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FAO REVIEW ON AGRICULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT

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WHOSE FELT NEEDS?
BY
KHOR KOK PENG
CONSUMERS' ASSOCIATION OF PENANG

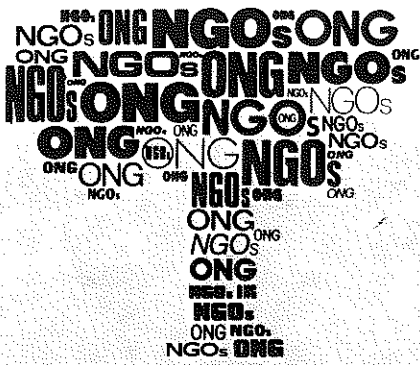
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The NGO role in rural development

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Many social scientists and economists have serious doubts as to whether the present model of development is really beneficial to the poor. All too often, "development projects" are selected by governments to introduce symbols of ultra-modernism (superhighways, 60-storey skyscrapers, multimillion-dollar dams) that have little meaning to the rural poor. Even more alarming, millions of farmers and food producers are being

pushed aside, marginalized and displaced for the sake of "development." In Brazil's Amazon jungle, hundreds of thousands of native people are being forced out of their homelands as forests are logged. Hundreds of traditional fishing communities in South and Southeast Asia are suffering from dwindling incomes as high-powered trawler boats scoop up the best part of the catch. Grazing land and food producing farms

Whose felt needs?

Helping communities to identify and discuss their problems is a crucial NGO activity

by Khor Kok Peng



are being demolished on a large scale to make way for dams, factory zones, Western-style suburban housing estates and road construction.

Ironically, the poor are thus often made victims rather than beneficiaries of development. To add insult to injury,

*"Simple" problems
villagers face include irregular
public transportation . . .*



they are usually told that there are "inevitable costs" to be borne in development, and that "everyone has to make a sacrifice." Needless to say, it is not inevitable that the poor be made to "pay" for development, and it is a scandal that their livelihood or homes have to be sacrificed for a development that principally benefits a small elite. But poor communities in general are not sufficiently organized and lack the confidence to voice their plight or represent their problems to the relevant authorities. Too often they suffer in silence.

The role NGOs can play. Ideally, poor communities should participate in development programmes that improve their resource base and provide more employment and income. Such basic amenities as housing, sanitation, clean water, garbage disposal, health services and education should be made available to these communities. But just as important, perhaps more, they should not be displaced and made even poorer through development projects.

In this context, nongovernmental organizations have a crucial role to play in protecting and enhancing the interests of poor communities. Not subject to bureaucratic controls, as are government agencies, NGOs can help the poor to express their needs and views and mobilizing them to make their demands in the larger political, planning and economic arena.

NGOs can:

- Help the community identify and discuss its problems. Very often the first impediment to action by the poor is their inability to recognize their problems as legitimate issues.
- Give the community confidence that these problems can be resolved if its members are prepared to organize themselves and have the will to act.
- Provide a link between the community and relevant government authorities; lawyers, scientists and academics; the mass media; and other communities and groups. The intellectuals and profes-

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sionals may give much-needed help; the media can publicize the issue and thus involve the public at large. This will give a push (especially to the authorities) to resolve the problem.

The following could be done along with the above:

- A check should be made of a community's basic amenities and needs. Does it have proper water, sanitation, garbage collection, lighting and public transport facilities? Discussions should be held with families to determine their most serious unfulfilled basic needs.
- If the community is facing displacement of its livelihood, a thorough study should be made of the causes and the legal aspects. Find out to which government authorities (state or federal government, district office, land office, health department, water department, environment agency?) the villages can make representations.
- The community should be encouraged to select an "action committee" responsible for taking up the issue and for mobilizing the community. This committee should be drawn from among active and dynamic villagers with a strong desire to resolve the problems. It need not be led by traditional community elites, although an understanding needs to be established between the "action committee" and the traditional leaders. The NGO should work closely with this group, not do the actual work itself.
- The NGO can help the action committee draft petitions and letters, which should be adopted and signed by all members of the community. These should be sent to the authorities or the parties concerned, and to the press.
- The NGO could organize a visit to the community for the press and for interested individuals (lawyers, students), so that the issue can be made public.
- Sympathetic professionals should be asked to help (e.g., lawyers, doctors, scientists, economists)
- The action committee should prepare itself to meet with government officials and other parties (e.g., directors of companies polluting their river) and to make appropriate demands at the meetings.
- All families in the community should be kept informed of developments and should actively participate in decision making through regular meetings chair-

The actual processes of decision making, mobilization and representation are carried out by the community

ed by the action committee.

During the implementation of the above measures, an NGO should act as a catalyst, setting in motion a progress by which the community chooses its own trusted leaders, mobilizes itself and represents its problems to the authorities and the public. The actual processes of decision making, mobilization and representation are carried out by the community. The NGO must work with and not for the community, otherwise the action will not succeed.

The experience of CAP. The Consumers' Association of Penang is an NGO in Malaysia that takes up development issues from a broad consumer perspective. Besides protecting consumers from business malpractice, it is involved in issues concerning basic needs, rational use of resources, environmental pollution, culture and lifestyles. Its activities include research, publications, educational programmes, media work and helping poor communities to voice their problems.

In its work with communities, CAP is involved in two main types of issues: first, basic needs and amenities, and second, environmental problems and the disruption of livelihood.

Basic needs and amenities. In the area of basic needs and amenities, CAP staff members conduct a "house counselling" educational programme in villages and estates during which basic principles of nutrition, health, budgeting, credit and other topics are discussed with the families, usually the woman of the house. At such sessions, the villagers also bring up pressing problems that they face. Very often these are "simple" problems, such as the irregularity of the village bus service or the high prices charged at the

only shop in the village. These complaints are discussed with villagers in a group, and then the CAP staff helps the community to act on the problem by, for example, writing to the bus company concerned (with a copy to the municipal authorities, the Road and Transport Department and the press) or by getting the villagers to have a heart-to-heart talk with the shop owner. These actions are sometimes successful, but they usually require a prolonged period of continuous pressure on the part of the villagers. What is important is that the community begins to recognize its common problems, to take action to overcome them, and thus to educate itself in justly demanding its rights.

Recently many rural communities in the northern states of Peninsular Malaysia complained to CAP staff that the nightsoil was left uncollected for several days in their villages. In the rainy season, the waste material overflowed the bins and polluted house compounds, threatening the health of thousands of people. The problem was prevalent in villages still using the "bucket toilet" system, where waste is collected in buckets placed under the toilet. Contractors are hired by the municipal authorities to collect the nightsoil, but the services provided are often inadequate and irregular, collection taking place once every week or ten days. Four villages with a combined population of 3 000 complained that 64 small children were found suffering from jaundice from the health hazards posed by overflowing waste.

CAP staff paid several visits to the communities to investigate the problem, and helped the villagers to organize themselves. Petition letters signed by hundreds of residents were handed to the municipal authorities. Journalists who visited the affected areas publicized the problem in the newspapers. Eventually, the municipal authorities improved their services, though not yet to the villagers' full satisfaction. What is important, however, is that these poor communities now have the confidence and experience to stand up for their rights. If the waste disposal system should again deteriorate, or other basic problems arise, they will now act to

rectify the situation and not merely grumble or meekly accept their fate.

Another important amenity often taken for granted by urban dwellers is the telephone. In rural areas where the transportation network is poorly developed, a public telephone booth becomes an indispensable means of communication, especially in emergencies when the fire brigade, police or ambulance are required. In many villages, CAP staff found that public telephones were one of the most acutely felt needs of the poor. Yet many areas are still deprived of this simple facility. As a result, CAP has helped several communities to draft letters and petitions to the Telecoms Department requesting the installation of a phone booth in their village. In half the villages, the authorities finally acceded to the request after several reminders and even more



months. In the unsuccessful villages more letters and reminders are being persistently sent. Last year, CAP also sent a memorandum to the federal government asking for more emphasis and funds to be allocated for public telephones in poor communities, which have been hitherto neglected despite billions of dollars spent on sophisticated telecommunications facilities. The villages that CAP had helped were cited a

examples of the importance of the telephone at grass-roots level. In this way, CAP is able not only to help individual communities but to bring the common problems of these communities into national focus for the attention of the authorities.

Environmental problems and dislocation of community's livelihood. An even more serious type of problem in rural communities concerns environmental issues and the dislocation of sources of livelihood. These problems are revealed to CAP staff during visits to villages or, increasingly, through letters written by the community to CAP. Most of the affected communities are fishing villages or food-producing farms. In Malaysia, as in other Southeast Asian countries, hundreds of traditional fishing communities are threatened by marine pollution and invasion of their

territorial waters by trawler boats. In Penang state alone, the marketable fish catch dropped by 60 percent between 1966 and 1980, according to the Ministry of Agriculture. At the same time, vegetable and fruit farms have been asked to make way for government development projects or private-sector activity (such as house construction). In the state of Penang, the acreage of cultivated vegetables fell by eight per-

cent between 1977 and 1981, while the acreage for 11 types of popular fruit dropped by nine percent between 1976 and 1980. The farmers may be tenants or squatters, and clearing them out can be done under the law. If they are owners of the land, the government can acquire their property and pay compensation, which is a poor substitute for income-generating farmland.

During the initial contact made with the community, CAP staff make a survey of the situation with the villagers. Facts about the social, economic and environmental aspects of the problem are collected and analyzed. Discussions are held with some villagers, usually those who had been active enough to bring the problem to CAP's attention.

...and
uncollected
refuse



During the discussions, natural leaders emerge who may sometimes be different from the traditional village leadership. Usually, the younger people in the community are more eager to take up the problem, and they emerge as the active elements. In some cases, they may form an action committee responsible for mobilizing the community; in other cases, these informal leaders work through the already established village leader-

ship structure. In either case, the traditional leaders have to become involved, at least in giving their approval, so that a unity of action can be achieved. NGOs have to be very sensitive to this interplay of village relationships.

A period of intense discussion within the community will follow, with decisions taken to send letters or petitions to government departments and ministries concerned with the issue, to the private companies concerned (if the problem is caused by them), to the press and other groups that might help. A response is then awaited. Newspapers may publicize the community's statement or send reporters to do in-depth feature articles. Government officials may visit the community to conduct their own investigations or meet the villagers. The community's leaders make certain requests or demands (stop the pollution, or relocate the road project elsewhere, or raise the compensation level) and negotiations are carried out. The process is usually long, stretching to several months or years. Seldom is there complete success from the community's point of view; often there is partial success; sometimes, only a frustration of hopes. However, the community builds up a capacity for representing its interests to the Government and the public. The depressed villages become revitalized with the optimism that comes from positive action to solve one's own problems. At the level of national planning, the voices of the poor communities, the "victims of development," are heard.

Case histories. The following are some communities facing problems of livelihood with which CAP has been working recently:

The riverine fishing village of Kuala Juru had its livelihood almost destroyed when factories in a nearby Free Trade Zone discharged poisonous effluents into the river, killing off fish life. CAP helped the villagers to publicize their problems and represent them to the authorities. The village youth collected water samples from the polluted river, and these were analyzed by university-based scientists who volunteered their services. The tests confirmed a high lev-

NGOs have an important role in helping to articulate the felt needs and grievances of grass-roots communities

el of pollution. The fishermen formed an action committee which met the state's Chief Minister and a number of Federal Ministers. The effluents were then diverted away from the river to the sea directly, but they still pose a potential threat to the new cockle (shellfish) seabed farms now cultivated by a cooperative set up by the villagers. The new cockle project is economically very successful. The success of the village has been largely due to able and dynamic leadership in the action committee which eventually also managed the cockle project. CAP's role was advisory and catalytic.

Kuala Kedah is a rice-growing village whose crops were destroyed by effluent discharge from a chemical factory into the village stream. CAP helped the farmers take up the case to the state authorities, the factory and the environment department. After initial resistance, the factory paid compensation to the affected villages, but the method of payment and the small sum did not satisfy the farmers. Occasionally the pollution still threatens the crops.

Famous for its fruits and spices, the village of Balik Pulau underwent a traumatic experience when a road was built through the nearby hills. Rocks blasted during the construction were dumped indiscriminately down the hill slopes, destroying dozens of acres of prime fruit and rubber trees. As a result of the uprooting of the trees, the land and rivers also silted up. A few young farmers contacted CAP and then organized a joint petition sent to various government authorities, including the police. Journalists visiting the site gave prominence to the farmers' plight in the newspapers. A meeting was then held between the farmers' representatives, the

State Public Works Department chief and the Managing Director of the private road-building company. Eventually the dumping of rocks was stopped and the company paid the farmers compensation for their losses. This was however only a partial success, because the compensation was inadequate and could not replace the loss of future earnings caused by destruction of their land.

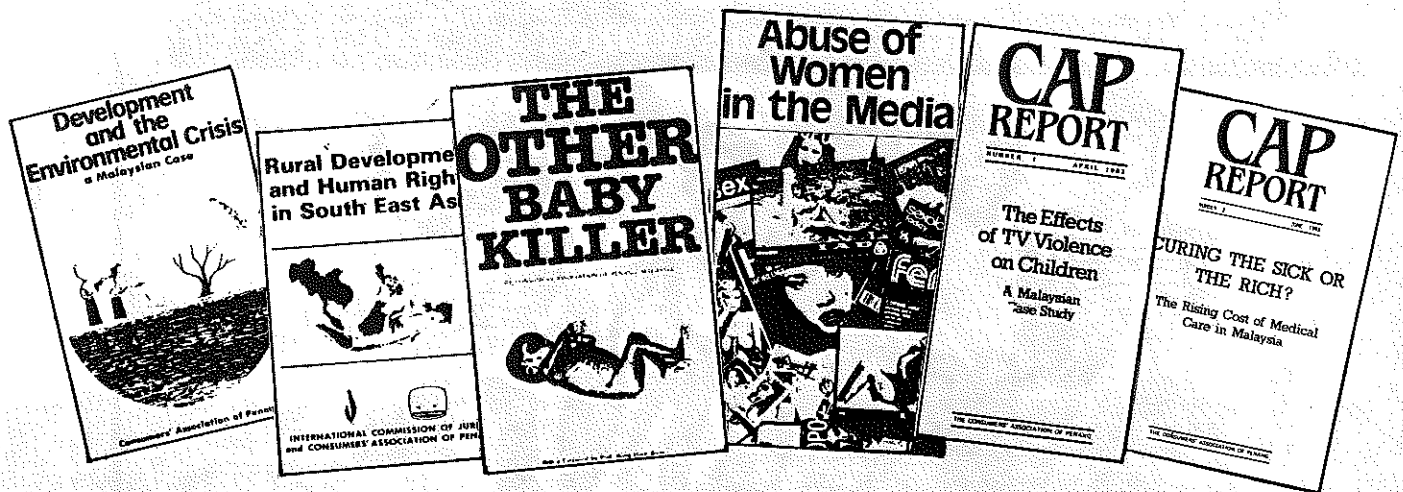
Bagan Lallang, a vegetable-farming and poultry-keeping village, was flooded under two feet of water for two months when a housing developer blocked the flow of the village stream. Because of the flood, crops and livestock were destroyed and houses were damaged. CAP staff aided the villagers to draft letters and petitions, and several meetings were held between the village leaders, the municipal authorities and the housing developer. Students from the consumer club of a nearby secondary school conducted a house-to-house survey of losses incurred by the flood. Eventually the developer agreed to dig a new drainage canal through the village and to pay compensation to the villagers based on the students' survey. The Penang east coast foreshore area (facing the seafront) houses several thousand fishermen, petty traders and shipyard workers who depend on the sea for a living. Their livelihood is threatened by a plan to construct an offshore highway that will close down several small shipyards and block the fishermen's access to the sea. The residents contacted CAP, which helped them carry out a survey of the socio-economic impact of the highway. This was used as the basis of a petition signed by 3 000 residents appealing against the highway. Recently the Government announced that the project has been shelved, probably due to lack of funds caused by the current economic recession. In the event of an economic recovery, the project may be resumed.

The 350-acre Thean Teik Estate is a major vegetable-producing area in Penang. Owned by a private clan association, the land has been rented out to farmers for several decades. In 1981, the 520 households (with 12 000 residents) were asked to vacate the land to

make way for a housing estate project. In 1982 bulldozers were sent in to destroy some of the crops, and violent fights occurred, during one of which a woman resident was shot dead and others injured. The residents' association has been working with CAP in drafting appeal letters. The farmers are asking that a portion of the land be preserved as farmland or that, at the least, the compensation offered by the developer be raised. The state's Chief Minister has now decided to intervene as mediator between the farmers, the landowners and the developers.

Some conclusions. The experience of CAP shows that NGOs do have and can play an important constructive role in helping to articulate the felt needs, grievances and problems of grass-roots communities and to channel these to the relevant government authorities and the larger society. In this process, the community is able to make its voice heard and can begin to look after its interests in the context of national economic planning and development. How successful the community is in doing so varies from case to case, depending on such factors as the quality of leadership and degree of cohesion among the villagers, the extent of sympathy in public opinion, and the response of the state authorities or private companies involved. As stressed earlier, the role of the NGO in this process is that of a catalyst, a facilitator and a help, not as the main agent of action which is the community itself. An NGO possesses certain skills, such as the ability to conduct surveys, carry out tests and library research, draft letters and statements and conceptually link local-level problems to national issues. It also has the potential to contact and draw in professionals such as lawyers, doctors, scientists, academics, teachers and also government officials to perform various tasks in helping poor communities. What the NGO needs is the dedication, determination and correct methods to perform its role. Experience and effectiveness will then follow. And the role it can play is not only vital but perhaps also indispensable if poor communities are to build up the capacity genuinely to participate in development.

SOME CAP PUBLICATIONS



Development and the Environmental Crisis

In the past 10 years the environmental movement in Malaysia has grown from almost nothing to a thriving combination of groups, the mass media and the public — all concerned about increasing pollution, depleting resources and a deteriorating quality of life.

This book marks a big step forward in the environmental movement. Spread over 430 pages, it provides a comprehensive view and analysis of the many aspects of environmental problems in Malaysia.

With masses of supporting data and diagrams, the articles are by the country's top environmentalists, scientists and civil servants.

Price in Malaysia: Softcover M\$25.00 Hardcover M\$40.00
Price Elsewhere: Softcover US\$20.00 Hardcover US\$35.00

Rural Development and Human Rights in South East Asia

The impact of development on human rights has been gaining increasing recognition in recent years. For far too long development programmes have ignored this relationship, often resulting in maldevelopment, with heavy consequences for the human rights of the poor, particularly the rural poor.

Through this book, it is hoped more and more people will become aware of the need for a wider concept of development, one that embraces all aspects of life and is commensurate with human dignity.

Price in Malaysia: Softcover M\$8.00 Hardcover M\$14.00
Price Elsewhere: Softcover US\$6.00 Hardcover US\$10.00

The Other Baby Killer

While much publicity has been given to the dangers of infant formula, little has been said of the deadly menace posed by the use of sweetened condensed milk (SCM) in developing countries. And even less is known of the continuing tragedy that is taking place every day as a result of its use.

This book shows the real situation in the rural areas, particularly the estates, where ignorant mothers feed their babies with SCM mixed with contaminated water.

Price in Malaysia: M\$4.00 Price Elsewhere: US\$4.00

Abuse of Women in the Media

The mass media has come to embody the interests and values of an alien and dominant culture which promotes not only a western brand of consumption and lifestyle, but also projects an image of women which is both discriminatory and oppressive.

This 85-page book traces how the media has been used to portray women as inferior beings and as sex objects in advertisements, women's magazines, paperback romances, in humour, in television programmes and in films. It also hits out at pornography and sex tourism.

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CAP'S REPORT SERIES

The Effects of TV Violence on Children — A Malaysian Case Study

Children love sitting before the screen, watching their television heroes in action. Some children have flown to their death, while others have been injured when they tried to imitate their favourite heroes. This report reveals the harmful psychological and physical effects television violence has on Malaysian children.

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The Consumers' Association of Penang is a voluntary, non-profit organisation which fights for the rights and interests of all consumers through research, educational and representational activities. Issues taken up include basic needs like food, nutrition, health, housing and environmental balance.

UTUSAN KONSUMER

Champion of consumers' rights



Photo: D. Trianti/New Internationalist

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