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Environmental Communication In Malaysia

By

Halimah Hassan
ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION IN MALAYSIA

(Country Paper)

by
Halimah Hassan

DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT
MINISTRY OF SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENT MALAYSIA.

April, 1985
Introduction

In Malaysia, the government's efforts to promote socio-economic development, as inspired in the New Economic Policy, are increasingly being reflected by the provision of basic physical and social needs such as food, clothing, shelter, education, health, employment opportunities, consumer goods and services—especially to those in the rural areas. These efforts, guided by the twin objectives of eradication of poverty and the restructuring of society, have resulted in an appreciable improvement in the standard of living.

As the pace of socio-economic development quickens so does the pace of environmental change. To deal with this change the public must be equipped with a high degree of competence in understanding and managing the environment.

The next step would be to identify actions which will ensure the preservation and improvement of humanity's potentials, developing social and individual well-being in harmony with the biophysical and man-made environment. In turn, it becomes the goal of environmental education to develop a population that is aware of and concerned about the environment and its associated problems, and which has the knowledge, skills, attitudes, motivations and commitment to work individually and collectively towards the solution of current problems and the prevention of new ones.
Since environmental education is necessarily oriented towards community action, there are many targeted groups for environmental education, both formal and non-formal. Efforts in each them have involved many different environments, institutions, and organizations, including governmental organizations, private and commercial enterprises, and non-governmental organizations. Nevertheless, it is necessary to mention a diverse range of approaches.

Environmental Education in Malaysia

The developing countries, including Malaysia, find it difficult in practice to influence the traditional methodology and approach of project evaluation adopted by development planners and decision-makers. These countries, therefore, need some assurance and perhaps conclusive proof that environmental management far from being a handicap can be actually a plus factor in any sound resource management strategy in helping to ensure optimum hoped-for benefits from development outlays. It should in fact be made evident that the environmental protection approach is a resource management concept while economic development is generally pursued as a resource use concept and that the underlying objective of integrating environmental planning into the development process is to integrate resource management ideas into the process of planning for resource use. Further, the lack of systematic studies to demonstrate clearly in a comprehensive and quantitative manner the assessment of benefits accruing from environmental measures has led to the expediency of ignoring environmental consideration in resource management.
What is needed is new knowledge, new perceptions, new attitudes and these must extend to all levels of government and throughout the private sector as well: to industries, to the professions, to each individual citizen in his job and in his home. We must seek nothing less than a basic reform in the way our society looks at problems and makes decisions.

We must train professional environmental managers to deal with pollution, land-use planning, and all the other technical requirements of a high quality environment. It is also vital that our entire society develops a new understanding and new awareness of man's relation to his environment. This will require the development and teaching of environmental concepts at every point in the educational process.

Malaysia, in this respect, has already begun to provide the institutional framework for effective environmental education and is currently in the midst of a dynamic movement to impart environmental literacy.

The Environmental Information and Education Unit of the Department of Environment was set-up in 1981 with the objective to provide information and education to the public regarding the protection and enhancement of the environment. The Unit is currently responsible for environmental information, education, publication, public relations and also functioning as a complaints bureau.

**Formal Environmental Education**

The Curriculum Development Centre of the Ministry of Education has introduced a subject 'Man and His Environment' to the new primary school curriculum. At the
Scientific and environmentally related topics such as climate change and control, pesticides, soil erosion, water pollution, noise pollution, radioactive substances and other current issues will be integrated into the curriculum in the near future. At the secondary level, it is also planned that environmental information be disseminated through various fora, for example, curriculum activities such as science and environment clubs, science exhibitions, field study centres, science newsletters and in-service education for teachers. At the tertiary level, University Pertanian Malaysia offers a degree course in Environmental Science. In the spirit of Environmental Quality Act, 1974, the curriculum content encompasses pollution control and management and pollution control technology of relevance to Malaysia.

University Pertanian Malaysia also offers a course as well as Bachelors degree in Fisheries in which environmental studies particularly chemical oceanography and marine pollution are highlighted in the curriculum. In the National University of Malaysia and University of Malaya, environmental studies form an option for graduates in the Diploma in Education. Other universities also have some environmentally related courses integrated into their Bachelor of Science degree.

Regarding environmental education and training programmes, for government officials, the officers of the Environment Department have been regularly lecturing, and continue to do so, to groups of government officers attending selected courses conducted by our Institute of Public Administration (INTAN).
Besides these lectures to groups of government officers, officers of the Environment Department have frequently participated in seminars which incorporate environmental elements and which are directed to upgrade the capabilities of technical personnel including professionals, development planners, engineers and industrial managers encompassing both the public sector as well as business and industry.

Non-Formal Environmental Education In Malaysia

Since environmental education is necessarily oriented towards community action, there are many target groups for environmental education outside the formal school system. They range from the general public to decision makers and planners including key or strategic professional groups, out-of-school children and youths, the unemployed, parents, local elected officials, citizens and/or pressure groups, industrial and commercial leaders and members of the printing and audio-visual media, to name a few. Thus effectively the message has to reach two general functional groups, namely the policy-makers and planners and the general public who are at the receiving end of decision-making. In this sense, environmental education through enabling public participation enhances the element of popular involvement in decision-making, hopefully making for more rational decision making.
Non-formal environmental education can be classified in two broad forms depending on whether they are government-initiated or inspired or whether they are organised by voluntary organisations and citizen groups. Activities by both these forms should be so structured as to reach out to the wide range of target groups envisaged and the modalities chosen should be such as to optimise impact.

The Department of Environment publishes a quarterly magazine 'SEKITOR' which is distributed free to government departments and organisations, universities, secondary schools and public libraries. Apart from this the Environment Department distributes guidelines and explanatory notes to target groups. In addition, to mark specific events such as World Environment Day relevant information, brochures and pamphlets are distributed to the public together with posters and special messages from the Minister charged with responsibility for the environment. Further, the Environment Department organises talks and panel discussion and co-operates with a wide spectrum of organisations while taking an active part in radio and television programmes focussed on environmental education. Seminars organised by the Environment Department range from issues in education and legislation to highly technical and scientific ones relating to pollution and effluent control. The Wildlife and National Parks Department as part of its responsibility for the management of national parks operates a Nature Study Centre at Kuala Atok in Taman Negara apart from issuing its own educational material. The Forestry Department and the Local Authorities along with relevant agencies organise activities such as Tree Planting and Cleanliness Campaigns which contribute towards environmental education.
Role Of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO’s)

Non-governmental organisations (NGO’s) commonly functioning as pressure groups can be regarded as representing the public or at least a section of the public. They have been known to play important roles in influencing both public and private sector policy making in the developed countries. An environmental education role is implicit in the rules and regulations of almost all NGO’s. Their public pronouncements and publicity are directed at effecting changes and shaping attitudes and so both directly and indirectly they become involved in environmental education.

Of great importance is the role of NGO’s in providing a mechanism for feedback on negative side-effects from programme implementation to the government and its regulatory agencies. In effect, they are holding a watching brief as a ‘watchdog’ on behalf of the people on the use of natural resources, conservation, professional practices and other activities of government and private sector which adversely impinge on the environment. It is this role of the NGO’s that has made them necessary in the scheme of things and so effective in developed countries. On the contrary, in many developing countries, the effectiveness and role of NGO’s are still being put to the test and quite a number of NGO’s in developing countries are beginning to flex their muscles, so to speak, in addressing themselves to the challenges. Yet few, if any, are disposed to take a broad view of matters, backed by indepth scientific study.
Feedback from the NGO's can take many forms. These include publications in the form of newsletters and magazines, exhibitions, talks, symposiums, fora and conferences. In sum, the effectiveness of NGO's can be enhanced by broad-based public participation and generous and informed coverage by the mass media.

The NGO's in Malaysia continue to play an important role in promoting environmental education and training. The active organisation in environmental issues are the Consumer Association of Penang (CAP), Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia (EPSM), Friends of the Earth Malaysia (SAM), the World Wildlife Fund Malaysia, the Malaysian Nature Society and Federation of Malaysian Consumers Association (FOMCA). A whole spectrum of activities such as seminars, research and publication including the production of slide displays, regular columns in newspapers and discussion programmes on radio and television are carried out by NGO’s in Malaysia.

**Role of Mass Media**

The mass media play a significant role in furthering the cause of environmental education. The task of environmental education programme is vast and enormous and without adequate support from the mass media namely newspapers and other printed materials, radio and television it would be difficult if not impossible to achieve optimum results.

The co-operation of and contribution by the mass media is critical in ensuring that available information reaches the public in a form that can be readily understood and acted upon. The impact of articles such as
those on consumer affairs and environmental issues cannot be easily gauged but, given relevance and prominence through relating them to actual and emerging issues, the public can be expected over time to be more enlightened on these issues. Moreover, mass media with a reputation for objectiveness can develop confidence in the public who would then more readily voice grievances or opinions in the press. This can only result in greater awareness of the public on issues of vital concern.

The active interest the mass media has exhibited recently has been encouraging. The press (printed media) has covered a wide range of topics on environmental issues, conservation and legislation not only as informative and interesting weekly feature articles, reports and daily news items but also as editorial pieces which could hardly be missed by the average reader. Occasional articles also do appear in some of the popular magazines.

Local and international programmes over the radio and television have carried information and messages on the environment. The radio through its several language channels has not only news bulletins, but talks and discussions. The television through some of its programmes such as "Focus" and also special programmes on Wild Life, Survival, to name a few, are very effective means of conveying the message.

Conclusion

Efforts and programmes to date are far from sufficient while marking a significant start in relation to national action in the near future of the future.
There is an agency to have these programmes co-ordinated so that efforts and energy can be maximised. This does not mean that the individual department efforts should be curtailed. There are, however, limitations by the nature of the departments' primary function other than information. This is also not a mere problem of cooperation since cooperation already exists. Coordination needs to be done on a regular basis with one co-ordinating agency specifically responsible for ensuring effective development and propagation of the non-formal environmental education throughout the country.

Future efforts will be concentrated towards co-ordinated and more sharply focussed programmes for optimum impact on target groups. The Department of Environment is currently working on a comprehensive programme on environmental education which will not only involve all possible target groups but will also involve co-ordination of all agencies involved in the field of environmental communication.

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