

Prepared for the National Congress on Continuing Education  
Manila Galleria Suites, Ortigas Center, Pasig City, Philippines  
October 24-25, 1996  
Organized by the Foundation for Continuing Education, Inc. (FORCE)

# Continuing Education for the Environment

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**CONTINUING EDUCATION, WHETHER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT** or for enabling an individual to catch up with rapid modernization, means non-stop learning. In theory, it ends only when there is nothing more to learn or when life itself comes to an end. Where it begins — ideally, from birth — is not at all that clear beyond its formal definition and depends on the varying needs of the learner and the demands of different learning situations.

In the Philippines, where formal schooling is so encompassing and getting longer and longer, in contrast to, say, a country like Bangladesh, continuing education has always stayed in the margins and has yet to earn the kind of recognition it rightly deserves. It is commonly regarded as an after-school or out-of-school affair very few care about.

Education for the environment, now emerging as a crucial component of continuing education, cannot wait for the formal school. Our late realization of its significance explains in part why our environment is already at an advance state of degradation as we find it today.

## **Before it is too late**

This line is borrowed from a book of the same title. The authors, Aurelio Peccei and Daisaku Ikeda, had been warning the world about the alarming state of our environment long before environmental advocacy became fashionable. Peccei, an Italian, was chairman of Fiat and Italconsult and president of Olivetti, and Ikeda, a Japanese, was the third president of the largest Buddhist lay organization, Soka Gakkai. Together in 1968, they founded the Club of Rome, an illustrious gathering of multidisciplinary intellectuals from around the world that problematized the future of humanity and planet earth.

The Club of Rome, although caricatured in some quarters as a bunch of population doomsayers advocating population control and “zero growth”, was a trail blazer of the new global consciousness. Not many people know about Peccei and Ikeda and their club but their ideas and questions have in a big way helped shape the worldwide discourse on environment and development. In a sense they may be considered as one of the precursors of UN Conference on Human Environment in 1972 in Stockholm and the succeeding Earth Summit in Rio twenty years later.

Humanity stands at a defining moment in history. This opening line of Agenda 21, the global plan of action produced by the Rio Earth Summit, resonates with greater urgency the message that Peccei and Ikeda had been communicating to the world twenty four years earlier. Humanity is in deep trouble, a condition resulting from a relentless drive to create material wealth at an ever increasing pace with little thought about nature’s limits.

It seems we are headed toward a point no sane person would want to be. Let us give ourselves a break and do serious rethinking. Our best hope for the future lies in a new human revolution that will fundamentally change our view of life and nature and the ways by which we seek to achieve human progress and happiness.

## **How to begin**

There are no simple solutions to the present human predicament. What seems to be clear though is, education plays a key role in understanding the nature of our present dilemma and in providing the clues for its solution.



But what if education itself is the problem? Obviously, the kind of education that guided the past we now tend to reject cannot be a means to the envisioned human revolution toward an entirely different desired future. Education itself has to be reconceptualized around a new vision.

**A**genda 21 dedicates a whole chapter, Chapter 36, on education, public awareness and training. More than this, education is linked to every part of this global plan of action. Education is a cross-cutting concern running through the social and economic dimensions, conservation and management of resources, and the required strengthening of capacities for individuals, groups and institutions that have a stake in our common future.

Three things are implied here. One, education is instrumental to advancing Agenda 21. Two, its content is the entire Agenda 21 itself and therefore broader than what environmental education would normally suggest. Three, continuing education for the environment will have to be fused with development education.

But there is a critical issue at hand: What if Agenda 21 itself stands to question? Where does this leave education?

True enough, Agenda 21 leaves a lot of questions hanging. The principle or concept of sustainable development that guides it cannot be pinned down to a singular definition. Its inherent ambiguity opens more questions than it can decisively resolve.

Nonetheless, Agenda 21 symbolizes a delicate balance between those who advocate for a fundamental change of course and those who insist to carry on with business as usual. As a product of negotiations among governments, Agenda 21 represents a consensus among a motley of democrats, liberals, conservatives as well as tyrants — the big politicians who rule nations and societies across this planet and who themselves are desperately in need of a new kind of education that we demand of ourselves. For good measure as well, Agenda 21 accommodates a variety of progressive inputs from non-state sources. For now, this is as far as global consensus could go.

From the perspective of education, the Agenda 21 can be a good take-off point, for want of anything more superior. For one thing, the process of its formulation may be considered as one of the most comprehensive short courses on environment and development. It was a short course that opened for its students more insights and questions than the



resulting consensus can possibly accommodate. As well, and notwithstanding its limitations, the Agenda 21 document can be a very useful core material on which educators can build whatever they may consider to be a more superior content for environmental education.

The popular version of the Agenda 21 developed by the Center for Our Common Future is one example of an attempt to facilitate understanding of the substantive issues tackled in the Earth Summit process. A lot more can be done as Agenda 21 proceeds along its localization track, a process that may yet see another leap of wisdom as Agenda 21 itself is fused with local color, fitted into local needs and enriched by time-tested indigenous knowledge systems.

### **Starting over and early**

It is beyond question that we all need to be continuously educated about our environment. We each have a responsibility for what has become of our environment and have a part to play in restoring its health. But as in the Earth Summit where a consensus was reached on common but differentiated responsibility in redressing our situation the same should apply to education, meaning those with the most accountability for the past should take the lead in reeducation.

Education for our common future can take different routes, some longer than others. Results will also vary according to our choices.

Some of us would prefer to focus on the big decisionmakers — the big politicians and bureaucrats, big money interests, the senior economists, the big lawyers, the honored scientists and technicians in the service of government and big corporations. These are the powers that be whose ideas and practices account for much of our present troubles. Others might just choose to invest in children, thinking that the present generation of leaders are a hopeless case. Or these may not be real choices at all but simply preferences within what is merely a division of educational labor.

It makes compelling sense to begin with educating the big decisionmakers. In other words education should start with the most highly educated. Since their decisions have the most significant and immediate impact on our daily lives, a decisive shift in their culture and behavior achieved through education can result not only in preventing the further deterioration of our situation but also in showing the way toward the alternative future.



As a pioneering environmentalist senator once said *"Environment is politics. When a government decides to allow foreign and local capitalists to come in and sink oil wells, cut down forests, set up air and water polluting mines, mills and factories, the effects are on the environment but the decision was a political one. Since it is political decisions that caused its ravaging, it should be political decisions that should pave the way for the environment's rehabilitation, regeneration and enhancement."*

These words were from a former senator, Helena Z Benitez, and they date back to 1972. She headed the Philippine delegation to the 1972 Stockholm Conference and subsequently authored a number of environmental legislations.

From the Benitez family, a family of educators, we can also draw some inspiration and lessons in continuing education for the environment. Here is one good example for starting early and right in our most immediate living environment. Helena grew up in an environmentally-sensitive home. Her parents, Dean Conrado Benitez and Francisca Tirona, were practicing environmentalists who taught their children how to save seeds and grow plants, among other things, and in ways that made all these a natural part of their values formation. Caring for nature is a value that is formed early in life and needs continuous nurturing.

Today, many modern families, especially those living in urban areas, hardly have time or concern for environmental education at home. Many children are totally ignorant of or could not care less about the nature of things they find daily on their breakfast table. They have no clue where the things they eat, wear and enjoy come from.

Things are slowly changing for the better, thanks to the efforts of many people in generating environmental awareness. For good measure the changes we now see have been facilitated by modern media technology. Through television, for example, we get to know about German children being trained early enough in proper waste disposal. We also learn about other best practices elsewhere in the world without having to leave home.

## **Symbols and action**

Teach by showing, learn by doing. These are key phrases from the Rural Reconstruction Credo authored by Dr. Yen, founder of the International Mass Education Movement and pioneer of rural



reconstruction movements in China and the Philippines. From the ivory tower to the mudhouse, as it were, Dr. Yen and his many followers would go to the peasant communities, live among them, start with what they know, build on what they already have, plan with them and show by example the ways to human emancipation from ignorance, poverty, disease and civic inertia. In the process their own learning would be enriched as they themselves discovered the hidden potentials and wisdom already there in the local communities long before their coming.

**L**earning about the environment is thinking and living it. The examples of Dr. Yen, Dean Conrado Benitez and those who took after them tell us that education for the environment is more than words and images. Symbols will have to be squared with exemplary action.

The moment calls for heroes and heroines — men, women, children, eminent and ordinary people — who will give off themselves to save our environment. We need many Juans, Marias, Pepes and Pilars, Abduls and Apo Sandawas who create little and quiet stories daily and whose collective deeds produce positive and enduring impact on our living environments. We need a Chico Mendez, a Macli-ing Dulag, and many ordinary people who are ready to put their lives in the line of fire. We need a Peccei, an Ikeda, a Rachel Carson and all the eminent global citizens inspired by them to continue setting the examples for others. We need a revival of the “peacenicks” generation of the 1960s. We need super media symbols like John Lennon, the derring-do’s of the Greenpeace Rainbow Warrior. They are our teachers by example.

No matter our position in society, wherever we may be, we all need to lend a hand, to show in words and action that we indeed think and live environment. This is the big challenge of our times.

**F**or nearly three decades down the road, from the rise of the flower generation or from the founding of the Club of Rome, politicians have been talking environment and doing another thing. These talks have reached up to summit levels at least twice within that same span of time. These were good enough to the extent that they helped bring environment into the global consciousness and triggered the forging of agendas for action.



Sad to say, it is also in that same span of time that we find the level of environmental degradation reaching peak heights alongside material abundance. And for whatever all the talks were worth, the fact remains that the environment crisis is far from over. Now on its fourth year of implementation, Agenda 21 has yet to show significant advances from the level of plan to real action on the ground.

This is not to belittle the value of the UN Summits, endless discourses of politicians included. The series of intergovernmental negotiations and their outcomes cannot be taken for granted. They have significant political as well as educational value. The point is, the world has been waiting for a real change and for much too long already.

What's taking it long? Is it the paralyzing debates that immobilize even those already willing and able to get into the act? Is it the mismatch between word and action? Is it lack of political will? Is it lack of consensus and cooperation between government and citizens? Is the problem institutional, financial or technological? What has education got to do with it?

All of it perhaps. Each of these issues may have something to explain why things are not moving as fast as we have been hoping. The words, the symbols abound. The Rio process, not to mention other UN processes before and after, has touched on nearly all and every human concern under the sun. As well, people are getting a piece of the action here, there and everywhere. And yet, there continues to be a universal concern over lack of significant progress toward set targets for restoring biodiversity and stabilizing the climate system. The wild facts about our environmental crisis seem to be getting wilder.

Progress since Rio may be justified from a time perspective. One can say it is still too early to expect quality change in the period of transition using 1992 as the baseline. For example, a continuing rise in carbon dioxide emissions since then is said to be understandable, that the environment will necessarily take a deeper plunge before it begins to curve up en route to regeneration. These may be a valid explanation.

There is some basis to be optimistic. But there are also more than enough reasons to be worried. We need to look into the deeper causes of our present troubles.



## Worse than bad education

The wild facts attesting to the existence of an environmental crisis of global proportions came to our attention as early as the 1980s. Lester Brown and Sandra Postel, in their 1987 essay, "Thresholds of Change", which appeared in the Worldwatch Institute's *State of the World*, pointed out the phenomena of a hole in the sky, global warming, and loss of biodiversity.

The hole in the sky refers to the depletion of the ozone layer which like a giant umbrella, serves as the earth's protective shield. What this means is, more ultraviolet radiation now reaches the earth and can cause skin cancers, crop failures and impairment of the human immune system.

**G**lobalwarming speaks of the trapping of gases, like carbon dioxide, causing rises in world temperature which have remained at tolerable levels until the detection of this phenomenon. It is likened to the greenhouse effect whereby sunlight is allowed through glass panels and heat is trapped inside the house. Every year human activities, especially deforestation and burning of fossil fuels, let out billion of tons of carbon into the atmosphere. The process causes a destabilizing effect on the global climate system.

Loss of biodiversity means decline or permanent extinction of plant and animal species that populate the forests, wetlands, coasts and oceans. Deforestation, chemical agriculture, pollution and other destructive human activities have been destroying the vital links to our life support systems, thereby endangering life itself.

Ozone depletion, global warming and the predicted collapse of global ecosystems are the so-called "loud emergencies" that triggered such summit events like that in Rio. They are the wild metaphors symbolizing the unintended consequences of human action.

Not as much hyped, but no less important, there are also the so-called "silent emergencies" of water pollution, land degradation and environmental diseases. They too were never intended by anyone.

So what then was intended? And why does it continue to produce what was never intended? Shouldn't we question human intention itself?



None of these questions is new. For as long as anyone can remember, they have been posed in various ways at different times by philosophers as well as ordinary people. And yet they have to be posed again and again, this time much more forcefully and decisively than at any time before. In the past, humanity still had the luxury to postpone the answers. This won't do any longer, for humanity itself is in grave danger if it does not find the answer now.

The present human condition is a product of both human intention and its unintended consequences. Happiness was intended, suffering was not. Equality was intended, injustice was not. Peace and security were intended, social breakdown was not. A healthy living environment was intended, environmental degradation was not. One can go on and on. The point is, as one thinker put it so sharply, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

At the heart of the human condition, as manifested in all these contradictions, is a faith worse than bad education and reinforced by education. To use a caricature, a metaphor if you will, growth is the answer — a deep-seated belief that has dominated modern times and achieved the character of a religion.

The high priests of accumulation — the industrialists, the bankers, the politicians, the economists, the scientists and technologists — have been telling us all along that by increasing wealth we shall be able to eliminate scarcity, poverty and deprivation. By producing larger and larger quantities of goods and services we shall be able to improve our living standards and attain a higher quality of life.

**G**rowth has been equated with human development. Instead of being a means to human ends it has become an end in itself. In recent years there has developed a more subtle articulation of this faith due in large part to mounting contrary evidence, criticisms, and perhaps the emerging doubts of the high priests themselves. The latest consensus is, growth is necessary but not sufficient.

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP), through its series of *Human Development Report* (HDR), has been grappling with this problem for many years now. The UNDP is not in the mold of the "antigrowth" group, as the Club of Rome, for example, is caricatured to be but it seems to represent the latest thinking as it articulates the human development perspective. The Human Development Report itself, especially its 1996 issue, seems to be one of the best sources around which may be used to question the assumptions of the growth paradigm.



Since time immemorial, human civilization has been transforming nature through inventions and labor. Precious little seems to remain untouched and beyond the reach of human activity. It seems virtually nothing will remain forever unknowable and impossible to human beings driven by an obsession to grow and acquire more. In the course of their interaction with nature, human beings have created wealth and waste beyond measure.

**B**y 1990 the measured value of the world's productive capital has reached up to about 20 trillion dollars. The size of wealth is amazing enough, the doubling time of wealth creation is even more incredible. It took all of human history for the world economy to reach 600 billion dollars by 1900 but only two years to produce this much from then on. On average, the additional economic output in each of the development decades — from the 1960s to the 1990s — has equalled the total from the beginning of civilization until 1950. Within this century, the global economy has grown 20 times and nearly five times from 1950 to 1990, from 4 trillion dollars to about 20 trillion dollars.

What this incredible growth story tells is, there is more than enough to feed, house, clothe, educate, lengthen the life, enable the enlargement of choices and freedom of every man, woman and child now living. Probably, enough will be left to include even the cost of clean-up of the monumental mess left behind by the process. But as Mahatma Gandhi pointed out earlier, "The earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need but not every man's greed."

The downside of the grand narrative of growth is described by the 1996 Human Development Report. Wealth creation is just one half of the story. The other half talks about growth that is *jobless, ruthless, voiceless, rootless* and *futureless*.

*Jobless* growth is where an expansion of the economy results in limiting employment opportunities, increasing job losses, longer hours of work and declining incomes, deteriorating working conditions, increasing burden for women. The world economy, ruled by mega corporations, is rapidly being integrated as goods and services are produced anywhere and traded everywhere but it is also creating a universal condition of job insecurity wherever it goes.

*Ruthless* growth means widening of the rich-poor gap in favor of the rich. It has created two worlds — that of the poor and the non-poor — divided by what each side has and cannot have or what it can and cannot do. The level of alienation between the richest fifth and poorest



fifth have been increasing with every development decade, by a ratio of 30 to 1 in 1960, 32 to 1 in 1970, 45 to 1 in 1980 and about 60 to 1 in 1990. Of the 23 trillion dollars global GDP in 1993, 18 trillion dollars is shared by industrial countries and only 5 trillion dollars by developing countries. The assets of the world's 358 billionaires exceed the combined incomes of 45 per cent of humanity — over a billion of whom are absolutely poor.

*Voiceless* growth is growth where there is no democracy or empowerment of people. The most impressive growth in recent times happened in those countries where alternative voices demanding respect for human rights and more citizen participation have been suppressed. The debate around bread and freedom trade-offs should have never prospered, to begin with, since people need both.

*Rootless* growth means the erosion of the integrity of some 10,000 distinct cultures that provide diversity to human life on this planet. With growth comes the domination of our thinking and behavior by a modern culture of accumulation, irresponsible consumption, wastefulness and homogenization at the expense of indigenous cultures and national identities. Cultures and knowledge can be shared and allowed to encounter without being alienated from their roots.

*Futureless* growth is growth that undermines humanity's survival itself. We have seen how rapid growth has been destroying our forests, farmlands, riversystems, wetlands, lakes, coasts, seas and oceans, polluting the air we breathe and destabilizing the climate system. The present generation has been eroding the basis of its own sustainability.

The way things are going, growth in global production will triple by around 2030. Given the state of our environment this threefold increase seems impossible to support, much less sustain, even if human ingenuity finds the technological fixes.

Growth or development, as the *Human Development Report* describes it, is neither equitable nor sustainable. It is about time to rethink whether it is worth pursuing at all. Why this kind of path to human happiness seems so hard to give up can no longer be explained solely by reason or education.



## Education for the future

Our problem runs deep. No less than a new human revolution is necessary to be able to deal with it, as Ikeda suggested. If we take up his challenge, we will have to consider two key factors for a fundamental change of course. One is religion, the other is education. Maybe we need not turn to Ikeda for guidance. But we will still need to confront the growth religion with a new kind of religion or spirituality if you will, that puts the highest value on the person and his or her bonding with nature.

It has been said that environment is where we live and development is what we do to make our life and living environment better. Education serves no other purpose than to acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes and values for the benefit of the common good that has been sacrificed at the altar of growth for much too long. In a sense, this is but the old humanism in a new context, that of survival and security of humanity itself.

Looking at what has become of our lives and our living environments, it would seem that education as we have been doing it till now has nearly lost its relevance. If it is true that the value of new knowledge acquired is only fit for a short obsolescence time span it is understandable why a student of a four-year degree course will be useless even before graduation, if what is learned in school is of any use at all.

Continuing education, or adult learning, guided by a new paradigm, seems to be the wave of the future. Whether it should be formal or nonformal is not an essential question. It need not have a permanent residence. It can happen anywhere —at home, in workplaces, in school, in the neighborhood, under the mango tree in a distant village. What is more important, this kind of education should enable us to understand what went wrong and do something about it.

Continuing education is located in our everyday life and struggles. It draws its lessons from real life situations and feeds a value back to life in a continuing fashion.

Continuing education for the environment should enable us to eventually free ourselves from a past that showed little responsibility for people and the environment. It should be able to help us question our past assumptions and deep-seated biases, teach us a new life ethics and better ways of doing things as we head towards a better, more livable and secure future.



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