



The Star, Malaysia

Martin Khor Kok Peng

Economist and champion of social justice and the Global South. He was born in Penang, Malaysia, on Nov 9, 1951, and died of cancer in Penang on April 1, 2020, aged 68 years.

A man who spoke and wrote on topics ranging from globalisation to climate change, and from trade policy to antimicrobial resistance, might be thought to have risked spreading his authority too thinly. But few listening to or reading Martin Khor drew any such conclusion. This was partly because he could identify the neglected links that often exist between seemingly unrelated issues, but even more so because what he offered was a consistent viewpoint. Khor's perspective was that of developing countries which, because of their poverty, lie outside the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the G7, and other international bodies accustomed to viewing the world's problems through the eyes of the world's rich. "He was a warrior for the rights of developing countries", says Sangeeta Shashikant, a legal and policy adviser to the Third World Network (TWN), a non-profit research and advocacy organisation focused on development and North-South affairs. "He brought [developing countries] together to advocate for their rights."

Among Khor's many admirers is Professor Anthony So of the Department of International Health at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore, MD, USA. As he puts it, "Martin devoted his life to championing social justice and challenging a system of globalisation that too often failed to address the needs of those in the Global South. Unfailingly, he would make his points with commanding

intellect, fervent commitment, and the compass of his vision. And he was as much at home speaking to ministers as he was to the students whom he saw as our future leaders."

Khor left Malaysia in 1971 to study economics at the University of Cambridge in the UK. He then joined the Singapore Government's Ministry of Finance before returning to Malaysia in 1975 for a lectureship in economics at its University of Science. 3 years later, on completing a master's in social science, he became Research Director of the Consumers Association of Penang (CAP), a body that supports people's right to food, housing, health care, sanitation, public transport, education, and a clean environment. It was an international conference organised by CAP in 1984 that led to the creation of TWN, of which Khor became Director in 1990. He maintained his role in both organisations until 2009, when he took up the Directorship of the South Centre in Geneva, Switzerland. This intergovernmental organisation of developing countries helps them to pool their efforts in promoting their common interests. Khor left the South Centre in 2018, returning to Malaysia but acting as Chair of the TWN Board until his death.

Khor worked with policy makers, implementers, and diplomats at many different levels in non-governmental organisations, governments, and other bodies, both regional and global. In addition to his three main posts at CAP, TWN, and the South Centre, he also took on a host of short-term or part-time tasks. He was a member of the UN Task Force on Environment and Human Settlements, he took part in the Helsinki Process on Globalisation and Democracy, he inspired developing countries to form their own bloc at the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit, and he wrote a regular column for *The Star* newspaper in Malaysia. Health care was also on his agenda. "On antibiotic resistance he was a huge advocate for the actions that needed to be taken, working with WHO and developing countries", says Shashikant.

"Martin was always very sharp in his analyses of situations, of political processes, of things that weren't going right in the world, and what needed to be done", says Ellen 't Hoen, a lawyer and public health advocate with the Medicines Law & Policy group. "And he had a talent for communicating these issues clearly, and with kindness...He always had the interests of the most vulnerable people at the core of what he did. That was his guiding light, and with it he guided a lot of people in the right direction."

So describes Khor as "a rare public intellectual, who could speak truth to power, but walk in the shoes of those less fortunate...Martin was a visionary, with a gift for connecting and communicating, and for diving deep into the details of international agreements [and revealing] how these would affect lives and livelihoods in the Global South". Khor leaves a wife, Meena, and a daughter, Rebecca, from a previous marriage.

Geoff Watts