

Don't betray future generations

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FOLLOWING the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's call for an education revolution in January 2003, and veteran educationist Tan Sri Murad Mohamad Noor recently using the analogy of changing to a new shirt to describe what the education system needs, another similar call was made last week.

This time it came from no less than the Director-General of Unesco himself at the Asia-Pacific Regional launch of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development at Nagoya University, Japan, on June 28.

Concurrently, Unesco together with the United Nation University organised a two-day international conference on "Sustaining the Future — Globalisation and Education for Sustainable Education".

In his keynote address, he described the new challenge of integrating Education for Sustainable Development (EfSD) into the mainstream education system.

Indeed, he regarded EfSD as the vehicle for educational change and mobilisation which is long overdue.

In fact, EISD is no less revolutionary in that the current conventional education system is deemed inadequate to safeguard the well-being of the ailing planet.

And thus the need for a revolution.

What is EfSD? Unesco described it as a "dynamic and expansive undertaking that envisions a world where every person has the chance to benefit from educational opportunities and to learn the lifestyles, behaviours and values necessary to create a sustainable future".

EfSD is for everyone, at all stages of life and in all possible learning contexts.

It engages multiple sectors and stakeholders — including the media and the private sector — and utilises all forms and methods of raising public awareness, education and training to promote a broad understanding of sustainable development.

More specifically, it addresses the three pillars of society, environment and economy.

It is important to reiterate that addressing issues on environment and/or economy alone is not regarded as EfSD. On the contrary, one of the challenges is to move education on environment and/or economy *per se* to EfSD.

In addition, seven interlinked strategies are proposed for the promotion and implementation of EfSD throughout the decade (2005 to 2014).

These are advocacy and vision-building; consultation and ownership; partnership and networks; capacity-building and training; research, and innovation; information and communication technologies; and monitoring and evaluation.

The proposal for establishing the Decade of EfSD was endorsed at the World Summit for Sustainable Development in 2002. Unesco was endorsed by the UN General Assembly as the lead agency.

The international launch for EfSD was done by the UN Secretary-General in March.

At one point, he was quoted as saying, "Our biggest challenge in this new century is to take an idea that sounds abstract—sustainable development — and turn it into reality for the world's people."

In other words, until and unless there are some concrete examples of how sustainable development can make a difference, little change will be forthcoming, if at all.

In this regard, the rector of the United Nation University (UNU) rightly pointed out that until recently, the role of education was not very well articulated, although sustainable development has been high on the political agenda since the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.

To make it worse, neither was education defined as one of the major stakeholder groups in the UN Commission on Sustainable Development process, according to the UNU rector.

Of the nine major stakeholders identified, education was somehow left out.

All these make the Decade of EfSD even more pertinent in filling the gaps that have been neglected for more than a decade now.

Otherwise, the future for the coming generations will be bleak indeed.

Or as often quoted from the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987), or commonly referred to as the Brundtland Report: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

Simply put, we are on this Earth as guardians, to keep it in hold for future generations.

We have no right to exploit it to the extent we have today. Because by doing so we will forever compromise the ability of the future generation to meet their needs.

In other words, to a large extent, our model of development has been unsustainable, more often than not accompanied by greed of the individual, rather than serve community interest.

For Malaysia, the concept of sustainable development is all-important because too often the many tragic incidences that occur in our society are clear reflections of an unsustainable approach towards development.

Unfortunately to date, not much has been done and some sustainability indicators in Ecological Footprint of Nations (2004) suggest that Malaysia may be living beyond her means.

This is an early warning that we may be living outside the regenerative and absorptive capacity of our part of the Earth. To put the situation right, EfSD must be high on the national agenda.

This includes dealing with issues such as knowledge systems, including learning local and indigenous knowledge, and integrating traditional technologies with modern ones, and that of cross-cutting issues such as sustainable futures and production and consumption.

All these are the voids that must be urgently filled if EfSD is to be realised for the good of the nation.

Failure to realise it will be a betrayal of the future generation.

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