

## Save our planet for the next generation

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RESEARCHERS and practitioners from the region converged on Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang for a conference on Education for Sustainable Development (EfSD) last week.

Sponsored by the Association of Southeast Asian Institutions of Higher Learning, the conference reiterated Asean's Vision 2020 for a clean and green region with fully established mechanisms for sustainable development.

It also aims to protect the region's environment, the sustainability of its natural resources and the high quality of life of its people.

Towards this end, Asean has put in place a number of plans directed at tackling environmental issues in the region, as reflected in several ministerial declarations.

These include the Manila Declaration on the Asean Environment (1981), Bangkok Declaration on the Asean Environment (1984), Singapore Resolution on Environment and Development (1992), Bandar Seri Begawan Resolution on Environment and Development (1994) and the Kota Kinabalu Resolution on the Environment (2000).

This is the effort of the five-year Asean Environmental Education Action Plan (AEEAP) which ended in 2005.

The effort is to make citizens environmentally literate, imbued with environmental ethics, willing and capable to ensure the sustainable development of the region through environmental education and public participation efforts.

The AEEAP supports collaboration among EE programmes (national and regional), survey, consultation, brainstorming and workshops.

The plan recommends appropriate strategies and actions to boost knowledge and awareness, and mechanisms to promote networking and collaboration within the region.

More recently, Asean came up with the Hanoi Plan of Action to enhance public information, education and awareness for participation in environment and sustainable development issues.

To date, it has carried out an inventory database programme which seeks to record EE activities in the region.

Comprehensive EE information for the public and requests for information on ongoing and planned activities/programmes in member countries are among its objectives.

In addition, it holds various stakeholders' workshops to integrate and prioritise national activities, develop programmes for the target areas, and ensure that partners as well as stakeholders are actively involved in future regional activities.

Although education on the environment was started very early in Asean, it is still short on EfSD.

In the attempt to create the appropriate strategies and actions to boost knowledge and awareness, the effort is still focused on the environment, be it nationally or regionally, despite AEEAP's mention about sustainable development.

In other words, Asean is very much locked into a conventional form of economic development with little emphasis on sustainable development except for a couple among the Asean member states, for example the National Council on Sustainable Development.

Still, as to how effective such a council has been is unclear. For Malaysia, the approach is not well coordinated according to an assessment conducted in 2003 based on Agenda 21.

In some cases, sustainable development is not even addressed. This is due in a number of constraints, namely, limitation in human resources and expertise such as teachers, trainers and material developers.

Until some of these are addressed effectively at the national as well as Asean level, it will not be easy to implement EfSD comprehensively in the foreseeable future.

It is, therefore, important that institutions of higher education in the region take the lead to advance the cause

of EfSD at all levels: formal, informal and non-formal.

This will lend credibility and relevance to EfSD, especially when sufficient reward and recognition is put in place for the institutions or faculty members who undertake EfSD.

One way to mitigate the situation is by establishing Regional Centres of Expertise on Education (RCE) for Sustainable Development, a novel concept initiated by the United Nations University in Tokyo.

RCE is charged with the responsibility to develop long-term programmes towards EfSD. To date, there are less than 10 RCE globally.

The centre in the Asean region is based at Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Each is intended to be the prime mover for the region by forging all-round links involving organisations from "A" (arboretum) to "Z" (zoo), including schools and industrial training centres.

Only through such efforts can sustainable development be embedded into mainstream national programmes in Asean and beyond. And, at the same time, saving the planet for the future generations.

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