

**George:** Welcome to the Global Opportunity Initiative podcast series. I'm George Westerman, your host. Today I'm delighted to be able to talk with Dr. Ethel Agnes P Valenzuela. She's the director of the SEAMEO Secretariat in Bangkok, Thailand. She can tell us more about what SEAMEO is and what her group is doing to help education ministers around the region.

**Ethel:** Hello, greetings to everyone. I'm Ethel Agnes P Valenzuela. I am the director of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization. It is an intergovernmental organization, and we promote regional cooperation in education and science and culture. And this organization, IGO, as we call it, was established since 1965, November 30. And since then, the ministers of education usually meet annually, and they talk about regional projects, regional solutions on so many educational issues in our region in Southeast Asia. Now when you talk about ministers of education, you know, it's easy to think about ministers of education do high school and elementary school, but you think about much more than that, don't you?

Yes, so it cuts across. Because some ministers of education are basically from K to 12, and the other ministers of education, they are in the whole continuum, from basic to higher education. So we have also our ministers of higher education, working with SEAMEO [INAUDIBLE], our regional center. We have 26 regional centers in Southeast Asia on different themes.

So basically, we have our high officials meeting in TVET. They are also ministers of TVET. We have higher education, we have ECC in now different agencies, but under one solid minister of education. So it differs from one country to another in terms of organizational structure.

But we call all the ministers of education, and they are what we call as the SEAMEO Council of Ministers, and they are the deciding group or body for SEAMEO.

And then, but you have these annual meetings, but then you do projects together, too. So what are one or two projects that you're really proud of that you're working on right now?

There are a lot of projects we're working on, but basically it is anchored on the accepted and adopted and endorsed education agenda, science agenda, and culture agenda. So we have recently adopted our SEAMEO strategic plan, 2021 to 2030. In that you can see our focus on education, on science, and on culture.

So for example, in education we're working on early childhood care and education. We're also addressing barriers to inclusion so that no one is left behind. We have projects on resiliency in the face of emergencies. These are DRRMs for Southeast Asia, Disaster Risk Reduction and Management.

We have also technical vocational education and training industry 4.0 as our agenda, preparation of curriculum and teachers, and revitalizing teacher education, which is basically more of making teaching a priority of choice for many of our graduates, and higher education harmonization. This is about mobility of our Southeast Asian students, teachers, and researchers. And finally, projects on 21st century curriculum. It's about ICT in the curriculum, it's about competencies of teachers, and also ESD and global citizenship education. It's a lot, and I like all of them.

So I love that term, global citizenship. Can you say a little bit more? What do you mean by that? So GCED, actually, it was adapted from the UNESCO, you know, what call declaration and the global citizenship education. This is about all the attitudes, values, that will sustain the future that everything we have now can be sustained in the future. So it has a lot of domains, like you

have their environmental protection, you have their climate change, you have peace, sustainable development and sustainable consumption, human rights, part of the GCED, and many more.

So what I did when we adopted GCED is training for all the teachers and policymakers on how we can integrate GCED in the curriculum. And prior to that, you see, you have to do scoping studies in Southeast Asia, which of the curriculum can we embed GCED? And basically it turns out that it can be in social studies or civic education. And after getting the scoping study, we go into teacher training all across Southeast Asia, moving from one country to another. That's what I like about it.

**George:** Wow. And I can see how you certify in math and you can certify in science and in reading. Are you looking also to certify people in this global citizenship?

**Ethel:** Actually, it's very interesting, but our work on GCED basically is focused, actually, on environmental education, on education for sustainable development, and on greening education for the region. Because we share the same planet, we share the same region. And there is another competency under STEM framework that we also try to improve the performance of our learners and our teachers as well under the STEM education.

Well, that is another project which is what I call as SEA-PLM Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics. In that grade 5 assessment-- this is our own version of PISA. So we have introduced the SEA-PLM since 2019, and we are able to have results on basic reading, writing, mathematics, and global citizenship.

And I have found out that there are so many non-readers even at grade 5. And there are also those who are lacking competencies in numeracy, and most importantly in writing. However, in that assessment, which you can actually download, there is a very good promise on GCED, said that many of our students understand ASEAN, our region, and others. Basically they're updated on, what we call as current events.

And they are aware of what is happening in the world. I think 80% of our students are actually knowledgeable on the region. They're very knowledgeable on their country, but they are also knowledgeable about the region where we are. And some students say they know more about also the US or other countries.

So that's very interesting. And we will do our next round of assessment. We're preparing now, 2023 and 2024, so that we will have the results by 2025, Dr. George.

**George:** That's sounds fascinating, and I love the idea that you're going beyond the technical to train the whole person and the whole way that you look at being a citizen in the world. So one of the things that, in the GOI, certainly education is important, but we really are oriented towards careers, towards entering a career and helping people grow in their career or change careers as they need to go. And SEAMEO certainly talks about that in your TVET work.

But can you talk a little bit more-- when you're trying to bridge the education and the workforce side, what are some of the biggest challenges you see there in South East Asia to make that happen?

**Ethel:** Our region is very striking in Southeast Asia. We're very active on the ASEAN trade, and we have a more integrated market. We have really tried our best to have ASEAN integration. We promote ASEAN connectivity, and our population is seventh largest in the world and third largest in Asia. So we have a very highly competitive economic region.

And that's why SEAMEO and SEAMEO centers, we have center for technical vocational education and training, we have our science, mathematics, and STEM ed centers. We're all working because our region is really, really harnessing the potentials of the young people. But I did the employability of graduates, and what I see there, there is a gap after graduation that our kids, they will not get jobs in six or some are even in nine months. They could not get the job right away. And even if our curriculum was already 21st century based, since like 10 or 15 years ago, we still see that the industry is-- they change so fast. And our curriculum could not really cope in that.

So we see that we need students to have relevant skills, and when we have interviewed the CEOs and managers of our industries, they have reported that they need more relevant skills, soft skills, teamwork, ability to multitask, and so many skills that the curriculum itself could not really match. That's why it's very important to have industry perspective in the way we review our curriculum or in the way we design our curriculum, as well as internship.

So since that is a requirement, we have been supporting our internship program here at SEAMEO. We did our internship programs in 2016, 2017, and even teachers, those who are graduating, they have to do internship in any countries in Southeast Asia-- that is my flagship project here-- internship for teachers and internship for students in business, IT, tourism, engineering, and so on and so forth. We have at least 12 priority areas where we can do internship in different parts of Southeast Asia.

So Thai students can do internship in the Philippines or Indonesia, Malaysia, and so on and so forth. And during the pandemic, I have to call back our students who are doing internship in industries and in different schools and universities, and we have developed the virtual internship program, and it generated like partnership among 74 institutions. Then we did the virtual internship program in the meantime that we are still close and no one is into face-to-face internship right now.

So that's my sharing-- so changing landscape for employment and also high expectations from the industry, CEOs, HR managers.

**George:** And this virtual internship-- it's a fascinating idea. How many students are in those internships right now? Do you have a rough number?

**Ethel:** Yeah, 74 institutions in Southeast Asia. And these are all higher education institutions and TVET institutions. And right now we have almost 1,000 students doing that. We have completed the first batch, and we are reopening for the second batch under SEAMEO program.

**George:** And to do this, you know-- the pandemic made it happen, but it sounds like this is something you can keep going.

**Ethel:** Yes. I would like to maintain that because we have invested on the platform. So in the platform we do the virtual interview, we have the virtual matching of institution, everything is

virtual. And like before that, we see each other in Malaysia or in the Philippines and we sign agreement face-to-face, and then we discuss the protocols for internship. But in the virtual platform, we have to discuss everything via the platform we have developed, or continue on with interviews and selection of students virtually.

I think it's a very good model that, you know, somehow we can make it happen, that we still learn from one another despite having the virtual platform. --Dr. George is.

**George:** And when you talk about ministers of education, do they talk about the continuing education, too, training the 30- and 40-year-olds, not just the 15- to 20-year-olds?

**Ethel:** Yes.

**George:** Tell us some interesting things happening there.

**Ethel:** In the Ministries of Education, there is a bureau or a division for lifelong learning. So they also cater to serving the population that has to be reached, like those who have retired. They provide lifelong learning and programs for them, like entrepreneurship, how they can make use of their talents, how they can be volunteers in the school.

So our ministers of education works actually with different ministries as well to support lifelong learning. So like for example, those who drop out already of education system, but they go for non-formal education, it's still part of the Ministry of Education. They have the bureau in charge of non-formal education, informal education and training. So there is a director in charge of that. And they also report that in many of our meetings, Dr. George.

**George:** Well, and I love this idea that you could find some really interesting innovation in Malaysia and then the Minister from Thailand can say, I want that, and you can share the practices. It sounds like that happens all the time.

**Ethel:** Yes, we have a regular platform. We have the strategic dialogue of education ministers I'm actually preparing now for the upcoming ministers meeting in February 8, 9, and 10 in Manila. And we are very busy designing the topics for discussions of the ministers. And basically, we selected foundational learning and lifelong learning.

Because now everything is like in the reset mode. For many ministries of education, they have to nurture the digital transformation that happened along the way, and they have also supported lifelong learning. And we embark on digital credentials. They attended a lot of webinars. So how do we make use of them?

So it's a very interesting discussion of the ministers that will happen in February in Manila. And we're so into that now, making sure that all ministers will come to share their thoughts on foundational learning and lifelong learning journeys, and what we can do together from 2023 onward.

You know, one of the things that you talk about all the time is trying to find those commonalities across the 11 countries. But on the other hand, the 11 countries are very different. And I'm wondering, are there some-- could you share one or two really interesting differences among the

countries that our typical listener who doesn't know the region very well might not understand, in terms of education or the types of jobs there, that kind of thing?

**Ethel:** Yes. You know, when I look at the region, having worked at SEAMEO for 16 years now, so you need a different approach for each country. Of course, the culture is different, the size, the population is different. And they have different ways of working at things. They have different issues. However, when we come to the table as SEAMEO or as ASEAN, we share a common vision, we share common aspiration, and that's very important.

And we share projects that will benefit everyone, no matter which part of the spectrum they are. We have rich countries, very rich countries such as Singapore, and you have also very big population Indonesia and the Philippines, and very fast, modern Vietnam, conquering a lot of new heights. And we have also the GMS, Greater Mekong Subregion, like Cambodia, Laos, and they're struggling. And we have a new member, Timor-Leste.

OK, so practically, Dr. George, we take a look at the projects. I'll share with you one example, when I did the online course for teachers of learners with disability during the pandemic. So I have different strategies for each. So for example, countries which can very well support online education, their teachers, we have guided them to be fully online. But you know, I noticed that many countries can easily complete the course. Like if we say Indonesia or Philippines, Vietnam, they have better access to digital technology.

But I see also those who are lagging behind. I look at Laos and I look at Timor-Leste. So what I decided on how we can implement that is to do blended. We have to print modules for them and deliver the modules, the courses we have developed, to each and every house in Timor-Leste, all the teachers, and reach out to them and do it differently than I would expect. We did not do house-to-house delivery in countries like the Philippines or in Bhutan when they joined us as well.

So this is different. You have to see that they have limitations in their digital infrastructure, and then you need to think of alternative ways of reaching out to the teachers. This is just one example.

So even if we say we want digital transformation at the ministerial level, and they have accepted that as a pathway, but when you do implementation of projects it will vary, Dr. George. So I can be all online in some places in Indonesia, but not in Laos. You have to have blended modality, or in Cambodia.

And from my experience, everything has to be translated in their local languages. Otherwise, if it's in English, teachers will not attend. So I invested a lot on translating all the training materials, modules that we develop at the secretariat, into their own languages, and that makes it more popular and more acceptable to the teachers, and do also launching, training for them in their own local language.

And luckily, we have SEAMEO centers spread out all in Southeast Asia. So when I have materials, online courses, make sure that our SEAMEO centers will help translate them. So that's the plus. I think it's a blessing that we have our 26 centers.

**George:** But Dr. Ethel, when I look at your background, it's pretty impressive. And I was wondering, could talk a little bit about your career-- you've done so many different things. And

also, is this what you started out to do? Or is this something you accidentally ended up in, to be in a position where you're doing this interesting stuff?

**Ethel:** Yeah, it's very interesting, my career path. I was a teacher, a secondary English and biology teacher. That's my first five years. And then I was also in charge of our campus journal. So basically I'm more of a writer.

And then I went to university and I was the chairperson of education. I worked with De La Salle University. And still, the same subjects, like English, biology, natural sciences. And then there is a twist in my career when I took up my PhD, and then my teacher, my professor, was working at the Commission on Higher Education.

And he said that you are very good. You can go join us at the Commission on Higher Education. And then I was, well, I tried my best, and we had like-- that time we are reforming the higher education system in the Philippines. And I was one of the first hired at the new Commission on Higher Education. It was from the Department of Education Bureau higher ed. And they moved to a new agency, Commission on Higher Education. And I worked there for about 10 years at the International Affairs Services.

So then I know ASEAN, SEAMEO, UNESCO UN, and a lot of bilateral, multilateral, I attended APAC, and I was also a recipient of the US IVP, International Visitors Program, as a leader in education. I have learned a lot in the US, and that really is a life changer. I have visited many universities, George Washington, I also been to Michigan State U, University of San Francisco Stanford.

They have all inspired me to do better. And I think that was the time that made me think of internationalization and transnational higher education, and made that as my PhD dissertation. So I was engrossed on internationalizing the Philippines at that time, and I developed the model to internationalize Philippine higher ed as early as 1999, 1990s. Yes.

And because I have worked with SEAMEO, suddenly they invited me to join SEAMEO, and it was really a big change of career. So I was practically a teacher, and I did a lot of policy researches with different bodies, and now I use those skills in managing the region, Southeast Asian region.

**George:** Here you were talk about internationalizing the Philippines as a doctoral student, then you've got the mutual recognition of higher education degrees across the region, you've got the ASEAN TVET Council, you've got UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, you're part of the UNESCO Global Steering Committee, all of these things. You talked about the fifth grade education, the lifelong learning.

These are big scary things. And so let me just ask you, what makes you think that you can solve these, and number two, what lessons can you offer to help other people that are trying to solve big challenges?

**Ethel:** Well, basically my friends at the UN, they ask me a lot of things like, Ethel, can you do multi-grade studies in South East Asia? Yes, I can do that one. And then after that one they, oh, we have this, can you do the toolkit for higher education recognition? Yes, I can do that one. I just-- because they are my friends, OK, I can do that one. And then do the work. And then I also did the big reform, the k-12 reform in the Philippines. Because my friends at the

department, hey Ethel, you're doing [AUDIO OUT] this one, say OK, I will do that one. It's a big research and comparison of higher education in Southeast Asia.

And then because, you know, when we have-- at the UN system they have election or selection. So because many of those that I have worked with, they gave me projects like ESD, Education for Sustainable Development projects in Southeast Asia, they gave me teacher education reform and such, a lot, a lot of studies they have given me, and I have delivered them on time. And that gives me the connection, as well, to many of the things they would like me to contribute on, like developing the ISCED-T the International Standards Classification for Teachers. They want me to be part of the steering committee, they want me to be part of this all steering committees. And practically I just say yes, not because they're my friends, but because I think it's a very good opportunity to help the education system, not only for my region but other regions as well.

And also doing capacity building for South Asians, I did like for Bangladesh and others, Nepal, Bhutan, and they became my friends. And they always say, hey, can you do another training on non-formal education? Yes, I can. So Dr. George, I keep on you know, giving my friends a yes whenever they invited me to help them in their projects.

**George:** But I'm also hearing you're just absolutely fearless, that there's no problem that's too big to solve.

**Ethel:** Yeah. I take the risk and I take the opportunities, and at the end of the day, I really have to make it happen. Because it's a commitment. So like sometimes it's quite difficult, like the hardest one I have accepted actually is the one on access to education by [INAUDIBLE] learners. It was funded by USAID. And I have to go through different provinces in Mindanao and really interview the kids, why they drop off the schools, and really be there in that part of the Philippines and talk to them, see them really cry, and why they are deprived of education. So sometimes doing all of these things, it's not scary, but you also risk your life and you have to manage your time well. And you have to look at all the issues in your work, but at the end of the day when you see, oh, now I understand why kids are out of school. Now we understand why they have this kind of stigmatizing or whatever, at the end of the day, when you present the results to all the policymakers, global partners, then they will understand what kinds of intervention would be needed.

So it's fearless, yes. It's risk-taking a lot, and at the end of the day, it's your choice to contribute to the aspiration of many of our friends in different organizations like UN, UNICEF, ASEAN, and the rest. And I love what I do. I love working with them anyway.

**George:** Well, thank you. We're starting this Global Opportunity Initiative, and it's a big scary thing, and it could have a big impact on the world. But it is pretty intimidating sometimes, so I'm going to try to keep these lessons in mind as we do what we're doing in GOI. Be fearless, do the hard work, build on it, and help your friends to make progress.

**Ethel:** But Dr. George, at the end of the day, you should always look at your north star. What is your focus? What is your goal? So even if you encounter a lot of challenges, and many of them,

the roads are not easy when you gather data, when you do projects, they're not easy. You have problems with manpower. You have problems with logistics.

But you should keep yourself anchored on the bigger goal, your aspiration. I want to contribute to inclusive education, and I have to finish this project so that we know how to bring inclusive education for everyone.

So you always go to your north star. You always go to your goal. And why you accept the project? Because precisely you want to contribute to the aspiration of everyone.

**George:** Well, thank you. Dr. Ethel, thank you for making time to talk to us, for sharing your expertise and your experience. I really enjoyed talking with you, and I'm sure everybody else will enjoy hearing what you have to say. Thanks again. Thank you for being with us for another episode of The Podcast Series for the GOI. If you have any questions or any comments, you can always contact us at [GOI-info@mit.edu](mailto:GOI-info@mit.edu). Thanks, and have a good day.