

INTERVIEW

Teaching happiness

Academic Sombath Somphone wants a rethink of education systems, with an input from students, as Asean countries prepare to come together in 2015

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There is no stopping academic Sombath Somphone from voicing opinions on issues close to his heart _ in this instance the need for Asean to focus on sustainable education as it prepares for the Asean Economic Community in 2015.



The Laos-born recipient of the 2005 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership is currently executive director of the Participatory Development Training Centre in Vientiane.

With degrees in education and agriculture from the University of Hawaii, Sombath's achievements to date have largely focused on the betterment of his people – including the Rice-Based Integrated Farm System Project to assist local farmers gain food security, and the founding of PADETC, a pioneering non-profit entity designed to foster sustainable and self-sufficient development in Laos.

Life caught up with the soft-spoken educator while he was in Bangkok to attend the Asian Public Intellectuals Regional Project Culminating Event.

He spoke passionately about the direction education needs to go to take advantage of the coming together of Asean in three years.

“Asean leaders have to focus on improving education in the region to make this union a constructive one.

“However, the road to achieving this does not look bright if we are to judge by the political will of Asean leaders, who are more interested in following such unsustainable patterns of development based on economic growth,” he said. “They also don't see the need for a fresh approach to education, which might go against what they are used to.

“Unless there is a major crisis, people will not wake up to the realisation that our education system needs a total overhaul. Today's schooling system is too slow and traditional. The focus should not solely be on academics.

“We have to recognise a student's individual abilities and talents. Everyone has it, it's just schools don't capitalise on the differences that are found amongst the student body. We have to let people excel according to their own abilities and talents, which can develop at any age. Sadly, we have not been taught to self-assess, which I believe is worth taking the time to invest in. The younger the student, the easier it is to find and develop their innate talents and skills.”

Sombath advocates the need to have youth involved in the direction education should be taking. He said it is critical to get their viewpoints because they are the future of

the country, and have the right to voice their thoughts via such channels as social media and public forums. It is the responsibility of people in authority to listen.

Today's students need to be supported and encouraged to share their opinions, said the concerned Magsaysay recipient, who has designed new child-focused lesson plans for primary schools in Laos. As an experienced educator, Sombath said regional events such as the Ninth Asia Europe Summit Meeting, which Laos will host at the end of this year, are forums that can be used to gauge the pulse of today's youth and understand what they want from their education system. During the lead up to this people's forum, there have been public gatherings in Lao provinces to gather ideas from various segments of society, especially the youth on how they want to map their future. He hopes to encourage more countries to practise this.

Innate intelligence, according to Sombath, should be stimulated when children are young. Having researched the issue, he said youngsters can learn as many as eight languages simultaneously prior to reaching puberty.

Unfortunately, the current education system is such that students don't learn a foreign language until they are about 12, which is not a brain-based approach.

It is regrettable, he lamented, that most parents leave education to schools and progress to development planners and then wonder why students coming out of educational institutions seldom link what they learn with what they do in life. Sombath said educators should be focusing on the connection between economy, spiritual well-being, nature and society as the fundamental building blocks of sustainability and happiness, adding that how one lives and educates himself and his family dictates the future of his loved ones.

"Our education system is not doing its job and should be put in criminal court," the amiable community leader joked. "A sustainable education and development model should have a balance between the four pillars _ economic development, environmental harmony, promotion and preservation of culture, and spiritual well-being.

"The model of development I propose was first initiated in Bhutan."

The goal of development cannot hinge on just how well the GNP (gross national product) is advancing, but also on improvement in people's well-being, also known as

gross national happiness (GNH). In this model, education is conceptualised as the foundation.

“The aforementioned four pillars represent various dimensions of development and are an anchored part of the education process. Education and development in an ecological, holistic manner are interconnected, both are inter-dependent and supportive of each other.

“Of course, at the base of the model is good governance, which promotes justice and fairness for everyone through the rule of law.