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ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION RESOURCES
by
Dr. Sankaran Ramanathan

Introduction

What is meant by environmental information resources?

Before we can answer the question, it can be stated that there are two of knowledge. We either know something by ourselves (primary knowledge) or we know where to find knowledge/information about something (secondary knowledge).

In this context we can also refer to the truism that "nobody has a monopoly over knowledge/information". Knowledge belongs to everyone, and those who have more of it or greater access to it, should share it with the less fortunate members of the community. Thus, knowledge/information become the leveller. This is the basic principle behind knowledge societies.

The development of knowledge societies implies that there is a greater need for the proper and efficient management of information resources. In the context of this Workshop, we are focusing on issues relating to the environment, those that have been explained in depth by the resource persons who have addressed you over the past two days.

Importance of Communicating about the Environment

With environmental problems increasingly becoming global in scope, we cannot afford to ignore the environmental problems in Asia brought about by rapid industrialisation. While Asia's environmental problems will have world-wide repercussions, environmental problems in other regions will also have impact upon Asia, as has been explained by Dr. Ponniah. Hence, we see the increasing use of the term, "glocalization" i.e. localization of the global issues.

Many Asian countries suffer air and water pollution, lack of basic sanitary facilities and depletion of tropical forests and wildlife species. Countries which have achieved unprecedented economic growth have done so, at least in part, by opting for economic development in preference to environmental protection. Thus, the challenge is for Asian countries to ensure that care of the environment becomes an integral concern in the development process.

Economic development and environmental protection need be neither contradictory nor mutually exclusive. Regrettably, the economic and social opportunities in environmentally beneficial projects are seldom recognised, so waste results. For instance, lack of clean water in Jakarta means one per cent of GDP is wasted every year because residents boil their drinking water. The Rio de Janeiro Conference on the Environment and Development (1992) noted the lack of action at national and regional levels to combat deforestation, soil degradation, air and water pollution and urbanization.

Because local environmental failures can have global effects, no one can afford to ignore the fall-out from rapid development. Example: Southeast Asia has almost half world's remaining mangrove forests. Deplete them and fish supplies will be affected everywhere, far beyond Southeast Asia. There are economic as well as goodwill benefits in helping to create a more environmentally-aware Asia.

Telling the people how environmental issues affect their lives cannot be done without media help. It is in their long-term interest to help, but a recurring handicap is that for short-term interest the media too often sensationalise environmental problems and neglect possible
solutions. One reason is that journalists (in both electronic and print media) often find environmental explanations too complex to explain for lack of adequate knowledge to do it. There are ideas and initiatives enough to cure environmental ills while retaining sustainable development. The need is for a way to bring this understanding to enough people over a wide enough area – to make them aware of both the environmental problems and their possible solutions.

In the context of the development of mass media in the 21st century, we must note the rapid convergence of media. Further, the growth of satellite communication and digitization will make media cheaper and more easily available.

In this age of rapid multimedia developments, communicating about the environment takes on an added importance. In particular, communicators must be trained in using the new technologies such as e-mail and the rapidly-proliferating Websites to gain access to information about environmental issues, repackage such information and disseminate it to the general public. Increasing the number and types of sources of environmental information will enable the journalist to be more capable in presenting balanced reports about environmental issues.

AMIC's Involvement in Environmental Activities

AMIC actively promotes awareness of environmental protection and conservation through its various programmes and already cooperates with governments and national and international organizations to achieve this objective. AMIC is a registered charity which had been recognized by UNESCO as an NGO with full consultative status.

Since 1980, in cooperation with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and other multilateral organizations, AMIC has conducted seminars and workshops for journalists and other media practitioners, imparting knowledge and awareness of environmental issues and practical skills in environmental reporting.

From 1984 to 1989, AMIC collaborated with the Carl Duisberg Gessellschaft of Cologne, in a series of regional seminars and workshops in the Philippines, Malaysia, Nepal, Indonesia and Thailand, on Media and the Protection of the Environment. These activities aimed to develop a core of journalists, audio-visual and film practitioners and other media professionals committed to environmental protection.

At the workshops, participants developed print, broadcast and audio-visual materials to alert the audience to environmental concerns. The workshops led to the mobilisation of communication educators and media professionals committed to use the media to help protect the environment.

With support from UNEP, AMIC set up action projects to use traditional and folk media in environmental communication in Indonesia, Malaysia and India. These activities have since been adopted or taken over by local environmental organizations. AMIC and UNEP also collaborated to mount seminars on "Media and the Environment" in 1989 and "Environmental Policies and Media Reporting in the Asia-Pacific" in 1992.

AMIC also promotes knowledge and awareness of environmental issues through its publication activities. These include:

(a) Publication of environmental news in a special section on the environment in its Asian Mass Communication Bulletin which is published six times a year. Over the past seven years, more than 150 such articles have been published.
(b) Publication of Water: Asia's Environmental Imperative, with support from UNEP, in 1997. This book, meant as a handbook for journalists, has been well-received and was launched in Singapore on World Water Day (March 22nd, 1997)
(c) Contribution of a chapter in ESCAPs publication State of the Environment in the Asia-Pacific (1995 edition)
AMIC has been involved in advisory capacities at both national and regional levels in various environment related activities. These include:

- Member of the Advisory Panel which helped develop a Strategy Plan for UNEP.
- Member of the Executive Council of the South and Southeast Asia Environmental Network (SASEANEE) at the Centre for Environmental Education (CEE) based in Ahmedabad, India.
- Panel Member of the Geneva-based International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN).
- Associate Member of the Asian Federation of Environmental Journalists (AFEJ).

Management of Environmental Information Resources

The principal environmental activities that AMIC will be organizing this year (1998) are two workshops on the management of environmental resources for senior journalists.

This is the first workshop, for print media journalists from Southeast Asia that is being held in Singapore from 9th to 14th November. As we have planned it, there will be two journalists (one from an English language newspaper and another from a national language newspaper) from each of the following countries: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao P.D.R, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, Singapore and Vietnam. The practical sessions of the workshops are held in the computer labs of the School of Communication Studies, Nanyang Technological University, as all you well know.

The second workshop will be held in Ahmedabad, India from 14th to 19th December, with assistance from the Centre for Environmental Education. Meant for South Asia's journalists, this project is supported by UNESCO's International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC). Currently, we expect to have two journalists from each of the following countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. In addition, at least four journalists from the host country, India.

Essentially, both workshops have been structured to have three modules as follows:

- A concept module dealing with the overview and background of environmental problems in the region and participants' responsibilities as journalists.
- A skills development module which will provide environmental information management and advanced editing and writing skills; and
- A management module which will provide skills for monitoring the proposed environmental news home page.

The workshops will be a mix of lectures/discussions working group sessions, hands-on experience and field exercises. They will provide updates and technology including the use of the Internet for more effective environmental reporting.

In seeking nominations from the leading print media organizations in these Asian counties, we have requested that participants should have the following prerequisites:

- Three years experience as a journalist
- Proficiency in English
- Basic computer literacy (with knowledge of word processing)
- Experience in environmental reporting
- Current or imminent access to Internet.

After the participants were nominated, we sent out questionnaires to them seeking to establish a profile of participants and ascertain their expectations. An analysis of the questionnaires received so far indicates that participants welcome this workshop and look forward to the training that they will receive.
The preliminary analysis of the questionnaires received by AMIC reveals the following:

(a) The computer operating system used most often by most of the respondents is Microsoft Windows 95/98. A few respondents use Macintosh systems.

(b) The majority of respondents have shared access to the Internet at their place of work. They use it primarily to send and receive e-mail. A few respondents also use the Internet for purposes of research and for access to print media (especially in Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand).

(c) All respondents operate in English and one other language which is usually the national language of their country. A few of the respondents are trilingual (with both written and spoken ability).

(d) Journalists in the Philippines and Malaysia write environmental stories at least thrice weekly, while their counterparts in other countries write environmental stories once a week or once a fortnight.

(e) Academic qualifications of journalists vary from Master's degree (in India & Pakistan) to the equivalent of O and A levels (in Brunei and Laos)

(f) The major environmental issues identified by the respondents are:
   - Deforestation, including slash and burn cultivation
   - River and sea pollution
   - Urban pollution in the major cities
   - Environmental degradation
   - Haze and air pollution
   - Waste disposal

This preliminary survey therefore indicates that participants will be coming to these workshops with certain expectations which the workshops will seek to fulfill.

**Future Plans and Activities**

Both workshops will result in the creation of a Website for environmental information with two nodal points, the first located in Singapore and the second at Ahmedabad, India. While nodal points will both have similarities in content vis-a-vis types of environmental stories, there will be marked differences in emphasis and focus. The first nodal point will focus on Southeast Asian stories and issues, while the second will focus on South Asian stories and issues.

The Websites will constitute the core of an a Regional Environmental Information Network (REIN) that AMIC proposes to develop in the next year (1999) and beyond. We would like to invite all journalists throughout Asia to support this initiative and contribute towards the development of the network.

One particular area of focus which we feel is of concern to Southeast Asian countries is preservation of coastal and marine ecosystems. Convinced of the importance of this topic, we have put together a proposal for a regional dialogue on this issue.

In the Asian context, there is a constant and urgent need to facilitate the involvement of Asian women in sustainable development efforts. To this end, we have devised a proposal to promote knowledge and awareness of this concept among Asian women. This a project that we hope to launch in 1999.

In all these efforts, we seek to fulfill our mission which is to act as a catalyst for the development of media in this region. We are committed to encouraging cooperative efforts in media and communication development and in trying to avoid unnecessary duplication in the use of information resources. This is possible through regular and systematic exchange of information, and that is the purpose for the creation of this Website. Our slogan and motto should be coordination, cooperation and collaboration.

From the above, it can be seen that AMIC continues to be actively involved in promoting knowledge and awareness of environmental issues, particularly among Asian communicators.
Once again, we invite all Asian journalists to join forces with us, so that there will be better and more efficient management and utilisation of environmental information resources.

References

Singapore
November 24, 1998