

“Inter-connectedness” for “Happiness Together”

A recipient of the 2005 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership, Sombath Somphone is currently executive director of the Participatory Development Training Center (PADETC) in Vientiane. After earning degrees in education and agriculture from the University of Hawaii, he returned to Laos in 1980 and launched the Rice-Based Integrated Farm System Project, to help Laotian farmers achieve food security. In 1996, Sombath founded PADETC, a pioneering non-profit organization designed to foster sustainable and self-reliant development in Laos. Recently he was invited to API Regional Workshop in Chiang Mai as Keynote Speaker on “The Force of Inter-connectedness” and shared with API more thoughts regarding the concept of “Inter-connectedness” and its relation to the ASEAN Community.



KEY ISSUES IN ASIA:

What are the key challenges of the ASEAN or the Southeast Asia region?

There is a lack, or very weak, connection between education and development. The two are being implemented in separate silos. The first challenge is the low quality and low relevance of the way we practice education. The second is that the development pattern being practiced is unsustainable and emphasizes economic growth at the expense of other key aspects of the quality of life. These key problems were inherited from the first world and have been repeated right up till the current globalized age.

What should be our priorities from your point of view?

Being part of the world's new center of economic gravity, Southeast Asia region should prioritize on how to take leadership in re-designing education and development of its society to meet the challenges of the 21st century. This will require strong political will and “out of the box” thinking that focuses on holistic/humanistic development rather than just growth measured largely in terms of economic indicators. Our education approach also needs to be transformed to anticipate the real needs of future generations. And the substance of this education should support sustainable development of our societies— more balances in economic and social development with environmental harmony, and spiritual and cultural well-being.

SHARED VISION:

What should be a shared vision of the region?

Our shared vision should promote our region as livable rather than just wealthy and technologically-advanced. We should focus on creating healthy, inclusive, just and sustainable livelihoods for all, giving space especially to greater participation by young people and civil society. We shouldn't just blindly copy the models of the developed world; rather we should work towards building societies which should stress compassion, peace, generosity, openness over competition and greed and self-interest. We should also give greater space to the development of a vibrant and responsible social media as a way of communicating, continuously educating and connecting the young and the old on issues affecting human security and global sustainability.

We should encourage our industries and corporations to seriously take on corporate social responsibility beyond “window dressing”. We should promote environmental sustainability and healthy lifestyles rather than mindless and abusive consumption of goods and services which are socially and environmentally detrimental for future generations. Fair trade principles should always be in practice for local producers.

THE ASEAN COMMUNITY (effective in 2015):

Is ASEAN the right body for regional development and cooperation since it was actually founded on the basis of economic cooperation?

The ASEAN Community has the potential to strengthen its bargaining power with bigger countries. If managed well, it can play a leadership role in shaping a more appropriate education and development model to meet the challenges of the 21st century. This means that ASEAN needs to operate beyond economic cooperation and trade. It also has to be a strong supporter/promoter of enhanced “quality of life” for its citizens with opportunities for all to receive relevant and holistic education and enjoy sustainable and just livelihoods. And it has to do so in a very

participatory way with strong civil society and representation from all social groups, including our youth, women and minority groups.

How should Laos prepare itself for the ASEAN Community and what should be its main concern?

As a relatively new member of the ASEAN Community, Laos should not be passive. Laos should lobby not only on economic and trade issues, but for greater cooperation in human resource and social development as Laos still lags behind in these areas compared to its more developed ASEAN counterparts.

Laos should not allow its ASEAN partners just to view the country as a source for short-term natural resource extraction to feed the industrial development needs of its neighbors. Rather, Laos' leaders should be more strategic and encourage ASEAN investors to view the natural richness of Laos as the community's common heritage deserving of appropriate protection and sustainable utilization to benefit the entire community and for future generations.

GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS INDEX (GNH):

Although the world has seen how an unbalanced development can impact adversely on the environment and the quality of life, economic growth is still the highest target in many countries. There are a lot of irresistible pressures to keep us focusing on profit maximization. How do we steer a country working towards Gross National Happiness instead?

Changing our way of education and development would shift the development paradigm from focusing on the GNP to GNH. A number of far-sighted political leaders and academics from the region are already interested in moving development beyond GNP to higher levels of GNH. There should be increased sharing of experiences and lessons learned, and communication between those leaders and intellectuals working on promoting GNH. There should also be more forum and discussions on GNH involving all sectors of society such as public, private, civil society, young people, educators, intellectuals, faith leaders, community leaders ...so that the concepts of GNH can become mainstreamed. In this way, people can really express and share what they think are important in their lives and what constitutes their well-being and happiness, beyond economic issues.

At the same time, developing countries should also learn from lessons from the developed countries, especially in analyzing the problems and limitations of development stressing mainly economic growth.

Who are the far-sighted political leaders and academics from the region who are already interested in moving development beyond GNP?

Obviously, Bhutan is the world pioneer in happiness policy and has used the Gross National Happiness (GNH) index as an alternative to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) since the 1970s. In the last ten years there have been three international conferences on GNH, organized by the Centre of Bhutan Studies, which have been well attended and have showcased happiness-focused policies across Asia and the world.

Others include The School for Well-Being, an independent and multi-disciplinary think tank inspired by the concept of GNH. It was established in 2011 with three founding partners—Chulalongkorn University; the Center of Bhutan Studies; and Sathirakoses Nagapradipa Foundation in Thailand.

Do you agree with the argument that only small countries like Bhutan can achieve the GNH approaches? Perhaps it depends on a particular background or core value on how the citizens weigh the importance of heritage/tradition conservation vs. economic growth?

Yes, I do agree that small countries will stand a good chance to successfully adopt GNH at the beginning. But as competition for limited natural resources intensifies globally and as cultural diversity and biodiversity become more threatened, countries will have to shift their development paradigm.

Happiness is not only a concept considered by small countries. The positive psychology movement which originated in the USA and Canada already regularly measures national subjective well-being. In 2009, French President Nicolas Sarkozy commissioned leading academics Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen and Jean-Paul Fitoussi to report on the potential advantages and challenges of including well-being considerations in national policy. Following the recommendations of this report, that subjective well-being should be systematically measured and should inform policy development, United Kingdom Prime Minister David Cameron—supported by leading happiness economist Baron Richard Layard—announced that the Office of National Statistics would include measures of subjective well-being in regular surveys. A consultation to decide the exact indicators to be used will be concluded in January 2012. Therefore, while acknowledging that it may be easier for smaller countries to consider GNH and that there are still many questions about the accuracy and effectiveness of such broad-scale national measures, it seems that even bigger countries are beginning to take happiness seriously.

INTER-CONNECTEDNESS:

How do we encourage people from different backgrounds and areas to feel the inter-connectedness?

Inter-connectedness starts with acquiring habits of critical thinking. This must be re-enforced with experiential learning and real life exposure. There are many tools that educators are already using to promote such habits. And we need to use all of our 5 (or even 6) senses to promote deep learning that reaches into our conscious and sub-conscious mind in order to bring about the needed change in behavior of connectedness and inter-connectedness. Some schools are already using holistic or enquiry-learning methods to encourage self-discovery and holistic learning. This should be scaled up and integrated into all curricular subjects in the entire education system.

How to we enhance the understanding among the people of different background and geographical origin that we are all inter-connected and to make them feel we are all in the same boat?

When we shift to GNH or when people feel that they need to shift away from GDP, people will try to understand the reasons why. This is voluntary inter-connectedness.

When crises increasingly take place due to climate change, for example, people will come together and become more caring and sharing. This is a forced inter-connectedness. The question I have to ask us all is that “Should we wait till an ecological crisis hits before we wake up?” Our intelligence or even common sense could do better than that.

HOLISTIC EDUCATION & DEVELOPMENT:

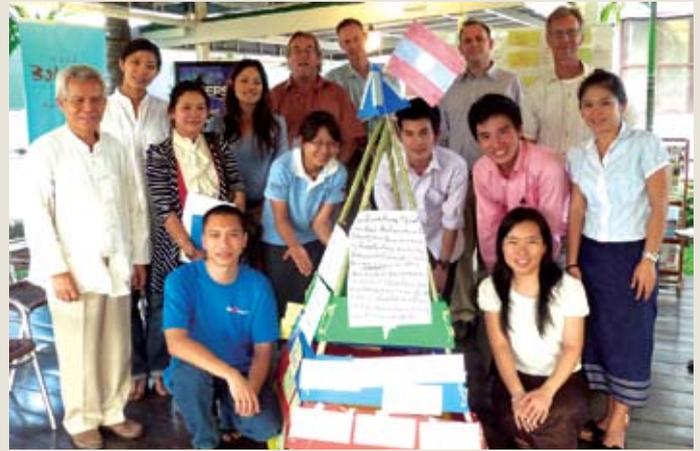
Why is holistic education which you strongly support so important? How far are Southeast Asian countries in reaching this goal?

Southeast Asian countries are very far from reaching the goal of holistic education or education for sustainable development. Our education systems do not adequately promote justice, peace and sustainability. We will require some major transformation before we can implement a holistic and sustainable education.

The most effective way of bringing about holistic education is the participation of young people in designing the future of our education and pattern of development. Young people themselves are more open-minded to new ideas and behaviors and should take ownership in designing their own future. We, adults, are not their future. We, adults, have broken the world. And we do not know how to fix it. So let the young people work on it. We can use our wisdom, not greed, and compassion to guide and mentor them.

How is the concept of holistic education in your definition and practice different from those of pioneers such as Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner?

It is pretty much the same in terms of child-centered approaches and pedagogy. Our practice of holistic education additionally offers inter-connectedness, experiential learning using all 5 senses to communicate



Sombath and his colleagues

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with the brain, and a bias towards action and real-world application; children learn that school and life or “the real world” are the same, and that not only are they responsible custodians of their community and environment but they are also agents of change and possess the power to make a difference.

All the teaching styles discussed here are designed to help the development of the “whole” child. As I understand it, Montessori focuses particularly on the intellect whilst Steiner focuses on creativity and spiritual development. I think our style focuses particularly on the children's role within their community and the relationship they have with those around them.

ROLE OF INTELLECTUALS

What can intellectuals do to support inter-connectedness?

There is so much to learn from the recent series of economic crisis, natural calamity and climate change. Intellectuals and educators should connect these events to their personal/ individual ways of life as well as to the larger collective ways of life. Each and every one of us can make a difference, either positively or negatively.

Concretely, intellectuals and educators should focus more on making education more holistic as well as re-directing development towards a more balance and sustainable path-way. They should view themselves as partners in learning and development with their students and young people who look up to them for inspiration and as role models. They should use their various skills and efforts to work hand-in-hand with the state, private sector, and civil society to promote human security and global sustainability. To be effective the intellectuals and educators should also learn to communicate in simple language and to demonstrate by concrete example rather than just theorizing. In other words, we have to focus more on practicing and less “intellectualizing”.

PADETC CONTRIBUTION IN THE FUTURE

As you are the founder of the Participatory Development Training Centre (PADETC), please share your organizational vision for the next 10-20 years.

PADETC's priority is to work at a national level, particularly in sharing its experience among the Mekong countries. We have started engaging teachers and young people in designing practical learning activities. These will improve the quality and relevance of education, especially towards a more sustainable development. We will continue to work with and learn from communities and facilitate the sharing of indigenous knowledge and wisdom in schools and communities. We will document such processes on film and in simple publications to share with other communities in Laos and with the region. At the same time PADETC will develop more learning centers to promote organic agriculture, community forestry, community libraries and small business enterprises operated by local communities. ❖

Chadapan Malipan