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Urbanisation and the Media: Strategies and Approaches for Sustainable Development
- Sustainable Coverage of Sustainable Development

By

Kunda Dixit
Urbanisation and the Media: Strategies and Approaches for Sustainable Development

Sustainable Coverage of Sustainable Development

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At Inter Press Service where I work as regional editor we have banned the term 'sustainable development'. I would like to go through this talk without using it even once. 'Susdev', as it is known to those in the Development Set making a living from it, has become a buzzword that is threadbare with over-use and misuse.

Efforts have been made to resuscitate the term by attaching a human element to it ('sustainable human development') but phrase is now hopelessly hackneyed and seldom means what it is supposed to. So we have told our reporters, don't use the jargon show us what it means.

A pity because the much-abused cliché is also the only solution: to ensure human well-being now so that future generations can also lead decent lives. One way to make that happen is to report with passion, accuracy and professionalism about the threats to a sustainable society or tell good stories of appropriate lifestyles.

Unfortunately, development journalism has been done so sloppily for so long by so many journalists that the whole subject has become an eye-glazer. Third World journalism is taken as an excuse to be third rate. This is not to say that development journalism is no longer relevant, it is more urgent than ever before, but it needs a new spark and passion for good writing.

More than any other region on earth, the Asia-Pacific is the most polarised between the haves and the don't haves. Environmental threats to the region come from both poverty and prosperity.

Sixty percent of the planet's people live here, and they are multiplying fast enough for the population to double in 45 years. Nearly three billion people clinging on the borderline of poverty, where immediate concerns of survival make long-term concerns of sustainability an abstract concept good only for seminars like these in faraway capitals.

The shifting cultivators of the Philippines or Nepal will keep on burning off forests to plant millet or yams because they have been given no alternative. Their governments are busy looking at the macro-economic picture and for them sustainable development means something quite different -- development that will allow the economy to grow at least as fast as the population, as fast as possible.

Then there is the other dynamic Asia of the newly-industrialised economies where per-capita incomes are now approaching those in Northern industrialised countries. This affluence has often been attained at high environmental cost: by poisoning the water, soil and air within those countries and the plunder of timber, mineral and marine resources of poorer neighbours.

This pollute-now-pay-later economic growth model for fast-track NIC-ood is now being replicated in the region's emerging economies. What are the implications for natural resource conservation of a ten-fold increase in the purchasing power of 1.5 billion Asians in the next 20 years? Is it the right model?
Almost every article we at Inter Press move out on our wire on environment issues grapple with this economy-ecology trade-off -- that chronic dilemma of (I have to say it) sustainable development.

We try to look for that elusive dividing line between the need for economic progress and the need to preserve nature. In every story, the parameters are different, an expensive new bridge in Bangladesh, a copper mine in Papua New Guinea, a fishing agreement in Polynesia, a controversial geo-thermal plant in the Philippines...

We report on the search among economists for a new development paradigm. The economics of sustainability is now a serious science. Old neo-classical doctrines that were reductionist, fragmentary and dominated by socialist-capitalist polarisation are being replaced (in thought if not yet in deed) by trans-disciplinary, real-life ecological economics.

In the media, too, old-style journalism that reduced everything to one-dimensional event-oriented reporting is giving way to contextualised news and analysis that looks at the linkages and true nature of change. Like the New Economist, the New Journalist must start from square one, questioning everything -- including statistics based on narrow perceptions of economic reality (like GDP per capita) that we have often taken for granted as a scale to grade development.

The dangers to the planet's viability are so vast and answers are needed so urgently that journalists cannot just be passive observers mass-producing short bursts of news as if it were a soft drink to be sold to the widest possible audience via satellite.

The international news business is still largely U.S.-dominated, and reflects that country's economic aberrations and wasteful consumerism. It is the age of throw-away news. News that has to be sugar-coated, packaged and marketted so that it briefly tantalises the lowest common denominator in audience surveys.

Kabul reduced to rubble? (Only if footage of cluster bombs exploding are available.) Dynamite fishing in Kiribati? (Nah, boring.) New famine in Sudan? (We did that last year.)

In his new book, 'Who Stole the News?' dissident U.S. journalist Mort Rosenblum points the finger at the main culprit: the American news media system and its obsession with ratings and circulation.

But this media network not only feeds the home market. It is also a staple for newspapers, television and radio stations in the Third World. What we in the South get is news meant for western tastes, seen through western prisms, and dominated by western news values.

Western journalism schools have for long propagated a particular definition of news: the prevalent U.S. model of wire service journalism for highly-processed, easily digestible news nuggets that detail the unusual, the negative or absurd.
For the proponents of this school, News is NEW, News is NEGATIVE, News is NEAR and News is NEUTRAL.

Most hard news for a wire service cannot be anything earlier than last night. If AP beats you to a story by 0.5 seconds, it has out-scooped you. An event is deemed to have happened only if it takes place within the perimeter of your interest.

But even as the world becomes more and more interdependent, we see media still reducing racism, migration, terrorism or recession to discrete, isolated topics and not linked to complex global realities. Read any story Asia's population explosion, and it is boiled down to a simplistic argument for promoting contraceptives. Rarely do you hear of the global economic inequities that prevent Third World populations from ever attaining a quality of life that would automatically reduce their growth rate.

Objectivity is sacred for the western media which says it aspires for 100 percent neutrality. Journalists are supposed to show superhuman emotional aloofness and not be moved by injustice and greed. And even if they are moved, the anger is not supposed to show in copy. Status-quo journalism is biased because it is blind to wrongs.

Because news is a commodity, coverage of developing countries simply reflects market forces and ownership of the main media conglomerates. (Is it a coincidence that most media moghuls now own Hollywood film productions companies as well?) Coverage of the Gulf war, Somalia and Bosnia show the media no longer performs the task of an early warning system to raise public consciousness -- the vital first step in preventing wars from breaking out.

This is not a pitch for advocacy journalism, although there is a place for that. At Inter Press we believe reporting on political, economic, trade, commodities, environment and culture are all development journalism. In the end, development reporting boils down to good story-telling. It is, first and foremost, good journalism.

In a guideline for our reporters in the field, we recently drew up the Ten Commandments of Development Journalism:

1. Discard the myth that development reporting accents the positive.

It does not accentuate the negative either. Good journalism must first reveal the reality of urban or rural life: the grime, the injustice, the squalour as well as the success stories, the kind-hearted, the brave, the ordinary, the everyday.

2. Find the fresh news angle.

Features are like vegetables. If they are timeless, they are rotten. There is news lurking behind every irrigation project, urban squatter rehabilitation, a new dam, the plight of flood victims...

3. Lively, accurate, eye-witness reporting.
Be passionate. Take us to the Ganges Delta and show us the landless mother whose seven children were washed away by a tidal wave. Let us hear her raspy voice and smell the sun beating down on the drenched paddy fields, let the stench of dead cattle assail our nostrils.

4. Take your time, don't rush.

Development reporting has no deadline. Sit around to observe the small details, do get carried away by the description. Don't gallop through a community, stay around to talk to an extraordinary member. Why not make a folk hero, however transient, of a Himalayan farmer?

5. Details are important to make a subject come alive, but don't smother us with them.

After the close-up, don't forget to zoom out, so we get the bigger picture. Imagine yourself in geo-stationary orbit 25,000 km above the place you are writing about and see it in true perspective.

6. Cover the underdog.

The rich and powerful already have megaphones, give a voice to the voiceless: poor countries, suppressed minorities, indigenous people, children, women, landless farmers, urban poor.

7. But don't preach. Don't wave the flag. Don't moralise.

Don't swing your machete wildly at villains (multinationals, big powers, big businessmen, pesticide companies, military rulers). Be subtle, let others do the talking.


Development reporters have often been told: don't touch coups and earthquakes. Nonsense. Better still: predict them. Kneel down to the human level of tragedies and look at causes. Be there after the parachute journalists with satellite dishes have come and gone.

9. Take a video, not a snap-shot.

Development is about change, about trends. People, societies, value systems and landscapes evolve. Look for the process, not the event. Small things have to be woven into a larger pattern. As snakes disappear, so do the charmers.

10. Look for the nuance, the linkages, the connections.

Frogs eat insects that damage crops. Bangladesh exports frog legs to Europe. With frogs gone, insects multiply and devour crops. Malaria comes back, and the country spends millions on pesticides to kill insects, polluting waterways and killing fish.

When we pick up our daily newspaper, turn on the radio news or
tune into current affairs programmes on cable TV we are bombarded by coverage from a wide variety of sources.

Most of these are based in northern industrialised countries. Cable News Network (CNN) and BBC now dominate the cable news market in Asia. Even television news in national broadcast borrow or pirate heavily from satellite feeds from BBC or CNN.

Newsweeklies like Time and Newsweek are U.S.-based. Even regional magazines like Asiaweek are actually owned by Time and the Far Eastern Economic Review is published by AP-Dow Jones. The International Herald Tribune tries very much to be a global newspaper, but is still a rehash of the New York Times and the Washington Post.

Among news agencies, the market is dominated by the Big Four: Associated press (AP), Reuters, Agence France-Presse (AFP) and United Press International (UPI).

In the 1960's the newly-independent former colonies in Latin America, Africa and Asia felt the western media had a monopoly on international flows, it was biased, gave a distorted picture of the reality in developing countries and was deliberately negative about their societies.

They sought to change this, and through UNESCO in the 1970's, pushed for a New World Information Order. This unleashed a vigorous backlash in the United States and the western media over what was seen as an attempt to strangle the "free" press.

Unfortunately, what the proponents of the new order had to offer in terms of an alternative news mechanism was along the lines of the Non-aligned News Pool which turned out to be nothing more than an exchange of press releases between governments.

All this talk about better and more sensitive coverage of the Third World has not gone unnoticed in the western press. With their resources and staff, the Big Four have been covering more human interest stories that would be excellent examples of how really to do development journalism.

Inter Press Service is a wire agency that tries to look at trends and processes affecting the Third World. It was started nearly 25 years ago by a group of Latin American journalists disillusioned with the way the European press covered their home countries.

IPS has now expanded into a truly global news agency. It is a non-profit cooperative of journalists mainly from developing countries. The IPS management headquarters is in Rome and the World Desk for the journalistic services is in Amsterdam. IPS has correspondents and offices in some 100 countries, and about 1,000 media and non-media subscribers around the world.

IPS is distributed through its satellite teleprinter network connected through central computer switching in Rome and London.
It also offers a wide range of language services, including Spanish, English, German, French, Dutch, Finnish, Norwegian, Portuguese and Kiswahili. These are available through on-line computer services, electronic data bases, printed bulletins or daily teleprinter.

The IPS Asia-Pacific Regional Office is in Manila and a sub-regional editing centre is located in New Delhi. The Asia-Pacific network is made up of correspondents and stringers in 16 countries.

IPS coverage includes just diverse topics as Japanese consumption patterns and how they affect the natural resources of developing countries, interviews with Chinese farmers who are setting up their own airline, an in-depth analysis of how historical factors have led to the present communal tensions in India, reports on how Sri Lankan villagers are getting tired of running away from war, how Nepal and China are getting together to set up the world's highest national park around Mt Everest.

IPS is distributed in Asia by teleprinter, by e-mail and a special fortnightly feature packet made up of special reports and a column by a well-known personality which are accompanied by graphics, cartoons and maps. IPS is now regularly used by major English national dailies across Asia.

In addition, IPS features are also translated into six local Asian languages like Bahasa Indonesia, Tamil, Nepali, Hindi and Thai.