

The Force of Inter-connectedness

10th API Regional Workshop
Sombath Somphone

It is a real honor and pleasure for me to be here addressing all of you – the leaders, thinkers, and educators of the region. I am really overwhelmed by the fact that the organizers want me to give the keynote address, as I think there are many more famous, wise and experienced people in this workshop who could do this much better than I. Anyway, let me just throw out a few thoughts as points for discussion to be taken up at later sessions as we ponder over such important issues as the Globalization of Culture and its Implications for Asian Regional Transformation.

If we look back over the last 2-3 decades, we must acknowledge that there has been amazing advances in technological and industrial development, and with globalization, many of such advances have spread even to many parts of the less developed world. In general more people are living longer and enjoying more affluent life styles. Unprecedented advances have been made in agriculture and aquaculture, yet more people go to bed hungry each day. Many nations have become very powerful, but the world has become ever more insecure.

Now with 7 billion habitants, we begin to be concerned if we are overshooting the carrying capacity of the earth. The urban population has now overtaken that of the rural. The gaps between the have and have-not continue to widen. Climate change resulting from industrial pollution is threatening the life-support system of planet earth. Everyone wants to make more money, and everything is monetized.

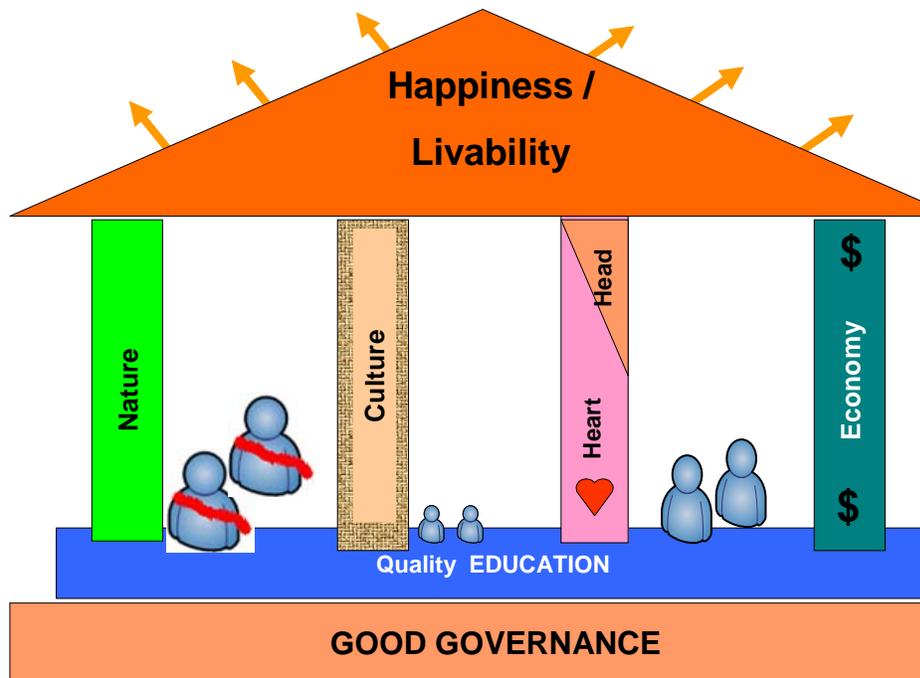
The bulk of the growth and progress comes from exploiting and extracting our finite resources from nature. With addiction to growth comes addiction to consume, and addiction to consumption has led many countries - as we now see happening in Europe and the US - into debt and financial instability. Now the center of growth has shifted to Asia, or the East, with China taking the lead, but the fundamental model of development has remained basically the same. Now we must ask, can the Asian nations follow such unsustainable patterns of development based on economic growth as originated in the West?

It seems to me that the shift of center of growth from the West to Asia presents both a great challenge as well as an opportunity for us to re-examine the model of development and growth and to do something right and sustainable. Many of us have, over the past decades, pioneered alternative and more sustainable models of sustainable livelihoods and

development. But many of such models are generally small, isolated and quickly overwhelmed by major interest groups and corporations, many of whom control our politicians and influence development policies. To overcome such stranglehold, we should make more effort to link the innovative elements of our research and practical experiments of alternative development better and weave these into a fabric of sustainable livelihoods and development. We need to collaborate with your peers and associates and break away from the traditional individualized and compartmentalized modes of conducting our lives.

A conceptual framework of a more balanced development model:

I would like now to share with you a conceptual framework of a more balanced development model which I have used to guide all aspects of my work in education and development over the past 20 years, and which I have and many of my colleagues have found quite useful. After years of working on various educational and development approaches, I have come to the conclusion that education and development need to go hand-in-hand and need to be more integrated and holistic. Unfortunately, we often leave education to schools and specialized institutions and then development to development planners/specialists and then wonder why people coming out of educational institutions seldom link what they learn with what they do in life. Hence, as educators and development practitioners we should be stressing the inter-connectedness between four areas of education and development mainly: Economy, Well-being, Nature, and Society as the fundamental building blocks of sustainability and happiness. In summary, how we live and how we educate (ourselves, our children, and our peers) will dictate our future.

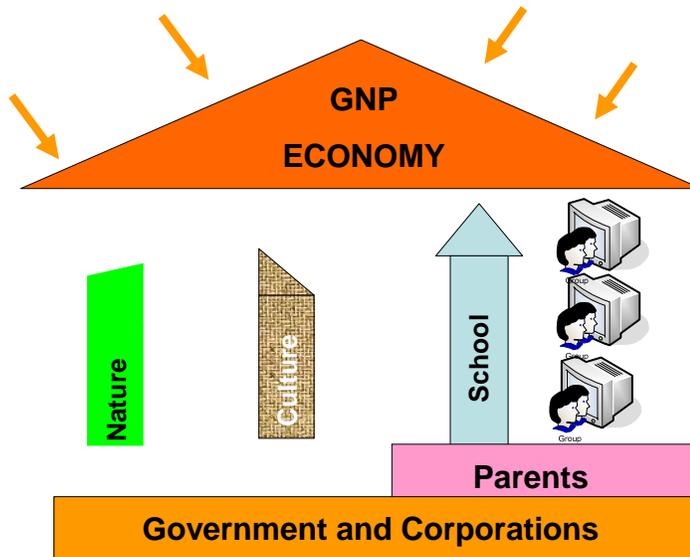


A sustainable education and development model is a model that has a balance between the four dimensions/pillars of economic development, environmental harmony, promotion and preservation of culture, and spiritual well-being (or the HEART and HEAD).

The model of development I propose is one that stresses human dignity and “happiness. This model was first initiated in Bhutan, but is now taken seriously by many countries. In other words, the goal of development cannot be based only progress in GNP (Gross National Product), but also improvement in people’s well-being or GNH (Gross National Happiness. In such a model of development, education is conceptualized as the foundation for development. The four pillars representing the different dimensions of development are anchored and are part of the education process. Here we clearly see the inter-connectedness between education and development. The two are inter-dependent and supportive of each other. At the base of the model is “good governance”, which supports justice and fairness for all.

Let’s look at our model of development as it exists today. The development model that is widely practiced today is not very sustainable. So many things do not fit, thus so many “failures” just like in our “schooling”. For example, the world is so rich and yet there is widespread poverty. One can be so rich in material wealth, but yet so poor emotionally and spiritually.

Boom: Unbalance growth and development is unstable and under stress



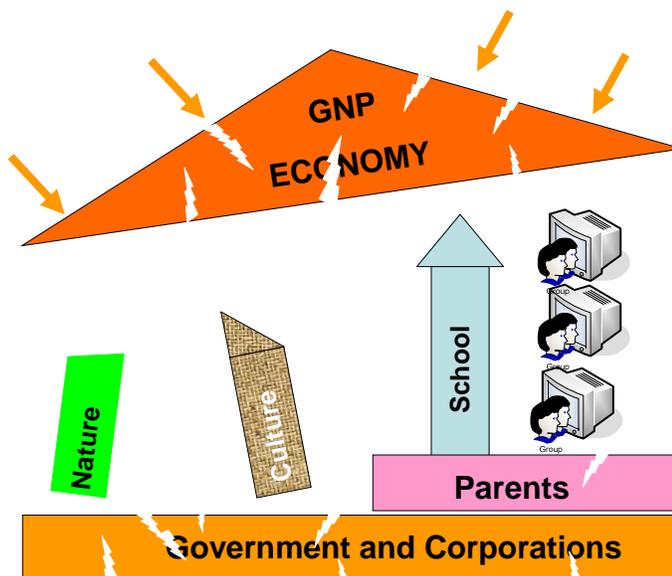
A common model of today's development stresses GNP or economic growth as its ultimate goal. This growth comes from the over-taxing our environmental capital, human capital, and cultural capital. Everything is monetized, including "Schooling". The media takes over the time parents and grandparents normally spend with the kids. We hand over the intergenerational and societal transfer of knowledge, history, and wisdom to our young to the media. But we know, the media is supported by business corporations whose interest is in promoting their bottom-line – hence the media promotes and shapes the viewers either towards mindless consumption or reduces the notions of greed and violence as entertainment. The media has become a very powerful instrument for shaping societal values.

And how can we blame the parents. They have little time for their children. They have to work very hard to support the kids through school as well as to satisfy their material needs.

The government too joins hands with the corporations to make sure there are enough business activities to create jobs and income. And that is not to say that creating employment and opportunities for livelihood is not an important function of government. However, oftentimes corporate interests are given higher priorities to other areas, such as ensuring adequate environmental protection, and investments in social development, including investment in education, especially quality and relevance of education.

Without safeguards for balance in the development system, development processes will put stress on the system, leading to imbalance and instability, which may not be apparent in the short-term but certainly will lead to systems failure in the long-run. Imbalances are often witnessed in the form of cycles of boom and bust - a way for the system to re-adjust itself. This cycle of boom and bust has been very prominent in our recent human history.

Bust : Collapsing to readjust



Clearly this model promotes production and consumption as main activities. It is a system of consumerism. The globalization of consumerism is happening at such a rapid pace that the planet can no longer sustain it. According to Global Foot Print Network, we have been consuming more than what the planet earth can regenerate since the 1970's. At the moment we are consuming 150% of our only planet earth. In about 30 more years we will be consuming 200%, or twice what the planet can reproduce. Essentially we are killing our planet and in the process killing ourselves along with it.

A wake up call has been way overdue:

We need to break the vicious cycle of mindless consumption and senseless over production. In order to wake up and break the cycle, we should begin with recognizing the

interconnectedness of all things, mainly the Heart, the Head, and the Hands. To do this, we need to consciously remind ourselves and reflect regularly that everything is inter-connected in a cause-effect relationship. Such mindfulness creates an internal force of internal peace, which will drive the sustainability of the world. Peace starts with us and with our every step.

In a world that is changing at such an incredibly pace and distractions, that internal peace is hard to come by. We can however try to cultivate inner peace through regular practice using techniques of reflection and meditation and appreciating nature, according to your own cultural orientation and faith. These practices are acts of internal peace building and can help us to develop self confidence, dignity, wisdom, compassion, acceptance of others. With the development of these inner strengths comes the foundation for reducing violence, and developing the insight to good decision making and reconnect us to our human spirit or our humanity. All faith and religious beliefs have these qualities.

Summary:

I hope that over the next few days as we discuss the various development issues and challenges facing our region, we should also reconnect with ourselves and with each other and try to:

- Work together to create a shared vision over the next few days so that you can go back to your home countries and convince others and you have each other to continue to support you on the journey;
- Make use of the up-to-date technological tools to disseminate and connect further. Social media has helped the Arab Spring revolution. In a similar way we can use it to revolutionize the region's holistic transformation.
- Invest in your country's young people's holistic education and development as they are potential agents of change to gaining momentum behind the new balanced model of development. We need to focus on youth because they have less baggage to unlearn. They have energy and curiosity to learn and to experiment with new ideas. We have been saying for too long that youths are the future and they are agents of change. But so far we have not engaged them and give them enough space to participate in education and in development. It is time to give them greater role to discover their own potential and to plan for their own future.
- Education must promote more experiential learning and discovery learning so that the head, heart, and hands of the students are strengthened simultaneously. This way they will be well prepared to lead the new development paradigm.

In closing, I would like to quote His Holiness, the Dalai Lama:

“Human being is amazing. He spends most of his life sacrificing his health for wealth. And then later in life spends all his hard earned wealth to recuperate his health”

Thank you for allowing me to share these experiences and connect with you all. Together let's start and expand our ecology of learning through more of this type of inter-connectedness. Let each one of us steer ourselves, our family, colleagues, and communities toward a more sustainable path way.