Planning Environmental Communication and Education: Lessons from Asia

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Background

The Asian region is undergoing rapid, although very uneven, economic development. A challenge is to have care of the environment an integral concern in this development process. The advantage is that prevention can be cheaper than repairing, cleaning, or restoring damaged areas or diminished human health.

Throughout the world, businesses are finding that they can actually increase their profits by reviewing their production processes so as to reuse or recycle waste and energy. Tourism contributes much to many Asian economies, and is very inter-dependent with environmental quality. Caring for the environment makes good business sense.

The issue of protecting the environment as a basis of development was the subject of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) that was held at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992. Building appreciation for the environment in all sectors of the society is a challenge for education and communication and was recognised as important in Agenda 21, the blueprint for action from UNCED.

Why this publication?

This publication reports on what Asian Ministries for the Environment are doing in partnership with other government ministries, NGOs and the
media in regard to educating people to consider the environment in their actions. It draws on case studies presented for a workshop organised by IUCN, UNEP and UNESCO in Bangkok in July 1996.

This publication, rather than providing full case studies from the workshop, provides extracts of policies, strategies and tactics in education and communication. It is intended that the material and the suggestion for a national workshop might trigger further national action on the strategic use of communication and education. In addition, the publication provides arguments for using communication and education as instruments of policy in order to help countries advance their own planning for environmental education and communication.

**Why a workshop?**

Since UNCED many countries in the region have developed a strategy for environmental protection or sustainable development. Undoubtedly a strategy's success will depend on how many people agree to it and are willing to cooperate in implementing it: in other words, how well communication and education play a role with other instruments in the process of strategy preparation and implementation.

As the UN would review progress five years after Rio in 1997, it seemed opportune to take stock of Asian national progress, and determine how to better provide support to education and communication in the region.

The IUCN Commission on Education and Communication CEC has organised similar regional workshops in Europe and Latin America with UNESCO and UNEP. These fora have allowed a common agenda for regional action to be developed and have contributed the voice of the practitioner to international action plans. All revealed that environmental education and communication are not high on the political agenda, and suffer from limited resources.

A similar problem was foreshadowed in Asia by the report, "State of the Environment in Asia and Pacific," 1995 (p.580), which stated: "Within the limited resources available, considerable progress has been made in the region in promoting environmental education and awareness. However, the need for more investments for education, awareness and communication on environment and development cannot be over-emphasised. As it is, most education and communication activities are starved of funds. The financial allocations for the purpose are minuscule in comparison to investments made in, for instance, infrastructure development. Yet enhanced awareness and greater public understanding of environment and development issues would be vital for the success of all other development programmes being pursued with much large investments. In other words, education and communication are akin to insurance policies to secure the future.

**The Asian workshop**

Participants from 17 countries, including some 80 people, were welcomed by the Regional Director of UNEP, Dr. Suvit Yodmani, the Regional Director of UNESCO, Mr. V. Ordonez and Professor Le Quy An, IUCN Councillor. The workshop was inaugurated by the then Deputy Prime Minister of Bangkok His Excellency Mr. Samak Sundaravej, who emphasised the importance of communication to stimulate partnerships to achieve sustainable development.

In a keynote, the chair of CEC presented what is meant by strategic use of communication and education, followed by brief reports from regional workshops in Europe and Latin America on strategic planning of communication and education.

Representatives from Ministeries/Departments of Environment from India, Mongolia, Hong Kong, Thailand, Pakistan, Bhutan, Maldives, Sri Lanka and the Philippines reported on their communication and education strategies and two Ministries of Education, Malaysia and Nepal, reported on environmental education integration in formal education.

International agencies, including UNESCO, UNEP and IUCN, explained their work in the region, along with regional organisations such as ESCAP, WWF and SASEANEE (IUCN Commission on Education and Communication Asian network).

The workshop considered in two parallel streams a series of case studies from NGOs and media that related to lessons learned in partnerships with government. Five groups subsequently met to discuss the lessons learned from the series of cases and from their own experience.

These were shared in a plenary session and became the basis for discussion in making recommendations. On the third day, participants addressed an obstacle currently impending their progress. Through a process of
questioning, participants were able to explore the causes of the obstacle and offer each other advice about the ways to overcome it.

Finally, the participants met in three separate working groups composed of governments, NGOs and international agencies, to formulate recommendations for further action. These recommendations were reported to the plenary. In concluding, participants, collaborating partners LTNESCO, UNEP and the Netherlands government were thanked for their support.

Observations

A key issue for many countries in the region is to integrate environment into development policy, and to use communication and education in an integrated way as an instrument of policy. There is a tendency to focus on formal school education target groups, by both governments and NGOs, rather than addressing groups who can make a difference in a policy issue.

One weakness is a tendency to decide on communication media (e.g., to make a TV program, or a poster) without thinking through the issues and the results wanted first. Lessons learned from the cases point to the need for more in-depth analysis of the situation before planning the communication strategy, and to involve the target group in the preparation of the strategy. Much more is to be done to draw on what people know and to integrate this with governmental information. People, it was stated, have a right to be informed on public decisions and interventions.

Awareness doesn't go far enough. Hong Kong's litter campaign has not had the desired behavioural change and participation. The Maldives showed that giving a credible story is only a first step. Before people will change they need to see examples of others making changes, as happened when schools offered to play a role in collecting waste out of the islands. To reinforce this action, supportive structures to collect the waste and take it to pick up points had to be organised so that the new practices became institutionalised. In the end the result was a win-win situation, with the airlines contributing to solving a problem induced by tourism, having a more responsible and greener tourism image, and the islands being able to reduce waste disposal sites on the islands.

As the example shows, to be successful we need to co-operate. According to the task this can be within government sectors, with educational institutes, the media, NGOs, community groups, Chambers of Commerce, corporations, small businesses, farmers groups and individuals. All can play a role in educating their constituencies as well as incorporating environmental concerns into their policies and practices.

Good communication is a cornerstone of co-operation and partnerships as a shared vision, as common objectives and approaches are negotiated. By involving representatives of key sectors to define the objectives, strategy and the approach, you can build ownership, a culturally appropriate way of working, and more commitment to action. Mutual benefits and respect are essential as are clear responsibilities, roles and accountability for successful partnerships.

Finally, participants suggested that international organisations should become more coordinated in their work in education and communication, as duplication and overlaps occur. They were cautioned against imposing their policies and priorities at implementation level, and to work more with NGOs and be more responsive to the grassroots.

The full recommendations and lessons learned are in the appendix of this publication.

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