

**The institutionalization of sustainable development (SD) among  
Philippine and Thai higher education institutions (HEIs)**

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My study experience at Kyoto University (Graduate School of Economics, East Asia Sustainable Economic Development Studies) has had a profound effect not only on my research orientation, but on my personal ideology and values as well. This is best demonstrated by how I have decided to change the trajectory of my research. As soon as I got home from my very last lecture with Prof. Hisano and Prof. Fonte, I wrote a long letter to my thesis adviser informing him about my decision to change my research topic.

Firstly, some context. As a student from the developing world, the notion of development is dominated by classical and mainstream economic conceptions (e.g. Rostow 1960). In ASEAN, the regional integration project is heavily geared towards the establishment of a quasi-common market, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). I am from a world where development is *measured* through economic indicators; where a common market is believed to be the solution to narrowing the gap between the rich and the poor. In my case, sustainable development (SD) was a somewhat foreign concept, something I have only sporadically heard of from the internet. Truth be told, when I was applying for this winter exchange study program, I had a hard time writing my statement of motivation. I just couldn't fully grasp what SD is, except that it was a niche concept but still a very crucial one. I have known from the very beginning that it is something that I should and need to learn about, but I just didn't have the knowledge about it from where I am from. The concept of SD was barely touched upon in all my years of international studies in the Philippines and Thailand.

So, having been shaped by a certain dominant notion of national and regional development, I chose a topic related to the AEC. To be specific, it was about the perspectives of the business and corporate community regarding the AEC. That is, echoing the business- and capital-centric critiques of business actors towards the AEC. In other words: how can we make the AEC more attractive to the ASEAN businesses. My study experience in Kyoto University, especially my interactions with the Professors, has helped me reflect on my original topic and my purpose and values as an emerging researcher. It made me realize that my original topic needs changing. It was a topic compromised by a lot of short-sighted personal constraints. Out of my sub-areas of interests about ASEAN, I chose this topic simply because AEC, particularly the neoliberal and business side of it, is the reigning buzzword in the region.

This experience reaffirmed my initial thought that SD is necessary, and – in my opinion – can potentially gain stronger traction and momentum in the developing world, where the development trajectory is still nascent. Now the question is where do we start? It remains a niche concept to date. This is where academia or higher education institutions (HEI) come in. I have more appreciated their key role in the promotion and achievement of SD efforts. Academia can foster SD paradigms through the institutionalization and integration of “sustainable development” in their program and course offerings, activities, and research and academic linkages. Academia is also the locus for the development of human capital, which is important in SD promotion and transition. In other words, we need something like KGS' EA course in ASEAN HEIs.

Motivated by this, I have now come up with a new research topic:

Topic: The institutionalization (or integration) of sustainable development (SD) among Philippine and Thai higher education institutions (HEIs).

Research question: How has the concept of sustainable development (SD) become institutionalized (integrated) in Philippine and Thai higher education institutions (HEIs)?

Part 1 will entail a descriptive study of the Philippine and Thai HEIs program offerings, course offerings, seminars, conferences, research activities and academic linkages. I will be looking for elements related to SD.

Part 2 will reinforce that with focus group discussions and/or semi-structured interviews with representatives from HEIs which have already integrated SD in their operations

Part 3 will perhaps be a case study of an HEI unit with a considerable degree of SD institutionalization and/or with a non-ASEAN institution with an already established SD program (e.g. EA course, GSE, KU). What can ASEAN HEIs learn from them?

Then maybe, for part 4, I can design a survey to examine the degree of awareness and appreciation of SD among the HEI community in the Philippines and Thailand; and also come up with a policy recommendation for ASEAN.

This study experience has been pivotal for me. Taking with me the lesson and the momentum I have acquired in Kyoto, I am looking forward to return to Bangkok to begin not just my MA thesis, but my life as a future researcher, as a citizen and as an individual more cognizant of the importance of sustainable development.