

Episode Transcription

Richard Zhou

Hello and welcome to CICE: The Podcast the podcasts, a student-led podcast out of Teachers College, Columbia University. As students of comparative and international education, we started this podcast to connect academic research in the field to the current events they inform and explain.

My name is Richard Zhou. I'm a student in the International and Comparative Education Program at Teachers College, and I will be your host for this episode. And I have two honorable guests – Ye, and Evan.

So our podcast topic today is about a case study on the United Nations Environment Program sustainability framework. Before we start our discussion, how about we take turns to introduce ourselves? Maybe I can start. I'm a recent graduate from a comparative international education program at Teachers College. And I'm currently a teacher at the Association to Benefit Children. I'm also a strong believer in climate change and sustainability, especially in the practice of international education, development, business sector and the school sectors. How about you, Evan?

Evan Zhang

Yeah, Thank you so much for inviting me to this podcast, Richard. So hi everyone. My name is Evan. I'm currently still a student in the International and Comparative Education Program in Teachers College. My experience with sustainability mainly started from my high school, which is like a topic that I work with my English teacher. And later I also have a little experience in my undergrad, but I think I have more experience about this topic in graduate school right now.

RZ

Thank you Evan. How about you, Ye?

Ye Huang

Hi everyone, and thank you Richard for inviting me to this podcast. My name is Ye Huang. I am a recent graduate from the same master's program as Richard and Evan. I was born and raised in a small village in China. I officially started my academic and career journey about sustainability after I came to the United States for my master's study. During my master's study, I worked in the UN climate change, UN Global Compact, and now I'm working as a researcher for a NGO focusing on renewable energy research.

RZ

Thank you both for being here. I'm so glad. So can we start with the first question? What do you think is sustainability? Why is sustainability important? Let's start with Evan.

EZ

Yeah, thank you, Richard. So in my opinion, I feel like sustainability is like you can use the resources efficiently and then you can keep the resources to use for many of the generations later. So it is like sustainability can continue to develop over time. And that's kinda like my understanding of sustainability.

RZ

Why do you think sustainability is important?

EZ

Actually it's kinda related to my own experience. I was born in Guangdong, China, which is like the South part of China. And when I was in my childhood, like around three or four, I kinda heard that we would have some typhoon pretty much once a year. But when I was growing up, I realized that we have more natural disasters going on in my hometown. And also, I was a boy who really liked to play on the beach. And then over time I can kinda see the seawater becomes more dirty over time. And that's kinda like my motivation to learn why we need to be sustainable. Because we can, I can kinda witness the pollution going on in my environment. And also I can see that there's something related to climate change. It's happening. So that's why I think sustainability is a really important thing that we need to focus on.

RZ

Thank you everyone for sharing your personal experiences. How about you, Ye?

YH

I agree with Evan and I think sustainability means we are developing in this generation without sacrificing the resources we will have for next-generation and many more generations to come on our planet Earth. I think it is very important. I remember before I came to the States for my master's study I traveled in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America to do research on Chinese overseas investment, community development and environmental conservation. I observed how local communities and overseas companies may make use of the resources locally, but without considering how we can develop it sustainably. Then the result is that we cause a lot of trouble in the local community in the long run. So I think it is very important, both locally and globally.

RZ

Thank you yeah, for stressing the distinction between local and global. So to me, sustainability means how to best use the resources without sacrificing, like Evan said, our future next generations. It is always concerned with the future and perhaps our grandchildren. So as a witness of my own mother land, China's climate issues including sand storm in Beijing in 2021 and flood drowning in subways in Henan Province also in the same year with a few people drowned. I was emotionally terrified. But at the time I did not have enough knowledge or support or like-minded advocacy groups. So before I came to Teachers College for grad school, I lived in China's Hainan Province for half a year to take care of my ill grandparents. During that time, Why? For the sake of preserving regional air quality. So the world famous Boao Forum for Asia is a conference for global cooperation including climate change agreements that is also held annually in Hainan Province. So my first final paper from Teachers College was to examine the health issues among youth and education interventions in the world's marginalized islands, including Hainan, Taiwan, Hawaii, Jeju Island, etc. Part of the health issues had to do with tropical weather across some islands. But just briefly, even yesterday, the famous canal in Venice, Italy turned green. And in the past Memorial weekend, there was a tornado in Regina, Canada. There was a forest fire in Northern Michigan, and there was hurricane winds that destroyed the cruise ships near Charleston, South Carolina, et cetera. So it's just very close to us, I think. But anyway, thank you so much for sharing your experiences. But I'd like to hear more about your experiences with sustainability in schools, especially in higher education like your undergrad, your college. How about we start with Ye?

YH

Yes, I did have the privilege to join a student club named Sustainability Task Force when I just came to Teachers College for my master's study. In fall 2021, we organized a petition at Teachers College campus, basically inviting students and faculties to sign and then share their ideas to support the teachers college to re-center sustainability on their campus. Within around two weeks, we collected more than 700 signatures from students and faculties. I was very surprised and also very impressed by how everybody was so concerned and so passionate about sustainability. And we finally got a chance to speak directly to the president and provost of Teachers College. And later on, we received an email, which was spread all over Teachers College, regarding how Teachers College will re-center sustainability as a campus, divest from fossil fuels and create more sustainability related courses at Teachers College and in New York City.

RZ

Thank you so much for sharing your experiences in Teachers College. How about you, Evan?

EZ

Yeah, so thank you. And I feel like in my undergrad, we made sustainability, like we discussed it in a classroom a lot. But I feel like that discussion kinda just stays in the theoretical way. We will discuss why there's a climate change happening and what's going on, what can we do? But in our own school community back in Arizona, we don't have that much actions to really like propose, or to promote the idea of sustainability to the community somehow. When I came to New York, I feel like there are more activities or actions going on. For example, there are some volunteer works about... we collect the trash in Coney Island. I think that's organized by [One to World](#) (An NGO that fosters intercultural understanding). And also there's a lot of organizations, NGOs, they really focus on that and they are trying to promote it in the classroom, or they just send out their websites and all those information about how to save the carbon footprints. So I feel like that are more ... like practical level to make the environment more sustainable in New York than other places.

RZ

Yeah, thank you so much. Thank you for emphasizing the gap between theoretical and experiential or practical aspect of sustainability. I think that's a huge difference, especially in different places where you go to college or schools. So thank you so much for sharing on this topic. Since our podcast today was still about UNEP, right? The United Nations Environment Program's intervention. So what are your impressions of large organizations? What are some of the problems when large organizations intervene in different countries? And what are some of the problems when UNEP pushes the universal global framework in different countries and cultures. What might be some solutions? Maybe, can you share something, Evan, first?

EZ

Yeah. So thank you for the question, Richard. I feel like if we have a universal plan for all the countries in the world, and that must be some unfairness happening. First, the framework itself is mainly organized by the developed countries like the US, France, and all of the other world powers. But the scholars from other developing countries, they are not part of the framework making. So if the standard is making for the developed country, it may not really fit for the developing countries as well. Especially when you consider most of the factories right now are not in developed countries, but are in developing countries. However, most of the profits were made by the developed countries. And the pollution are mainly just like suffered by the people from the less developing countries. And because of this world system that is functioning right now, if we are having a universal framework for every country at the same level, then you can see that for the developed countries, they already don't have that much pollution from the industry part. So they don't really need to worry about fixing that problem. But for the developing countries, they don't have that much money and they need that industry to feed

their people. However, if they need to cut down the pollution as well, then they need to sacrifice more than the developed country.

RZ

Thank you Evan. Thank you so much for pointing out this imbalance of development. What about you, Ye?

YH

Yeah, I agree with Evan. I think when we come up with this universal comprehensive plan for every single country, every single community, we neglect and overlook a lot of different nuance difference between different communities. Including what Evan just mentioned, the developing countries and developed countries and also urban area, rural area, inland countries and small island countries. And Western knowledge system and indigenous knowledge systems. All of them are different from each other. I think when we try to come up with this whole plan, maybe we need to compile all the different perspectives in the creation process. But it's so hard and as far as we know is not yet comprehensive. So I think there's still a long way to go.

RZ

Yeah, thank you so much for sharing about the different geographies and even geopolitics, right? And how they play into this complex issue. So for me, my impressions of large organizations are perhaps powerful, inaccessible, or a big city like New York, you could create a Western culture worship, in a sense. For example, in Singapore, they took, they learned a lot, pretty much everything from Britain into the country. And what happens is that many of my classmates do not really pay much attention to learning mother tongues or their native languages, and they start to view their countries of ancestry as perhaps a bit backward. So many of them sort of directly or indirectly discriminate against, for example, living in China or India. That's why identity crisis is often talked about in classroom discussions. So for me, the worst thing could happen is that sustainability would become a Western cultural export instead of environment and climate change. So one example could be Ecotourism. Although Ecotourism is becoming more and more popular in the West and outside the West, there has been a lot of concern about its effect on the indigenous culture and local environment because of its profit driven nature. So lastly, I do not see Mandarin as a linguistic option for the global framework. Because I look at the framework, I'm not sure if it is going to be as effective in universities in less developed areas in China as it is in English speaking countries, it has to do with interpretation. So our last question I want to talk about, do you think sustainability is a privilege? What do you think, Ye?

YH

At the beginning, I think this is a privilege, because we heard from the news that always developed countries has the technology to test. But then I remembered a story that happened during my conversation with my grandpa. I visited my grandpa this February during spring festival. My grandpa still lives in that small village back in China. When I was talking with him, suddenly he shared with me that he said, Ye, I think farmers like us, we're struggling now. I think the world is warming up right now. We have been suffering from the drought for several years. It's so hard for farmers to survive. I think. Then he said, I think you need to study more. You, then you can make more money, make a better life, something like that. But I was so surprised to learn how my grandpa, although he didn't really go to school, but he has observed the problem happening right now all over the world. He's completely aware of that. When I was observing how my grandpa is living in his house, I was so shocked because I realize how my grandpa is suffering from the climate change because he's a farmer. At the same time, he really has left very small carbon footprint on the Earth, for example, they will recycle everything. They will recycle plastic bags. They will make sure they don't waste the food. They will recycle the water they use to wash rice. They would walk a lot instead of taking flights and taking cars. Then I realized, maybe sustainability is not a privilege for rich people or people with higher economic and social background. Everybody can be aware of the problem of sustainability and everybody can take actions towards sustainability, starting from life at home.

RZ

Thank you so much for sharing about your grandfather and I definitely think many people do not need a lot of privileges to practice sustainability. What do you think, Evan?

EZ

I really agree with what Ye said? So from like a bigger scale perspective, like the big organizations, like the developed countries, they do have the more advanced technology and also other methods to control the pollution, which is their advantage. But I think we cannot really treat it as a privilege. Because everyone, if you really have the mind to make yourself more sustainable and to reduce your carbon footprint, you can also contribute to yourself, like contribute your part to the environment and sustainability.

RZ

Yeah, thank you so much, Evan. I think it's true that on the grassroot level, everybody should be able to practice sustainability at least in some life habits. So just to sum up for me, I think it is a privilege and it is not a privilege, at the same time. So it is true that everybody can practice it no matter what cultural background they're in. However, if you'd look at the news and politics, you can tell that climate justice as a concept, speaks a lot about how less developed countries have to shoulder the consequences of climate change contributed more by developed countries. The

debate is usually about whether developed countries should make less developed countries pay the same equal amount of money to cut carbon emissions. Another part of the privilege has to deal with the dominance of science. Countries with technocracies, or are large technology companies, are usually able to get a bigger bite of the cherry in the global market. In other words, get more money, so they usually have more resources and confidence to talk about sustainability. Also, when schools teach sustainability, they usually teach signs or natural disasters. Many scholars have been trying to bring sustainability into sociology and anthropology in order to give a more holistic perspective. One of the books we talked about was titled [Underwater](#), written by a professor named Rebecca Elliot. It talks about the complex relationship between flood relocation costs and emotional cost and even the concept of moral economy. Therefore, I think sustainability is also a political economics and psychological issue, more than just science. So just for the benefit of audiences, if you can check out the book Underwater by Elliot, which I highly recommend.

So as our time draws near to close anything to share as final comment?

YH

To sum up, I think we still, we can still have a lot of hope in terms of climate action. Because now I'm working as a researcher for, which is focusing on energy transition. So we have been observing how different countries in the world and globally, how people are transforming their energy from fossil fuels and oil and gas gradually to renewable energy, which is very promising. And all of us have been studied in education and also climate change education. We have been observing how climate change is incorporated into the curriculum in K 12 and in formal education. So I think there are more people who are aware of climate change and more people and companies and governments are taking active action towards climate change, towards climate action. So I'm very hopeful towards the future, a more sustainable future.

RZ

Yeah, thank you for sharing the positive vibes. Just to be very quick, I've been a volunteering intern for the Association to Benefit Children in East Harlem since last summer, where I helped with the preschoolers in local communities. We taught sustainability in the forms of songs, games, and paintings. We even brought soil and grass seeds to the classroom to teach them how to plant. Most importantly, we had an Earth Day Parade and brought all of our children to march to different classrooms wearing garbage bags or green color clothes. Overall I learned so much from students and teachers about how sustainability education is implemented in practical ways. So I think in the future I suggest we take time to learn what each school and even at the classroom level are doing. And for me, ethnography might be the best approach perhaps.

So anyway, thank you so much, Evan and Ye, for joining us.

YH

Thank you for having us

EZ

Yeah, thank you so much for inviting us

RZ

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