Taking Bold Steps to Involve Southeast Asian Students in Saving the Future

Sustainable development has become a key and urgent issue for many societies throughout the 21st Century. This necessarily entails that we look at our world as a system that connects both space and time, transcending geographical and generational boundaries as we strive to meet and protect not just our life opportunities but those of the future generations as well. It also entails that the social, economic and environmental well-being of the people are promoted and advanced as a matter of right, ensuring everyone a life of dignity.

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The Brundtland Commission in its 1987 report “Our Common Future” defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.” There was greater appreciation of the concept on sustainability and of development, paving the way for milestone events such as the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, 1994’s International Conference on Population and Development and World Summit for Social Development, and the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development.

However, awareness of the ESD issues such as climate change, disaster risk reduction, biodiversity, poverty reduction, and sustainable consumption requires changes in the way education is practised today. People in various countries and cultures should be able to embrace the principles of sustainable development by ensuring everyone understands and relates to its issues and challenges. Therefore, it was recognized by leaders and experts that sustainability of development could only be achieved through education. Thus, at the 57th United Nations General Assembly in 2002, the UN Decade for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) was proclaimed enjoining countries to integrate education for sustainable development (ESD) into their educational systems using the International Implementation Scheme approved by the UN General Assembly in 2004 starting from 2005 until 2014.

“Leading ESD advocate Dr. Rosalyn McKeown relayed in her work in 2002 that ESD espouses four objectives.” McKeown enumerated the objectives according to their urgency. The first priority she pinpointed is the promotion of basic education which includes skills for critical-thinking, organizing and interpreting information, formulation of questions and analysis of issues affecting communities.

Reorienting the existing formal education system is given second priority since it is needed to be redirected towards teaching and learning knowledge, skills, perspectives, and values. These will enable people to pursue sustainable livelihoods, participate in democratic society and live in a sustainable manner.

A third priority is on improving public understanding and awareness about awareness of ESD concerns in order to support policies and programs initiated by governments, civil society or international development organizations. Lastly, there is a need to prioritize the training of citizens in sector-specific practices and procedures.

McKeown proposes that in order to achieve the prioritized objectives of ESD and for students to gain understanding and practice of sustainable development, the following learning components should be used as channels through which the content and delivery of curricula can be shaped:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>comprising concepts needed to help students understand ESD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Issues</td>
<td>problems affecting sustainability of the planet</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>needed practical capacities which students can use to contribute to sustainability</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perspectives</td>
<td>familiarity with various viewpoints of different stakeholders whether conflicting or concurring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>morals and ideals which a society holds essential in daily living and interaction</td>
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**Stumbling Blocks in ESD**

Southeast Asian countries have done so much to realize the goals of ESD. However, even if the whole world is nearing 2014, there are still imminent issues and challenges in promoting and practicing ESD in the region which remain as stumbling blocks to the widespread recognition and practice of sustainable development. The insufficient understanding of sustainability issues within the education community has been a nagging problem. Awareness and recognition of the importance of education to sustainability is often times found at the international and national levels. However, policymakers and educators on the ground or those in the local levels, have limited or no awareness of ESD.

Another problem is the absence of knowledge about sustainable development. Sustainable development is a continuously evolving concept spanning various
disciplines. The burden of transforming its concepts into non-overwhelming and non-confusing messages relies heavily on the conviction of educators to do so.

Other issues identified include the confusion over the proper implementation of ESD and determining how to position ESD within the overall national development blueprint of a country. Moreover, since “ESD is seen as a movement for change, it is not exclusive to government and to school leaders and teachers.” Ideally, community participation is necessary especially in implementing education for sustainability.

Lastly, “aptitudes for ESD and about sustainable development are far from adequate. In-service and pre-service teachers need the training to capacitate them as effective implementers of ESD. In addition to reorienting the overall education system to raise young people into future-conscious individuals, teacher-education itself needs a reorientation on how their professional skills are developed.”

Integrating ESD through Social Studies as a Subject

SEAMEO INNOTECH through the SEAMEO INNOTECH Regional Education Program (SIREP) produced and published a toolkit titled “Integrating Education for Sustainable Development into Secondary Education Social Studies Curriculum in Southeast Asia.” The toolkit is the result of a Regional Research Workshop on Integrating Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Concepts in the Southeast Asian Social Studies Secondary Education Curriculum held from 28 to 30 April 2010 at the SEAMEO INNOTECH in Quezon City, Philippines.

The UNESCO Curriculum Model represents a holistic model of the school curriculum (see Figure 1). It captures all the elements that shape the educational experience in schools. It is within this “universe” or “domain” that the ESD framework is to be infused, particularly in social studies as subject taught to children in both formal and non-formal education. As it is multi-disciplinary and flexible in nature, social studies is the perfect area where the ESD should be adopted primarily for the reason that it initiates socialization in societal relations; transmits facts, concepts and generalizations from academic disciplines; and it promotes reflective thinking.

The toolkit developed by SEAMEO INNOTECH focuses on the aspects of social studies curriculum in Southeast Asian secondary schools and linking these to the overall ESD scheme. The toolkit briefly discusses the background and core concepts of ESD; explains the link and consequent importance of social studies to the ESD framework; emphasizes the discussion of curriculum integration within in the Southeast Asian context; provides specific strategies, methods and activities to integrate ESD in secondary school social studies curriculum content and delivery in Southeast Asia; and helps teachers gain understanding of their role in the overall ESD framework.

Though designed as an easy yet comprehensive reference for Southeast Asian curriculum developers, school leaders and teachers who have limited time and resources to extensively study the rationale, concepts, and methodologies of integrating ESD into secondary education social studies curriculum, the toolkit is tailored to suit the needs of different school levels and subjects/courses. It also aims to inspire educators from outside the region.

Removing the Barriers: ESD Practices in Southeast Asia

The toolkit provides a glance of the progress in integrating ESD into secondary school social studies curriculum across the Southeast Asian region. The country reports
presented and discussions that took place among participants during the workshop helped SEAMEO member countries review their respective social studies secondary curricula towards integrating ESD concepts with selected content areas in order to improve their relevance.

For example, Indonesia’s progress on ESD integration shows that the core principles and values of ESD is already embedded in its national education system since 1984, while its ESD was first officially embodied in the Strategic Plans of the Department of National Education of Indonesia 2005-2009. On the other hand, its good practices include existence of school health units club, Boy Scout (Pramuka), Environmentally-friendly School Program, etc.

Malaysia for its part has drawn up a list showing the extent it has progressed in ESD integration as well as its good practices which include: establishment of Environmental Education Learning Stations, Student-Centered teaching and learning methods, Environmental Awareness Camp, River Watch Program and others.

As for the Philippines progress of ESD integration, the report of the Filipino workshop participants showed that ESD integration into social studies curriculum began in 1987 as mandated by several policies of the Department of Education. Policies on human rights, peace education, gender equality were also issued and mandated. Some of the good practices evident in the country include the development of modules and teaching exemplars on ESD concepts, capacity-building for integration of ESD concepts among others.

Common challenges emerged during workshop discussions, among them are the following:

- Minimal and superficial awareness, knowledge and understanding of ESD by educators and curriculum developers;
- Social Studies curriculum developers have limited involvement in actual ESD curriculum integration initiatives since science experts are often assigned to take lead in the task;
- Confusion as to how and where to integrate ESD principles given an overloaded curriculum;
- Environmental education is not fully integrated in formal curricula;
- Teachers do not fully imbibe the holistic and interdisciplinary scope of ESF framework and often focus only on the environmental aspect of sustainable development.

The toolkit is more than an addition to the extensive literature of ESD. It provides a step-by-step instruction for educators and school leaders to follow in raising their experience in integrating ESD in their own secondary education social studies curriculum. Though the toolkit offers specific steps from building a lesson plan to the actual day-to-day activities that may be conducted by teachers inside the classroom with the students, teachers should keep an open-mind and take their own creative steps in inspiring students to engage students to participate in sustainable development activities in their communities and infuse in them the importance of sustainable development for a better future.