From Region of Nations to Nation of Regions:
A report on the UNECE ESD indicator process and links to South West England

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Background

1. UNECE: United Nations Economic Commission for Europe: 55 countries across Europe Central Asia plus USA and Canada. At the 2003 *Environment for Europe* Ministerial Conference in Kiev, Member States endorsed a *Ministerial Statement on ESD*.

2. The UNECE Committee on Environmental Policy established an ESD Task Force that nominated a Drafting Group to prepare the *ESD Strategy*. This included NGO representation (through European ECO Forum) and a member of DfES.

3. The ESD Strategy was adopted at Vilnius in 2005 by all UNECE Member States (except the USA) and the *Vilnius Framework for Implementation* was agreed. This called for an 'Expert Group' on ESD Indicators to develop ways of monitoring: (a) Member States' progress in implementing the strategy and (b) the effects of implementing the Strategy.

   (All documents available at: http://www.unece.org/env/esd/welcome.htm)

The Expert Group on ESD Indicators

4. Many of the Strategy Drafting Group members are also serving on the Expert Group (EG); however, the group's membership has shifted from having a majority from environmental ministries to a balance in favour of education officials. One NGO representative (European ECO Forum) is permitted.

5. The EG's collective expertise covers education, environmental sciences, ESD and statistics. There are no 'experts' in ESD indicators *per se*.

6. The EG were instructed to follow closely the provisions of the ESD Strategy and the Vilnius Framework. This led to a 'managerial' approach, with questions asking for, "the extent to which x provision in the strategy is being implemented."

7. Members of the group also argued in favour of developing indicators that would promote learning in themselves. This included ECO Forum's suggested indicator (that illustrates what John Huckle terms the *action research approach*), i.e.:

   > *"Evidence that groups (classes/community groups/work-based teams, etc) have discussed and developed their own set of indicators on sustainable development."*

8. Statisticians in the group felt that none of the suggestions were truly 'indicators', rather they were all 'checklist' questions. However, they felt that this was a legitimate approach as reducing the available evidence to numbers would be meaningless. Other group members recognised that it would be important politically to retain the term 'indicator'.

9. This is more than an issue of re-defining a term like 'indicator'; this is hinting at a more structural underlying problem: i.e. we are dealing with *concepts* (SD/ESD) that are by definition a 'grasp at complex and loosely-bounded ideas'. Indicators, on the other hand, are *management tools*.

10. Management is critical for achieving targets but the learning that takes place is *how to achieve the target*. The EG wanted to promote higher level learning and this is reflected in a number of ways:

    - Suggestions that institutions and learners should set their own SD indicators
    - Spaces to complete tables rather than exhaustive lists
    - Opportunities for respondents to state what they think their achievements will be over the next reporting period and what they think of these indicators and whether we should modify them

11. Another way in which the UNECE Strategy could promote learning would be to shift from asking, *have you included ESD in your national education policy?*, to asking, *to what extent does ESD contribute to your national educational objectives?*

12. This is critical, if we (the ESD community) are not contributing to the collective educational objectives of the nation, then who are we to change and modify those objectives over time?

13. This is the question that we find ourselves asking at the local/regional level in the UK. The South West ESD Coalition is developing an action plan that recognises that anyone involved in learning has a role to play, indeed is playing a role. We have a framework of involvement based on *reasons to care* about ESD.

Question: Can we build an approach to 'indicators' that promotes *reflection on practice* rather than simply *hitting targets* so that the shape of our ESD emerges, through practice, throughout the education system?