I would like to begin by thanking the organizers of this international seminar for the opportunity to speak to you this morning. As the Platform Manager of UNESCO’s Intersectoral Platform on Education for Sustainable Development and as the Director of the Education Sector Division responsible for ensuring UNESCO’s leadership and coordination of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD, 2005-2014), you will not be surprised to learn that my remarks are from the perspective of education for sustainable development (ESD).

While the Decade is clearly the main current strategic and operational frame of reference of UNESCO’s work on ESD, we should not forget that UNESCO’s engagement with ESD precedes the onset of the Decade by several years through its role, still ongoing, as Task Manager of Chapter 36 of Agenda 21 (the Rio ‘Earth Summit’ Declaration on Environment and Development of 1992); the adoption of Chapter 36, which is about promoting education, public awareness and training, was a key moment in UNESCO’s shift towards and embrace of the
concept of ESD in preference to ‘environmental education’. UNESCO’s long-standing commitment to ESD, I believe, will continue for the foreseeable future until such time as there is a radical and comprehensive paradigm shift within the United Nations as a whole. In the case of both Chapter 36 and the DESD, let me add, UNESCO’s role in ESD is to lead on behalf of the UN system; that role is therefore outward-facing and global in character but it is also one that has internal implications for how UNESCO organizes itself and its actions.

The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) aims to integrate the values, principles and practices inherent in sustainable development into all aspects of learning – in all types, levels and settings of education - to encourage changes in attitudes and conduct which will help to create a more viable and fairer society for all. The basic vision of the DESD is a world where everyone has the opportunity to benefit from a quality education and to learn the values, behaviour and lifestyles required for a sustainable future and for positive societal transformation.

The DESD constitutes UNESCO’s educational framework for enhancing and promoting active learning oriented toward sustainable development in its environmental, economic, social and cultural dimensions. With regard to the theme of this international seminar, the orientation of UNESCO’s Education Sector is very much that of addressing climate change through ESD. Climate change is one of the key themes of the DESD and one of the strategic perspectives to inform education and learning for sustainable development, as recognised in the International Implementation Scheme (IIS) designed for the Decade through a wide and intensive consultation process. Within ESD there is a clear recognition of the importance of raising awareness of the crucial and urgent need to limit damage to the atmosphere and check harmful climate change. Moreover, ESD is a key means through which education can build a global lobby for effective action, showing people that, as conscious consumers and responsible citizens, their concrete actions can contribute to lasting solutions
to such challenges as climate change. By the same token, we recognise that
climate change issues can help to make ESD more accessible, relevant and vivid
for teachers and learners alike.

Recently, the UNESCO World Conference on Education for Sustainable
Development, held in Bonn, Germany, on 31 March to 2 April 2009, had much
to say about climate change, not only in a lively workshop on the educational
dimensions of this issue but also in the final outcome document, the Bonn
Declaration. In the latter, UNESCO – as lead agency responsible for the DESD
– was requested to represent and/or promote the ESD agenda in major education
and development forums, including the Copenhagen Climate Change
Conference later this year, where UNESCO is also called upon to highlight,
through ESD, the relevance and importance of education and training to climate
change issues. The Bonn Declaration also calls upon UNESCO to intensify
efforts and initiatives to put climate change education higher on the international
agenda, in the framework of the DESD, in the context of UNESCO’s strategy
for action on climate change, and as a component of UN-wide action.

At the present time, the DESD secretariat in UNESCO is actively engaged in
preparing a draft strategy for the second half of the Decade, in consultation with
key stakeholders, and these climate change-related matters as well as other vital
considerations in the Bonn Declaration will certainly be taken up in that
strategic framework.

In that regard, I can see several important aspects of both ESD and the Decade
that require an engagement with climate change issues. They might be called the
five bases of engagement: there may well be more but this is what I have come
up with:

First, the evidence base: the science of climate change has major contributions
to make to the knowledge and information – the content – that ESD contains and
transmits. This evidence base is important not only for curriculum content and teaching/learning processes but also for ESD-related advocacy.

Second, the values base – or the ethical dimension. Climate change is a challenge not only to the sustainability of our world but also to the cogency of our values and the adequacy of our codes of ethics. ESD, which is grounded upon a values approach, is very interested in this ethical debate.

Third, the emotional and attitudinal base – climate change issues can provide a particularly vivid way to explore how we feel about the changes taking place, including changes such as global warming that may seriously threaten our hopes and feed our fears about the future and about our place in the world. ESD, I believe, provides a vision and an approach that can help people make sensible choices, take more responsible decisions and withstand the temptations of passivity and hopelessness.

Fourth, the pedagogical and curricular base – climate change issues often have an urgency, vividness and immediacy that can be a stimulus to effective teaching and learning and to the design and renewal of curricula; ESD can benefit from this.

Fifth, the situational base – climate change is undoubtedly a global phenomenon but its impact and effects are highly situation-specific. In the realm of HIV and AIDS, a wise mantra is ‘know your epidemic’ and, if this were transposed to the challenges of sustainability and climate change, it would serve to highlight how imperative it is that educational responses are grounded upon situation-specific knowledge and culturally sensitive understanding. In the case of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), for example, it is vital that you ‘know your island’. It is also important to ‘know your education system’, and here I would like to mention the presence here today of David Atchoarena, the new Director of our
Division for Educational Strategies and Capacity Building, and a real expert on the education systems of SIDS.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In pointing to these contributions of climate change to ESD’s agenda, it is important that climate change is not seen as primarily ‘environmental’ – it certainly is not in terms of its perceived causes (economic development models, industrialisation, urbanisation, patterns of consumption and lifestyles, etc), nor in terms of its actual and anticipated effects, nor in terms of the means through which it may be mitigated and adapted to. Indeed, it could well be the case that climate change is a classic case for consideration through the lens of sustainable development and ESD, that is, through the dynamic interface between environmental, economic, social and cultural factors.

I notice that, apart from the title of the intersectoral platform that I manage, the agenda of this seminar does not mention the term ‘sustainable development’ or ESD. Nor, for that matter, do the terms of reference of the thematic working groups. I assume this is part of an effort to have a clear and clean look at your theme. However, given the backgrounds of the participants attending the seminar, I suspect that these dimensions will emerge in due course and find concrete expression in the discussions and outcomes of the meeting. I also notice the explicit absence of Education for All (EFA) – the Organization’s highest priority over the past several years – from your agenda, but EFA, let us recall, is not just about access to and completion of basic education but also about the quality of that education, and this is or ought to be a matter of concern to this seminar. I would make a similar point about the MDGs.

I say these things because context matters and because, one way or another, the seminar’s educational theme will come up against other education and development initiatives that are already underway and in which there has been
considerable investment by the UN system, governments and civil society organizations as well as education and development policy-makers and practitioners. How receptive will they be? And what will be the relationship between them? It is what might be called ‘the inter-adjectival question’.

Interestingly, this question came up in the report for the recent mid-Decade review of the DESD, a draft version of which was presented and discussed at the Bonn Conference. The report noted that there are many ‘adjectival educations’ which coexist and intersect and overlap: in addition to ESD and environmental education, there is a host of others: peace education, human rights education, inclusive education, citizenship education, and so on, each with a claim to their specificity and some with a claim to an all-embracing universality; each with porous boundaries and many with an ill-defined claim to superiority. This is not the place to go into their relative merits but one does hear the heartfelt cry of the desperate headmaster and the overworked teacher as yet another adjectival education arrives to be included somewhere, somehow, in the over-full curriculum. Notwithstanding my own current responsibilities, I confess to sometimes entertaining a silly thought: what if we really focused on participatory learning, critical thinking and reflective practice, and made all the adjectives purely secondary in importance?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

If one main challenge is that the very purpose of education often gets lost sight of – a one-time colleague of mine used to talk darkly of ‘smuggling learning into schooling’ – another is that our thinking and practice are trapped within disciplinary boundaries, organizational silos and, as we have seen, adjectival loyalties. In an attempt to overcome this, UNESCO has set up intersectoral platforms in several areas.
As the Manager of the Intersectoral Platform on ESD within UNESCO, it is my task to bring coherence and synergy to the Organization’s work on ESD at Headquarters, in the Institutes and in the field. I will not go into specific detail about the Intersectoral Platform on ESD and its components here. In reflecting on our experience thus far of the functioning of the Platform and on its design, I have identified three main concerns. First, there is a clear need to develop a stronger practice of interdisciplinarity and intersectorality at all levels – including better intrasectorality as far as the ED sector is concerned. Second, there are important gaps in coverage that the very concept of ESD demands, for example in relation to the economic dimension of SD and ESD. Third, there is a need for what I have in the past jokingly referred to as ‘interplatformality’, that is, how the different Intersectoral Platforms interact with one another. The presence here today of representatives of three such platforms – on climate change, ESD and SIDS – is an important opportunity to further explore how different but related platforms can work better together. The fact that we are drawn together on the theme of education relating to climate change is, for me, very encouraging and exciting.

Thank you.