

Education for Sustainable Development in the Third Millennium: The Philippine Perspective

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Introduction

Education for sustainable development is no longer an option but an imperative in the third millennium. The wanton destruction of our ecological capital and the widening gap between rich and poor, especially as it occurs between industrialised and developing nations, make a new framework for development necessary if future generations are to have a world in which they can survive. The transition to sustainable development is a process that will require the cooperation of all sectors of society, including the education sector. What, however, is sustainable development and where does education fit in?

Understanding Sustainable Development

If we are to understand sustainable development, we could be guided by the definition provided by the World Commission on Environment and Development, also known as the Brundtland Commission, which defined sustainable development as 'development which meets the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.'

Central to the concept of sustainable development is *the integration of environmental considerations in economic policy- and decision-making*. For development to be sustainable, the means must be found whereby economic development can be achieved without sacrificing environmental quality. Development cannot be sustained in conditions where a country's ecological capital--its natural wealth--has been severely depleted. Thus, economic development and environmental protection must be pursued simultaneously.

Moreover, for sustainable development to be attained, there has to be *a commitment to social equity within nations, and in this age of globalisation, among nations*. Environmental protection cannot be sustained amid

conditions of extreme poverty. The poor are often the causes of, as well as the victims of, environmental destruction. Many environmental problems such as forest loss, water and air pollution and the destruction of coral reefs, may be traced, at least in part, to such conditions as poverty, landlessness, and the lack of education, basic services and sanitary facilities. In international relations, the prohibitive cost of clean technologies to poor nations stands as one of the biggest stumbling blocks to the resolution of environmental problems, which cross national boundaries, such as air pollution and the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.

Finally, sustainable development considers not only the traditional measures of economic performance, such as GNP and per capita income, *but expands the concept of development to include the improvement of the quality of life*. The benefits of clean air and water, or conversely, the effects of the lack of these, are not usually made part of traditional economic measures. Neither is the aesthetic or practical value of a clean and beautiful environment. These, however, have to be considered if development is to be sustainable and meaningful for those who are supposed to benefit from its attainment.

The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, which was adopted by the first United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development held in June 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, lays forth 27 principles of sustainable development. Here are some principles, which are relevant to our discussion:

- Principle 4. In order to achieve sustainable development, environmental protection shall constitute an integral part of the development process and cannot be considered in isolation of it.
- Principle 5. All states and all people shall cooperate in the essential task of eradicating poverty as an indispensable requirement for sustainable development, in order to decrease the disparities in standards of living and better meet the needs of the majority of the people of the world.
- Principle 7. States shall cooperate in a spirit of global partnership to conserve, protect and restore the health and integrity of the Earth's ecosystem. In view of the different contributions to global environmental degradation, States have common but differentiated responsibilities. The

developed countries acknowledge the responsibility that they bear in the international pursuit of sustainable development in view of the pressures their societies place on the global environment and of the technologies and financial resources they command.

- Principle 8. To achieve sustainable development and a higher quality of life for all people, States should reduce and eliminate unsustainable patterns of production and consumption and promote appropriate demographic policies.
- Principle 12. States should cooperate to promote a supportive and open international economic system that would lead to economic growth and sustainable development in all countries, to better address the problems of environmental degradation.
- Principle 25. Peace, development and environmental protection are interdependent and indivisible.

The Philippine Context

Education for sustainable development must necessarily take into consideration the context in which it is placed. Like many developing countries, the Philippines faces the dilemma of how to spur economic growth without depleting its ecological capital, or, on the other hand, how to protect the environment without compromising the attainment of economic goals.

External pressures such as huge foreign debt obligations, as well as internal pressures such as massive poverty and a growing fiscal deficit, make the ‘balancing act’ of achieving sustainable development a particularly daunting one.

The Philippines finds itself right in the middle of North-South tensions, or those tensions that exist between industrialised and developing countries. The liberalisation of trade and the opening of markets have not exactly benefited developing countries. The growing perception has been that globalisation has, for the most part, benefited the United States and the countries of the European Union. In the Philippines, for instance, cheap agricultural

imports have endangered the livelihood of Philippine farmers who are already poor to begin with. Access to information is still a privilege of the rich and the powerful. That the US economy should experience an unprecedented boom at the same time that Asian economies wallow in recession does not help dispel growing anxieties over the effects of globalisation.

Internally, the Philippines is in an environmental quagmire. The alarming loss of forests, the extinction of animal and plant species, heavily polluted rivers and lakes, degraded marine ecosystems, severely eroded farmlands, the unmanageable accumulation of solid waste in large urban centers and serious air quality problems--all these form part of the Philippine environmental landscape.

The economic landscape makes the situation even more precarious. Millions live in abject poverty, deprived of educational opportunities and basic social services; they are both contributors to and victims of degraded environments. Because of ignorance or because of need, they destroy the very resources that they depend on for survival; slash-and-burn farmers, coral extractors, dynamite fishermen and the urban poor who live in settlements along riverbanks are classic examples. Meanwhile, thousands have lost their jobs since the Asian financial crisis began, even as the cost of living continues to rise.

It is in such a context that education for sustainable development should be carried out. It should focus not only on the economic and environmental problems themselves, but also on the social, political, cultural and spiritual dimensions of such problems. It should recognize and understand the complexity of today's environmental and developmental problems, and from there empower individuals with the means to address these in a non-violent way.

Education for Sustainable Development

Education for sustainable development entails building a culture among people; it is as much a matter of inculcating values and shaping attitudes as it is imparting knowledge and developing skills. Emphasis must be placed on its affective and ethical goals, which should include, at the very least, developing love, respect and a

sense of personal responsibility for nature and humanity.

In the Philippines, efforts are well underway to educate the citizenry for sustainable development. Assumption Antipolo, for instance, promotes concern for the environment through its PACEM Eco-Park, which features an ecology center, a mini-forest, a butterfly garden and butterfly museum, an aviary and wildlife sanctuary, an herbal garden and an organic farm. The school integrates environmental education in the curriculum, and environment-friendly practices are adopted on campus, especially as these relate to sustainable solid waste management and energy efficiency. Ecology camps are held for students. Seminars on ecology and creation spirituality are given to administrators and faculty. The students of the school also participate in undertakings aimed at building in them a sense of personal responsibility for the survival of the planet, such as the 'Adopt A Piece of the Planet' project, where each class takes care of a particular spot in campus.

The school's programs address not only environment concerns, but social equity as well. Students, faculty and administrators have been involved in outreach programs, which provide poor families with housing, livelihood opportunities, education and other social services. The Center for Service and Sharing provides poor residents of communities around the school with opportunities to augment their family income.

Another school at the forefront of environmental education is Miriam College, whose program called 'Public Education and Awareness Campaign for the Environment', or P.E.A.C.E., works to promote environmental concern in the school community and in communities around the school. Miriam College is home to the Environmental Education Center, which gives seminars and workshops on environmental themes and issues. The school integrates environmental education in the curriculum and offers baccalaureate degree programs in environmental science and environmental chemistry; master's programs in environmental studies, environmental management, and environmental education; and a doctorate program in environmental studies.

Other schools undertake programs to help the environment, with their most common activities being tree-planting and recycling drives.

Philippine Women's University addresses peace issues through the activities of a youth organisation called

Children and Peace Philippines, which has been working to spread a culture of peace in their schools and their communities. They have been involved in peace education and advocacy for more than 10 years now, conducting workshops with children and other young people, in an effort to replace the prevailing culture of violence with a culture of peace and hope.

While all these efforts are commendable, there is still much to be done if education for sustainable development is to be successful. Individual schools should continue efforts to transform themselves into environmentally sustainable communities through feasible solid waste management programs and energy- and resource-efficient practices in campus. If environmental considerations are to be integrated in policy- and decision-making, environmental accountability should be made an integral aspect of school life. This accountability should apply to top management, administrators, department heads, faculty, the non-teaching staff and the students, and it should also be a criterion for the assessment of individual, departmental and institutional performance.

Environmental education should be integrated in the curriculum in a way that would foster a sense of solidarity with all living creatures, and a commitment to the common good through non-violent pursuit of social equity, peace, and social justice.

In the Philippines, education for sustainable development should be able to empower individuals with the attitude and the ability to deal with conflict-of-interest situations. This may be achieved through problem-oriented teaching using an interdisciplinary approach, giving students the opportunity to examine the various aspects of problems related to environment and development. Through such an approach, students develop problem-solving skills that should serve them well once they assume positions of responsibility in government or the private sector. They also gain the ability to go beyond simplistic analyses, to examine the various, often interrelated, dimensions of problems with the aim of arriving at win-win solutions. Moreover, students acquire an understanding and appreciation of different perspectives, which, in turn, helps promote a culture of peace in the resolution of problems.

To provide such an education, most Philippine schools would have to invest in curriculum and faculty development. The curriculum should be reoriented to the problem-solving, interdisciplinary approach.

Educational strategies should be expanded, to include exposure/immersion activities, the conduct of area studies, and environmental management simulation and role-playing. At the higher education level, students in fields that have an environmental impact, such as engineering and agriculture, should be required to take courses in environmental management. Students should be encouraged to engage in extension activities to understand the various dimensions of poverty, actually experience the plight of the needy, and undertake activities to help the poor help themselves. The faculty, meanwhile, should be trained to integrate environmental education in their specific subject areas, as well as to facilitate interdisciplinary work focusing on problems related to environment and development.

In the end, the ultimate test of education for sustainable development would be the extent to which individuals adopt environmentally responsible values, attitudes, lifestyles and behaviours. Values such as peace, cooperation, and solidarity with nature and humanity, should be ingrained in every individual if sustainable development is to become a reality in the next millennium.

Challenges in the Third Millennium

Sustainable development requires individuals and societies to live within the earth's carrying capacity. Only this year, however, the world's six billionth person was born. As the global population continues to increase, so does the pressure on environment to provide for its needs.

Meanwhile, industrialised countries consume 85 percent of the world's paper, 79 percent of its steel, 85 percent of other metals and 80 percent of commercial energy (*WCED 1987*). The 20 percent of the world's population who live in industrialised countries control 86 percent of the world's gross domestic product, 82 percent of world exports, and 68 percent of foreign direct investment (*UNDP, cited in the PDI, 1999*). Consumers in industrialised countries use up 160 times more energy; 10 times more paper; 50 percent more calories, 100 percent more protein and 110 percent more fat daily; 30 times more water; 15 times more steel; and 13 times more of other metals than people in developing countries (*Troyer 1990*).

About a quarter of the estimated 4.2 billion people in the third world live without adequate food, basic education and health services (*UN 1992*). In many countries the top fifth of the population may be 10 to 20 times richer than the bottom fifth (*Philippine Institute of Alternative Futures*). While developed countries consume half of the world's food, an estimated 350 to 800 million people are undernourished (*George 1976*, cited in *Elsworth 1990*).

Under such conditions sustainable development becomes a pipe dream. Eventually, even the most industrialised countries will be dragged down by the poverty, misery and environmental destruction in poor countries. When the borders of the rich are about to burst from the pressure of the impoverished masses seeking bread and water on the other side, everyone loses. If poor countries are not assisted in an effort to address environmental problems such as air pollution and global warming, the entire world will pay.

Change, therefore, is imperative.

The Rio Declaration cites the need for international partnerships. Individual nations can no longer deal with issues related to environment and development in isolation. The idea of an interdependent, interrelated and interconnected world has already begun to gain acceptance among many people and many countries. The challenge is to translate that acceptance into actual measures that would promote economic development and protect the natural environment within individual nations and on a global scale.

For its part, education should prepare students to shape a world where the Earth and all life are respected; where the earth community in all its diversity is cared for; where free, just, participatory, peaceful and sustainable societies exist; and where the Earth's treasures are secured for the present and future generations. One of the greatest challenges to education is to break away from 'isolationist' or 'protectionist' thinking, and to promote the idea of one indivisible world, where we can all go forward as an earth community, preserving our ecological capital, promoting peace and social equity; or we can go the way we have been going thus far, depleting our resources to record impressive economic indicators, protecting a system where the rich get richer and the poor poorer. On one hand we can choose life, on the other, self-destruction.

The choice should be obvious. *