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Chapter 14

Decolonising the Paradigm of Sustainable Development through the Traditional Concept of *Sejahtera*

14

▸ **Summary**

ESD Innovation

Delving into aspects of etymology-anthropology (in this case, on the concept of *Sejahtera*) and connecting them to the network of cultures provides a better strategy for making ESD a 'living' concept beyond the prescriptive technical and bureaucratic aspects for implementation. Putting the subject in its relevant historical and cultural context creates a deeper appreciation and understanding, which results in ease of acceptance and quicker adoption. The approach used here is a departure from that widely used today, where sustainable development is presented as a 'foreign' concept arising from the 1987 Brundtland Report, ignoring similar and powerful, culturally endorsed ideas that were in existence well before the twentieth century.

Societal Transformation

The strategy described here rests on positive attitudes and understanding of sustainability issues, with respect to the use of resources, conservation of the environment, and the maintenance of balance and harmony as outlined by the 'SPICES' approach, which goes beyond the 3Ps (People, Planet, and Profit) of sustainability. Periodic reinforcement of the internalisation process as part of the 'learning by doing' towards sustainability ensures the success of the strategy.

Implications of Development for Knowledge Institutions

The strategy of raising awareness among the students and the community about the preexisting concept of sustainability in their culture allows them to feel a cultural connectedness to the idea and philosophy, as something that has been part of their culture and lifestyle (albeit forgotten) since time immemorial. Co-creation and co-learning of the concept through interaction with the community would give all parties a sense of ownership and make the changes easier to implement.

In this sense, knowledge institutions must be open to broadening the knowledge system by embracing relevant traditions or even indigenising the knowledge base as part of the process of the decolonisation of knowledge.

The Growing Recognition of Relevance of Indigenous Knowledge and Wisdom

Three decades ago, in 1987, the Brundtland Report, entitled 'Our Common Future', known officially as the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (*WCED 1987*), was launched. The Report became a game changer in that it called for a 'new' way of thinking that would ensure better quality of life in generational terms. Sustainable development (SD) soon became a part of the global conversation and the foundation of the 'Education for Sustainable Development' (ESD) framework.

By 2014, when the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) drew to a close, SD had gained global acceptance, with a number of higher education institutions playing key roles in embedding ESD into their curricula and carrying out collaborative activities with the community to create greater awareness and demand for ESD. Also in 2014, the International Association of Universities (IAU) decided to focus more attention on indigenous knowledge and the need to better understand the ancestral perspectives as the 'forgotten' part of ESD. Following the *IAU 2014 International Conference on Blending Higher Education and Traditional Knowledge for Sustainable Development*, held in Iquitos, Peru, in March 2014, a normative instrument known as the IAU Iquitos statement on Higher Education for Sustainable Development was adopted (*IAU 2014*). It was then presented at the International Conference on Higher Education for Sustainable Development: Higher Education Beyond 2014, on 9 November, 2014 at Nagoya University, Japan.

Succinctly, the Declaration recognises that indigenous knowledge and wisdom that well-preceded the Brundtland Report have a significant role to play in contextualising ESD as the 'new' platform influencing the purpose of education, and how education is being reoriented toward a more sustainable future. In a manner of speaking, SD and ESD could be traced back to the many facets practised by the ancestors, especially focused on positive values and ethics. Anthropocentrism was not a major issue then, unlike how it is being categorically singled out today (*Montague 2013*). This became apparent over the DESD when indigenous knowledge and wisdom found their way into, and became firmly anchored in, the ESD framework. This further widened the relevance of ESD beyond the scope envisaged in 1987. It set up a new focus on ESD by broadening and enriching it as a living educational approach that engages and collaborates with real-life communities; contextualises sustainable livelihood as real-life experiences beyond the limits of living labs; and invites an even greater involvement of the global community in promoting and preserving relevant indigenous norms, values, and practices. More importantly, it blends indigenous knowledge and wisdom with the existing 'modern' knowledge in articulating newer ideas that have been cast aside by the excesses of colonisation.

Sejahtera: A Philosophy of Sustainable Living and Balanced Coexistence

A case in point is the word *sejahtera* in the Malay language, which carries a positive connotation referring to abundance, happiness, prosperity, peace, and tranquillity.

Sejahtera is not easily rendered into other languages because of its comprehensive and multi-layered meaning and nuances. It underscores
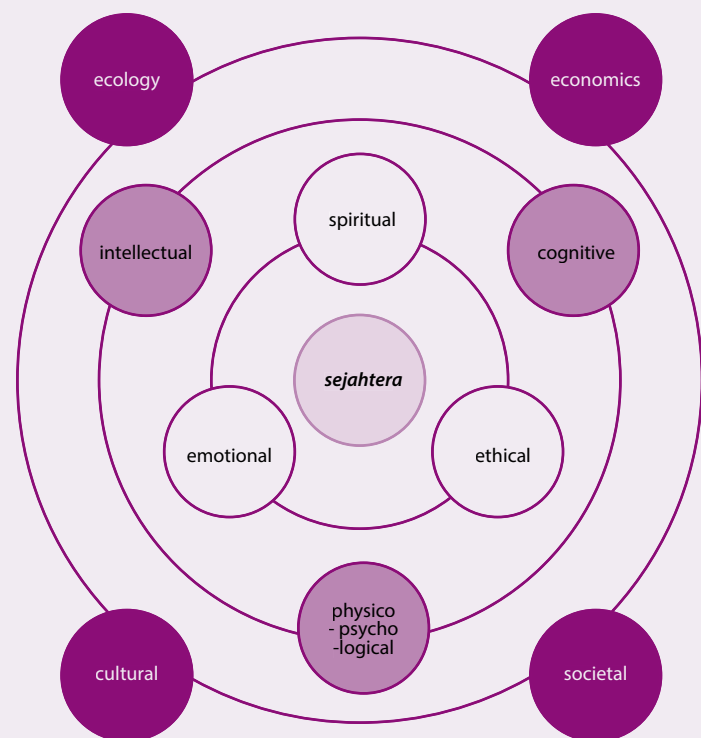
Figure 1: Sejahtera Circle.

that indigenous knowledge and wisdom have had their own uniqueness, strength, and relevance for the local community over the years. Although it is often translated as 'well-being' or even 'prosperity,' its inherent meaning is much more than that. In fact, it is 'beyond well-being.' It is human-centric in that it spans the macrocosmic-microcosmic nexus. It is macrocosmic because it relates humans to the external environment – nature and fellow beings, including other species. It is microcosmic because it embraces the 'self' and the inner (esoteric) dimensions, including spiritual consciousness. Taken together the status of *sejahtera* can be described as a balanced lifestyle summarised by at least ten different elements neatly woven into the acronym SPICES, namely spiritual, physico-psychological, intellectual, cognitive, cultural, ethical, emotional, ecological, economic, and societal dimensions (*Figure 1*). Not only must each aspect be in balance in itself, but each must be in balance with all the rest to achieve an overall

state of well-being that is lasting (sustainable) over generations.

The last point is pertinent because it implies that sustainability is not a new concept that emerged in the 1980s following the well-acknowledged Brundtland Report. Arguably, sustainability is an ancient concept in many indigenous traditions that has been overtaken and lost in the drive toward modern unsustainable development. The result is that development becomes purely a physical venture and no longer focuses on building 'collaborative relationships' between humans, the community, the environment, and the 'creator' as an enduring lifestyle. In so doing, the fine state of balance is severely offset by a hefty price tag for future generations. In short, the embodiment of *sejahtera* goes beyond the conventional three Ps of Planet, People, and Profit. Although each aspect can be individually targeted and developed, for example *sejahtera ekonomi* (economic well-being),

it is only when expanded into the 'socio-ecological' dimension within SPICES that all elements are harmoniously blended and nurtured. That makes it a holistic endpoint for a sustainable future.

Without doubt, 'relationship' (or coexistence) is an important concept in making *sejahtera* work in a balanced way with an in-depth meaning, taking the cultural context and nuances into account. Collaborative relationship in particular embraces compassion, empathy, and the uncompromising spirit of oneness transcending differences and bitterness, bringing about the much-needed close relationship, coexistence, and interdependency. Similarly, within the context of sustainable development, the same traits are needed to cater to the millions who are under urgent threat of global warming and climate change. The unprecedented occurrence of crisis after crisis cannot be handled effectively without nurturing the relationship that binds people via a set of common values and ethics. In reality, the world is highly complex, dynamic, and interdependent; therefore isolated, compartmentalised, independent, and conventional linear approaches are most likely to fail (because they are unsustainable). Instead, constructive relationships and networks are essential to allow for self-reliance and steadfastness in mitigating any form of crisis that is happening at an ever increasing rate. This means that relationships must be nurtured early in life as a part of *sejahtera*; they must be cherished, protected, and lived by.

Etymology and the Cultural Context of *Sejahtera* Philosophy

Ideas regarding a sustainable and balanced relationship between humans and nature have been a part of the sociocultural makeup of all ancient societies. *Sejahtera* is an indigenous

concept in the Malay Archipelago. Today, it is more often associated with the idea of 'balanced well-being' or even 'coexisting with common shared values and prosperity,' but its essential meaning is 'beyond well-being of individuals, institutions, organisations and society.' However, the origin of the word is probably not local. When and how it started to be used in the Malay language is unclear, but its etymology can be traced to the Sanskrit language. The possible words from which *sejahtera* was derived include *sadhya* (celestial being), *sudatra* (granting gifts), and sucitra (distinguished). Although the meanings of these Sanskrit words only narrowly imply the meaning of *sejahtera* as it is understood today, all of them have a strong positive connotation.

Regardless of the etymology of the word, the very core of the *sejahtera* concept as understood by the early society moulded the concept of statehood in the Malay Peninsula (*Braddell 1980*). This concept led to the economic and political importance of the port-polities, which developed under very special circumstances, in contrast to many great kingdoms of Southeast Asia (*Coedes 1968; Paludan 1998*). Ethnographic studies, archaeological data, and historical records also offer important insights into the culture of the ancient societies of the Malay Peninsula. Records show a cultural continuity from antiquity until today, suggesting a sustainable lifestyle through the centuries. In terms of their internal political organisation, polities of the Malay Peninsula had distinct structures as compared to the agrarian kingdoms in Southeast Asia (*Wheatley 1961*). The kingdoms, such as Angkor, Campa, Majapahit, Medang, and Dvaravati consolidated their power based on control of land and territory. In the Malay Peninsula, riverine and coastal settlements evolved into kingdoms and port-polities. These settlements often had extremely small populations and lacked agriculture, but their populations possessed important skills: they were great seafarers or

Evidences of Sanskrit Inscription found in Bujang Valley, Kedah.

skilled rainforest foragers. These small societies were fully adapted to their rainforest and coastal environments in a sustainable way.

The stimulus which triggered the change from a prehistoric society in the Malay Peninsula toward the formation of port-polities was trade and the demand for rainforest products. While they were still living as hunter-gatherers, contact with foreign traders had led to an exchange of commodities and ideas, which led to social stratification and eventually to forms of statehood. However, while their social structures changed, unlike in agrarian societies, their lifestyle as rainforest dwellers and foragers remained. Thus, these kingdoms possessed several characteristics that were in line with the *sejahtera* concept, which later led to their success.

From Philosophy to Practice: *Sejahtera* in the Practices of RCEs and Beyond

Bringing the Concept of *Sejahtera* to University
The concept of *sejahtera* was first introduced in Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) as a way to empower and entice the students to contribute positively to the university. It embraces the five principles of the *sejahtera* program, realigning the USM campus with a global agenda and providing it with a platform that helped it gain a global presence and prominence. This happened in 2005 when USM became one of seven pioneering Regional Centres of Expertise (RCEs) globally, which then led to the APEX (Accelerated Programme for Excellence) agenda when USM declared its vision as a sustainability-led university.

This concept was introduced as a mere campus-bound idea in 2002, but has since evolved into a regional and international concept with the establishment in 2011 of the Sejahtera Centre and Sejahtera Forest by RCE Tongyeong in the southern part of the Republic of Korea. The forest is particularly meaningful not only because it is next to a national park, but more so because it is also a 'living laboratory' that embellishes 'the unique traditional culture of the Asia-Pacific region with an emphasis on coexistence.' Indeed, this is well summed up by the vision of the Sejahtera Project: "Coexistence between human beings, man and nature, present and future generations." There is no doubt that the bold initiative of 'collaborative relationship' rooted in the deeper meaning and philosophy of *sejahtera* will enlighten future generations. It will also help to reclaim the traditional wisdom and cultural values that have

faded or gone astray. As stressed by UNESCO (*2014*), "Sustainable development cannot be achieved by technological solutions, political regulation or financial instruments alone. We need to change the way we think and act. This requires quality education and learning for sustainable development at all levels and in all social contexts." In this case, it naturally blends in the RCE vision of 'coexistence' between humans and nature in a balanced way.

The Sejahtera Project, the USD 20 million initiative funded by the Ministry of Environment of the Republic of Korea, covers an area of 200,000m² and comprises the eco-park and the Sejahtera Centre, a creative research and teaching centre. It opened on 23 May, 2015. RCEs from the Asia-Pacific region interested in participating in the organisation of the joint platform for sustainable development in the region comprise the Sejahtera Network Committee (*Dzulkifli 2015, 2016*). 2017 saw the launch of the third Sejahtera Fellowship Programme for researchers from Asia-Pacific RCEs.

Every year, one researcher is invited to stay at the Tongyeong Sejahtera Centre for three to five months to conduct research of interest to the awardee, and to produce a research report. The overarching objective of the initiative is to develop a Sejahtera Project discussed among Asia-Pacific RCEs in search of an Asian approach for ESD (*Piquero-Ballescas 2015*). In this way, it can strengthen the regional network, create a new global learning space for ESD, and further assist in the practice and implementation of the SDGs. Won J. Byun (*2016*), the founding Director of RCE Tongyeong, outlined three Sejahtera Forest strategies, namely (a) a need-based design process involving stakeholders, (b) building on existing networks that include the school ESD network, a non-formal network with the Sejahtera Centre as the Local Education Hub, linking to local education groups and their programs offered for visitors to the Sejahtera Centre, and (c)

a common platform for partnership, adding value created via the existence of the Sejahtera Centre as a physical platform, as well as the synergy among programs and organisations.

More recently, Malaysia has initiated a Sejahtera Leadership Initiative (SLI) to address the issues of ESD from a leadership position. Malaysia has introduced human-centric dimensions of leadership focused on balance and trusteeship, in addition to justice, as a continuum of leadership evolution into the twenty-first century. SLI is a citizens' initiative that enshrines more than one decade of aspirations and efforts to hold up to the community and institutions in Malaysia and elsewhere. The initiative is a contemporary adaptation from the corpus of universal psycho-philosophical wisdom, both ancient and modern, which seeks to serve the dire need for values-driven leadership at all levels of life. This is encapsulated in the SLI vision of "nurturing a holistic human-centric and balanced well-being leadership towards living in a harmoniously peaceful society", which embraces the three core values of humility, mutual respect, and balanced coexistence. As such, it directly addresses the 'anthropocentric' factor that is the major cause of the global crises of today. This chapter argues that the concept of *sejahtera*, with its conscious or unconscious etymology, was practised by the early historic societies in the Malay Peninsula. In practical terms, it brought to life the practices of trusteeship, responsibility, harmony, and balance beyond that of ownership and growth in constructing 'better' ESD that is more naturally inclined without much imposition from the outside.

Sejahtera: Bringing sustainability and livelihood 'home'
Further reflections on SLI open the door wider into the historical evolution of the global study of sustainability and all that it signifies today. There is no question that indigenous (traditional) knowledge had been the great hallmark of living

communities, representing the collective 'science' and special expertise of leaders and community heads through much of human history. This knowledge has played a critical part in the very survival of the community as an integral entity. At the same time, exchange of knowledge took place on a wide scale, through trade, wars, and peaceful means. When nations or groups of nations eventually began to behave expansively, a culture of dominance based on unbridled material greed and power became the order of the day. The function of knowledge came to sustain and perpetuate the needs of the powerful over the poor or less powerful (*Campbell 2015*). Some nations were quick to grasp how to learn and transfer the science and technology of their advanced counterparts with 'superior knowledge.' 'Modern' universities played a large part in this process. As all this happened, it was also observed that the opportunity to record the traditional knowledge that existed in the less 'modern' societies came to be seen as desirable and important (refer to the growth of detailed cultural studies and monographs from the 1960s until today).

For example, a study of the evolution of the RCE Kitakyushu ESD Council in Japan provides inspiring ideas and motivation. A shared vision, a sense of mission, and a systematic cultural approach were the underlying features that infused dedication and success to the collective social endeavour. At least seven outstanding achievements are worth noting: the formation of the ESD Action Plan for 2015–2019, sharing of information through social media, building of a strong foundation with civil society, networking with the city government and local politicians, working with women's advocacy groups, introducing ESD curricula in elementary schools, and sharing of concepts and success stories with other cities. Malaysia, on the other hand, is focusing on 'balanced' (traditional) villages through the Mizan Research Centre located at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM). In particular, the

projects in Kampong Bharu (one of the oldest villages in the capital city of Malaysia), and among various indigenous communities in other states (e.g., Negeri Sembilan), deserve mention with respect to nation-building and the philosophy of sejahtera. These projects include support from the private sector and the Office of Malay Agricultural Settlement (MAS), which share common ideals in the cause of service to the community – particularly important as part of the wider, underlying philosophy. For example, Kampong Bharu, that has stood the test of time for more than 110 years, with 2,600 villagers being housed there in 1928 (when the first census was done), comprises a diverse group of descendants maintaining their own identity, traditions, and ways of sustainable livelihood (*The Star Online 2014*). So much so, it is now regarded as the focal point of the local indigenous people that withstood the challenges of an increasingly urban village with a population of 17,000 today. It has managed to escape the long arm of (unsustainable) development because it was duly protected to remain as a living testament of sustainability. A quotation below from Roff (*1965, 299*) explains the history, evolution, original activities, and existence of Kampong Bharu despite many external influences, including those of the colonial government.

"The 'Malay Agricultural Settlement', better known later as Kampong Bahru, was established in 1899, on some 224 acres of land lying at what was then the north-eastern edge of Kuala Lumpur. Its aim was to create, close to the town, a sort of model village, in which traditional Malay agriculture and crafts might be pursued and developed, while children of the settlement were given literary or technical education to enable them to find Government employment. Half-acre lots of land were leased to settlers on what was effectively a permanent tenancy, a school and other facilities were built, and a committee composed of British

officials and leading Malays was formed to run the settlement. From the start it seems to have suffered from a superfluity of ideals insufficiently attached to reality. A scheme to grow padi, undertaken against the advice of the Malay members, failed utterly, and plans for co-operative live-stock rearing did little better. Craft instruction in wood-carving, silversmithing, tailoring, mat-making and the like was poorly attended by youths who drifted off to take other jobs in the town. In some respects, however, the settlement was a notable success, enabling, as the Annual Report on Selangor for 1902 said (p.28), 'many families of respectable Malays of the Peninsula to live their natural village life almost within the precincts of a large town'. By 1924, Kampong Bahru, which had been absorbed completely within the town area, had 544 houses and a population of 2,600."

In this regard, the notion of indigenous knowledge that stresses the importance of development and future planning should be determined mostly from the insiders' or the communities' perspectives. One good example of this is the understanding of 'home', which originally connotes the fundamental interpretation of 'community well-being' owing to societal changes and transformation.

The concept of 'home' is now more oriented to indicate 'economic well-being'. This is evident from both empirical and theoretical perspectives as well as cultural reasoning based on multiple observations from urban villages locally and around the globe. The 'economic well-being' and 'community well-being' of home are two highly contested scenarios globally. 'Economic well-being' means that human lifestyle and the place of living are determined mostly from economic demands or patterns, and that community has limited power to influence it. This contradicts the original understanding of the 'community well-being' of 'home' that carries the essence of communal will and freedom to decide what is best and most suited

An original house in Kampong Bharu in a rapidly developing urban area, showing a resident doing his routine job to dry fish.

to the needs and preferences of the community without compromising lifestyles and the place of living that is often balanced and sustainable. This raises an important issue in the context of ESD and the indigenous concept of *sejahtera*, namely: which is the preferred pattern of a 'home'? Even though the 'economic well-being' idea provides the community with material needs and other forms of wealth and luxuries ranging from systematic water system to a hi-tech community lifestyle, the situation is deemed unsustainable because it limits the power and freedom of community members to decide for themselves. 'Community well-being' as it relates to the concept of 'home' recognises the total freedom and power of the community to suggest, promote, preserve, and evolve community traditions and indigenous knowledge as the foundation of the rights to a sustainable or *sejahtera* lifestyle. Arguably, this lends a more powerful understanding of 'life' that matches the present needs of the people without compromising their future needs, and the needs of the generations to come, beyond mere 'economic well-being'.

Transit home, on the other hand, is a phenomena that portrays a new style of living influenced mostly

Mizan Research Centre, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia

An interview session with a group of land owners of houses in Kampong Bharu, 17 July, 2017, organised by Malay Agricultural Settlement.

by external economic factors. The original concept of 'home' as analysed by some scholars, notably Shelley Mallet (*2004*), highlighting the elements of community protection and serenity, is absent in the concept of a transit home. The study at Kampong Bharu and studies from various other locations clearly demonstrate how a 'community well-being' 'home' is gradually being reduced to one concerned with 'economic well-being'. As a result, the entire community is rendered unsustainable and precariously exposed to continuous external threats of extinction, as witnessed throughout Malaysia's historical and colonial period, and even well into its independence six decades ago in 1957. Similar experiences are also noted in other Asian communities and beyond, including Africa.

In other words, indigenous community knowledge and wisdom is imperative in defining lifestyles and the corresponding idea of 'home', and must not be overshadowed and sidelined by external influences and domination. Concepts like *sejahtera*, in tandem with ESD, should again be mainstreamed in order to revitalise and enable balanced, harmonious, and sustainable lives and livelihoods in an effort to nurture part of the global drive to meet the goals within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Conclusion

In contrast to most other ancient kingdoms in Southeast Asia, which built their civilisations upon mobilising their large populations either for labour or to man their military force, the coastal and riverine polities of the Malay Peninsula were characterised by small populations, economic subsistence based on tropical rainforest adaptation, lack of agriculture, simple social structure, and material culture based on rainforest products. Yet, with such austerity in their culture and lifestyle, these city-states managed to assert their relevance in the economic and political landscape of the region. This was due to their sustainable relations with their environment, and the ability to optimise the usage of their meagre resources. This indirectly implies that the conscious behaviour of these ancient societies was in line with the concept of *sejahtera* as it is known today.

Now the growing uptake of ESD requires enabling co-learning to coexist in a balanced way taking into account a deeper understanding of indigenous knowledge, its pristine concept and etymology within the local historical and cultural context. The processes of decolonising SD becomes vital in this sense if ESD is to have greater meaning and impact by making the diverse cultural context more organically rooted and intact for generations to come. As it stands today, ESD implementation is somewhat 'artificially' imposed by the limits of Eurocentric reports and thinking (e.g., the Brundtland Report) that does not give sufficient latitude to indigenous knowledge and wisdom that hearken back to ancient times. Colonisation wasted them for many centuries, but now the time has come to reinstate them as a living heritage. Sustainability is indeed a collective heritage, and should be recognised as such before it becomes fashionable only within a limited scope, as is happening currently.

Sustainability is not just a target to be achieved by attaining a certain set of numbers and figures over a period of time (as with the Millennium Development Goals that ended in 2014); it is also vital to the attainment of higher purposes in life that may have nothing to do with the amassing of material wealth. Yet, unless there are attempts to consider and build equally robust, intangible foundations, taking into consideration indigenous knowledge and wisdom that can ensure sincere, equitable, and cohesive partnerships, *sejahtera* cannot be sustained in the long run.

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