
ASIA WOMEN LEADERS Interview

Dr. Ethel Agnes Pascua-Valenzuela

Director, SEAMEO Secretariat, Bangkok, Thailand

Q1. Could you tell us about the initiatives that you are currently focusing on in education in ASEAN specifically what you are doing and what are the directions you/we are heading?

Thank you very much for inviting me. First I would like to introduce you to SEAMEO. SEAMEO is an intergovernmental organization composed of 11 member countries, eight associates and affiliates members. We have 26 centers. We have a vision of to be the leading organization for enhancing regional understanding, cooperation, and education in science and culture for a better quality of life in South East Asia. So as the director of SEAMEO, I make it a point to maintain our work and aspirations for the development of peoples in the region. First, we need to address the educational issues - especially the inequality which has been magnified by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. We know that SEAMEO places a lot of comparable emphasis on capacity-building, human capital development, or human resource development. We would like to respond to the skills needed in a knowledge-based economy and in this digitalized era and globalized environment

Q2. Please tell us about any episodes that impressed you the most

The best part of this three-year process while we are in pandemic is we were able to fix stuff of where we are in SEAMEO. We were able to develop our SEAMEO strategic plan between 2021 to 2030 amidst the lockdown during the pandemic. We have utilized all existing channels and platforms of Zoom, WebX, and many others for consultation. We were able to do SEAMEO integrated operations plan 2021 to 2025. In that regard, we are in this process of a new road map was adopted by the ministers of education. In the next 10 years, detailing the goals, strategic themes, operational objectives, as well as redefining our core values, core competencies, and priority areas in education in science and in culture. The pandemic did not stop the SEAMEO secretary, SEAMEO centers, and our partners. We have moved forward to the big start of all the challenges but also the opportunities provided to us during the pandemic. Thus, for now, the SEAMEO strategic plan to guide us, it has three agendas in education, in science, and in culture and together we are able to prioritize and do resource mobilization and strategies for all the member countries of the region.

Q3. Could you tell us about the results of your activities for ASEAN education and what kind of problems you are facing now?

What is the problem that I am addressing right now? Let's take a look at south east asia. Today, we have over 680 million in population based on the latest UN estimates. And among

this, the education of 140 million south east asian learners have been disrupted. This is due the school closure since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, since early 2020. Most countries across the region have already reopened schools at the start of last year. But, as you know, learning was severely affected. On average, children miss almost every second day of school. UNESCO estimates that 2.7 million children across east asia and the Pacific region will not return to school once schools reopen. This is on top of 35 million children in east asia and the Pacifica, including south east asian regions who have already dropped out of the education system. When children do not go to school, this is our problem in the region. These children will be at risk of experiencing violence, abuse, exploitation, and girls will be more exposed to additional risks of teen pregnancy and early marriage. That's why we need to address barriers to education. We need to address learning poverty and learning losses during the pandemic. And this is where all countries in SouthEast Asia should work together to build back better

Q4.As a Women leader, what is a problem that is persistent in your career what is your driving mechanism to keep moving?

I am teacher by profession and for over three decades, the problem that we see is actually the skills and competencies of our learners, of our staff, and the people who are around us. That's why for me, my reflection is that we need to change mindsets. Especially we need to promote lifelong learning. We should promote everyone to continue to learn skills and retone themselves. And this is why lifelong learning in southeast asia is very important. We need to really support lifelong learning education. From early childhood to higher education and all throughout life. So when we convened meetings with ministers about lifelong learning, most of the countries in south east asia would like to have a lifelong learning society. What do we mean by that? Every person in the region would have the ability and the interest to learn again all throughout life. The ministers have recommended that we need to recognize that people are at the core of lifelong learning. We need to address the learner's needs to able to develop relevant and learn-centered policies and intervention. We also need to reimagine and transform lifelong learning. It shouldn't be boring - it should be a happy activity as we learn new things all throughout life. And we must do this with patterns and organizations who share the same common end purpose.

Q5.What do you think about the future education needs for Asian children in 2030 and in the next 8 years before 2030, what do you anticipate will occur in education in Asia first? Will there bve any fundamental shifts?

Practically, we have only 8 years before we achieve SDG 2030 before 2030. And in that 7 years plus more months, we need to transform education. We need future education towards sustainable growth, increasing emphasis on the importance of addressing diversity, inclusion, and equity in education. Our flagship program and agenda should be towards promoting quality and equity education as well as using education for sustainable development concepts. It is a common policy for South East Asian countries regardless of levels of development. We need to transform learning. We need to transform education. We need to transform teaching. We need to transform teachers. If we all work together, then we will achieve SDG goals in 2030.

Q6.If there is anything we can do to act or cooperate? We would love to hear your suggestions.

SEAMEO with its 11-member countries, associate member countries, and affiliate members together 26 centers and networks have collaboratively supported sustainable development goals. We welcome all partners, non-state actors in education, non-government organizations, to work with us in the post-pandemic resilient recovery for us to build forward together for greater inclusion and equality for everyone. We share the same goals and aspirations, I think we can work together to achieve a common goal.

Q7.With fiscal constraints, how do you predict will the education sector be supported and whether there will be an adjustment towards the method of teaching/learning in Asia?

We know that we are all rising out of the pandemic. This is a reset mode for everyone, but we should also take note that during the pandemic the most difficult times we have experienced a lot of resources coming in. Public and private partnerships emerged. That means that even if with limited resources and financial resources in each country, if we work together, combining resources of the government and non-government sectors, and non-state actors, we can have inclusive and equitable quality education for everyone. That's why the ministers of education of SEAMEO have recommended that together, we can create a policy environment that enhances collaboration and partnership among key education actors to transform education and science in a manner consistent with South East Asian identity culture and values. We can really support capacity-building for teachers with all the digitalized environment and most teachers are already adjusted to these hybrid or blended learning. Together I think, even with limited resources, and online, we can develop future ready-learners in an ever-evolving world despite the limitation of financial resources.

Q8.How do we bridge the Western education system and Asian education system so that there are minimal gaps in quality?

If we have western education and south east asian education system, the best is that we need to learn from one another. We can learn the good practices in the western education, they can also learn the good practices in the south east asian education system. Only by sharing the good practices that together we can harmonize and create minimal gaps in quality. This culture of sharing good practices, but not having copy-paste method system will be useful. So benchmarking, signing cooperation agreement between south east asian countries and those overseas North American or European universities. This will be beneficial to south east asia. That's why internationalization of education and the harmonization of higher education is in SEAMEO education and agenda.

Q9.We are aiming to create a platform where there will be 1,000 professional women leaders to collaborate and ally with one another, for the betterment of Asia, if such an online AWLF platform exists, are you interested in supporting and utilizing it? Please tell us about some of the ideas. Could you please give us a message supporting the AWLF?

Well, finally congratulations to you for creating a platform where there will be 1000 women leaders to collaborate and support each other. This is a very good agenda. This will help south east asian women leaders to all the more be confident and to have strength coming from another. The AWLF platform is really a benchmark for us. We can support and utilize this platform. I think this is the way forward. We should continue to collaborate and continue to have a bigger number of women leaders who can support, coach, and be a mentor for one another. Congratulations.



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Dr Ethel Agnes Pascua- Valenzuela is the director of the SEAMEO Secretariat, which serves as the executive arm of the SEAMEO Council of Ministers of Education from 11 member states that make up SEAMEO. She is the 18th Director of SEAMEO Secretariat and the first woman director since SEAMEO's establishment in 1965.

Since Dr Ethel Valenzuela joined the SEAMEO Secretariat, she oversaw the implementation of SEAMEO College projects with ADB; SEA PLM- the first regional assessment of grade 5 learners in reading, writing, mathematics literacy as well as global citizenship and SEAMEO Inter-centre collaboration activities and UNESCO-SEAMEO projects. She represents SEAMEO in the UNESCO SDG Steering Committee and the Intl Teacher Task Force. She is a advisory board member of UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), the ASEAN TVET Council and UNESCO ISCED-T Advisory Group.

When the pandemic broke in, she has introduced a wide range of COVID-19 responses of the organization including the development and rolling off the SEAMEO Webinar Series, SEAMEO COVID -19 Accessible and Responsive Education Support (CARES) Programme and SEAMEO Border Schools Project aligning its actions to the UNESCO Global Education Coalition for COVID-19 Response and Toolkit for Remote Teaching and Learning to name a few.

Prior to joining SEAMEO, Dr Valenzuela also served in the Philippines as Commissioner of UNESCO National Commission (2003-2010) and played an integral role in the ratification of UNESCO Mutual Recognition of Higher Education Degrees, Studies and Certificates (2003) as well as in the drafting of the TOKYO Convention for the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications (2011). She served as Director IV of the Commission on Higher Education for Office of Student Services and Director III of the International Affairs Services. An accomplished academic and writer, Dr Valenzuela led SEAMEO researches on K to 12 Toolkit, Regional Comparison of K to 12 Systems in Southeast Asia, Southeast Asia Teaching Competency Standards, Education For All Assessment of the Philippines, ESD Toolkit, UNESCO Toolkit for the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications and Toolkit for National Information Centre to name a few and two Outstanding EIU Best Case Studies from UNESCO APCEIU on Peace Education and Literacy.

As a passionate educator, Dr Valenzuela also serves as Professorial Lecturer at the Department of Educational Leadership and Professional Services, College of Education, at the University of the Philippines -Diliman Philippines since 2006. Dr Ethel Agnes Pascua-Valenzuela is the director of the SEAMEO Secretariat, which serves as the executive arm of the SEAMEO Council of Ministers of Education from 11 member states that make up SEAMEO. She is the 18th Director of SEAMEO Secretariat and the first woman director since SEAMEO's establishment in 1965. Since Dr Ethel Valenzuela joined the SEAMEO Secretariat, she oversaw the implementation of SEAMEO College projects with ADB; SEA

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