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By

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8

COMMUNICATION NEEDS OF PRESSURE GROUPS FOR DEVELOPMENT¹

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Today, all groups need to be not only skillful in communications but also the ability to utilise existing mass media and creating new channels of communications in order to be successful in achieving their objectives. In this regard, pressure groups have long realised that they can never meet their goals without the aid of the mass media and they themselves being masterful in their communications and whenever possible to create their own mass communication channels.

However, before proceeding further it would be better to define pressure groups and their role in society as well as their contributions toward development.

DEFINING PRESSURE GROUP

Definitions of a pressure group is almost limitless. It usually depends on who defines it. It is very much like the proverbial blind men who viewed an elephant by touching it. One of the men, feeling the leg, believed the elephant to be very much like a tree. Another, feeling the tail, thought the elephant to be a snake, and so forth. Thus, definitions of pressure group is generally based on the leanings and objectives of the person or group defining it. Notwithstanding, some of the definitions of pressure groups are as follows:-

1. A group that utilises issues and communication channels to elicit support for itself or for its cause. It claims to voice and champion public opinion and public interest for the common good of all.
2. A group will be labelled a pressure group when it lobbies the government or the administration for a new law or to uphold existing law or to amend that law or regulation on the basis that it is beneficial for the people or constituent it represents.
3. Any group other than political parties that is organised to influence public policy in accordance to their own interest or public interest.

With the above definitions it can be concluded that pressure group is any collection of individuals in a given society who organise themselves into an association or a movement to champion or lobby for a common interest, usually the public interest or the interest of its members.

Pressure groups' main target publics are policy makers, specifically the government, to ensure that public interest prevail. However, to influence government, the pressure groups must be able to show that they have the support of the people on the particular issue that it champions as well as the support of the mass media. In this respect the pressure groups must be able to communicate its cause effectively to the people, the mass media and the government.

ROLE OF PRESSURE GROUPS

Increasingly, pressure groups are seen to play a vital role in a country's national development. This is especially so in countries where political parties in opposition are weak or ineffective or even none.

However, it is observed that the effectiveness of pressure groups in a developing country depend very much on a number of factors. It includes the quality of leadership, the issues it champions, financial supports, communication skills and channels as well as recognitions and respects from all sectors among others.

It is further observed that pressure groups that are considered successful do not necessarily have large memberships even though it is often said that a little army seldom wins a battle not to mention a war. What is more important is how well the pressure group is seen fighting for its cause and how much the mass media provide coverage for them. As such the strength of pressure groups are more often measured by the public at large which they purported to defend by the amount of mass media coverage they receive rather than the numerous unreported activities that have been conducted to champion the cause.

Hence, a pressure group that has contributed a lot to a cause might still be considered ineffective or even inactive if it fails to communicate its activities and ideas effectively to its target publics. If the target publics are the people at large then it is essential that it gets the support of the mass media to get its activities disseminated, lest they assume that the concerned pressure groups are inactive or ineffective and not worth supporting or worse still that the particular pressure group is bought over by business sectors or cowed by governments.

Thus, pressure groups need to be seen to be doing something, that is, to be able to communicate about its activities to its target publics and the general public for it to be perceived as effective. Some of the essential roles of pressure groups in society, especially in a developing nation that would contribute to its continued existence and increasing importance in the 1990s could be as follows:-

1. Ensuring a free flow of information by asking for the disclosures of the appropriate data before any public policy is formulated to guarantee that public interest is safeguarded. Advocate for the removal of any laws that impede free flow of information. Lobby for a freedom of information act. Whenever required, to be able to provide alternative mass communication channels. If possible to publish own newspapers or magazines and even books.
2. Providing relevant information to enable the general public or specialized publics to make an informed decision with regard to any policy that hurt public interest.
3. Research and disseminate all information that have a bearing on public interest.
4. Generate discussions on policies, issues and incidents that affect public welfare. Encourage people's participation in policy making and nation building.
5. Act as a moderator between the people and the government in areas affecting public interest. Whenever needed, be a skillful and knowledgeable voice of the people.

PRESSURE GROUP AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Pressure groups contributions to the national development of a country is seen through its efforts to point out its leakages, weaknesses and some of its inappropriateness. Leakages and weaknesses here refer to corruption, inefficiency, neglecting certain segments of the population or areas, adverse social effect, negative impact of the environment and so on. Inappropriate development refers to luxury projects and heavy industries while the basic needs of the people are still not met. For example, one worrying feature of development in the Third World is that they seem to have been too much taken up with the belief that modernization per se will provide the key to their development, a belief which originated from the west and was passed on to them, even though in the west itself they are now abandoning this assumption. In developing, they seem to think that big and prestigious projects are the hallmark of modernisation and growth. However, in the light of resource depletion, economic and environmental problems, it may be necessary to reassess development projects which are either existing or are being planned. Such re-evaluation is essential to ensure that a huge wastage of funds does not take place.

After all, today, after many years of political independence; after so-called 'Development Decade'; after all the efforts of United Nations agencies; after the thousands of pious declarations on aid, trade and development; and after the millions of pages printed and published on development; living conditions have hardly improved and may indeed have deteriorated. The quality of life has somewhat declined, with a worsening of all forms of pollution and increasing inaccessibility of food and other basic goods and services due to rising prices and shortages. Further, most of the people in developing countries continue to be poor, unemployed and homeless. Pressure groups, especially the consumer movement have been severely criticising the type of development which seems to be prevalent in many Third World nations that give emphasis on capital-intensive technology and high living consumer lifestyle.

Also, consumer movement have attacked national development policies that have caused developing countries to be overly dependent on developed nations as well as on the world economy.

As such the consumer movement have advocated for the formulation and implementation of development policies in which the concerned countries produce sufficient quantities of food and basic consumer commodities for use by the local population, rather than exporting raw materials in exchange for manufactured items and even food.

More important, consumer movement have advocated the need of each country to develop their own ideas and policies on development to suit national and indigenous needs and to meet local aspirations. For the Third World, consumer movement have advocated for an emphasis on the basic needs approach to development.

The consumer movement because of its criticism on development that are inappropriate or hurts the environment or both are often accused by governments as anti-development.

However, the consumer movement philosophy on development have always been "Development Without Destruction" and "Appropriate Development". As such, the consumer movement have long advocate this philosophy and approach of development

Furthermore, the consumer movement do subscribe to the "Sustainable Development" approach that are now being considered and hopefully practiced by all nations. This is because sustainable development is an approach to progress that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. It is an approach of using resources in an ecologically sound manner so that they will be sustainable over the long term.

FACTOR CONTRIBUTING TO PRESSURE GROUPS DEVELOPMENT

The above roles are some of the important responsibilities of pressure groups in ensuring a just society. Those duties are becoming increasingly important with members of society despite being more educated than ever before are generally too compartmentalised or specialised to handle highly complex bureaucracies and industries.

Further, social developments are also conducive to the growth of pressure groups. As a whole, the public are becoming both more educated and more affluent. At the same time expectations are rising. In many Third World countries it is observed that the mass media among others have caused the problem of rising expectations that look rather difficult to fulfill or satisfy. This in many ways have contributed to the growth of popular activism.

Further, the rapid scientific and technological development, especially the communication technologies have created an information explosion that requires the people to be skillful in selecting information that are useful to their well being quickly rather than be overwhelmed by it. Those who could not cope with the avalanche of information can easily be a victim to the speedy development and thus could accelerate widening the gap between the have and the have not or the rich and the poor.

Worries on the rapid advancement of the communication technologies are also that it gives undue advantage of nations having it over countries who do not have it. It raises the fear of cultural imperialism since these technologies do not respect national boundaries. Further, it raises the fear that the whole world would become a market for multinational companies who can afford these technologies. It is said that consumers are buying everything from 'space command' via remote tuning on TV sets.

Also, the speedy scientific and technological advancement of the past two decades and especially in the 1980s have shown some adverse affect on society including the environment. It had generated a stream of new products which both delighted and bewildered the consumers. They were delighted to the extent that the new products provided an opportunity to satisfy long-standing needs. But, they were bewildered by the demands these products made on their knowledge as consumers.

Paradoxically, the rapid technological advancement which have given people more leisure time has also been said to generate depersonalization in society. Often, consumers who have been used to personal contact in their dealings with retailers found that they were communicating their problems about billing errors, etc., to a machine programmed only to handle relatively routine occurrences, and incapable of exercising judgement. The normal result is that the aggrieved consumer writes letter after letter into a non-answering void, his or her resentment growing at each unanswered letter.

These negative consequences are seen by numerous groups as not being properly handled by their producers and the governments who regulate them. In fact the industries

and the government are not only seen to be neglectful but also ignoring the problems and wishing it away, if not trying to hide the negative effects. A majority of the countries, especially in the developing nations do not even have the appropriate laws or regulations to handle problems posed by new technologies and practices that have an adverse impact. The problems are worsened when developed nations irresponsibly dumped obsolete and sometimes hazardous technologies into the Third World.

Further, it is also believed that the Third World have not only become a dumping ground for the Industrialised World but also their "guinea pigs" with regards to products that are not fully tested and yet exported to unsuspecting countries. Consequently, the bad side effects of the development have become more apparent and felt in these countries.

As a reaction to this neglect and abuse the 1980s saw the proliferation and growth of numerous public interest groups or pressure groups in the Third World. Among the most vocal and active in voicing their oppositions towards these neglect and abuse are the consumer movement and environmental groups.

According to Robert N. Mayer (1989) the consumer movement does fall within most social scientific conceptions of contemporary social movements. It conforms to the requirements that it be "a purposive and collective attempt of a number of people to change individuals or societal institutions and structures. Also, it operates primarily through persuasive strategies and be countered by an established order. This definition also makes the consumer movements as part of the pressure groups.

In modern times the consumer movement as an organised, independent force didn't emerge until the 1930s. It began in the United States, a logical starting point since that was where the free market was most advanced and potentially most damaging (Ellwood, 1984). With the growing complexity of the modern market place, consumers needed help sorting out the confusing array of products. People were concerned about 'value for money' - making sure products were fairly and safe to use. They were hungry for information that would aid them in their decision-making. By carefully testing the quality of scores of new consumer goods, comparing prices and reporting on their findings in their magazine, *Consumer Reports*, Consumers Union had become a household word (Ellwood, 1984).

By the early 1960s the organised consumer movement has spread to Europe with the help of seed funding from their American counterpart. Many of these consumer organisations started their own publications featuring testing results like their American counterpart.

This selling of independent information proved to be a critical stepping stone for the consumer movement. Information was something the public wanted and was willing to pay for. As more people responded to what was published the strength and credibility of the whole movement grew (Ellwood, 1984).

Meanwhile, in the newly-independent developing nations the consumer movement was also establishing itself as a force to counter the expanding global reach of multinational corporations. Today there are hundreds of such groups, both large and small, in dozens of Third World countries (Ellwood, 1984).

A CASE STUDY-MALAYSIAN CONSUMER MOVEMENT

As seen the consumer movement is relatively a recent development in the Third World. In Malaysia, the first consumer association was formed in late 1964 making it among the earliest nations in the developing world to have it. The consumer movement in Malaysia emerged primarily as a public reaction against retail price fluctuations of essential items, especially food. These discontentments were usually manifested by calls for the Government to do something about it through the mass media. The local media, specifically the newspapers, gave considerable coverage to the calls and the acute inflationary situations both as news items and letters to the editors.

However, despite the pervasive publicity, the first consumer association in Malaysia died three months after its conception. Its early demise was attributed to the lack of a clear and sustained programme, including communication strategies.

The Selangor Consumer Association (SCA) was born on January 1965, one month after the formation of the first consumer association is still active making it one of the oldest consumer association in the Third World. The success of SCA was due to its convenors' recognition from the start of the need to develop and sustain public interest by an effective consumer education programme and communication strategies, including the use of the mass media to publicise its activities.

However, the SCA very early realised that publicity alone was inadequate to promote an effective consumer movement and that too much publicity for publicity's sake could in fact, create a dangerous complacency and smugness or even create a boomerang effect. It was also felt that persons who had read about the SCA or heard of it over the air waves soon forgot about it or had only very hazy recollections of what it was all about. Further, even when the address and telephone number were well publicized, people forgot to note it down or simply ignored it. Hence, it was strongly felt that SCA in its infancy was urgently in need of a distinct identity. This identity was thought to be best developed by associating SCA with names and faces. It had to shed its anonymity and 'civil-servant-like image' (in fact, a page had to be stolen from the commercial book so that 'brand consciousness could be created, with SCA as the product or service being offered (SCA, 1969).

This meant, SCA leaders had to assume their rightful place in the news as personalities. The President, Deputy President, Honorary Secretary and Honorary Treasurer as well as those chairing sub-committees must be seen, heard and known. The SCA itself must communicate effectively and come in direct contact with the public it was seeking to serve, instead of appearing 'second-hand' through news releases or news stories. The first SCA committee therefore took a deliberate decision to participate in a number of fairs and exhibitions in Kuala Lumpur (SCA, 1969). The SCA also tried to open district liason committees and conduct house-to-house visits to counsel consumers on their rights.

The success of the early SCA motivated other states in Malaysia to form their own consumer associations. SCA can be said to be the father of the consumer movement in Malaysia as it was instrumental in the formation of the other states consumer associations. Today, all the 13 states in Malaysia have at least a consumer association.

To coordinate the activities of the state consumer associations, on June 10, 1973,

the Federation of Malaysian Consumers Associations (FOMCA) was formed. Other than being a coordinating body, FOMCA provides the consumer movement in Malaysia a national stature and act as a consultative agency by and through which consumer associations may exchange views, information and take collective decisions and authorize action on matters of mutual importance.

Today FOMCA is recognized by the Government, business sectors and the general public and provide direct representations on various government agencies that involved consumer interest. By providing representations in the relevant government agencies FOMCA has managed to communicate its interest directly to the people in power and as such slowly but surely changes are being made with regard to protecting the consumers' better.

Apart from making national representations, FOMCA also provide links with regional and international consumer associations, other public interest groups and United Nations agencies with the goal of developing a 'Need-Oriented Development' through the power of purchasing and consumption to promote socio- economic and environmental justice for a better quality of life.

IMAGE

In its effort to champion consumer interest and social justice, consumer movement in Malaysia are often forced to shatter the image of certain government agencies or companies. Consequently, those affected have frequently countered by alleging that consumer associations are: prophet of doom; over- reacting; exaggerating; anti-development; anti-government; or anti-business.

These charges might mar the images and credibility of consumer associations. Left unchecked, these charges could reduce the effectiveness of consumer associations especially with regard to public and media support.

As such, consumer associations need a positive image and sustained visibility in order to: win consumers' support; increase membership; attract media attention and coverage; gain respect of the Government; gain respect of business sectors and receive financial support from funding agencies.

In order to enhance its communication opportunities, consumer movement in Malaysia try to cultivate the following image:-

1. **A People's Movement** — Membership is open to everyone above 18 years old for a small annual subscription.
2. **A Service Organisation** — It handles complaints and seek redressal for all consumers. Also, it offers free legal advice and organises forums/seminars/symposims, etc.
3. **An Information Centre** — Realising that information is power, consumer associations are setting up an information and resource centre.
4. **An Education Organisation** — All consumer associations in Malaysia have consumers' education programmes. There are divided into:
 - (a) General Consumer Education - to instil the initial consumer consciousness

- so that the people will be interested to participate in future consumer programmes.
- (b) Consumer Education Through Information Sessions/Workshop Dialogues. This is geared towards potential consumer leaders.
 - (c) Consumer Education for Schools. Initiating consumer schools clubs at school levels.
 - (d) Consumer Education Through Mass Media. The consumer associations in Malaysia recognise that the mass media is a very effective tool to be utilised for consumer conscientization and education programmes. In this aspect, some of the local media have been very cooperative by giving air time or space.
5. **A Testing and Research Organisation** — By conducting regular surveys and testing, consumer associations are able to get regular coverage and cultivate high visibility as well as an image of objectivity.
6. **A Publication Organisation** — Most consumer associations have their own publications. Apart from tabloids, magazines and newsletters, consumer associations have produced books, booklets, leaflets, pamphlets, posters, films, filmlets, etc., pertaining to consumer and environmental issues and education. The objectives of consumer associations publications are to:- create consumer awareness; provide consumer information; impart consumer education; develop consumer protection and generate publicity for the movement. The consumer associations publications have been found to be an effective communication and public relations tool. The local mass media uses some of the stories published in the consumer publications and this enhances the movement visibility among the general public and the specialised publics. It further ensure exposure of issues which the local media feel reluctant or fear to publish because of their commercial interest of political affiliations. This would help to portray consumer associations as a bold and a responsible movement.
7. **An Action-Oriented Organization** — Consumer associations organise campaigns on various consumer issues, conduct seminars, and talks, etc., and implement programmes and activities aimed at improving consumers' welfare and quality of life. Issues visibly affecting consumers such as food, health, breastfeeding, housing, anti-smoking etc., are selected to campaign for against.

COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGY

The communication and public relations strategy of consumer movement is based on its objectives and activities to protect consumer interest. Because of its public interest nature nearly all of its programmes and activities are considered newsworthy by the mass media, local and international.

Spokespeople for consumer associations are normally the President and in his absence, the Deputy President or the Secretary.

Further, each workgroup chairperson may make media announcements related to his or her committee activities with the permission of the President or Secretary. The professional staff may also issue media statements pertaining to their areas of expertise and duties as long as they do not touch on the policies of the organisation after getting the approval of the President or the Secretary. At district level, the Chairperson of the District Liason Committte may speak to the media people regarding consumer issues in their areas.

The number of people allowed to speak to the mass media representatives are not limited since consumer associations need to be visible and must be seen to be championing any issues per- taining to consumer interest. As such, consumer interest is legend. Also, because consumer issues are of great public interest, the news people are rather fond of soliciting consumer associations comment on them as well as asking solutions for them. Thus, consumer movement requires an adequate number of people who understand their philosophy and policies to be their spokepeople.

However, consumer associations are also aware that their spokepeople must never contradict each other lest it create a bad impression on inconsistencies or 'infighting'. This is more or less resolved by having regular meetings among the spokepeople.

Also, because dealing with the media can be disastrous if mishandled, consumer groups have appointed a special committee to handle all media relations

The spokepeople and professional staff of consumer associations, besides researching consumer problems to champion also monitor local media for issues to to comment on. This is done to project consumer movement sensitivity to current consumer issues. In this case, media representatives in Malaysia have been so far generally very cooperative.

Efforts are also made to establish personal contacts with individual reporters and editors, especially those who are supportive or sympathetic to consumer cause. This is essential because there are times when consumer groups urgently need to comment on certain issues and which can only be done through media statements over the telephone. Because of this a personal note or a follow-up call to the news people is regularly done to ensure a cordial relationship.

Also, efforts are made to ensure that the media is kept up-to-date on matters relating to consumerism. As such, all materials published by consumer groups are also distributed to the media people.

Consumer associations publications are also distributed free to national and international contacts, funding agencies, sympathetic and supporting organisations and individuals. Other than this exercise being good for public relations it also elicit feedback which may strengthen the movement's campaigns. Another reason, is to convince the funding agencies of the worthiness to support consumer associations.

Consumer associations try to keep regular contact with its members not only through the mass media but also through its own newsletters. This internal communication is vital because it keep members involved and supportive.

Consumer associations do not restrict their communication strategy to the print and electronic media. They also conduct regular talks, meetings, public forums, public seminars, workshops, speeches, etc. Aslo, whenever possible, consumer associations do try using the traditional media. This is because the consumer movement recognises that

communication has deep cultural roots and too often remain purely 'intellectual', ignoring the emotional forces of song, poetry and drama. Also, because the consumer associations have realised that communication today, rather than knitting people together, often does just the opposite, dividing us into separate individuals who merely absorb outside stimuli. Hence, consumer movement need to think about communication in its fullest sense - as a mutual exchange of information leading to greater understanding.

TARGET PUBLICS

Everyone is a consumer. Logically, consumer associations target must be everybody. However, consumer groups resources are limited. Hence, it must select the ones that are in dire need of consumer protection and the ones can have a lot of bearing in improving consumer interest.

Those that consumer associations feel urgently require consumer education include school children, women and youth groups, rural communities. They are reached through school consumer clubs, workshops, seminars, forums and district liaison committees and the mass media.

Government agencies who are involved in consumer protection are also an important target public. They are approached for more effective enforcement of laws, to review laws with loopholes that are detrimental to consumer interest and introduce new laws to better protect consumers. Their representatives are often invited to present their views. Also, consumer associations will try to get direct representations to their advisory committees. In Malaysia, consumer associations are also trying to get seats in the city/town or district councils so that consumer voices are better heard.

Consumer associations are also approaching state legislative councils and members of parliament to win their support.

Also approached are academicians and professionals to seek their expertise and assistance.

The business sectors are also approached, especially when trying to settle complaints against them.

Every effort is also made to improve media relations. They are considered as vital allies. Also, specific mass media are identified and approach according to their policy and interest.

CONSUMER MOVEMENT AND MASS MEDIA

Today, generally the mass media in Malaysia is supportive of consumer groups. As noted, they played a vital role in publicising and encouraging the formation of the consumer movement. At that time the government was encouraging the formation of consumer groups because the nation was experiencing severe inflation. However, in the late 1970s, when the Government was labelling consumer groups as anti-development or bearer of bad tidings, the mass media began to be less cooperative with the consumer movement.

Now, with the Government being more confident and the mass media more matured, coverage of consumer issues are growing in importance. Nevertheless, there are some issues, especially environmental issues that often get played down because of Government sensitivities about it. As the President of the Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia,

Mr. Gurmit Singh, lamented that less than 30 per cent of his statements get published.

Currently, a number of newspapers and magazines are having special columns on consumer issues or consumer related features. Even the electronic media have introduced special programmes that are of consumer interest. Not surprisingly, many consumer leaders are given the opportunity to write or appear in these programmes.

However, it is inevitable that the mass media cannot be wholly supportive of consumer issues. They face the dilemma of satisfying the advertisers' interest who bring in revenues and of the public to whom they owe a duty to inform and educate. Nevertheless, despite the constraints, they have played a fairly active role in support of consumer groups and protecting consumer interest.

CONCLUSION

It must be said that the consumer groups as pressure groups must continue to improve their communication skills and widened their communication channels. Whenever possible, pressure groups must be efficient in providing an alternative communication network.

They also need to further enhance their media relations. Pressure groups like the consumer movement and the environmental groups can even provide training to journalists in area of consumer and environmental reporting.

To be pervasive in their communication they must also improve their networking. They must get as many groups together to champion causes that are of public interest and to ensure the success of their communication campaigns.

Pressure groups should also established information centres so that interested citizens can easily get the information they require to make a wise decision.

It is therefore in the best interest of pressure groups to pay special attention to their communication needs and the communication needs of their intended publics. Also, to ensure that no communication barrier or breakdown occur.

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