



"The values of the university, as I see them, should be the commitment to what is around it"

In the case of Sustainable Earth Alliance, this commitment is given by the relationship with social sectors such as farmers, fishermen, etc.

By Carla Estrada Jopia

What are the challenges facing the university in the 21st century?

The university has historically been linked and subjected to powerful sectors such as the church and the state and more recently the market. Although it has always been a very important institution, now it is even more recognized, especially in the financial and the capital world. This is not unusual, because when it comes to business the market always recognizes potential features before any other organization. An interesting example of it is the issue of writing. While schools have always had difficulties making their students writing or mastering this technique, mobile phone companies realized this potential and took advantage of it using a device that has traditionally been used to talk. They created a tool that writes and which they make money of. It also succeeded to create in people the desire to write, even if in a minimalist way. The school, however, has more difficulties in making these advances. I think the university is still not aware of its power nowadays.

I think the main issue we need to consider is the relationship between the university and society, in the context of the society being a complex body. Specifically, in the case of Sustainable Earth Alliance, we extend this relationship especially in the sectors that have been most excluded and that seems to have nothing to do with the university, social sectors such as farmers, fishermen, etc. What do we do with a university that has always been devoted to educate the ruling elites? I think that this should be evident, we must relate to all sectors of our society.

Here in Vietnam, for example, I think there are many areas in which the university could act. There is a very interesting informal economy channel where the university should participate in order to improve. Issues such as people eating in the streets, public health, food processing, are good examples of areas that perhaps could be improved. This is not

about mechanizing the whole country, but doubtless these customs and traditions could be in a better condition. When you think of the amount of traffic on the streets and those huge cars passing by, for instance, a viable alternative to it could be the use of closed motorcycles with air conditioning, which are comfortable, do not take much space and do not cause as much traffic on the streets. A city with the number of inhabitants of Ho Chi Minh City, could do things to live in a more harmonious way and the university should not be indifferent to that.

And more specifically in Brazil?

I think a huge challenge for Brazil is the size of its territory. We have for instance, groups of people scapeing from cities and are now facing the problems of a very low standard of life found in such places. These people are looking for new places to live and are now beginning to occupy spaces that were never inhabited before, in the countryside for instance. We must think on how to bring about a more balanced regional development or to invest in the territory that is not in use.

The university and the policies are somewhat contradictory. It is true, however, that during the government of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva there has been created a Department which addresses the issue of rural education. This Department aims to develop education according to local needs, taking into consideration local characteristics and regional productive lines, which develop without being harmful to people or the environment. In general, there is much interest in environmental issues and the subject is being worked at schools. The topic may be treated slightly superficially, but it is definitely being approached, especially among children.

What are the university values for the 21st century?

Well, values are related to the right that everyone has to have a decent quality of life. The values of the university, as I see them, should be the commitment to what is around it. Clearly today this equation is more complex, because they are institutions subjected to regional, national and international rules. Especially the latter have outweighed all the others and that is why the importance of discussing, also within the university, the weight that international interference has in it. It is necessary to strike a balance on how to intervene without shutting down traditions, developing the traditions in a way that it can potentially improve human dignity, in some basic sense. That is a very difficult calculation, but must be made in each context in a different way.

How should the university change?

The university is quite lost. It realizes that it was wrong on several things and that it has an elitist history. However, it no longer wants to be elitist, it has a new goal which is to be accessible to everyone, but with quality, being aware of the difficulties of reproducing models around the world. But what can be understood by quality? Quality is associated with excellence, however, it does not make sense to think that excellence is the same in Brazil, Vietnam or Chile. It is not the same and should not be the same and we must be aware that should not be the same.

All of it takes me back to Vietnam. What we see here is interesting, because they started of thinking, that they should be the same as others places or that were outdated because they were not at the same level of the U.S. This is does not make sense! The development of a place or an excellence should be in harmony with the local reality, unless it is done in a pathological way that ignores the local codes, the environment, and the local resources. If you ignore all of that, you may try, but it is a great violence. Now we also need to dialogue with the rest of world, but that does not mean copying or submitting and this is very difficult to absorb, to understand.

Is academia ready to meet these challenges?

In Brazil, for example there is a huge variety, if you look well. We have many programs and if you check the investigation lines, there is a lot related to social issues. In general, Brazil is aware of its main social issues that need to change, such as gender issues, minority groups and so on. It does not mean that the elites do not exist, but during conferences,

one can find critical line of thoughts, coming especially from people related to left wing movements.

I think Brazil actually has one of the best potential to tune with the project of Sustainable Earth Alliance. For example, it would be interesting to create an international mobility for a period of about three months, some type of people exchange that can generate actions and activities. I believe that for these sort of initiatives, Brazil has high chances of getting funding, I think there is harmony.

What can Brazil and Vietnam learn from each other?

I think there might be an interesting exchange of experiences and themes that can enrich each other. I have been talking a lot and I can see there is much work on gender issues that needs to be done; we could produce for the Spanish or the Portuguese articles discussing the Vietnamese situation, for example.

Now, I feel the research perspective is not yet settled here in Vietnam. I do not know, but maybe Vietnam should work on that and to develop a better a sense of curiosity, which is typical of any investigation.

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