

# REGIONAL COOPERATION TOWARDS EFFECTIVE CURRICULAR REFORMS: THE SEAMEO MISSION IN CAPACITY BUILDING AND INNOVATIONS FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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*The new century sees a much greater spirit of cooperation among countries of the Southeast Asian region, particularly in the field of education. This is spearheaded by SEAMEO—an acronym for Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization, founded in 1965. The current prime concern of the countries in the region on education is curricular reform. This is aimed at making the region's education systems more effective in producing a citizenry that is better equipped to handle the effects of an expected 21st Century "globalization." Whilst SEAMEO covers a wide field of education with its sixteen Centres spread over the region, the Centres that would play the key role in capacity-building towards curricular reforms are those that provide in-service enhancement training in specialised areas to educators and teachers of the region. These areas are: science and mathematics, English Language and educational leadership. Much has been achieved over the past three decades, but the momentum must be maintained or even raised through more external inputs to maximise the contributions of these Centres.*

## INTRODUCTION

As the 21st Century dawns upon mankind, there is an increased urgency towards greater cooperation among countries within geographical regions in virtually all areas of socio-politic-economic activities. This urgency is readily understandable as "globalization" ('born' towards the end of the 20th Century and set to characterize the 21st Century) with its attendant issues, problems, opportunities and effects, requires solutions and resolutions which transcend national boundaries. Education is one such area of activity that is among the earliest to recognise the need for regional

cooperation, and, some 30 years before the term “globalisation” has become too familiar, countries in the Southeast Asian region had already initiated the formation of SEAMEO and embarked upon similar issues and parallel perspectives.

SEAMEO stands for *Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization* and it was established on 30 November 1965 (with the Secretariat based in Bangkok, Thailand) with the vision of “... strengthening regional understanding and cooperation in education, science and culture for a better quality of life.”

In accordance with this vision statement, the mission of SEAMEO is geared towards:

1. The establishment of networks and partnerships;
2. The provision of an intellectual forum for policy makers and experts; and
3. The development of regional centres of excellence for the promotion of sustainable human resource development.

Since its establishment 35 years ago, SEAMEO has achieved remarkable progress and success in human resource development in its member countries in the areas of education, science and culture. This is made possible by the close links and spirit of cooperation that prevailed through the years among the member and associate member countries. Naturally, this strong foundation of cooperation can be effected when it becomes imperative that curricular reform in education is urgently needed in order to adapt the region’s education systems to meet the challenges of globalisation in this new century.

### **CURRENT STATUS OF CURRICULAR REFORMS IN THE SEAMEO REGION**

At the outset, it is pertinent to set the term “curriculum” as meaning “school” curriculum, or the curriculum which constitutes a child’s first 11 years or 12 years of basic formal education — in a primary as well as a secondary school environment. With this setting, a comparative overview of the region’s diverse school curricula becomes possible and meaningful.

A study of the region's new or "about-to-be-adopted" national school curricula will reveal some common trends in the curricular reforms intended by the respective countries. The following are the common trends:

### **Increased democratisation of education opportunities**

In all countries in the SEAMEO region, serious efforts have been made towards free and/or compulsory education up to the 9th or even the 12th year of school education. This augurs well to usher in an era of increased literacy rates and a more educated population, receptive to and capable of realising concepts such as lifelong learning, continuing education and self-improvement.

Raised profile of selected components of the curricula, namely

- a) Science and mathematics.
- b) IT usage and its application.
- c) Acquisition of an international language — largely English.

Whilst serious efforts have been made towards a balanced curriculum in each country, such as, integrating elements of various components across the curriculum, however, it is quite apparent that the above three components stand out in all the reformed curricula or "about-to-be-reformed" curricula. The rationale behind these components' prominence is in line with world trends as the coming dominance of the k-economy would invariably require that the human resource of any region be scientifically literate, and IT-functional.

### **Pedagogical shift towards child-centred, activity-based methodology**

Increasingly, the curricula of the countries in the region advocate a move from the traditional teacher-centred methodology to one which is child-centred and activity-based. This move is not entirely a new one but it does differ from the previous ones in that it goes beyond mere child-centred activities (such as lists of procedures in science practicals) towards involving students in problem-solving and investigative work. Such a trend would entail the employment of a wide selection of teaching strategies such as cooperative learning, higher-order thinking skills and active-learning.

**Assessment, move towards alternatives**

Whilst the traditional paper-and-pencil tests still prevail in the regional curricula, increasingly this traditional notion of academic assessment through a single valid way begins to give way to the application of other alternative assessment instruments. These alternatives in a variety of forms such as portfolios, projects, and self-assessment would give a more holistic representation of the students' knowledge and progress. Thus, this move represents a shift from the traditionally upheld instruments based on verbal-linguistics and logical-mathematical skills towards assessments that include a greater range of human capacities and intelligences, in line with current world trends on school assessment.

**SEAMEO'S ROLE IN ACTUALISING CURRICULAR REFORMS IN THE REGION**

The term "curriculum" can be taken either in its narrow sense or in its wider sense, but whatever its sense, its intent must be effectively implemented to produce the desired outcomes. Effective implementation entails aspects of planning, teaching, learning and assessing, and all these aspects constitute the major domains of teacher-education/training programme, so necessary in moulding a professional teacher. Successful implementation of a curriculum would require efficient and well-equipped implementers, i.e. professional teachers. In the same vein, any curricular reform depends greatly on the implementers at the school level i.e. the quality of the school managers and teachers. In this respect, a very disturbing scenario emerges in some member countries of the SEAMEO region, particularly in the former Indo-China countries where teacher shortages, untrained teachers, under-trained teachers, pose grave problems to the implementation of a worthwhile curriculum and render any curricular reform ineffective.

SEAMEO, as a regional organization committed to its vision and mission of promoting regional cooperation in matters related to education and human resource development, has a positive role to play in helping the regional countries to overcome their curriculum implementation difficulties and consequently to the actualisation of reforms. Under the umbrella of SEAMEO, there are currently 14 Centres of specialised institutions spread across the region and closely linked to one another. Although the primary

focus is on training education personnel from member countries, each Centre has research, consultancy and training capacities that go beyond its “core” business. These Centres are structured in three groupings, namely: (a) learning, (b) health, (c) agriculture/natural resources/environment. Of the three, group (a) would be the appropriate Centres whose specialised expertise can be employed to help the member countries in their curricular implementation and reforms. As the area of interest concerns basic education, the group (a) Centres which could make direct impact and contribution in capacity-building towards curricular reform would be the following:

1. SEAMEO RECSAM (Regional Centre for Education in Science & Mathematics).
2. SEAMEO RELC (Regional Language Centre).
3. SEAMEO INNOTECH (Regional Centre for Educational Innovation & Technology).

All these three Centres have, over the past three decades, built up a wealth of experience and expertise in training and professional activities to enhance the skills of teachers, educators and school managers in their respective fields. Their specialisations match the main concerns of the member countries’ curricular reforms which are:

- a) Science and mathematics.
- b) English Language acquisition.
- c) Educational leadership.

This capacity-building of teachers and school managers is vital as the actualisation of any curriculum implementation and reform would ultimately depend on this group of human resource. An elaboration on the expected role of each of these three institutions would be appropriate at this juncture.

### **SEAMEO RECSAM**

This is an institution committed to capacity-building of human resource development in the area of Science, Mathematics and Technology Education. Whilst it involves itself with the normal education professional activities, its main thrust is on training. Basically, RECSAM offers two types of training

courses to teachers and educators in the region. They are, the *Regular* and *Customised programmes*.

In the *Regular programme*, the courses are designed based on the needs and requests of the ten member countries. This makes the content and methodology of the course relevant to the ground situation — particularly with regard to the elements in the curricula pertaining to intended reforms. All participants are fully funded by the Malaysian SEAMEO Educational Development and Endowment Fund (SEDF), and selected by Ministry officials in their respective countries. All available resources are maximised to help them to improve their pedagogical skills and efficacy, and to keep abreast of current global trends and developments in Science, Mathematics and Technology Education.

In the *Customised programme*, the courses are designed to meet the special needs of member countries as well as other client-countries' prevailing needs in the advent of basic education curricular reforms. These are generally short courses which may be conducted in-Centre or in the client-countries. Recent programmes include the following:

1. Malaysian Ministry of Education with a World-Bank Loan-sponsored project, to upgrade 1170 Malaysian science and mathematics teachers, from 1999 to 2001.
2. Indonesian Ministry of Education through an Asian Development Bank (ADB) Loan-sponsored project, to upgrade 100 Indonesian teachers.
3. Thailand Teachers' Council-sponsored project, to improve skills of 88 Thai mathematics teachers.
4. Malaysian Ministry of Science-sponsored project, to upgrade 1320 Malaysian science and mathematics teachers for the country's Smart School programme.

Future programmes would include RECSAM's collaboration with Sheffield-Hallam University of U.K., to provide training for Malaysian primary science teachers in "Active Teaching and Learning Approaches in Science (ATLAS)."

Whilst it is a fact that these courses make an impact only on a miniscule fraction of the total population of teachers, it is felt that the "multiplier"

element that forms part of the course would produce a ripple-effect among the teachers in each member country as well as the student population. A “tsunami” effect would be too far-fetched, but it would make a positive contribution towards curricular reform in the region.

### **SEAMEO RELC**

This Centre is dedicated to the development of expertise and excellence in language teacher education in the region, and the promotion of cooperation and interaction among language professionals of the region and beyond. The Centre started as a centre for English Language but has since included many other languages of the region plus French in its courses.

A close examination of the region’s national curricula would reveal that the status of English Language has been raised. It now forms a significant element of the region’s curricular reform, and in most countries English is taught from the primary level upwards, even in the former French Indo-China countries. This is a reflection of the stature of English, which apart from being an international language has also become a dominant language of the Information and Communication Age. This is the hard reality of the 21st Century (“hard” for the language nationalists), and RELC with three decades of experience and expertise in its “core-business” of enhancing the skills of English Language teachers region-wide, is in an excellent position to make greater impacts on the region’s capacity-building towards curricular reform — specifically in the English Language component of the new national curricula.

Among RELC’s many programmes and activities, the following have direct bearing on capacity-building towards curricular reform in the region:

#### **Training Courses**

Three types of courses are run by the Centre to meet the needs of the region:

- (a) In-house *Regular Courses* which include the following:
  - M.A. in Applied Linguistics.
  - Diploma in Applied Linguistics.
  - Specialist Certificate in Language Testing.

Specialist Certificate in Language Curriculum and Materials Development.

Specialist Certificate in Teaching of English for Business and Technology.

(b) *Customised Courses:*

So far, over 3000 participants have successfully gone through these courses which include:

English for International Communication Courses, a tripartite project between the Canadian International Development Agency, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore, and RELC; for senior government officials from Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam.

French Courses, working in close collaboration with the French Linguistic Attache' of the French Embassy of Singapore.

(c) *Distance Education Courses:*

So far, six Distance Education English courses for teachers i.e. TESL/TEFL have been completed in Vientiane (Lao PDR), Cebu (Philippines), Surin and Chiang Mai (Thailand) and Ho Chi Minh City and Danang (Vietnam).

This mode of delivery complements the other two types of courses in contributing to the overall capacity-building efforts to enhance the skills of English Language teachers in the region.

### **SEAMEO Regional Schools Internet Project**

This project which started in 1999 has successfully linked 30 schools in seven countries of the region. In this internet linkage, students from the participating schools are given the opportunity to exchange ideas and experiences of a given theme, through the use of English as the vehicle of communication. In this way, the project provides a very active platform and environment for schools to use and popularise English. This helps immensely in the learning of English in countries and locations where the environment for English usage is very limited.

An offshoot of this project was the "Virtual Forum for English Language Teachers," which had the active participation of 139 teachers from nine

countries. Through this virtual forum, active professional discussions among language teachers would boost the teaching-learning process of the language.

### **SEAMEO INNOTECH**

This Centre's mission is primarily to foster education for human resource development through initiating and disseminating innovative and technology-oriented programmes for the betterment of the region through cooperation among the nations of the region. Among its wide spectra of activities, its training programme which focus mainly on "educational leadership" is the most relevant to the issue of capacity-building towards actualising curricular reforms in the region. Whilst it is true that the quality and skills of teachers are of primary importance, the grass-root educational leaders in the form of school managers such as principals and head-teachers are equally important if not pivotal in the successful implementation of school curriculum and its attendant curricular reform.

In the October-December 2000 issue of IIEP the Newsletter (Vol. XVIII, No. 4), de Grauwe Anton wrote:

*"Much research has demonstrated that the quality of education depends primarily on the way schools are managed ... and that the capacity of schools to improve teaching and learning is strongly influenced by the quality of leadership provided by the head-teacher."*

It is in this light that the training programmes of INNOTECH with its focus on "Educational Leadership" stand out as extremely important for any successful implementation of curricular reform. The training courses cover sixteen major tracts ranging from Educational Planning and Management to Media Production and Utilisation, and they offer participants the chance of being better equipped to improve school management practices, making schools more effective and hence, making positive contribution towards actualising curricular reform in the region.

### **CONCLUSION**

Education is a major component of SEAMEO's core interest, but the term covers a wide area and involves a wide spectrum of activities. However, when the term "curricular reform" comes to the fore, it is usually taken to

mean basic education curricular reform and school curricula become the theme of this discussion. The three SEAMEO Centres which have been singled out to be in the forefront of the Organization's involvement in the region's curricular reform have been making tireless efforts at enhancing the skills of the grassroot workers at school level for the past three decades or so. These workers are none other than the teachers and managers of the countless schools in the region, and, as the region progresses, societal demands and expectations on the schools become greater, their tasks become more complex and multifarious.

These three Centres with their specialisations are by no means entirely adequate to effect total success in each country's target curricular reforms. However, as their specialised expertise constitutes the core-elements of the reforms, it is hoped that their efforts and contributions in basic capacity-building towards effective curricular reform in the region's education systems would be significant. SEAMEO, as a whole, is sensitive to the need to continuously re-orientate and adapt itself to new situations in order to stay abreast with new developments and changes in the new Age.

The Centres' activities reflect this philosophy, and their training programmes are continuously upgraded to meet new requirements. Currently, each of the three Centres' training capacities has sufficient room for increased numbers of trainees. It is hoped that international aid agencies such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB) can join in to provide sponsorships in addition to the host countries' limited scholarships. This would maximise the contribution of these Centres in this ever-pressing need of capacity building. It is a truism that nations in the region must help themselves first, but perhaps the time has come for greater outside help in this issue of curricular reform. The momentum has been built up; it does not require prohibitive external inputs to make great strides. Let us then move concertedly, confidently and convincingly to meet the impact and implications of globalisation in this 21st Century with what has been achieved so that more can be realized in education for all in the region.

#### REFERENCE

Anton, G. (2001, March). *International Institute for Educational Planning*, 18(4).

