

# Asia Pacific Forum for UNESCO —Future of Our Culture and Education

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In cooperation with UNESCO and the Japanese National Commission for UNESCO, ACCU organized the Asia-Pacific Forum for UNESCO: Future of Our Culture and Education from 29 to 31 July 2003 in Tokyo, with the participation of 70 overseas experts from UNESCO and 30 Asian and Pacific countries, as well as 30 from Japan. We were very pleased to welcome a wide range of experienced participants, from government officials in charge of non-formal education to museum curators, from Papua New Guinea to Kyrgyzstan.

## To Respond to the Changing Needs

ACCU has considered for some time about the need for assessing what sorts of changes are actually taking place in the region, so as to reflect them in its programmes. Facing the onslaught of globalization, the region is having a lot of socio-cultural problems such as identity crisis. The region continues to suffer from the considerable gap of income and the inadequate provision of educational and other public services, for example, between countries and localities in the same country, despite generally observed economic development throughout the region.

Another consideration for holding the Forum was that we had to respond to the latest UNESCO initiatives. Realizing there is a long way to go before attaining the 50% improvement in the levels of adult literacy by 2015 set in Dakar in 2000, UNESCO has embarked on the UN Literacy Decade this year, and the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development will start in 2005. Also, total of 19 spaces or forms of cultural expression were proclaimed Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2001.

What is permeating all these movements is a strong commitment on the part of every UNESCO member state to the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity adopted at the 31st General Conference in 2001. This is the first international instrument to assert that intercultural dialogue and respect for cultural diversity and toler-

ance is the very essence of our identity. Are we really responding to changing needs of Asian and Pacific countries in the new UNESCO framework? Can we continue our programmes along the same path as in the past?

The Forum was, therefore, designed to look together at what is happening today at the grassroots level of our Asian communities, in particular in basic and non-formal education, and tangible and intangible cultural heritage. We wanted to learn from each other's precious experiences and lessons in order to apply them to other countries. At the same time ACCU wanted to benefit from the Forum in enabling it to adapt its activities to new changing situations in the region, especially at the time of financial difficulties. As end-results the Forum expected to produce concrete programmes and projects at different levels. Two basic underlining principles for the Forum exercise were Education for All and Cultural Diversity.

## How the Forum Proceeded

The Forum was guided by two distinguished keynote speakers: Professor Ishii Yoneo, President, Kanda University of International Studies, and former President, Japanese National Commission for UNESCO; and Mrs. Tuenjai Deetes, Senator of Thailand, and Executive Secretary, Hill Area and Community Development Foundation. Their excellent presentations were common in urging us to respect cultural diversity, but the former emphasized language preservation at global level, while the latter detailed the real life of northern hill tribes. Dr. Sheldon Shaeffer, Director, UNESCO Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau for Education in Bangkok, explained various UNESCO activities, both at international and local levels, covering so-called 'Decades' and 'Community Learning Centres' in the region.

Then, a panel discussion took place with the interesting presentations of 5 panelists to enable the Forum participants to open up their minds further. Three workshops



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were then led by 2 co-chairpersons and participants listened to 4-5 presentations on national and local activities by Asian resource persons. This was followed by discussions, culminating in 10 programme proposals at the end.

## Fruits of the Forum

Let me summarize here briefly the major findings and achievements of the Forum.

Firstly, we found various activities going on in the region about which ACCU and perhaps most of the participants in the region had limited information so far. For example, in a few countries, programmes had been started on the preserving of mother tongues, which are in critical situation.

Secondly, facing the decreasing financial support from their respective governments, many participants expressed the desire to initiate projects by themselves at local levels rather than waiting for guidance and support from outside sources, including the governments.

Thirdly, the participants and ACCU could find a few experts in new areas such as the educational use of museums, to be integrated into regional networks of resource persons. It is extremely important to be able to accede to expertise in the region and to update data and knowledge related to our activities.

Fourthly, all the programmes proposed by the Forum take a holistic approach to such issues as preservation and development of mother tongues and encompass education and culture.

Fifthly, ACCU renewed its realization of how precious the resources, which ACCU has accumulated during its thirty years' life, are, and they will likely be adapted to create new products responding to changing needs in the region. As one example, Asian Folktales will be an important part of a new book on character building.

Sixthly, reflecting widening socio-cultural differences in the region, there will be increasing needs for undertaking more sub-regional programmes, better responding to different local needs.

The most important achievements of the Forum were, however, that the Asian experts could get together and exchange their experiences and ideas, face to face, in a friendly and open manner, and that they could take advantage of these precious contacts in their future collaboration. Appreciating this rich network of experts, ACCU looks forward to further strengthening joint collaborative activities in Asia and the Pacific with their trust and renewed confidence.

(Director-General, ACCU)



Active discussion at Asia Pacific Forum for UNESCO