Report of the

Side event at the 6th Session of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development

"The Role of Higher Education in Achieving the SDGs"

27 March 2019, 12:00 – 13:15

Meeting Room F, United Nations Conference Centre, Bangkok, Thailand

Contents

I.   Introduction

a. Overview of the side event

UNU-IAS, UNESCO Bangkok and the Ministry of the Environment of Japan (MoEJ) jointly organized a side event at the 6th Session of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APSFD) on "The Role of Higher Education for Achieving the SDGs" on 27 March 2019, held at the United Nations Conference Centre in Bangkok, Thailand. The event explored how higher education institutions can support the capacity development of local communities for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The content was based on the outputs of a joint project titled "Development of a Framework for the Local Implementation of the SDGs".

b. Background of the project

The project "Development of a Framework for the Local Implementation of the SDGs" is a joint project between the Promotion of Sustainability in Postgraduate Education and Research Network (ProSPER.Net),

United Nations University Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability (UNU-IAS), and UNESCO Bangkok Office. It aims to enhance higher education institutions' capacities to support and collaborate with local communities for the effective implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the local level.

Launched in 2018, the project saw four case studies conducted by ProSPER.Net member institutions in India, Japan, the Philippines and Thailand. The purpose of these case studies was to explore how the implementation of the SDGs can be effectively facilitated and accelerated by collaborating with local communities. By collaborating with the communities, they can be empowered towards collective action for achieving the global goals. The case studies provided insights on the current situations of the local implementation of the SDGs in the respective countries. Subsequently, the project members developed a tentative set of guiding principles based on the lessons learned from the case studies, with an aim to provide guidance for higher education institutions to engage with local communities to contribute towards the SDGs.

c. Contents of the side event

The presentations and moderated discussion at the side event provided concrete examples of enabling multiple local stakeholders to effectively contribute towards achieving the global goals. The event consisted of opening remarks, a keynote presentation, and a panel discussion including case study presentations from the participating ProSPER.Net member institutions and the discussant.

The side event aimed to address the following questions regarding the role of higher education in achieving the SDGs:
1. How can higher education institutions contribute towards developing the capacities of local communities?
2. What is the current implementation of the SDGs at the local level?
3. How can local communities be engaged and empowered to implement the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs at the local level, ensuring inclusiveness and equity?

II.   Opening session

Hiroaki Takiguchi, Project Director, UNU-IAS, began the event by inviting Shigeru Aoyagi, Director, UNESCO Bangkok, to give his opening remarks. Aoyagi highlighted ESD as a key enabler of all of the global goals. He stressed its importance particularly as part of the SDG 4, which promotes quality education for all. ESD, SDG 4, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, are crucial global attempts to change the mind-set of the people. He explained that UNESCO has been working with partners to contribute to the creation of peaceful and sustainable societies. As the Regional Bureau for Education, UNESCO Bangkok regards education, including higher education, as the most important tool or platform to promote the idea of sustainability and the creation of peaceful societies. Aoyagi hoped that the four case studies presented at the session would contribute to reflections on the role of higher education in relation to the SDGs. He stated that UNESCO is happy to work with partners to address global challenges and the global goals.

Next, Ryuzo Sugimoto, Director, International Cooperation and Sustainable Infrastructure Office, Global Environmental Bureau, MoEJ, gave his opening remarks. He mentioned ProSPER.Net as an alliance of

higher education institutions in the Asia-Pacific region working towards integrating sustainable development in post-graduate education and curricula. The network is funded by MoEJ through UNU-IAS. He stated that MoEJ not only focuses on regulations in relation to environmental issues, but also the promotion of creating sustainable societies. He emphasized that localizing the SDGs, engaging local communities in solving environmental issues and achieving sustainable societies are the agenda of the MoEJ. Sugimoto further highlighted that transformation can only happen if everyone in the community is engaged and committed to a change of behaviour. Higher education institutions will take the role to support the communities by connecting and empowering the people to ensure inclusiveness and the achievement of the SDGs. Sugimoto also emphasized that SDG 4 is linked to the other goals as education is a key component to the implementation of all 17 goals. Moreover, Goal 17, concerning partnership, is another key element for localizing the SDGs. Higher education institutions are expected to collaborate with various stakeholders such as local residents, communities, business sectors, NGOs, local governments and others throughout the region in implementing the SDGs. Furthermore, there is a need for a commitment to keep the environment healthy, and this can be done through ESD and partnerships, which will also create more sustainable and resilient communities.

III.   Keynote presentation

In his keynote presentation (available here), Mario Tabucanon, Senior Visiting Professor, UNU-IAS, provided highlights on the critical role of higher education in the transition to sustainable development. He stated that traditional higher education focuses on learning disciplines and knowledge. Curricula in universities are discipline-oriented with disciplines and knowledge being viewed in silos. Learners coming from these traditional curricula would subsequently have problems applying said knowledge. Tabucanon referred to this as "the push system", meaning that the knowledge is acquired first, and then the learner must push to apply it. However, the age of sustainable development is changing the learning paradigm. Higher education now focuses on problems and sustainable solutions, viewing them in an interdisciplinary and holistic fashion. In this paradigm shift, the problem is the focus and the knowledge needed to solve the problem is pulled from the relevant disciplines. Tabucanon called this the transition from "the push system" to "the pull system".

Then, Tabucanon further asserted that the sustainable development agenda and the education agenda are converging. In other words, sustainable development is integrating into education and vice versa. In this process, ESD brings together non-formal and formal education. However, major work remains. There is a need for coherence in policies and integration of ESD in relevant sectoral or sub-sectoral policies. Moreover, the adoption and implementation of the SDGs provides challenges and opportunities. Challenges exist in the implementation, especially in localization, but this also provides opportunities to focus on education. Tabucanon agreed with the comments made during the opening session that ESD is a key enabler of all the SDGs and that partnership is also an essential part of this implementation. He further elaborated that these are not only goals in themselves, but they are also methodologies towards other SDGs. Therefore, these should be mainstreamed by being integrated into the planning, programming, budgeting, implementation, and monitoring of all SDGs.

Tabucanon went on to emphasize that the role of higher education is very important in understanding the interaction among the goals and targets. This interaction should be seen as a network where the goals and targets affect and influence each other, with higher education as a platform to delve deeper into the

understanding of these interactions. Tabucanon asserted that every interaction consists of two layers; one layer has a scientific element and the other a human element, which concerns policies. Some policies may have a negative effect, but higher education can play the role of turning this around for better and more effective policies. He pointed out that, although governance at the global level is laid out through the SDGs which must be translated into national strategic plans and policies, the real actions lie on the ground. Therefore, the outreach activities where universities support the local communities are regarded as particularly important.

In 2008, with the support of the MoEJ, UNU-IAS launched a network known as ProSPER.Net, which started with 18 members. Currently there are 46 members and the number is still increasing. Tabucanon emphasized that the idea of this network is to integrate sustainability into the heart and soul of universities – and that is in the curricula. The second aspect of the network is capacity building and the need to change the mind-set of the people including young professionals, students, and teachers among others. The third aspect is policy influence. Tabucanon stated that the ProSPER.Net project, which the session will revolve around, will look at the capacities of local authorities and communities through the lens of its four case studies, two in urban and two in rural communities, with the expectation of coming up with learning models and guiding principles in developing curricula.

IV.   Presentation of the case studies

The panel moderator, Kazuhiko Takemoto, Director, UNU-IAS, introduced the researchers from ProSPER.Net member institutions in India, Japan, the Philippines, and Thailand.

a. India
Smriti Das, TERI School of Advanced Studies, India, reported on the case study (presentation available here), which was conducted in New Delhi, with focus on urban villages and slums in the South Delhi Municipal Corporation area. This specific location was chosen in order to focus intently on the implementation, and capacity building issues, targeting economically marginalized groups. This case study concerned three SDGs in addition to the SDG 4 and the ESD framework. These three are the SDGs 3, 6 and 11; more specifically, the case study touched upon the topics of health, water and sanitation, and solid waste management. The key issues found were as follows:
- Health – There are shortcomings in affordability in terms of high out-of-pocket expenditure for local citizens to access health services. People were driven towards private healthcare services due to poor public health infrastructure but suffered in the absence of adequate financial assistance.
- Water – Water supply shortages, lack of non-potable water and a high amount of groundwater extraction can lead to more problems in the future; furthermore, there is water contamination due to maintenance issues and overflowing of sewage water.
- Sanitation – There have been policies regarding the coverage of toilets; however, some communities do not have access to toilets and other basic facilities.
- Solid waste management – The government could not effectively reach some slum dwelling communities for waste segregation and collection.

Based on review of the governance structure and local implementation experiences, the research identified the following challenges and learnings.

- Because of the quasi-federal structure and the complicated governance regime, there was a complex distribution of roles and responsibilities. Consequently, the lack of coordination was often cited as reason for non/poor implementation by the executing agencies.
- Planning is mostly centralized; upon analysing the policies, there were many instances of top-down approaches in planning and implementation. There should be a shift towards decentralization.
- As there are multiple interests and roles of the many stakeholders and local governance in SDG implementation, multi-stakeholder engagement and strategized partnerships would be beneficial.
- There should be increased capacity building in executive agencies regarding SDG implementation. Local stakeholders, students and professionals also needed capacity building.
- There is a need for improvement in management and planning in relation to the reviewing, monitoring and evaluation system and the feedback cycle.

For the way forward, curricular frameworks may be developed for students and executive agencies on capacity building for local SDG implementation. The curricular framework should include the following stages: the localization of the SDGs, understanding of the implementation framework and processes, identifying implementation challenges, and addressing the gaps in implementation along with the re-evaluation of goals based on changing contexts. The entire process should be participatory to include local stakeholders for effective implementation.

b. Japan

Cosmo Takagi, Keio University, explained the case study in Japan (presentation available here), for which a rural area was chosen as the study location. As Japan is facing the issue of depopulation, this case study aims to explore how to improve the issue in this particular area in the context of the SDGs. It focuses on the Takahashi district in Toyooka city, a district that is facing the greatest population decline in the city. The Takahashi district consists of agricultural villages surrounded by mountains and fields. The following issues were found in the study.
- The district lacks adequate management of the forests; there are frequent reports of damage from wildlife such as bears.
- There is a decline in forestry and agricultural workers in the region.
- There are no noticeable tourist attractions or entertainment facilities, so there is little incentive for visitors or returning residents.

The objectives and methodology of this case study consisted of developing a curriculum in SDG implementation for higher education, interviewing parents and middle school students in order to obtain more information, and conducting participatory workshops with local residents to understand the local perspectives, for example asking the participants what their ideal town would look like.

The study had the following outcomes.
- The locals decided that the target for the population of the city should be 1,000 people. However, some challenges were identified by the participants for reaching this target such as increasing the number of visitors and returning residents or "U-turn ratio".
- To address these challenges, Keio University, Toyooka city and Tanto Middle School collaborated and to take action jointly.

- During the workshop, the local residents identified a set of targets for the community to achieve by 2030.
- A higher education curriculum was developed from the results of the workshop and the content from the interviews.

The case study concluded that it is important to focus on youth, particularly in this case, middle school students. Moreover, the participatory approach with the locals created a sense of ownership in the community, which relates to the localization of the SDGs.

c. Philippines

Nestor Castro presented the research project in the Philippines by the research team at the University of the Philippines-Diliman (UPD) (presentation available here). The project was conducted with cooperation from the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Community Affairs of UPD. The selected study area was Barangay UP Campus in Quezon City, a highly urbanised city located in Metro Manila, the national capital region of the Philippines. It is the biggest city among all Philippine cities. "Barangay" is the native Filipino term for "village". The research team held workshops with community stakeholders, dividing them into three groups: community residents including banrangay officials, children and youth from Barangay UP Campus, and the transportation sector, particularly drivers of jeepneys (public utility vehicles, a popular means of transportation in the Philippines), commuters, and pedestrians. The three groups were asked the questions, "How would you prioritize the various SDGs based on your own local experiences?" and "What Filipino values you have identified that could enable you to achieve these goals?"

The study found the following:
- Most of the residents were squatters who do not have ownership of the land that they occupy.
- Despite the highly urbanized area, there is still a small amount of households that do not have access to electricity and/or do not have their own water connections, relying on illegal water connections.
- There is no elementary or secondary school within the village.

The main output produced through this research project is the development of a learning module on the SDGs in the local language. The module comes with a teachers' guide for elementary and high school teachers. It aims to incorporate three core Filipino values identified during the workshops—*bayanihan* (cooperation), *pagtitipid* (prudence), and *malasakit* (empathy)—into teaching and learning. The module has been approved by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, the Department of Education, and the government agency in charge of non-formal education.

Finally, Castro identified challenges to the institutionalisation of the local implementation of the SDGs. Specifically, he foresees difficulties in sustaining the project's efforts after the change of village officials, who were recently elected in May 2018. In addition, there will also be new city officials, who will be elected in the upcoming national elections in May 2019.

d. Thailand

In her presentation (available here), Sayamol Charoenratana, Chulalongkorn University, described the area chosen for study, which is a rural agricultural area in Nan, a small province in the north of Thailand. In this small community, residents suffer from economic problems as well as health problems due to heavy

pesticide use, land problems from forest encroachment, and effects of natural disasters, particularly flooding. The research team conducted qualitative research including focus group interviews, community workshops, SWOT analysis, and GIS surveying.

From their observations during the study, the research team found the following issues in localizing the SDGs in the community:

- The researchers found it very difficult to communicate the meanings of the technical terms related to the SDGs for the local communities in rural areas. For example, the word "sustainable" is a very technical and academic term that the local residents in the study area do not understand, even when it is translated into Thai.
- The residents in the community could not relate to the concept of sustainability as they were primarily occupied with their own need for survival and sustaining their livelihoods in the present. This required a change in the ways the SDGs are communicated to the local residents. For example, SDG 1 and 2 (No poverty, no hunger) were communicated as, "how can we have food to eat every day for one year?"
- The goal the residents in the community related to the least was SDG 4 (quality education) as they believed that education is not necessary for them as farmers with very little formal education.
- The community was only focused on their current basic economic, social and environmental needs, which are primarily related to their livelihood or security such as hunger, poverty, good jobs and economic growth, and good health.

Charoenratana shared the four steps to localizing the SDGs according to the *Roadmap for Localizing the SDGs*, which was published by the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments and translated into Thai by SDG Move, a research collaboration project of TRF and the Faculty of Economics, Thammasat University. The four steps are: (1) awareness raising, (2) advocacy, (3) implementation, and (4) monitoring. In this study, the research team was only able to implement the first step, awareness raising, due to the difficulties in communicating the sustainability concepts.

The research identified the following steps needed for the community to work towards sustainability in the future.

- Continued awareness raising and advocating from the local level, strengthening local policy using a bottom-up approach
- Improvement of the local residents' livelihood and security including increasing secure jobs, using local products, building social capital, reducing chemical use in agriculture, etc.
- Engaging youth in the community to help communicate sustainability concepts and further community development and planning
- Networking in the local area to strengthen partnerships for a sustainable future

The following are the lessons learned from the study in developing knowledge on SDGs for local residents and research staff.

- The research staff understand the meanings of the SDGs; however, communicating these meanings to the local residents has proven to be difficult. This requires transferring academic knowledge to the community by using new tools.

- Networking and youth are very important for sustainability. As the community in the area is now an aging society, they must consider how to engage youth towards a sustainable future.
- Development of the implementation of the SDGs must be carried out at the local level for it to be self-sustainable.
- For the local residents, there is no future without present security.

V.   **Discussant: UNESCO Bangkok**

Ushio Miura, Programme Specialist, UNESCO Bangkok, provided her observations and insights from the project and its four case studies (presentation available [here](#)). As UNESCO works in the field of education, Miura specified that she would be commenting on the project from the perspective of education and learning.

A particularly noteworthy point in the project in regards to education and learning is that learning is taking place for all those involved in the research process in the four case studies. A variety of stakeholders are involved, from the researchers themselves to the graduate students in the research teams, the local schoolchildren, youth, community residents, and government officials, among others. As all of these stakeholders discuss and analyse sustainability issues in the community, "co-learning" i.e. collaborative or cooperative learning occurs in the process. Also through the co-learning process, the researchers and the local communities were able to articulate their own shared values and understandings on sustainable development and the SDGs in their respective contexts. This can possibly trigger collaborative action for the implementation of the SDGs at the local level.

As the project has only been implemented for less than one year, it has not yet been able to demonstrate its impacts in concrete ways. However, it is clear that it has the potential to do so, as indicated by the outputs so far which suggest a strong commitment from the communities to implement sustainability projects and actions.

The case studies show that, through fostering co-learning processes, higher education can play a role in facilitating local actions for achieving the SDGs. As there are only four case studies so far, the scope is limited. However, the lessons learned have already been able to provide sufficient insight to develop some guiding principles on how higher education institutions can effectively play the aforementioned role. Some examples of these guiding principles are as follows:
- Putting the SDGs in the local context and meaning system
- Bottom-up approach to analysis and planning
- Multi-stakeholder engagement
- Institutionalization is needed.

The key challenge of the learning module that emerged from the case studies is the learning outcomes, which the project has not been able to fully demonstrate as of yet. However, the project will continue to develop in the coming years in the hope that the transformation of these communities will have been realized by 2030, as per the aspiration of the UN's Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The moderator invited questions and comments from the audience.

Shahbaz Khan, Director of UNESCO Jakarta, agreed with Tabucanon's statement regarding the importance of bringing higher education institutions closer to societies to benefit the people. Khan found the observation from the Thai case study to be quite striking that sustainable development means very little to the local people, as they are primarily concerned with their own livelihoods and survival. He inquired how sustainable development and the SDGs can be implemented "on the ground". In addition, he expressed his reservations about the bureaucracy in each country and its inability to work effectively with higher education institutions and the local communities. He posed the question of how to bring multiple stakeholders through universities and non-invasive partners to guide and collaborate with local communities for sustainable development.

A participant from the Economic Relations Division of the Ministry of Finance of Bangladesh further elaborated on the engagement of bureaucracy, which is also very difficult in his home country. He shared that the Government of Bangladesh has initiated an "empathy-building" programme among the government officials, facilitated by the Office of the Prime Minister. The programme trains officials, particularly in the junior and mid-levels, so that they can understand the realities and demands of the people, and also what they can do for them. This is carried out by the officials going door-to-door to listen to the people in the communities. He stressed that policy-level intervention is needed from high-ranking authorities to gain empathy for the people.

Junichi Fujino, Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES), stated that the role of higher education is closely related to the localization of the SDGs. In addition to requiring top-down intervention, bottom-up activities are also important for the local implementation of the SDGs through higher education. He asked whether there were any more cases or opportunities for collaboration in this localization, as this is also related to the side event of the following day on "Promoting Enabling Environment for Inclusiveness by Localizing SDGs" organized by IGES. He also invited all participants to attend the said side event.

Das agreed on the issue of bureaucracy, which was mentioned in the comments from the audience. She shared the case of her own home city, New Delhi, which has a plan called Delhi Vision 2030 with clearly defined scopes of responsibilities of the various ministries. However, as the case study began to explore the situations in the local communities, it seemed that the municipalities and local governments were not even aware of such a document. This demonstrates the centralization and concentration of authority at the higher levels and how it is necessary to include local-level officials in discussions in order to build their capacities as well. The research team found that there is keenness among the local-level agencies to engage and build their capacities. They regard this as a stark contrast compared to some political actors who did not express any desire for training.

Furthermore, Das specified that there are both direct and indirect channels to engage bureaucracy in sustainable development. For example, according to the comment from the Bangladeshi participant, the building of empathy within the officials is a top-down policy-level approach to directly engage with bureaucracy and executive agencies by developing capacity-building programmes. On the other hand,

there are also indirect responses, such as developing the capacities of the students at postgraduate education level who will become officials and will be able to address sustainability issues in the future.

Takagi addressed the localization of the SDGs, stating that fostering shared values and a common purpose is the most important step to embed a sustainability perspective in the community in order to achieve the SDGs at the local level.

Also regarding localizing the SDGs, Castro shared that local governments have expressed interest to be involved in the Philippines case study. This indicates that local governments are interested in implementing a similar movement for the local implementation of the SDGs. He mentioned that in Phase II of the project, the research team may consider engaging with these other agencies as well.

In terms of engaging with bureaucracy, Castro mentioned that in the Philippines, there is a Department of Interior and Local Government. In addition to currently already working with the Department of Environment and the department of Education, in the future the researchers will also engage with this agency, as they would have access to local government units.

Charoenratana reiterated that, in localizing the SDGs, it appears some meanings are lost in translation when conveying sustainability concepts to the local communities. For example, in the Thai case study, the word "sustainable" is not understandable for the locals, even when it is translated into Thai. Instead, the research team chose to convey it more simply as "for the next generation" or "for your children", which is a concept they can understand and consider to be important. This is also a problem in many other countries. For example, in the Philippines, there is no direct translation of the word "sustainable" in the local language, and a completely new way of conveying the meaning must be established.

She further elaborated on the role of higher education in collaboration with government agencies for the local implementation of the SDGs. As many local communities are suffering from poor economic status and insecure livelihoods, they are not yet concerned about the future and sustainable development. In this case, higher education institutions and government agencies must address the current problems in the community, to improve the lives of the local people, before addressing sustainability issues.

VII.   Closing

In conclusion, Takemoto stated that UNU-IAS together with UNESCO Bangkok and partner universities are committed to continuing the collaborative research on this subject. As the project will proceed to its second phase in 2019, the project members will provide information on further developments as the project moves forward in its next phase. He also thanked all of the participants who joined the session before closing the event.

Annex: Concept Note

"The Role of Higher Education in Achieving the SDGs"

Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development 2019

Date and time: 27 March 2019, 12:00-13:15

Venue: MR F, UN Conference Centre, Bangkok, Thailand

Organizers: UNU-IAS, MOEJ, UNESCO Bangkok, ProSPER.Net members

Scope of the event: all SDGs, especially SDG4 and SDG17

Modality: Presentation and moderated discussion

Abstract:

The implementation of the 2030 Agenda by local authorities, communities, civil society organizations, and the scientific and academic community is crucial to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In order to accelerate local implementation, further efforts are needed to explore how local communities can be engaged and empowered to implement the global agenda at local level.

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) can play an important role in bringing transformative actions to local communities as a key enabler of all the SDGs. In particular, higher education institutions can support the capacity development of communities at the local level, through research as well as through education in many fields that are crucial for SDGs.

The Promotion of Sustainability in Postgraduate Education and Research Network (ProSPER.Net) is an alliance of higher education institutions in the Asia-Pacific region working towards integrating sustainable development in postgraduate education and curricula. ProSPER.Net links local initiatives to international SDGs and ESD platforms and processes. The Japanese Ministry of the Environment (MOEJ), through its contribution to UNU-IAS ESD Programme, has been supporting ProSPER.Net projects and activities since the network launched in 2008.

Based on the outputs of the project on "Development of a Framework for the Local Implementation of the SDGs," which is jointly led by UNU-IAS, UNESCO Bangkok and ProSPER.Net member universities, the Side Event will explore how higher education institutions can contribute towards developing the capacities of local communities that enable local stakeholders to effectively implement regional efforts towards achieving the SDGs.

Programme:

Opening Remarks	10 min
Mr. Shigeru Aoyagi, Director, UNESCO Bangkok Mr. Ryuzo Sugimoto, Director, International Cooperation and Sustainable Infrastructure Office, Global Environmental Bureau, Ministry of the Environment Japan (MOEJ)	
Keynote presentations	15 min
"The Role of Higher Education for achieving the SDGs" Prof. Mario Tabucanon, Visiting Professor, UNU-IAS	
Panel discussion	45 min
Case study presentations on local implementation of the SDGs • *Dr. Smriti Das, TERI School of Advanced Studies, India* • *Mr. Cosmo Takagi, Keio University, Japan* • *Dr. Nestor Castro, University of the Philippines Diliman, Philippines* • *Dr. Sayamol Charoenratana, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand* *Panel Discussion* **Moderator:** Prof. Kazuhiko Takemoto, Director, UNU-IAS **Discussant:** Ms. Ushio Miura, Programme Specialist, UNESCO Bangkok **Panelists:** Discussant and case study speakers	
Closing	5 min