

Asian Educators Tackle Major Regional Issues

KUALA LUMPUR — Population growth, quality of life, health, the environment. These are some of the urgent issues that require attention from Asia's educational system if basic education for 80 per cent of the world's children by the year 2000 is to be met.

How effectively education leaders and the education community as a whole respond to these major challenges will have a direct effect on the quality of life and future development of the region,' notes a report prepared by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

The report notes that 3,400 million, or almost two-thirds of the world's population, live in Asia and the Pacific.

'Continued population growth presents major problems for economic growth and for tackling problems such as poverty and need to improve health services and the adequate provision of food,' notes the report which was distributed during the sixth regional conference of ministers of education and economic planning in Asia and the Pacific, organised by UNESCO with the cooperation of UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) held here.

Due to rapid population growth in

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the region, the number of primary school-age children (6-11 years old) will increase from 409 million to about 481 million by the year 2000.

Over the past decade, the economic performance of many developing countries in the region has been impressive. Average gross national product (GNP) per capita in Eastern Asia and the Pacific increased from US\$390 in 1980 to US\$590 in 1990. In South Asia, it grew from US\$230 to US\$330 during the same period. Overall economic conditions in the region remained strong in 1990 to 1992, despite a slump in the world economy.

Despite impressive economic gains, poverty remains a major problem in the region. 'Poverty is often associated with low education standards and lack of relevant employment skills,' the report observes.

The AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) pandemic is an example of how education plays a role in socio-economic development. This is so because more Asians than Africans will be infected by AIDS in the mid-1990s, according to health

authorities.

'In the absence of the vaccine, education for the prevention of behaviours that lead to infection with the AIDS virus is essential,' the UNESCO report notes. It adds that AIDS education within the school curriculum is a necessity.

Responding to the AIDS pandemic, UNESCO collaborated with the World Health Organisation in establishing the 'AIDS Education and Health Promotion Materials Exchange Centre for Asia and the Pacific (AIDSED Centre). It became operational in 1990 but closed its operation at the start of this year due to lack of financial support.

But before it closed, operation, AIDSED Centre was able to collect a large number of AIDS education books, monographs and articles, among many others. Its computerised data base was made available to educators, teachers and students.

In recent years, concern about the environment has also assumed an important consideration in development planning. The UNESCO report notes the region faces deforestation,

air and water pollution, floods and landslides, reduction of biological diversity and so on. There is also a growing concern in the region about global warming and the depletion of the ozone layer.

'Countries of the region face a major challenge in helping to achieve sustainable development based on their past experience, the current state of the environment and future plans,' the report points out.

The UNESCO report was drawn from the report and recommendations of the several conferences conducted over the past decade, including the Jomtien conference held in 1990, which provided UNESCO the opportunity to remind leaders in Asia and the Pacific that an educated population was a nation's most reliable engine for growth.

Some 2,000 education leaders from 150 countries who participated in the Jomtien conference in Thailand set their sights on three main objectives to be achieved at the end of the century. They are: basic education for at least 80 per cent of the world's children by the year 2000, reduction of the adult illiteracy rate by 50 per cent of its 1990 level; and equality of education opportunity for girls and boys.

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