Hans van Ginkel

On the Vision, History, and Status of the Regional Centres of Expertise in ESD Programme

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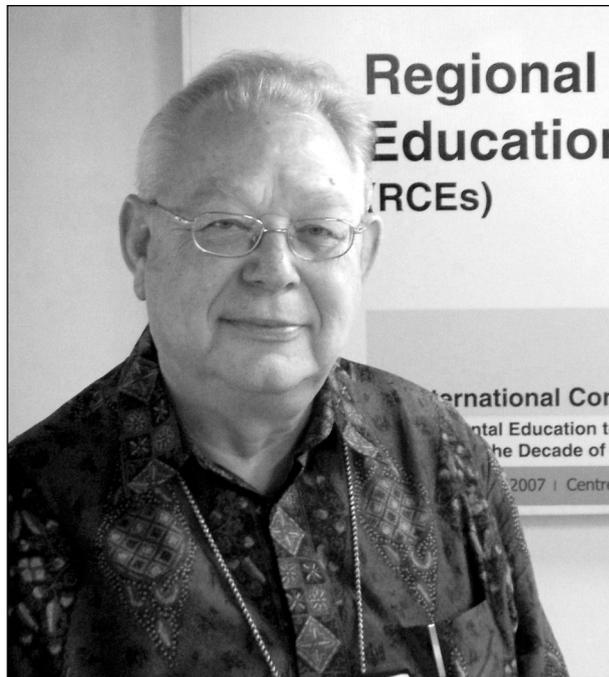
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Professor Hans van Ginkel, Rector of the United Nations University, Tokyo, (1997–2007) and president of the International Association of Universities (2000–2004), pioneered the concept of Regional Centers of Expertise in Education for Sustainable Development (RCEs) as a strategy for meeting the goals of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UN DESD) by translating its global objectives into the context of local communities. van Ginkel's fields of interest include human geography, urban and regional development, population, housing studies, science policy, internationalisation and university management. He has published widely in these areas and has received numerous awards in addition to three honorary doctorates. He was born in Kota-Radjah (Bandar Acheh), Indonesia, and came to the Netherlands in the 1960s to study at Utrecht University where he obtained MSc and PhD degrees, both cum laude.

RCE networks consist of existing formal, nonformal and informal education organisations, mobilised to deliver education for sustainable development to local and regional communities. RCEs are networked worldwide. Currently there are more than 50 approved RCEs with hundreds more applying for recognition.

This interview was conducted during the Second International United Nations University Regional Centres of Expertise in Education for Sustainable Development (RCE) Conference in Penang, Malaysia, August 8, 2007.

Glasser: For people who may not be familiar with United Nations University (UNU) or its primary initiative to support the DESD, please introduce the concept of Regional Centres of Expertise in Education for Sustainable Development (RCEs).

van Ginkel: We have been working on education for sustainable development (ESD) for about twenty years in different places around the globe. The fundamental observation is that environment and development are different everywhere. When you think about ideal outcomes or consequences of the DESD, it is difficult to think in terms of a universally accepted ESD curriculum or world pedagogy. Rather, we have to think in terms of different curricula for different places. What is appropriate for Toronto will likely be different from what works for Fiji. To be effective, ESD has to be built from regional units.

The second observation is that ESD should not be a separate topic that is offered to children of a certain age for two, three or even six weeks, without influencing their other subjects and coursework. Instead, ESD should infuse and engage all existing subjects.

The third observation is that the process of developing and implementing ESD curriculum must be done exceptionally well. University professionals generally have little knowledge of what is being taught in secondary schools and even less knowledge regarding what is taught in primary schools. When we increase the number of topics taught in schools, however, we have to be more efficient at allocating time. Having effective sequencing of issues for different age levels becomes extremely important. We must establish powerful linkages among what is taught at all age levels—from primary schools to secondary schools to higher education. We also need to go beyond formal education and begin to explore informal learning opportunities.

Glasser: How do you unite these three observations—the necessity for ESD curriculum to be regionally grounded; the idea that ESD should engage and infuse all existing subjects; and the importance of developing and implementing exceptionally high quality curriculum—in a new, integrated approach to lifelong learning for SD?

van Ginkel: The only way to bring all these issues together is to optimise a series of concepts or knowledge in the education of a child from 4 to 24 years of age. When you aim to bring together organisations such as schools, museums, media and local governments, you need to restrict the geographical scale to be successful. You must also find some commonality of issues and problems. People often feel that they belong to their region and they are prepared to work hard to improve its prospects for the future. So when these feelings of commonality exist, it is important to capitalise on them and help people to work together. Only then does it become relevant to consider the region's scale.

Regions are generally defined by their centre, but their borders may change. Therefore, over time, you have to address how big the regions should be. You want enough commonality and also enough diversity. The number of formal, nonformal, and informal education organisations must be sizeable to allow for interesting cooperation. On the other hand you don't want the scale to be so expansive that it limits opportunities for discussing projects through face-to-face contact. A rough indicator of appropriate scale is that people can meet one another during the day and sleep at home that night. Such regions are generally known by names, such as: Brittany, Yokohama, Penang, Rhine-Meuse, West Michigan, and so on.

Glasser: How do we respond effectively to contemporary, globalised society's trend towards continual expansion and its corresponding tendency to monoculturise (diminish regional uniqueness)?

van Ginkel: Many people will think or want to enlarge the size of their region beyond what is normally feasible or manageable. There is no need for this. The network connecting the RCEs is equally important. This network will make it possible to share information across the RCEs and make useful comparisons among them. People learn most from in-depth analysis of places where they are and comparisons with other places. So these two elements—RCEs and global learning spaces (GLS)—are interconnected. The GLS is much bigger than individual RCEs—it is the 'glue' that binds all of the RCEs together. From a geographical perspective, there are many other levels of aggregation among the RCEs and the GLS. When you are in South Africa, for example, you can be part of the RCE of the Rural Eastern Cape and you can also be a part of the network around Africa or the network of other developing countries, before you aggregate up to the global level. At the same time, the RCE might choose to be part of a thematic network that focuses on health, production and consumption, climate change or teacher education. So, while there are many opportunities for cooperation and collaboration, the essential building block is the RCE. The decision about the borders of RCEs should not be based on a top-down approach—the participants should decide the border. In my view, this is the principle of self-organisation for the 21st century.

Glasser: Please elaborate on how the necessity for critical engagement and face-to-face contact act as natural constraints, both limiting the physical extent of an RCE and helping to characterise the appropriate context for alternative modes of communication, such as the Internet.

van Ginkel: The RCE Programme aspires to bring together people of diverse backgrounds and institutional affiliations—from primary education to higher education, certification programmes, and lifelong learning and from non government organizations (NGOs) and businesses to local governments and the media. We all know, however, that at the end of the day, when you attempt to explore new, innovative opportunities for cooperation, it's much better to be able to meet face-to-face, in real time, to identify opportunities for moving forward. After people know each other and have an established pattern of close collaboration it's possible to have very fruitful contact through the Internet. Once this pattern of close collaboration has been successfully established on a regional basis, it also becomes possible to link different regions through the Internet.

Glasser: Can you share some insights on the origins and history of the RCE concept?

van Ginkel: This is a topic that I have been wrestling with for some time. I think an important moment was in 2001, at Lüneburg University in Germany, when we had a meeting with Copernicus-Campus, the European University Alliance for Sustainability.[1] Since 1987, Copernicus had been trying to have an influence on the 1992 Earth Summit and Agenda 21. These efforts were not very successful because at the end of the day higher education was just a footnote on some page. We began thinking about how we could strengthen the position of higher education for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg in 2002. Lüneburg was where I concluded that higher education—by itself—could never be strong enough politically to have a potent influence. Furthermore, whatever higher education might say on the topic could easily be seen as self-serving. We had to find a formulation in which we could not be accused of self-serving aims. To serve the general interest, we had to bring together *all education*—formal, non-formal and informal—over all age groups.

So in the Lüneburg Declaration we mention that higher education is really a part of *all education*. Considering the level of cooperation amongst institutions that is required to address *all education*, it became abundantly clear that such close cooperation could only be achieved at the regional level. The Lüneburg Declaration in 2001 is the first time the RCE concept is mentioned and it is mentioned again at the WSSD in Johannesburg.[2] I also included it in my 2003 contribution to the World Conference on Higher Education + 5, in Paris.[3] Another important development that took place at the WSSD was UNU's effort to create the Ubuntu Alliance, which is a global umbrella for all the major science and education organisations.[4] The Ubuntu Alliance documents also mention the RCE as a major tool for realising sustainable development.

Glasser: Please comment on the significance of integrating formal, nonformal and informal education into the RCE process and explain why this represents such a promising approach to delivering ESD.

van Ginkel: You see, I've been involved extensively in teacher training. I taught 12 to 14- year-old children when I started my career and I was a teacher trainer for both primary and secondary schools for many years. Increasingly you come to appreciate that what is being taught in schools is only part of what children learn—and it's certainly only a small part of what people learn over their lifetimes. So one cannot look at formal education in separation from the nonformal and informal. Peoples' interests and concerns often shift and evolve over time. So we must think in terms of lifelong learning. I think when we really focus on education for sustainable development we cannot limit our focus to specific age groups. Rather we will take the perspective of supporting continuous learning in daily life, where in addition to formal education, information and knowledge can come through television programmes, the internet, radio programmes, reading, performances and by all kinds of meetings organised through civil society. When I am honest I have learned more outside of school than inside school.

Glasser: What are the key organising principles for RCEs?

van Ginkel: For me the essential requirement is self-organisation. When you think about it, it is people coming together to organise their joint activities. The crucial point is self-organisation for mobilising as many partners as possible.

Glasser: How does the RCE process fit into the UN DESD?

van Ginkel: I think the UN framework, the UN DESD, has been created as an enabling framework. UNESCO, as the lead agency for the DESD, has made it possible for contributions to come in many ways. In fact, this approach has been included in the framework on our request. We thought openness and flexibility would help to engage and mobilise people. If we imagine the 192 member nations of the United Nations each having two RCEs on average, then in 2015 we would have nearly 400 RCEs as a measurable outcome of the DESD. If we can assume that each RCE develops at least one project over the course of a year, we should have somewhere around 2,000 projects to learn from by the end of the DESD.

We are emphasising more and more that the different RCEs formulate a portfolio of projects with implementation plans, timelines, clear objectives, and intended outcomes. In this way the different projects in the portfolio may serve as measurable outcomes of the DESD. In order to help us identify the most significant projects, we have also asked the RCEs to highlight their most special or 'flagship' projects.

Glasser: How does an RCE, as an umbrella group itself, receive official designation?

van Ginkel: We have developed some guidelines and core criteria for RCEs that can be found in UNU's RCE materials on the web.[5] In the first place the prospective RCE must decide on some kind of governance structure—a governance structure that can give some guarantee of the group's own sustainability. Second, they have to really focus on issues of education *for* sustainable development—what we call transformative education. Third, they have to focus on research directed at producing and creating transformative education. Finally, they need to demonstrate the potential for innovative

collaboration across a diverse set of participants and institutions. The completed applications are reviewed and evaluated by the Ubuntu Committee of Peers.

Glasser: What is your vision for the RCE process?

van Ginkel: We want to have about 400 RCEs by 2015. We want them to be networked; we want students in different RCEs to be able to access information and modules from other RCEs via the Internet. Those types of things have been defined, in general. The exact number of RCEs, the number of projects in each RCE, the intensity of relations among RCEs, all these things will have to be developed, because success of individual RCEs also depends on the group's confidence in their capabilities to achieve these goals.

Glasser: It is now quite clear that information about broad-scale unsustainablility—by itself—does not appear to be sufficient to inspire the massive behavioral shifts that are required to facilitate a transition toward sustainability. What is the significance of integrating theory and praxis in the RCE process for helping to bridge this gap between the pro-SD values and concerns expressed in the Gallup Voice of the People Survey that you mentioned earlier and our generally unsustainable actions, practices and policies?

van Ginkel: Since the Club of Rome, several reports, based on analyses of trends, have expressed great anxiety about the future. These reports, however, always presented their results in an abstract, detached manner. The proposed responses were often seen as decisions by governments and because governmental negotiations generally have very slow progress, people tended to feel paralysed and powerless. What can they do? I think the RCE process offers an answer to the question, 'What can people do?' We often hear 'think global, act local'. The RCEs now offer us a positive, creative platform for local action on ESD. At the same time, RCEs also embody the inverse—'think local, act global'. We have to learn to move fluidly between the global and the local in the present world. People in the RCEs have to see how their daily actions have an impact on the global situation and that can be accomplished through worldwide information sharing and cooperation among RCEs.

Over the years at the UNU we have tried to come up with more concepts such as 'What can you do?' For instance, we created a zero emissions initiative. Now of course the aim of zero emissions is to reduce the use of raw materials and to reduce waste production. Zero is not possible, but as a symbolic aim it's highly motivating—it indicates what you can do. It doesn't predict doom-n-gloom and lead to paralysis. Professor Zakri, the Director of UNU Institute of Advanced Studies and the Co-Chair of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA) took the same approach.[6] The MEA indicates that there has been a lot of development over the last several decades, but there was also vast environmental degradation. They do not predict doom-n-gloom; rather they invite us to arrive at some kind of balance between the two. They challenge people to come up with positive action. I think the RCEs are the next step in this process, in which people are invited and challenged to contribute toward improving things instead of being deafened with a future they cannot influence.

Glasser: Please say more about this idea of RCEs focusing on practical, real-world problems, issues that the formal education sector—particularly higher education—has tended to shy away from.

van Ginkel: Schools and universities have a tendency to be detached from the real world. Colleges and universities have been given academic freedom and institutional autonomy for a reason. Why? The region or country expects them to make good use of their freedom by contributing to the progress of the region. The notion of *quid-pro-quo*, having academic freedom and autonomy in exchange for making meaningful contributions to society, is often forgotten. I think this is a major shortcoming.

I think RCEs represent an effort to inspire innovation, especially in higher education—to reassess the links with the outside world, which go well beyond contract research or research grants. RCEs bring together universities with the media, primary and secondary schools, museums, businesses and local government. They create a natural framework for helping higher education institutions to break out of their normal confinement and play a positive, meaningful role in society. I see the RCEs as having a kind of hidden agenda—to help universities and schools go beyond sustainable development as topic of academic study to actually playing a role in creating positive societal change.

Glasser: One of the things that truly make human beings unique as a species is that our cultures can learn. We can create progress in terms of higher levels of understanding over generations, so that the mistakes one generation has made—say, with respect to unsustainability, social justice or equity—don't have to be repeated by future generations. Please comment on the potentially catalytic effect of RCEs as helping to build a culture of sustainability, region by region.

van Ginkel: The core of RCEs is to do things together. Societal progress is based on the progress of individuals—on growth in their knowledge, maturity and wisdom—but is this progress among individuals shared? That's the major question. In order to translate individual growth into community and societal progress, there needs to be a kind of joint experience with sharing knowledge and wisdom. Because the RCEs are trying to bring people together, because they create the conditions for effective communication and because they focus on meaningful, positive societal change—they can play a catalytic role in this process of maturing societies.

Glasser: From the perspective of my own research on social learning, the RCE process looks like the most significant, global-scale experiment in social learning for sustainability yet created.[7] Can you please comment on this hypothesis?

van Ginkel: I realise myself now that this is true, but I come from a discipline—geography—where we always have our feet very close to the ground. The RCE movement has been developed without any theoretical concept of social learning. It drew from my experiences in the education field and my experiences, meeting many people from all over the world and seeing what motivates them. I think social learning is very much about how we create inviting frameworks for people to learn cooperatively, over time, from both those in one's region and those from outside. It

also involves creating challenges, responding collaboratively and sharing experiences for mutual benefit. This is exactly what the RCEs are trying to do.

Glasser: Roughly two years have passed since the first group of seven RCEs was announced in June 2005 in Nagoya. Are you surprised about the current response and the current level of achievement of the existing RCEs?

van Ginkel: I'm pleasantly surprised and quite proud. At the moment we have some 45 officially acknowledged RCEs and when we look at the pipeline, there are hundreds to come. I thought the process would take off more slowly. I think the major successes are not just the numbers of the RCEs but the activities they are developing. Most of the RCEs have been successful in bridging between education and the world of business, between education and different cultural institutions and other institutions in their region. I think for the first time we have been able to successfully establish links between different sectors of society at the regional level. Another pleasant surprise is the enthusiasm and leadership—people are much more ambitious and capable of developing new activities, new ideas, new networking than we might have planned in advance.

Glasser: How about any unfavorable surprises?

van Ginkel: On the negative side, even with self-organisation, we still have a long way to go with building the self-confidence in the RCEs. I regularly hear people ask for more guidance, others are requesting textbooks. Now maybe we should respond to the requests for textbooks a bit by reviewing established knowledge around the world on particular issues such as climate change or energy security, but at the same time these textbooks could be developed independently and they should reflect the regional flavor of the RCEs.

Glasser: You have said that UNU should offer some help, but not too much help to support RCEs. Please elaborate on your views about what UNU should be doing to support the RCE process?

van Ginkel: Well, I think we have already done a lot by developing the concept, by indicating the guidelines, by specifying how people can start an RCE. We can help by making available more information and making it more accessible and by knowledge sharing. But we should never forget that the basis of RCEs is self-organisation. At the end of the day it's about people taking responsibility for their own future. So help, yes. We can improve the information function, maybe we can give some guidance when it comes to research regarding ESD, but at the end of the day the RCE has to be built by the people themselves.

Glasser: In the final analysis, how will you judge whether the RCE programme has been successful—beyond sheer numbers of RCEs or projects? How will you assess the RCE programme relative to the goal of transformative education?

van Ginkel: I think the first criteria would be the impact of the programmes—did they really change behaviour and practice? The second would be the extent to which these programmes positively impacted the actions of every partner in the RCE. Do the

industries act more sustainably? Is SD now viewed as a critical element of corporate social responsibility? How have elected officials reflected commitments to SD in their behaviours on specific issues? If we were to commission a Gallup Poll type of interview among the members of a RCE, it should be possible to establish whether they feel that SD has been advanced in their region. And I think we should not just ask authorities, I think we should ask the people.

Notes

1 For information on the European University Alliance for Sustainability, see: http://www. copernicus-campus.org/

2 The Lüneburg Declaration on Higher Education for Sustainable Development was adopted on 10 October 2001 in Lüneburg, Germany, at the International COPERNICUS Conference 'Higher Education for Sustainability—Towards the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Rio+10)' held at the University of Lüneburg 8–10 October 2001. For more details, see: http://www.lueneburg-declaration.de/

3 For details, see van Ginkel's presentation, 'Mobilising for Sustainable Development,' (especially pp. 86-87) in the *Final Report of the Meeting of Higher Education Partners* (World Conference on Higher Education + 5), available at: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001352/135213e.pdf

4 For more details on the Ubuntu Alliance, see: http://www.ias.unu.edu/research/ubuntu alliance.cfm

5 For details on UNU's RCE Programme, see: http://www.ias.unu.edu/sub_page.aspx?catID=108&ddlID=183. To download official RCE application materials, see: http://www.ias.unu.edu/resource_centre/RCE application guidelines.pdf or Email: rceservicecenter@ias.unu.edu.

6 For details on the *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment*, including access to the full PDF reports, see: http://www.millenniumassessment.org/en/index.aspx

7 For details on social learning for sustainability, see: Harold Glasser. 2007. 'Minding the Gap: The Role of Social Learning in Linking Our Stated Desire for a More Sustainable World to Our Everyday Actions and Policies', in A.E.J. Wals (ed.), *Social Learning: Toward a More Sustainable World,* 35-61. Wageningen, The Netherlands: Wageningen Academic Publishers.