Facing dark reality on the International Day of Peace

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More than three decades have passed since we celebrated the first International Day of Peace in 1982. And, as we mark the occasion once again today, it is instructive for us to think in terms of such long timespans, of the effect our actions will have not just in the short term, but over generations.

In the Asia-Pacific region, this means facing the dark reality of what can happen when the rot of cultural and ethnic hatred - within and between countries - is allowed to fester over the years.

This region is home to more than half of the world's population and a multitude of cultures; however, this great wealth of diversity is all too often the source of hostility rather than celebration.

Deep-seated mistrust and intolerance diminish the ability of the youth of each generation to effect meaningful change and pull us away from this poisonous legacy of division towards a culture of solidarity and peace.

It is fitting, then, that this year's International Day of Peace focuses on the theme of "Education for Peace".

As UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon, said in his 100-day countdown message: "It is not enough to teach children how to read, write and count. Education has to cultivate mutual respect for others and the world in which we live, and help people forge more just, inclusive and peaceful societies."

These aims form one of the main pillars of Unesco's mission throughout the world. I would like to highlight two recent initiatives that Unesco Bangkok is pursuing that seek to improve future generations' appreciation of diversities through learning.

An exhibition on display until tomorrow at the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre is an extension of the first of these initiatives, the "Learning to Live Together" study currently being conducted throughout the region.

The overall research initiative involves an in-depth examination of the education systems of 10 countries in Asia-Pacific to map efforts in each to promote tolerance and a respect for diversity. Armed with this knowledge, we can advise regional educational policy-makers as to the concrete steps needed to promote the concept of "learning to live together" among students. With this foundation, generational shifts in attitudes become attainable.

The exhibition complements this initiative by providing us with a vivid glimpse of what issues such as unity in diversity and "learning to live together" mean to the people we hope will benefit the most: The region's youth.

More than 200 young people from throughout the region submitted photographs, paintings and drawings to a competition held by Unesco Bangkok that asked them to show us what "learning to live together" meant to them.

The results were as diverse as the region itself, and the 30 images selected for the exhibition depict everything from the lives of minority ethnic groups to friendships between young people of different backgrounds, as well as abstract representations of peace and intercultural understanding.

Second-place winner Allan Jay Quesada of the Philippines captured the hopes we all have for this generation with his photo of a smiling young girl holding out a string of paper cutout figures, each dressed in traditional garb from individual Asean countries.

As we are sadly aware, however, that the reality in this region falls far short of the picture of solidarity expressed in that photo. It is in the hopes of moving closer to that ideal that Unesco Bangkok has embarked upon another initiative: working towards the creation of shared history textbooks for Southeast Asia.

A forum held at Unesco Bangkok earlier this week, "Promoting Intercultural Dialogue and a Cultural of Peace in Southeast Asia through Histories", brought together pre-eminent anthropologists, education specialists and history scholars from throughout the region to share their insights on this daunting, yet exciting prospect.

The experts, including leading thinker and former Asean secretary-general Surin Pitsuwan, discussed how shared histories could overcome the ill effects of traditional, nationalistic teaching that often leads to what the media have dubbed "culture wars".

"Making space for the shared histories of Southeast Asia will move us beyond the zero sum game mentality, where in every historical narrative, there is always a clear-cut winner and loser, creating a simplistic sense of triumphalism and defeat, which may have vengeful consequences down the line," Dr Surin said.

And, indeed, from my own perspective as an educator, I believe real generational change is possible if we improve young people's understanding of the past events and of their individual countries and neighbours as unique parts of a diverse and dynamic whole.

Reassessing education systems throughout the region then offers us the hope that a generation from now, a culture of peace will be more than a theoretical idea - that it will be an everyday reality to be cherished and safeguarded for the generations to come.

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