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**Promoting critical knowledge, skills and
qualifications for sustainable development in
Africa: How to design and implement an effective
response by education and training systems**

Sub-theme 1

**Common core skills for lifelong learning and
sustainable development in Africa**

**Synthesis Paper - Sub-theme 1
Executive summary**

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Working Document

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

1. This synthesis paper reviews the present state-of-the art as regards perspectives, policies and practices in Africa related to sub-theme 1 of the Triennial, i.e. Common core skills for lifelong learning and sustainable development. It forms part of a set of four papers that review key issues related to the overall theme of the Triennial: Promoting critical knowledge, skills and qualifications for sustainable development in Africa: how to design and implement an effective response by education and training systems.

2. The intention of this paper is to prompt discussion at the Triennial Meeting. Thus it aims to highlight major issues regarding the nature and conditions of effective lifelong learning for sustainable development; the state of practice and experiences regarding different types of common core skills; the nature of paradigm change in basic education and the challenges this poses; and current debates and recent developments in areas of reform that constitute a critical enabling environment for change.

3. The paper is divided into three parts: Part I addresses the focus and agenda for deeper educational reform in relation to the framework of lifelong learning and education's contribution to sustainable development. It starts with follow-up from the Maputo Biennial, discussing reform initiatives inspired by the Maputo outcomes (Section 2) and continues with an in-depth focus on the notions of common core skills, lifelong learning and the challenges of linking learning with sustainable development at the level of basic education (Section 3). Ongoing reflection and action related to lifelong learning in relation to education for sustainable development are reviewed in Section 4.

4. Part II reviews the nature and state-of-practice regarding key areas of skills and competencies. Section 5 starts with exploring the state of thinking and practice regarding "common core skills" for sustainable development by introducing the "common core" in relation to curriculum reform and there after addresses different types of skills and competencies in some depth: literacy and language (Section 6), cognitive and scientific skills (Section 7), personal development and life skills (Section 8), social and citizenship skills, including peace building (Section 9), and work-related skills (Section 10). This part concludes by listing several key challenges of such agendas for educational reform.

5. Part III addresses essential enabling conditions for achieving effective acquisition of skills relevant for sustainable development. Here, Section 12 addresses relevant conditions pertaining to education systems themselves, while Section 13 looks at various issues related to conditions in the wider socioeconomic and political environment. The final section (14) gives an overview of the principal findings of the analytical work.

Part I – Background and setting the agenda

6. The principal argument in Part I is that the Biennial in Maputo has inspired countries to move their education system towards a holistic and integrative approach, and to take on a lifelong learning perspective but that much work is still required. More countries have come to recognize other existing forms of education and training, including non-formal education, Qu'ranic schools and education outside schools such as shepherd schools and market schools. Implementation of an integrated approach, in such way that diversified but equitable basic education systems would emerge, remains very challenging as this would require the upgrading, expansion and subsidization of quite a few alternative education provisions, enabling disadvantaged young people to transfer from one program to another according to circumstances in order to access further education and training.

7. Some countries that have made great efforts towards inclusivity, such as Kenya, find that improved access and participation do not necessarily go together with higher levels of achievement. It appears that performance may not correlate with socioeconomic background but that improvement of

the teaching-learning interaction in the classroom can be a major factor in offsetting constraints for learning in the home situation.

8. It was also found that the concepts of lifelong learning and education for sustainability are still poorly understood and need to be operationalized in national context as a basis for policy development and change of practice. Too often, lifelong learning is still equated with adult education only, rather than with a comprehensive framework to organize all education and training in terms of their life-wide (covering different forms of education) and lifelong (continuing learning through all stages of life) dimensions, bringing these together in an integrative way.

9. Education for sustainable development (ESD) is about building a critical mass of citizens who are not just informed and trained, but who are above all capable of using their achievements to bring about the economic, social, cultural and political changes required for sustainable development. UNESCO emphasizes a wide range of aspects of education that should be part of ESD: such as the centrality of respect for others, for difference and diversity, for the environment and for resources of the planet; working towards an inter-disciplinary and holistic curriculum, critical thinking and problem-solving; using multiple methods in teaching and learning; participatory decision-making; integration of learning experiences in daily life and work; and addressing local as well as global issues using languages which learners commonly use.

10. ESD has implications for educational reform in terms of re-structuring education provision, extensive curriculum reform, and reviewing the actual quality of teaching and learning to make them more effective and to ensure continuous impact on the environment and society. Above all, as UIL points out, simply expanding the quantity of education and lifelong learning will not be sufficient to advance sustainable societies. The quality of education and training, including appropriateness and relevance, must be enhanced. Thus ESD has come to strengthen the agenda for improvement of quality by focusing on the importance of learners effectively acquiring core skills needed for life and work.

11. Thus, ESD is more than environmental education or training young people for work. It affects the entire curriculum in all learning, whether through formal, non-formal or informal channels, and is intended for all ages, as learning new skills necessary to cope with the continuing challenges of life and work never ceases. It is also argued that an African sustainable development paradigm calls for a pedagogy that is based on community-focused learning and the expansion of learning beyond the school-walls and into different sectors of society, thus facilitating the convergence of academic knowledge, local wisdom and experience. Thus, education becomes “learning without walls”, involving learners, parents and teachers in joint efforts to share knowledge and acquire relevant skills.

Part II – Exploring the challenges of different core skills

12. In Part II the nature of the challenges that a lifelong learning framework poses are elaborated in greater detail in relation to a range of common core skills that countries can put at the heart of good quality and relevant basic education. The types of core skills are not new to most education systems. Indeed, it is shown that many of these have in various ways become part of efforts to improve relevance of education for different age-groups, starting with pre-school learners up to adults. Important innovations have been developed in both formal and non-formal education settings. However, the complex nature of many of these skills and their specific requirements for effective pedagogical methodologies require that they need far more explicit attention; thus, they should be systematically developed in relation to one another across the curriculum.

13. It is established that the skills of literacy and early reading are the most essential skills of all as they determine the acquisition of knowledge and other important skills in later years of learning. The paper re-emphasizes that literacy, not only for adults but also for children, must be acquired in the mother-tongue and that strategies for early grade reading must be drastically improved, as assessment in a range of countries has shown that children are not learning because of language constraints.

14. Much attention is also given to the continuous strengthening of cognitive and scientific skills. It is shown that the basis for cognitive skills is already laid in the early years of childhood through stimulation of thinking, curiosity and creativity. Thus, the quality of pre-school learning tends to be crucial for a child's later academic success.

15. The paper argues that in Africa an early interest in science needs to be developed in school and at the primary level, with as much parental support as possible. It is important that at this level skilled teachers capitalize on children's natural interest in their environment and interact constructively with the "theories" ("children's scientific ideas") that children develop to make their own sense of the world. This means that it should be recognized that children do not start in a void but that teachers can help to construct learners' knowledge by linking new ideas and experiences with what they already know.

16. An important part of social skills in several countries affected by fragility and conflict is the exploration of modalities for peace education. Some papers have shown what progress is being made to change education from a force for maintaining divisions, inequalities and tensions in society to a force for building and maintaining peace, by enabling young people to reflect more deeply on issues of conflict and peace, and also to develop critical skills and values, such as tolerance, respect for other views and cultural traditions, and peace-building skills. The importance of peace education also involves ensuring greater access to tailor-made education provision for young people directly affected by conflict and violence. Such education should acknowledge their needs for various kinds of support, including life and coping skills, vocational skills and psycho-social support.

17. The current trend to regard core skills as valuable only in the light of their relevance for the labour market denies their broader significance for the lives of younger and older people in general as well as for the social, cultural and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. It is also argued that core skills need to be linked to the "life world" of the learners and that they must be applied in the school environment and the community in a practical manner. This implies that schools and parents think about how their own ways of thinking and acting can be adjusted to produce models for learning. It further implies a need for school learning to be connected to learning in the home environment as well as to indigenous knowledge for the purpose of helping children to understand the value of different traditions.

Part III – Implications for changing the enabling environment

18. Part III reviews a number of implications for educational reform that are essential to ensure that core skills can effectively be developed in different education environments. It is argued that the entry point to wholesale and integrated educational reform towards greater relevance for sustainable development must be the curriculum; thus, developing a comprehensive curriculum framework to be valid across all forms of basic education, incorporating selected common core skills, must be the first priority.

19. The introduction into education systems of skills-based curricula will need to be done in a holistic manner, linking curriculum reform to major changes in teacher education and development, teaching-learning support materials, use of ICTs, school leadership, management and supervision, and assessment practices. This should involve all forms of education, including early childhood development, non-formal and informal forms of learning, thus creating "schools without walls".

20. The lifelong learning perspective demands that youth and adult education become integral parts of the overall education system, and that essential complementarities can be identified between skill requirements for children and those for their parents, as well as those for adolescents and adults. It should be acknowledged that curriculum reform for school education may need to go together with fundamental reform of adult education and functional literacy programs, as large numbers of adults have experienced the same deficiencies (if not more) that characterize current school education and thus are equally poorly prepared to face the impacts of present radical changes in society.

21. Such holistic reforms will require participation and collaboration in decision-making on design and implementation by all stakeholders, in particular communities, relevant civil society and private organizations, teachers' unions and sector ministries. This is necessary in order to create effective partnerships in developing new approaches and programs as well as in governance and mobilization of funds. This is also necessary for pedagogical reasons as in basic education for children where there is need for a pedagogic triangle of teachers, learners and parents (community) in order to achieve desirable learning outcomes. The interactions in this triangle should be based on respect, trust, care and concern for the wellbeing and learning of the child.

22. In terms of the further implications of curriculum reform to ensure its relevance for ESD, much attention needs to be given to actual pedagogical practices in the classroom, effective use of appropriate teaching-learning support materials, and the central role of learning assessment. Research in East Africa showed that teacher-pupil classroom interaction appears to be the single most important factor accounting for wide differences in outcome measures using the same curriculum materials and purportedly the same teaching method.

23. Changing pedagogical styles and classroom interaction constitutes a major challenge to teachers, and to teacher training and development institutions and programs. While the challenge lies partly in the area of pedagogical skills, other issues include the development of a very different mindset about teaching and learning and thus about the roles and responsibilities of teachers and learners in the pedagogical process. Teachers need to be assisted to understand and appreciate their roles and responsibilities and to accept what may be an additional workload. This can be a major issue, particularly in countries where teacher motivation and commitment have been negatively affected by decreasing salaries and poor conditions of service.

24. Further issues concern changes in classroom management and the organization of learning; changes in school governance and organization; the very "ethos" and culture of schools; the principles governing learners' activities and behaviors; and changes in the manner in which teachers interact with the outside world, from parents to employers. Moreover, changes in pedagogy pose challenges to school heads, supervisors, professional support and quality assurance personnel, and not in the least to learners and their parents.

25. Inclusivity linked to achieving equality of opportunity for all children regardless of their background, circumstances and age is gradually being recognized, but there is still a long way to go to ensure that young people can follow different pathways and still have de facto equal access to further education and training opportunities. One major factor is how schools place themselves within the wider environment of available support provided by other public and private agencies. A strategy pioneered in SADC countries makes schools the sites of integrated and comprehensive care and support necessary to improve children's access, retention and achievement in school, thus catering for different non-educational aspects of vulnerability.

26. The learning environment of young people also concerns other aspects related to the integrity and moral behavior of those who deal with young people. Learners will benefit much from protection against harassment, drugs, violence and conflict, and from the integrity and ethical behavior of government officials and education staff. Countries emerging from conflict face the arduous task of reconstruction, but a much more comprehensive challenge must be faced to create a conducive environment for young people that responds to their education needs in a holistic and equitable manner. This points even more strongly to the urgent and broader needs of countries to produce effective education policy, management and planning capacity as essential contributions to sustainable development.