries can be satisfied without over-exploiting the natural resources upon which all life depends and without threatening the ability of future generations to meet their wants and needs.¹

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¹ This chapter is adapted from Orienting technical and vocational education and training for sustainable development (UNESCO-UNEVOC 2006), which the authors prepared for UNESCO-UNEVOC and is revised here with the permission of Dr. Rupert Maclean, Director, UNESCO-UNEVOC.
Moving toward the goal of sustainable development requires fundamental changes in human attitudes and behavior—in our personal lives, in our community activities, and in our places of work. Successfully making these changes is critically dependent on education and training. The concept of sustainable development is not a simple one, and there is no road map to prescribe how we should proceed. Yet time is short, and we must act without delay. We must move ahead now, in a spirit of exploration and experimentation and with the broadest possible range of partners, so as to contribute through education and training to a sustainable future. Taking incremental steps in both developed and developing nations now is preferable to waiting for larger measures to be realized.

An Opportunity to be Taken

In October 2004, UNESCO hosted an International Experts’ Meeting on Learning for Work, Citizenship and Sustainability as a 5-year review of progress since the Second International Conference on Technical and Vocational Education (TVET) which was held in Seoul, Korea, in April 1999. Discussions on the central theme of the Seoul Conference—lifelong learning and training for all, a bridge to the future—led to the conclusion that we need new paradigms of both development and TVET. As the preamble to the recommendations in the final report stated:

We have considered the emerging challenges of the twenty-first century, a century that will be an era of knowledge, information and communication. Globalization and the revolution in information and communication technology have signalled the need for a new human-centred development paradigm. We have concluded that Technical and Vocational Education (TVE), as an integral component of lifelong learning, has a crucial role to play in this new era as an effective tool to realize the objectives of a culture of peace, environmentally sound sustainable development, social cohesion, and international citizenship. (UNESCO, 1999, p. 61)

The “new human-centered development paradigm” was elaborated at the Millennium Summit of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2000, which agreed to a set of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These goals include: halving extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education and gender equity, reducing under-five mortality and maternal mortality by two-thirds and three-quarters respectively, reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS, halving the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water, and ensuring environmental sustainability. They also include the goal of developing a global partnership for development, with targets for aid, trade, and debt relief. As a strategic vision, the MDGs are steps toward a longer-term vision of building internal capacity in all,

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2 The International Experts’ Meeting was organised by UNESCO in collaboration with the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). The meeting was held in Bonn, Germany, on 26–28 October 2004.

3 See http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/.