

Embracing sustainable development

MY VIEW

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REGIONAL Centre of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development (RCE-ESD) was a concept promoted by the United Nations University (UNU) in Tokyo amid attempts to understand and translate what sustainable development (SD) is all about. This was in the early 2000s when SD was still a vague and abstract idea.

In 2005, the then UN secretary-general (1938-2018), the late Kofi Annan, was quoted as saying: "Our biggest challenge in this new century is to take an idea that seems abstract - sustainable development - and turn it into a reality for all the world's people."

It was in the same year that the RCE-ESD became a reality with the establishment of seven pioneering RCEs around the world including RCE Penang, which is based in Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). Others in Asia are in Japan.

The RCEs were expected to translate SD into reality through education, that is, ESD, which is deemed to be the key in its implementation.

In so doing it must be transformational in substance, such that SD awareness is heightened enabling SD to be practised and eventually becoming a "new" way of life for the rest of the 21st century and beyond. This part somehow has been missed in most education systems worldwide as they

pursue business (literally)-as-usual approaches at the expense of ESD, thus the future. This is because there is no unlearning taking place, and thus there is zilch "relearning" of ways that we could be aligned to the implementation of SD across the community. There is no colearning as well, which is necessary in taking into account local indigenous knowledge and wisdom - which are generally "sustainable" in nature because of the closeness between the community and nature then.

Members of the community, more often than not, are acquainted to their local traditions, decorum and heritages, which were nurtured over centuries and generations.

All these make the concept of RCE an interesting one since it upholds and respects what is available locally and assimilates it into mainstream knowledge to be recognised as yet another source of legitimate knowledge that has been marginalised for a long time, especially with the advent of colonialisation of learning and education.

Otherwise, SD is made less "abstract" because it can be easily identified by the locals as part of their own traditions and framed meaningfully within their context.

For example the concept of "sejahtera" and "budi" is very much attuned to SD but now is almost lost in the practice of it all despite the words being bandied around without any deeper appreciation at all.

More than that, each RCE has therefore its own uniqueness given the varying traditions and cultural context. In fact this is one of the outstanding features of the RCE

where diversity is celebrated and widening even more participation across the global community.

It is not surprising therefore to find that there are now close to 200 RCEs in all continents within a span of some 10 years. Each of them is networked to other associations and organisations (including botanical gardens, zoos, museums) that are deeply involved in promoting and enhancing the implementation of SD across the board.

One very distinct feature of RCEs (unlike the “stereotype” conventional institutions of higher learning) is that it is not a one-size-fits-all model and that it is very closely linked to the local community working hand in glove to bring SD back into communal activities so that future generations are better adapted to ESD and their social responsibilities.

In other words, it does not have to adopt “foreign” ideas (even so-called “experts” or “consultants” – often with exorbitant “fees”) when it is incompatible with local values, traditions and norms that have a tendency of being hegemonic by asserting what is deemed as a “new” form of colonialism as the prime minister warned recently.

More ironic when the ideas (or consultants) are known to fail in transforming their country of origin; yet have the audacity to claim otherwise away from home.

It is here that Malaysia has some good news to celebrate when just last week the country’s top private university – UCSI University (note the “S” stands for “sustainability”) had been acknowledged by

the UNU as the fourth RCE-ESD in Malaysia. The first three are USM, UM and UTM in that order – all are public universities located in the Peninsular.

This makes the UCSI’s RCE rather special, being the first Malaysian private university and located in Sarawak. And together all four RCEs form a formidable consortium to move ESD, especially at the tertiary level, linking it to numerous communities that support one another in all matters related to SD at the most basic level, not forgetting schools.

In doing so, the entire community and the nation will be more ready to embrace SD development as envisaged some 40 years ago.

In 1968 for example, Unesco organised the first intergovernmental conference aimed at reconciling environmental and development, in what we now call SD, that is inspired by the local context and nuances.

In so doing we are reliving the aspirations of former secretary-general Kofi Annan as quoted above, especially as an attribute to the only black person to hold the position (1997-2006), who passed away recently at the age of 80 after a short illness.

He will be remembered as the main “driver” for ESD and will be sorely missed. May he rest in peace, as ESD thrives on, without exception in Malaysia under New Malaysia.

With some four decades of experience in education, the writer believes that “another world is possible”. Comments: letters@thesundaily.com