

**The 36th South East Asia Ministers Of Education Organisation
(SEAMEO) Council Conference**

Kota Kinabalu, Sabah 12 February 2001

Let me first of all extend a very warm welcome to all Ministers, distinguished delegates and observers to Malaysia. We are indeed very honoured by your presence in the city of Kota Kinabalu to attend the 36th South East Asia Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO) Council Conference.

2. For the past 35 years, you have gathered annually to renew your pledge to promote cooperation and collaboration in education, science and culture in Southeast Asia. This year is the real beginning of the new Millennium. I think it is timely that we ask ourselves what SEAMEO needs to do to remain relevant and viable to all its member states.

3. Perhaps we can approach the above question by examining some of the inter-related challenges that confront us in the new Millennium.

4. SEAMEO comprises member states that range across a broad socio-economic spectrum -- countries whose economies are at different stages of development. Therefore, the first challenge we face is to narrow the economic gap between SEAMEO member states. Unless we are able to do this, the new global forces will push us further apart.

5. We have therefore a need to understand these forces which go under the collective term "globalisation" and to be able to handle them and their abuses. It is argued that globalisation will lead to the spread of wealth to everyone. I agree that deepening economic integration, increasing economic openness and growing economic interdependence is a desirable thing but it must not be done at the expense of neighbours who lack the resources to compete in a free-for-all open market. Globalisation will only benefit everyone if we have equal capacity to compete. A level playing field is not enough.

6. I am not against globalisation but the interpretation given to it at the moment will only benefit the rich with minimal or no benefit to the poor. Free flow of capital can only benefit those with capital. Free trade too can only benefit those with goods or products to export. Those without capital and goods can only see a one way flow. Whereas inflow of capital can be beneficial for a poor country but a free flow also implies an outflow. If the capital brought in is suddenly pulled out an economic recession will almost certainly happen. If again the export earnings of a country

is not brought back because of one reason or another, the free capital flow can also undermine the economy of a country.

7. As for free trade, it must be remembered that no country can sustain an adverse trade balance for long. Unrestricted imports of highly competitive goods must affect local industries adversely. On the other hand exports of local goods to sophisticated markets will be met with insurmountable non-tariff barriers as well as unequal competition. Raw material exports usually face ever diminishing returns as they come up against more and more substitutes. Besides, the trading centres for all raw materials are in the developed countries and there have been many instances these centres officially support the speculators who failed to make good their contract undertakings.

8. When the currency traders attacked the East Asian countries they claimed that it was a part of free trade. It may be so but the result of free currency trading was to destroy all the economic tigers of East Asia. Hundreds of billions of dollars of wealth built up over decades were lost, millions were thrown out of jobs, demonstrations and riots resulted in arson, murder, rape, and the overthrow of Governments. The consequent turmoil cannot be easily stopped and the borrowings to resuscitate the economy can place the country at the mercy of the lenders.

9. If such massive catastrophes can occur to economic tigers, can we accept free trade as a blessing which we must not reject ever?

10. But worse things seem to be on the horizon. In anticipation of the opening up of markets the huge banks and corporations of the rich are merging and acquiring each other in order to become globally dominant. These entities are very many times bigger than most developing countries in terms of capital and resources. The puny local banks and businesses would stand no chance of competing with them. They will have to accept being swallowed up by these giants.

11. A world dominated by a few huge banks and corporations is not likely to be a free world. Businesses are only concerned with profits. They are not run by directors elected by the people as a whole. They would not be too concerned about the social problems and catastrophes that they cause. The currency traders have already said that the impact of their trading is not of concern to them. They see only figures on the screen, not people.

12. Governments on the other hand, are concerned about their countries and people. They may be incompetent or not too straight but their reach is limited. International pressures can be brought to bear on them. But by and large Governments can be relied upon to look after their countries and people. The Governments of the East Asia tigers had developed their countries to a high level.

13. But the super-giant corporations are beholden to no one. Their shareholders care only for the returns on their investments. Besides, they are backed by the giant media corporations owned by their colleagues who also have a stake in the kind of global operations that they enjoy. Any outcry against their exploitation would be silenced by the world media, which would always sing the praises of globalisation and the good that comes from having only a few giant corporations in every sector. The disasters that the corporations and banks and free trade cause would be glossed over or laid at the feet of powerless Governments. We have already seen this happen when currency trading destroyed countries.

14. Free trade means low or no tariffs. But poor countries depend on import duties for revenue and also to protect local industries. Corporate and income taxes are minimal. Obviously Government finances are going to be adversely affected without import duties. It is not clear what new taxes can provide funds for these Governments. Even import licences or certificates can be regarded as import taxes and disallowed.

15. Perhaps I am painting too frightening a picture of the fate of developing countries in a free trading globalised world. But then Malaysia went through a harrowing experience brought about by the currency traders. We do not want to have that fate befall us again. We managed to recover the last time but we are not sure we can recover again if another economic turmoil assails us.

16. Our currency turmoil had been an education for us, a very costly education. If we are going to be able to avoid such catastrophes our people must learn all about free trade, globalisation and the international financial and trade regimes. Perhaps a good number of our universities should teach the new economics, the ways currency is traded and manipulated, the roles and power of the market and the giant corporations and banks.

17. Globalisation is of course not about currency flows alone or about free trade only. Globalisation has been creeping on us without our realising it. The media has been globalised

long ago and as we all know it exerts a powerful influence on our minds, our acceptance or rejection of ideas and products.

18. The former voluntary organisations have also been globalised. They are now called NGOs and they operate across borders. Their influence and pressures limit the powers of Governments and the international community. Seattle showed how powerful they are.

19. Of concern to us here is the globalisation of education. The advances made by information technology have made the location of learning centres less relevant than before. Distance learning is a reality which can compete with the best of on-campus learning. Students can now interact in real time with teachers half way across the world. Recorded knowledge can be accessed freely and completely from anywhere. It is said that anybody can learn how to make a nuclear bomb by accessing the writings and records available through the Internet.

20. Obviously these masses of information can create a more knowledgeable world. People will become more intelligent and sophisticated. The best teachers in the world will be at everyone's beck and call.

21. They used to say that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Could it be that a lot of knowledge is also a dangerous thing? Maybe there will not be too many to attempt making a nuclear bomb. But what about the more simple bombs which can make anarchists more effective than they are now? Will we be seeing more and more violence as more lethal instruments are produced by the less responsible but knowledgeable people?

22. Still we cannot stop the on-rush of the information age. There are too many things to gain for human society. If we reject knowledge then we will be dominated by those who will acquire maximum knowledge. As with other globalisation, the globalisation of knowledge is inevitable. We reject it at our own peril.

23. In the mad rush towards the global information society, perhaps we should also think about ethics and morality. Unless we are taught how to handle knowledge well, knowledge will spell disaster for us. Maybe a new code of ethics and morality should be devised, designed to make knowledge and the information age a blessing for us all the way. Maybe the ethics and morality should be globalised also, and taught as a compulsory subject to everyone.

24. Let us look again at the SEAMEO vision. It states: "A dynamic, self-reliant, strategic policy-driven and internationally recognised regional organisation for strengthening regional understanding and cooperation in education, science and culture for a better quality of life."

25. Although conceived 36 years ago, this vision has become more relevant than ever. In order to deal with the challenges that we face in the 21st Century, we need to remain dynamic and self-reliant. There is an urgent need for us to clarify and implement our strategic policies to cope with the multifaceted globalisation and the mounting demands made on our resources by advances in ICT. Our region must grow from strength to strength in order to safeguard our national, social and cultural integrity. This calls for greater regional understanding and cooperation in all fields and at all levels. We must help each other to develop a cohesive and coherent entity. I believe in this aspect, SEAMEO is poised to make significant and meaningful contributions.

26. The same can be said about your mission. SEAMEO seeks to enhance regional understanding and cooperation and unity of purpose among member countries and achieve a better quality of life. The paramount task ahead of us is to ensure that all the member countries can work in tandem and forge ahead hand in hand -- shouldering together our burdens and sharing equally our prosperity.

27. SEAMEO has indeed made great strides in meeting its goals since its formation in 1965. The goals are still relevant. However, the strategies that we employ to realise them may have to change because of changing needs and new demands. For instance, SEAMEO could play a leading role in exploring ways to re-structure education systems to meet the human resource demands of an E-commerce or K-economy. The existing Regional Centres can also look into ways to help member countries set up their own Centres of Excellence that will cater to the unique needs of each member country.

28. While we recognise the extent of the challenges we have to face in the 21st Century, there is no reason for pessimism. I am convinced that if we stay strong and united, we will together overcome all obstacles.

29. I wish all of you a very successful Conference and an enjoyable stay in Kota Kinabalu.

30. It gives me great pleasure now to declare the 36th Conference of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation Council open.

