

## Learning, unlearning and re-learning

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

Comment

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IT had been a successful 5th World Environment Education Congress that ended in Montreal last week.

What started as a small gathering of a concerned group of 350 people on the state of the world environment in Espinho, Portugal, in 2003, drew more than 2,000 participants, representing virtually all disciplines and activities, in Montreal.

It has gained momentum as a social movement, registering its presence in matters about the environment, and, at the same time calling to question what has gone terribly wrong.

The impact of this can be felt from the very outset of one of the keynote addresses entitled, "Life, the great challenge. The world is not a commodity", presented by renowned political scientist and economist Richardo Petrella.

What is interesting though is the context of the world today, which Petrella put it as "violent, with more than 2.8 billion people living in abject poverty, another 1.7 billion living in shanty towns, more than 2.6 billion without proper sanitation".

Yet, as we know it today, this is perhaps just the tip of the iceberg. What with the state of the world's economy, it can only get worse.

As the speaker puts it, we are heading towards a "global crisis" when everything that is associated with life, including life itself, are being commoditised.

Mother Earth, in short, has become an asset to be hoarded for the benefit of the strong.

He also lamented that "scientific and technological advances seemed to have done little more than devastate our planet's ecosystems".

This was underlined by another keynote speaker, Stephen Lewis, who highlighted the ultimate consequences on humanity, focusing on the interconnection of health, social justice and poverty in the context of global climate change.

"Humanity is conducting an unintended, uncontrolled, globally pervasive experiment whose ultimate consequences could be second only to a global nuclear war," he said.

Lewis chaired the first international conference on climate change which drafted the first comprehensive policy on global warming.

Such was the tone set for the Congress where vibrant discussions, workshops, presentations (oral and posters), alongside movies and exhibitions, were conducted in three languages over a four-day period.

The topics ranged from a whole series of discussions themed on "Ecologising colleges and universities", showcasing examples from all over the world, including Malaysia, to one themed as "Art: Imagination, creativity and meaning".

The latter created an extended space for an important discussion in education about the environment and sustainability.

Yet, the arts have been shown to provide better communication and outreach to a wider audience who will otherwise remain oblivious to the issues at hand.

Some were mundane issues, for example, about shade-grown coffee.

This project in Mexico involving coffee producers, to whom millions of consumers owe thanks to, yet unaware of the significance of shade-grown coffee, is as an excellent example of sustainable agriculture of great relevance to the environment as well as the economy.

The Congress was informed that coffee planted under the shade of trees kept and protected many species that were found in the area.

It was suggested that many of these species are endemic, threatened, rare or in danger of extinction.

On the other hand, "interaction among species balances in such a way that coffee plantations do not need pesticides or fertilisers".

By consuming shade-grown coffee, one not only helps in promoting sustainability but also compensates the producers in rural communities, economically.

The message is to insist on shade-grown coffee all the time, which will have a very far-reaching impact.

After all, ecology and economy as well as education is becoming more and more intertwined.

Ultimately, to paraphrase Petrella, we have to learn to reconstruct our society into one that is capable of valuing life, the life of all of the planet's inhabitants.

This is possible only when we recognise that the right to life belongs to all of the Earth's inhabitants. It is a globally-shared good, not just for anyone's enterprise based on might.

This argument is further substantiated in yet another series of rich discussions themed, "Indigenous knowledge and practices", and another "Ethics, environmental thoughts and worldwide".

In all, the Congress is a window to a world of complexities that turns the cliché of "learning, unlearning and re-learning" into one vast opportunity in shaping the world of tomorrow.

\* The writer is the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia. He can be contacted at [vc@usm.my](mailto:vc@usm.my)

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