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Contribution of Kobe University to the Regional Centre of Expertise (RCE) on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Hyogo-Kobe

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Abstract:

Purpose - The purpose of this paper is to introduce the Regional Centre of Expertise (RCE) on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Hyogo-Kobe, and the contribution of Kobe University as a model case. An attempt to develop and implement a new ESD programme in higher education is also reported.

Design/methodology/approach - A brief description of RCE Hyogo-Kobe, which was approved in 2007, is followed by the description of the contribution of Kobe University to the RCE's starting phase to date and in the near future. The initiative of establishing the RCE as well as the design and implementation of the ESD programme developed through the collaboration of three faculties: the Faculty of Human Development, the Faculty of Letters, and the Faculty of Economics. The programme focuses on students carrying out participatory action research enabled by collaboration with regional stakeholders on ESD and SD.

Findings – Interdisciplinary collaboration was found to be essential in creating an innovative education programme in higher education. Activities and projects on ESD that existed earlier played important roles in the initiative, in formation of the network, and in directing RCE activities.

Originality/value – Information from the case study will be useful in the establishment and development of an RCE through the initiative of an institute of higher education.

Keywords: Education for sustainable development, Regional Centre of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development, institute of higher education

Paper Type: Case study

Introduction

The United Nations University has been promoting *Regional Centres of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development* (hereafter abbreviated as RCE) worldwide (Fadeeva and Mochizuki, 2005). RCE Hyogo-Kobe was established and approved in 2007. In this paper, we will introduce RCE Hyogo-Kobe and the contribution of Kobe University to the establishment and initial phase of the RCE.

RCE Hyogo-Kobe

Characteristics of the region

The prefecture of Hyogo (around 5.6 million population and 8,400 square kilometres of area) is located in the western part of the Japanese mainland, facing the Inland Sea to the south and the Sea of Japan to the north. The city of Kobe, the seat of the Hyogo prefectural office, has a population of approximately 1.53 million and is the sixth largest city in Japan. It is also known as an international port city with a harbour that has its history as a port town. Kobe stretches between the Inland Sea and the *Rokko* mountain range, one of the national parks in Japan, and is surrounded by abundant nature. The prefecture of Hyogo has an abundance of natural areas. There are also urban areas with advantages of infrastructure for intellectual, educational, and informational purposes. These give the prefecture privileged conditions for organizing activities that combine natural and urban elements.

The area of Mount *Rokko*, which is located in the northern part of Kobe City, lost its forest in the Edo period when trees were cut down for fuel and materials. Kobe suffered washouts from heavy rain due to the earlier deforestation. After the late Meiji period around 1900, the city of Kobe started to promote tree-planting in the mountain areas, leading to the recovery of the natural environment.

In 1995, the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake heavily damaged the southern area of Hyogo prefecture, including the city of Kobe. It has now recovered to the level prior to the earthquake in various ways. For example, the population returned to the pre-earthquake level in the autumn of 2004. Just after the quake, Kobe accepted volunteers from other regions of Japan and from all over the world for aid and assistance in evacuation. They played an important role in the early phase of the restoration process as well. With this as a turning-point, civil activities in various fields such as community building, welfare, preservation of natural environment both in the region and nationwide, emerged and have been growing steadily since.

In 2005, the United Nations World Conference on Disaster Reduction was held in Kobe, with the participation of representatives of governments of 168 countries, 78

international organizations, 161 NGOs, and a total of 4,000 people. The Hyogo Framework of Action adopted at the conference (ISDR, 2005) declares in its preamble: "Efforts to reduce disaster risks must be systematically integrated into policies, plans and programmes for sustainable development and poverty reduction". The declaration emphasizes the necessity of intimate links between sustainable development and the ideas of disaster reduction / prevention as the basic standpoint.

The characteristics and historical background of the area briefly described above served as important resources in organizing RCE Hyogo-Kobe and its activities.

Vision of the RCE

With the above characteristics and history as its background, the RCE Hyogo-Kobe has the following vision.

- (1) It will create a platform of dialogue among various ESD stakeholders in the region and promote collaboration with the initiative of the institutions of higher education. We expect that it will enhance the social capital of the regional community, which will be the foundation for sustainable development.
- (2) While including environmental education as an important issue, we will emphasize the development and promotion of programmes to incorporate ESD with a wider scope in formal and non-formal education including higher education. Through this, we aim at enhancing people's awareness and activities on SD and ESD in the regional community.
- (3) As the region that experienced the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, we recognize the prevention/reduction of disasters as an important component of SD and intend to create and disseminate the culture of disaster prevention/reduction.
- (4) The concept of ESD and its realization can have significant impacts on education and learning. RCE Hyogo-Kobe will strive to contribute to the transformation of education and learning through ESD.

Key Institutions

Key institutions of RCE Hyogo-Kobe as of March 2008 are (1) Kobe University, (2) The Museum of Nature and Human Activities, Hyogo, (3) Hyogo Environmental Advancement Association, (4) Asian Disaster Reduction Centre, (5) United Nations Centre for Regional Development, Disaster Management Planning Hyogo Office, (6) Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) Hyogo International Centre, (7) Hyogo International Association, (8) Kobe Shimbun (Kobe Newspapers), (9) Sun Television, and (10) Kobe City Board of Education. The steering committee of the RCE consists of

representatives from these institutions and that of an intermediary organization (*Hyogo NPO/NGO Network*) to act as an interface with a variety of civil society organizations (hereafter abbreviated as CSOs). Collaboration with Kinki Regional Office of the Ministry of Environment has also been initiated. The number of key institutions may increase as the project develops. The secretariat of the RCE has been set up at the Action Research Centre for Human and Community Development, Kobe University. One of the characteristics of RCE Hyogo-Kobe is the participation of large number of expert institutions including international organizations in the region. It is partly due to the initiative of the university in the initial phase to form the RCE.

Contribution of Kobe University to the RCE Hyogo-Kobe

Efforts to establish an RCE in the Hyogo-Kobe area was led by staff of two departments at Kobe University: the Graduate School of Human Development and Environment, and the Graduate School of Humanities. In this section, following a brief description of the university, we introduce its contribution to the RCE in its initial phase.

Kobe University and its initiative in the RCE

Kobe University is one of the major national universities in Japan. It has eleven faculties, eleven graduate schools, and other facilities and centres including the Research Institute for Economics and Business Administration, the Research Centre for Urban Safety and Security, and the Research Centre for Inland Seas. The university has about 2,600 teaching and administrative staff and 17,000 students. Activities related to the RCE in Kobe University have been led by two departments: the Graduate School of Human Development and Environment, and the Graduate School of Humanities. Each of the graduate schools is organizationally connected with the Faculty of Human Development and the Faculty of Letters for the undergraduate education respectively.

The Graduate School of Human Development and Environment has the *Action Research Centre for Human and Community Development* (hereafter abbreviated as ARC). The ARC was established in 2005 with the mission of conducting participatory action research on human and community development in collaboration with various stakeholders in the regional society such as CSOs, local governments, and business corporations. It has standing research sections in six fields: volunteerism and informal education, adult education and social promotion, health promotion, child development and family, social inclusion, and gender issues and education. From 2005-2007, it also had an action research project to create support systems for scientific research in civil society, which later developed into the *Kobe University Science Shop* in 2007. A

Science Shop in general is a facility that provides participatory research support responding to concerns in civil society (e.g. Leydesdorff, 2005). The Science Shop at Kobe University supports science education and research activities based on intellectual interests of citizens. As one can see from its mission and fields of research, the ARC is intimately related to the concept of ESD.

The Graduate School of Humanities carries out the *Project Innovative Ethics Kobe* (PIEK), which is a frontier interdisciplinary project aimed at developing new humanities approaches to socio-ethical problems in the time of globalization of economy, technology and cultures. PIEK addresses issues of immediate concern to the Kobe region and beyond based on the activities of local citizens and building on existing expertise in the region. For example, it deals with the ethics of science and technology based on an action research study of asbestos victims in *Amagasaki* (an industrial city located in Hyogo). Another PIEK initiative is development of the "sociology of disaster prevention" in corporation with a UN organization in Kobe. This initiative explores the issue of creation of a "culture of disaster prevention"—building of social capital of mutual understandings, trust and cooperation and human relationships and consciousness set against disasters, risks and hazards. Another issue tackled by PIEK is a search for multicultural lifestyles in Japanese society. Through these initiatives, PIEK contributes to addressing the holistic nature of ESD.

The ARC had been developing a network of ESD stakeholders, including CSOs, local government, and business corporations, in the regional community. On the other hand, the Graduate School of Humanity has developed a network in the area of disaster prevention that includes local governments, international organizations, and some schools in the Kobe area. These networks were the core of the RCE at the initial stage, and some of the partners became members of the key institutions.

As mentioned above, ARC's research and action cover areas beyond environmental education. Together with the fact that key focus of PIEK is the creation and dissemination of the culture of disaster prevention, RCE Hyogo-Kobe's scope has been wider than that of environmental education from the start. This is in contrast to many other RCE and ESD activities in Japan that start from environmental education. We believe that RCE Hyogo-Kobe has the potential to contribute to further expanding the scope of ESD practices. It may be worth stressing that the ARC emphasizes concepts like informal learning in society and empowerment of citizens as well as that of marginalized people, which is in accordance with some of the key concepts of ESD.

Development of an ESD programme at Kobe University

Kobe University is developing a new ESD programme with its focus on action research, in which students participate in practices and activities in various fields of ESD or SD. The programme aims at increasing the capacity of students in leading and promoting ESD in various fields in society, and certificates of "ESD practitioner" will be granted to those who fulfil certain requirements. It is a collaborative project of three faculties: the Faculty of Human Development, the Faculty of Letters, and the Faculty of Economics. These faculties have developed a unique curriculum as an optional sub-course that involves sharing educational resources including subjects concerning ESD and research fields. Actual implementation starts in April 2008. The project is subsidized by the *Support Programme for Contemporary Education Needs* of the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.

The fields of action research for 2008 are: (1) support to voluntary activities of citizens to create *Satoyama* (a natural woodland that coexists with a nearby populated area), (2) activities to restore and maintain the natural environment in Toyooka area that allows the coexistence of human activity and wildlife symbolized by the white storks, (3) a project to support community building in South Awaji area though activities to preserve and restore forests from damage caused by wild deer (a collaborative project with the Science Shop), (4) support activities in a community space, which is established as a satellite facility of the ARC to conduct action and research to build a drop-in and family resource centre for local residents, based on inclusive human relationship, (5) activities to create and disseminate a culture of disaster reduction and prevention, (6) interview survey of victims of health damage caused by asbestos, (7) activities including social experiments through a non-profit organization to reduce garbage production through a collaboration of university, industry, citizens, and government. Many of these topics are dealt with by RCE Hyogo-Kobe's network.

The ESD programme at the university is valuable not only because it helps develop ESD practitioners and leaders, but also because it activates the ESD activities in the community. The collaboration between citizen groups and university students and staff will strengthen the partnership and is expected to lead to empowerment of citizens in the regional community. It will provide feedback for the development of the RCE and for raising awareness of ESD in the community. Further details of the programme including the results of implementation and evaluation will be reported in the future.

Other aspects of contributions

Support for international networking is another area in which institutes of higher education can contribute. English is the language of communication between RCEs and

ESD stakeholders internationally. This is a hurdle for regional stakeholders such as CSOs, local governments, and primary and secondary schools in Japanese. Human resources at the institutes of higher education will be able to support them in clearing the hurdle and in developing the international network. It will enable ESD stakeholders to share information on good practices on ESD, promote international mutual understanding, and raise awareness of global problems for sustainability.

Institutes of higher education are also expected to be able to provide relatively stable resources for RCEs. Although CSOs are one of the most important stakeholders in promoting ESD, their financial as well as organizational foundations are insufficient and sometimes unstable in Japanese society at this stage. Leadership of institutes of higher education can be a possible solution under the circumstances to secure stable financial and human resources although they may be inadequate. Social and political awareness of the importance of sustainability is rapidly rising in Japan as of 2008, and government and business corporations are providing various grants that support activities related to ESD as part of their CSR programmes.

Future plans

Less than a year has passed since the launch of RCE Hyogo-Kobe, and it is still in the starting phase. The regional network of an RCE should intrinsically be an open system, and the network of RCE Hyogo-Kobe continues to grow. In this subsection, we introduce some areas in which the RCE, with the contribution of Kobe University, will push forward in the immediate future.

Although the main focus of interest among staff members who are working on the ESD programme and the RCE at Kobe University has been higher education, adult education, and informal learning in civil society, supporting ESD activities in primary and secondary education in the region is also an important mission of the RCE. In fact, one of the recommendations made by the Ubuntu Committee of Peers for the RCE in 2007 was to pay specific attention to school-based ESD activities especially in primary and secondary schools. In Japan, the importance of environmental education and trans-disciplinary integrated learning has been widely recognized, and various efforts and good practices have been studied. The strategy for the RCE's contribution in this area is an issue to be discussed. The tentative plan is for Kobe University to conduct a survey of the status of ESD in primary and secondary schools, collect information on good practices in the region, and open a forum to exchange information between school teachers and between teachers and other stakeholders in the region. The predecessor of the present Faculty of Human Development, one of the main departments that leads

RCE activities at the Kobe University, is the Faculty of Education, and it has strong ties with schools in the region. This will be a useful resource in starting to act in this field.

One of the expected functions of an RCE is to contribute to the regional knowledge base on ESD. The design of an online prototype system of the knowledge base is proceeding with the leadership of Kobe University. Implementation will be in 2008. Special attention will be paid for the system to cover the wide scope of ESD and to have a function to support exchange of information between regional stakeholders.

The contribution of institutes of higher education should not come from just one institute. Other universities in the region will be invited to join the RCE network and activities. We will also promote participation of a wide range of departments within the Kobe University in the ESD programme and RCE activities.

We would like to mention the political and social movement that will push forward the promotion of ESD in the region and nationwide. The summit of the group of eight major powers (G8) is to be held in Japan in 2008. The Environment Ministers' Meeting for G8 will take place in Kobe. The Japanese national government, the Prefecture of Hyogo, and the City of Kobe are mounting campaigns to raise public awareness on environmental problems to promote actions at various levels. This is expected to result in the creation of a favourable social environment for ESD and an interest in environmental education.

Summary and Conclusions

In this paper, we introduced the RCE Hyogo-Kobe established in 2007 and the contribution of Kobe University in the RCE's starting phase. Activities and projects related to ESD that existed earlier at the university played important roles in the initiative, formation of the network, and directing the RCE activities. Kobe University started a new ESD programme for undergraduate students with a focus on participatory action research, which is enabled by collaboration with regional stakeholders on ESD including RCE members. The process of designing and implementing the programme brought in intensive discussions and interdisciplinary cooperation between the three faculties. This could be one of the precursors of a larger scale transformation of higher education in Japan towards an integrated higher level of commitment to sustainable development in the regional society and in the global community. We would like to realize such a transformation.

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