‘Sustainability education, social policy integration required for the future’

International experts gather to discuss strategies for economic growth with minimal environmental damage

By SHARON CHASEN

The key to pushing sustainable development forward is nothing but sustainability principles to a staple of educational curricula and integrating them into social policies and cultural norms, national and international experts agreed on Thursday.

Academics and other professionals from the sustainable development sector gathered together at the Social Pillar of Sustainability Symposium, hosted by the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya’s School of Sustainability.

The school was founded in January by a group of prominent political leaders, including Prof. Moti Shechter, who is an indication that “sustainability is here to stay.”

Sustainability can generally be defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs,” explained Prof. Yossi Hosaghar, of Columbia University and the Sreeji School of Art, Design and Technology in Banglore, India. Traditionally, this definition has also stuck to the importance of three Fs – environment, economics and energy – leaving the social and cultural components to the side, according to Hosaghar.

In order to make sustainable practices “work,” proper education should be equipped with proper knowledge of these concepts in secondary schools and institutions of higher learning across the board – seamlessly integrated into their education, according to Alexander Leicht, chief of Education for Sustainable Development at UNESCO in Paris.

“The vision of the hope of course is that integrating sustainable development into teaching and learning into education – kindergarten to adult education – is seen as a key paradigm for good quality, relevant education and a key paradigm to any progress toward sustainable development,” Leicht said.

All over the world, education administrators need to reorient their institutions entirely, he explained.

In Shanghai, Prof. Li Fenglin of Tongji University’s College of Environmental Science and Engineering, is already employing these techniques at his university, where he also heads the United Nations Environment Program – Tongji Institute of Environment for Sustainable Development.

“Students are our future leaders, so this should have the concept of sustainable development,” said U., who also serves as UNESCO’s chairman for education in sustainable development.

Throughout their degrees, the university’s 40,000 students get sustainability education no matter what their major at the school, and also gain a strong sense of social responsibility within their community, Li explained.

The same type of sustainability education goes for the students of the University of Luxembourg in Germany, said Prof. Gerd Michelsen of the university who is also the UNESCO chairman for higher education in sustainable development.

There, too, sustainable development has been integrated in the form of a general studies mandatory component for all bachelor’s degree students. In addition, the university also offers majors, minors, masters degree, certificates and PhDs in sustainability studies.

Equally important for furthering sustainable development throughout the world is making sure that people understand it as a multidimensional concept – with nebulous qualities like equity, justice, social cohesiveness, cultural diversity and human development, according to Hosaghar.

Social sustainability talks about the quality of life for people – treating everybody fairly and providing essential services that are effectively delivered to everyone who needs them, stressed Prof. Arza Churchman from IDC’s School of Sustainability. Therefore, leaders need to achieve a very difficult balance among all the economic, sociological and ecological components that are central to sustainable development, she explained.

“The challenge is to find a fitting and fair balance between the different goals and needs,” Churchman said.