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Involving Media in Asia’s Sustainable Development
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(Paper delivered during the 1997 Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC) Conference with the theme: ‘Skyways, Highways and Corridors’ set on June 19-21, 1997 at Hotel Nikko, Kuala Lumpur.)

Agenda 21, the road map to sustainable development which guides business and government policies and for personal choices into the next century, was endorsed by the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil by 179 governments. It was in this guide that the need to involve media in sustainable development has been highlighted.

The guide laments the failure of people to understand the close ties between human activities and the environment due to inaccurate or insufficient information. It cites the need to increase people’s sensitivity to, and involvement in, finding solutions for environmental and development problems. Education, it explains, can give people the environmental and ethical awareness, values and attitudes, skills and behavior needed for sustainable development. To do this, education needs to explain not only the physical and biological environment, but the socio-economic environment and human development. Countries have been asked to work with media, theatre groups, entertainment and advertising industries to promote a more active public debate on the environment.

According to Agenda 21, there is already a wealth of information that could be used for the management of sustainable development, but many people have trouble finding the information they need when they need it. It observes that in many countries, information that exists is not adequately managed due to shortages of technology and trained specialists, lack of awareness of the value and availability of such information and to the demands of other immediate problems.

This, it explains, is specially true in the developing world, and the gap in the availability, quality and accessibility of data between the developed and the developing world has been increasing.

Agenda 21 also cites the need for different types of information. Commonly used indicators such as gross national product (GNP) and measurements of individual resource or pollution flows do not provide enough information about sustainability. It urges the use of environmental, demographic, social and developmental information to produce indicators that show if we are creating a more sustainable world.

It suggests that sustainable development information needs to be provided to people who need it, when they need it, and in forms they can understand.
The guide says people today need:

--More information about the state of urban air, fresh water, land resources (including forests and range lands), desertification, soil degradation, biodiversity, the high seas and the upper atmosphere.

--More information about population, urbanization, poverty, health and rights of access to resources. Information is needed about relationships of groups, including women, indigenous peoples, youth, children and the disabled with environment issues.

Media today is already participating in Asia’s sustainable development. Newspaper, radio, television and other forms of media have been publishing, broadcasting and disseminating environmental stories that help build capacity of people and institutions to understand the complex environment and development issues so that they can make the right development choices.

You can read stories about the endangered koalas in Australia’s Sunday Observer and what’s being done to protect them. You can read stories about overfishing and pollution of the seas threatening to wipe out many fish species in The Bangladesh Observer in Dhaka. You can read about efforts to save the Golden Eagle, called the king of birds of prey, in the Asahi Evening News in Tokyo. You can read about efforts to halt the slaughter of turtles in the New Straits Times of Kuala Lumpur. You can read about reports on water-logging, salinity damaging fertile land in the Dawn of Pakistan. You can read about “free for all” border logging in The Nation in Bangkok. You can read stories about cleaning the arctic in the Indonesia Observer in Jakarta. You can read stories about contaminated plastic wastes travelling the globe in the Bangkok Post of Bangkok. You can read about reviving the Pasig River in the Philippine Daily Star in Manila. And you can watch environmental stories over television (CNN, BBC, CBS, etc) or listen to the radio about environmental reports all over Asia. In other words, there is an abundance of environmental stories in Asia today.

Unfortunately however, not all journalists are trained to write about the complex issues on environment and development to be able to help people make the right development choices. Many still have to be taught not just to report about events but to write in-depth stories that explain the complex environment and development issues.

Training requires scientific, technological, organizational, institutional, and other skills. For there are many difficult issues involved in policy choices when
dealing with such complex problems as global climate change and protecting biodiversity.

The need to train journalists, broadcasters and other media personnel in quality environmental reporting is well-recognized in Asia today. Training is often provided on-the-job in media outfits with environment desks or in formal courses or pre-service programs. They are also trained through regular seminars and workshops on environment offered to journalists who are already in the profession.

Many countries in Asia with press institutes or similar bodies offer such training. This is often carried out in collaboration with national forums of environmental journalists which have been formed in over 17 countries in the Asia-Pacific region. These national forums are linked by the regional network of the Asia-Pacific Forum of Environmental Journalists (AFEJ). They function as independent media organizations or as NGOs in their respective countries. They also promote better environmental coverage in the mass media through the training of journalists and other programs.

In the past three years, AFEJ had conducted a series of programs to train young women journalists in Asia and the Pacific in collaboration with the Asia-Pacific regional office of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Workshops were also conducted in various national forums in the region.

In support of such training programs, AFEJ and UNEP have come up with a series of training materials such as the “Media and Environment Handbook” and “Reporting on Tourism and Environment: A Backgrounder.” More training materials are still being produced. In addition, a training newsletter called “ACCESS” has also been published for young journalists.

In 1989, AFEJ and the Bangkok-based United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN-ESCAP), jointly published a book called “Reporting on the Environment: A Handbook for Journalists” also to be used as training material. This was updated and rereleased in 1995.

In 1995, AFEJ also published as training material the “Four-Country Citizen’s Report on the Environment” based on the state of the environment in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Thailand. The project was undertaken with the help of the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation.

Lately, AFEJ has expanded its reach in the training of Asian journalists when it linked up with the Paris-based International Federation of Environmental Journalists (IFJE). Both networks now work together in the training of journalists through workshops and exchanges of journalists and resource persons. An IFEJ Congress highlighting Asian environmental issues was hosted by the Philippine
Environmental Journalists Inc. (PEJI) and AFEJ in Cebu City, Philippines Nov.
11-15 last year. Another IFEJ Congress is set in October in Budapest which will see a large participation of Asian journalists.

Aside from the press institutes and the AFEJ network, several media organizations conduct their own training programs in environmental journalism. The Manila-based Press Foundation of Asia (PFA) has been holding environmental reporting workshops for Asian journalists since 1982. Since then, PFA has organized, either by itself or with a national associate or in partnership with another organization like Inter Press Service, a total of 15 similar or related training courses. According to a UN-ESCAP report, most have taken place between 1991 and 1993. Each focused on the environment or, lately, the larger concern of sustainable development. The report says these courses reached a total of 255 journalists, most of them mid-career. The countries covered by these courses include Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand. Apart from national courses, it reveals PFA has organized sub-regional courses on environment for SAARC and ASEAN journalists.

In the early 1980s, the Singapore-based Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Center (AMIC) has also been conducting a series of training workshops on environment, both for practicing journalists and also for media managers and policy makers. AMIC programs cover both print and electronic media, and are often implemented in collaboration with national organizations, according to an ESCAP report. AMIC is a major resource for communicators in the Asian and Pacific region serving as a clearing house of information, an initiator and implementor of research activities, a publishing house specializing in communication issues, and a focal point for communication scholars and practitioners to exchange ideas and experiences. As AMIC commits itself to a strong follow through program, seminars and workshops are carefully planned to ensure synergy by tying in related work done in other areas and by systematic long term planning, the ESCAP report notes.

The Kuala Lumpur-based Asia Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development (AIBD), also works for the development of human resources in broadcasting in the region. Recently, the ESCAP report says AIBD has introduced environmental reporting and production training programs for both radio and television professionals. In 1991, it conducted workshop on integrated media planning for environmental programs. In 1993 and 1994, it organized two sub-regional workshops in Sri Lanka on environmental coverage for television professionals, which was attended by two dozen trainees from West Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia, the report adds.

According to the ESCAP report, an increasing number of bilateral and multilateral donors, as well as private foundations, are financing training programs in environmental journalism in the region. This includes UNDP, UNEP and ESCAP as well as the Asia Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Reuter and Thomson Foundations.
All these training programs are directed at creating capacity for sustainable development. But what is sustainable development?

Such was defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) led by Gro Harlem Brundtland in 1987 in its book “Our Common Future”. It says the premise of sustainable development is “to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The concept of sustainable development considers development as a continued process in which resources must be managed or stewarded to be regenerated. It calls for the recognition of the importance of certain policies for the environment:

1. The rate of resource utilization,
2. Environmental quality, specifically of public resources such as rivers, seas, public land, forests and air; and
3. The quality of human resources, as revealed through mortality rates, life expectancy, illiteracy, enrolment ratio in elementary education and unemployment levels

Sustainable development as a “world policy” simply takes environmental protection and economic growth as a single issue. But it is also dictated by human demands for survival. What is abhorred is environmental abuse that could damage sustainability of the resource.

In the pursuit of sustainability, the United States today has espoused what it calls “sustainability thinking.” This was based on recommendations of the President’s Council on Sustainable Development based in Washington DC which were submitted to US President Bill Clinton as America’s guide to a sustainable future.

The concept seeks prosperity - not just economic growth - in a way that draws together economic, social equity, and environmental consideration, striving always to sustain the Earth’s resources and its people.

It also envisions that every person should benefit from a healthy environment. A healthy economy is to be sustained to afford the opportunity for a high quality of life. It ensures equity and opportunity for economic, social and environmental well-being. It also seeks to protect and restore natural resources for current and future generation. It encourages stewards and for people to work together to create healthy communities. It also creates full opportunity for citizens, businesses and communities to participate in and influence the natural resource, environmental, and economic decisions that affect them. It leads in developing and carrying out sustainable development policies globally and ensure access to formal education and lifelong
learning that will prepare citizens for meaningful work and a high quality of life and give them an understanding of concepts involved in sustainable development.

The concept obviously admits that human use of the Earth's resources is inevitable. But such use can be tempered if humans want to create a healthy economy and high quality of life through proper environmental management. This will help create opportunities for attaining environmental goals at lower costs.

This "sustainability thinking" concept should serve as guide not only to Americans but also to journalists and other peoples of the world. This will help enlighten journalists in their quest to make Asia's development sustainable. For the stories that they will tell will definitely carry the sustainable development message that will enable the public to make the right development choices.

UNEP, on the other hand, is also advocating the concept of "Environmental Citizenship," to make every inhabitant of this world conscious of sustainability in all their actions. This is contained in UNEP's Environmental Communication and Information Strategy for Asia Pacific (1995-2000) in which media's role has been put into focus. Media, through the help of such regional organization as AFEJ, is to help foster UNEP Asia-Pacific Regional Office's role in catalyzing "environmental citizenship" by delivering the information necessary to plan, manage and act in defense of the environment while maintaining development goals and improving the quality of life.

Understanding these concepts are part of building capacity, an essential step in pushing for Asia's sustainable development.#.
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BIODATAS:

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