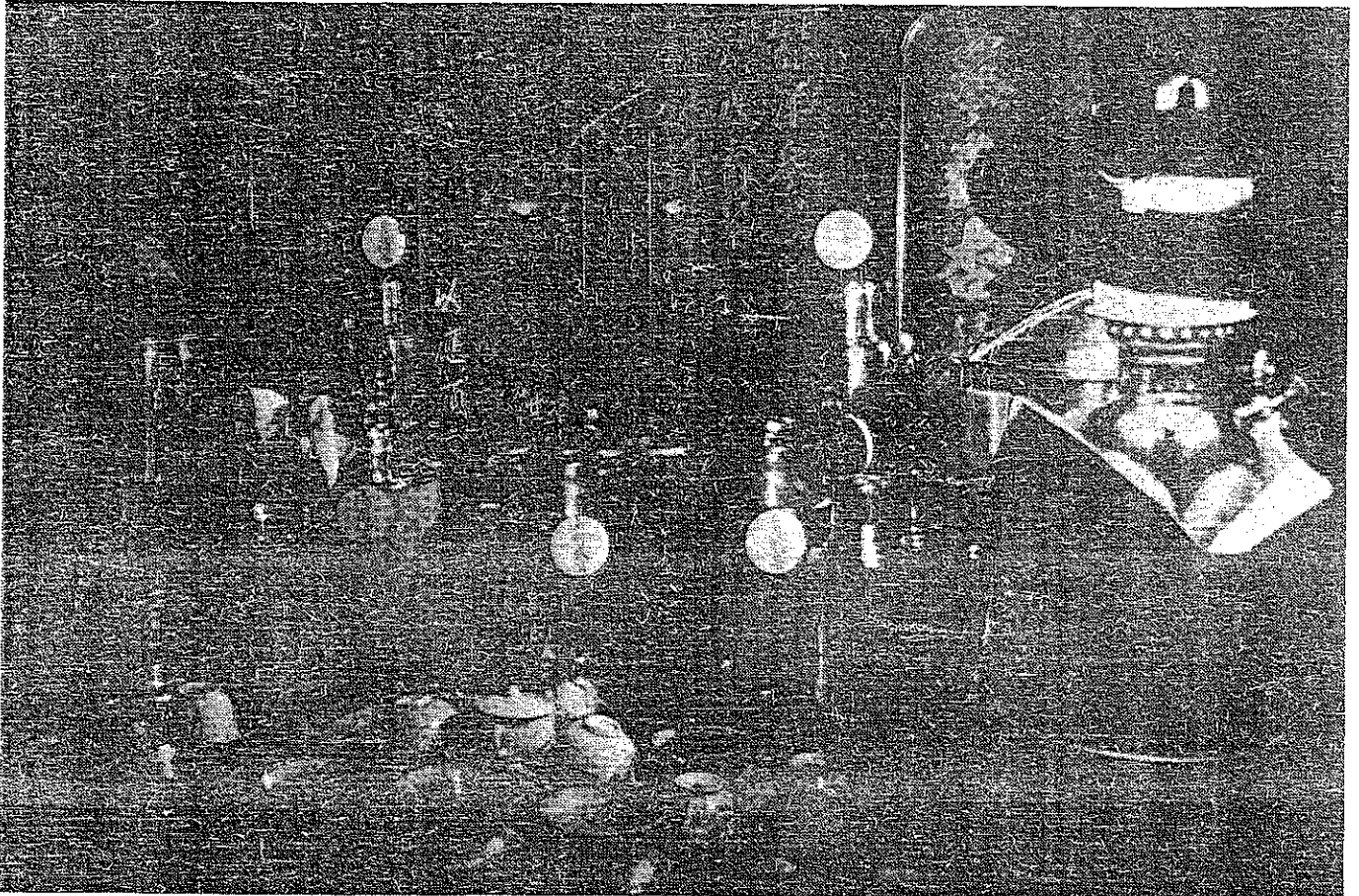

Value for People:

The Potential Role of a Consumer Movement in the Third World

by Khor Kok Peng



American women spend more on cosmetics in a year than the budgets of all African governments combined.

That remarkable fact symbolizes the irrationality of the world pattern of consumption. The industrialized countries account for only 16 per cent of the world's population but use up as much as 57 per cent of the energy resources. Meanwhile the Third World countries of the market system have 62 per cent of the world population but consume only a mere 14 per cent of the world's energy resources.

Within the Third World countries themselves, the basic needs of perhaps two-thirds of the population have yet to be satisfied. In many countries, the numbers of people

living below the poverty line have increased significantly, despite moderate rates of economic growth. The degree of income inequalities between income groups has also increased as growth fails to solve the basic needs problems of the poor. In these Third World countries, planners and politicians more often than not strive for a style of national development which imitates the models set up in the industrialized countries. Much in the name of development goes towards the creation and sustenance of artificially high lifestyles imported wholesale or with some minor modifications from the west.

Nor is the "transfer of taste" from the industrialized countries solely confined to the elites in the Third World. High-powered advertising

and aggressive sales campaigns by transnational companies ensure that the imported consumer culture penetrates and permeates through every social strata and every corner of the land. "The Taste of America" is painted in big, bold letters across a wall in busy streets, persuading everyone to smoke a cigarette. On the roadside newspaper stands, a woman's magazine cajoles women into having a "love affair" with the latest perfume. Inside the cinemas, thousands of ordinary people watch as the screen flashes bikini-clad girls singing, "This is the beer! This is the life!" In every big hotel, hundreds of young people dance to "funky music" while pinball-machine centres and bowling alleys are choked full of teenagers and students. In the countryside, poverty-stricken mothers have been

persuaded by the sales tactics of transnationals to switch from breastfeeding to bottle-feeding, with disastrous effects on the health of their infants. Striving to attain the urbanized life-style, farmers buy modern furniture and motorcycles by instalment after the harvest or when prices of their products are high, only to lose these goods during the off-season or in times of poor prices when other needs take precedence. Coca-cola is sold in every village coffee shop and even the families of fishermen buy canned fish which is advertised on radio and in magazines.

Having an almost captive market in countries eager to adopt the high-consumption way of life, the transnationals are now practising a subtler but more deadly form of exploitation on the Third World. Dangerous and sub-standard products which have been banned or withdrawn from the markets in industrialized countries are being "dumped" into Third World countries in large amounts. The effect on the health of the people in Third World countries must be horrendous, all the more so because most Third World consumers are ignorant and unsuspecting of these unethical sales practices. Again, corporations and whole industries affected by stricter occupational safety and environmental laws in their home countries have exported their factories for production in many Third World countries.

The present type of industrialization being followed has also resulted in an environmental crisis of startling proportions. Actual events show that the environment and its resources are the very basis of development. The destruction of the environment will eventually also destroy the very basis for development and indeed the chances of man's survival.

This scenario of the present and future world problems is the background to the activities and concerns of the Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP). An independent and non-profit organization set up in 1970, CAP is based in Malaysia, a rather well-off Third World country which faces all the contradictions of development described above. It has a council of

10 members, many of whom are community leaders, university academics and teachers. Its activities are carried out by staff of about 50, most of whom are young people interested in contributing their bit to social progress. Unlike most other consumer organizations in the world, CAP's primary concern is not only to test which brand of a product is better, but to inform, educate and represent the people on such issues as basic needs, consumer protection and environmental destruction. This results in CAP's taking a stand on crucial matters involving development priorities (should we build more tourist hotels or more homes for the poor?), basic human needs (the availability of food, health services, housing, transport, education, etc.), exploitation of the consumer and environmental deterioration (water and air pollution, deforestation, depletion of fisheries resources, occupational hazards and so on). Far from following the concept of "Value for Money" adopted by consumer organizations which originated in the industrialized countries, CAP bases its activities on the concept "Value for People".

CAP's objective, according to its President, Encik S.M. Mohamad Idris, is to awaken the consciousness of the people to the present irrational and suicidal style and rate of development which destroys the environment and produces things which are useless or harmful to health, without satisfying the basic needs of the majority of people. CAP believes that only when development serves the needs of people and not the other way around will real progress be achieved. For this to come about, the awareness of the people must be awakened, and that is the role CAP sees for itself.

As an organization oriented towards consumer protection and social reform, CAP sees its role as bringing up important development issues and in generating public consciousness on these issues.

CAP is organized into various sections, each of which reflect an important aspect of its approach to development work, and all of which seek to inform, educate and represent the public on basic issues.

The Complaints Section seeks to protect the public's right to redress and compensation in the face of cheating, exploitation or neglect on the part of producers, middlemen or government departments. A wide variety of complaints are lodged by the public at CAP's office either personally or through the post.

These complaints range from poor quality of goods, defective and dangerous products and cheating by housing developers, shopkeepers and moneylenders, to the rudeness of government departments, poor services at the hospitals and absence of a proper drainage or transport system. On receiving the complaints, CAP staff investigate the particular cases involved and press for redress, compensation or better services from the parties complained against.

The popularity of this complaints service can be seen from the increasing number of cases handled — 55 in 1972, 400 in 1975 and over 2,000 in 1978. This increase is due partly to the fact that CAP manages to settle about 80 per cent of the complaints to the satisfaction of the complainants, but also largely to the spreading knowledge that wrongs can be righted if one is willing to take positive steps to do so. "A single complaint is worth a thousand words of grumbling!" urges a CAP pamphlet. "All consumers have at one time or other been cheated or treated shabbily. Don't despair: Don't grumble to yourself. Do something about it. Make a Complaint!"

The value of the Complaints Service cannot be underestimated. In ex-colonial societies where the people have for too long been used to the passive acceptance of life's injustices, the successful lodging of a complaint changes the perception and attitude of individuals who now see that redress can be obtained if one is willing to do something positive about it. The Complaints Service thus becomes an effective means and channel through which the public is able to exercise its rights to fight business malpractices and to press for fair and better services from companies and government departments as well as to demand protection of these rights from the authorities. The Complaints Service

is especially useful for the poorer sections of the community who are usually not articulate or confident enough to take grievances on their own, and who are certainly not able to afford legal services.

CAP's Survey and Testing Section is responsible for carrying out basic research and alerting the public and the authorities to such problems as unfair price increases, misleading advertisements, unscrupulous sales tactics and practices, the marketing of dangerous foods and drugs, the inadequacy of poor medical and transport services, poor conditions of housing, lighting and roads, and so on.

The section carries out a weekly survey of market prices of essential commodities such as rice, meat, sugar, fuels, text-books, bus fares, medical fees, as well as regular investigations into shortages of such necessities. Any irregularities in the market, whether of price, quality or supply, are immediately made known to the public through the mass media. Details of the problem as well as concrete proposals to reduce or solve it are also forwarded to the government in the form of letters and memoranda.

Regular CAP surveys have raised the alarm over the high prices and acute shortages of kerosene, charcoal, firewood and matchsticks, which constitute the energy sources of the poor. CAP has fought against the increase in the domestic price of oil on the grounds that Malaysia itself is an oil exporter and the oil companies are already making huge profits as a result of the OPEC price increases, and has called for the ban of advertisements which unethically make use of sexual themes, children and the appeal to health instincts to sell the product; a survey shows that more than half of all advertisements make use of such themes.

One CAP survey found that the standard reading fare of Malaysian teenagers comprised comics, movie and pop magazines and novels based on romance and spy thrillers; the habit of serious reading on social issues was sadly lacking. CAP is also pressing for the proper registration of opticians and day-care centres after surveys showed that 90 per

cent of "opticians" were not qualified, while the baby nurseries were found to be badly run (resulting in the deaths of two babies). And the organization has called for a ban on cigarette sales promotion and a ban on smoking in all public places.

Where testing activities are concerned, CAP focuses on determining the safety, cleanliness, purity and quality of products that are commonly used. Tests are also carried out on short-weighting and other forms of exploitation which producers and traders practice on consumers.

Recent CAP test-findings include: dangerous levels of dyes and additives (including banned chemicals) found in very popular foodstuffs and drinks; fresh fish containing a level of human and animal faeces 11,000 times above the safety level; popular brands of drugs and cosmetics containing lethal dosages of dangerous metals such as mercury, cadmium and lead; "coffee powder" containing only 5% of real coffee grains, and tea leaves heavily contaminated with dangerous dyes; motor vehicles found to have defective gear boxes, bursting tires and self-shattering windscreens; loaves of bread and packets of rice found to be significantly short-weight; toys with sharp edges and which are inflammable, being safety hazards to children; defective electrical appliances which can cause fires and electric shocks to users.

The results of these tests are widely disseminated through the mass media to alert the public. Through memoranda and statements, CAP acts as a pressure on government authorities to establish and enforce safety standards so as to protect the health and lives of consumers. In a number of instances, the authorities have responded by introducing new legislation and withdrawing certain products found to be hazardous, and CAP continues to press for reforms while educating the public.

The Research Section undertakes in-depth studies on important issues which usually arise from the activities of the other sections. These studies are usually on-going processes which draw on the raw data obtained from the complaints

received, from the results of the tests and surveys, or specially collected for the specific studies.

Some of the major areas of CAP's long-term research work include food and nutrition, health and sanitation, housing, habitat and transport (the acute shortage of housing, the problems of squatters, etc.), the sale of dangerous products, the unethical sales promotion of infant formula, inflation, the impact of transnational corporations, the adverse effects of the consumer culture, social problems such as drug addiction, and the promotion of appropriate technology.

The studies involve a combination of desk research and field research, including interviews with ordinary people and professionals. The aim of the research is to deepen the public's knowledge on basic needs and other crucial issues and on the basis of this increased awareness, to pressure for urgent social reform.

The right to a clean, safe environment to live and work in is one of the most basic rights of consumers. Concerned about the worsening crisis in the Malaysian and world environmental situation, CAP has been vigorously campaigning against the rapid increase in pollution, the deterioration in the rural and urban environments and the dangerous depletion of non-renewable natural resources. The environment is one of the most crucial aspects of CAP's work because the present trend of development is wreaking havoc on the natural ecology and the continuation of this trend can lead only to economic and ecological catastrophe which will then threaten the very survival of mankind.

Key issues taken up by the **Environment Section** include: industrial and chemical pollution which is destroying marine life, croplands and the livelihood of fishing villagers and farmers (in Malaysia, 50 major rivers are so polluted no fish life can survive); the rapid chopping down of forests at the rate of 1 million acres a year, resulting in the complete depletion of timber by 1990 (deforestation has led to the silting of rivers, the flooding of towns and villages, and a reduction

of water flowing to reservoirs); the rapid diminishing of fish stocks due to overfishing by trawlers and pollution of the seas and rivers (the resulting fall in fish catch is causing hardships to 70,000 fishing families and has caused a drop in protein intake of the population); and industrialization and problems in the working environment, including industrial accidents and occupational hazards. In Malaysia there are 50,000 recorded industrial accidents a year and workers also suffer from exposure to dangerous chemicals and gases.

By raising the environmental consciousness of the public and policy makers, CAP hopes eventually to bring about a change in developmental priorities away from blind adherence to economic growth towards a policy of conservation and ecologically sound development.

More than two-thirds of the Malaysian population live and work in rural villages and estates. Typical of Third World countries, the rural communities produce the nation's food supply as well as much of the export products (Malaysia is the world's chief producer of rubber, tin and palm oil) but the people continue to live in conditions of poverty.

In 1976, CAP launched a **Rural Education Program** to inform, educate and represent the rural communities on consumer, environmental and basic needs issues. Under this Program, CAP helps the rural communities to articulate problems affecting their livelihood and living conditions and provides them with basic consumer education on issues such as food, nutrition and health. Problems which have been taken up include the invasion of trawler boats into the inshore territory of small fishing villages; the dislocation of rice farmers and small cattle rearers from their traditional lands to make way for development projects; pollution destroying the crops and fishing grounds of dozens of villages; inadequate sanitation and night soil collection services, threatening villagers' health; exploitative credit arrangements, including high interest charges which lead to severe indebtedness, etc.

When such problems arise, CAP

helps the affected community to present its problems through its own action, such as the writing of petitions, meetings with government authorities, and interviews with the press. CAP also helps by publicising the problems in newspapers or in its own publications and slides. As a result the depressed villages become revitalized by the positive action being taken. In some cases, the pollution is stopped or compensation is paid, but in most cases the battle is prolonged for years.

Besides helping the farmers with their problems, CAP also carries out an education program of talks, discussions, slide shows, exhibitions and house-to-house counselling in the villages and estates. During the program, advice is given to families on suitable diets, foods to avoid, how to budget, how to avoid being victims of the consumer culture, and so on.

The rural program helps to awaken the awareness of long-neglected communities to their rights to a fair share of the fruits of development, and to mobilise them to defend their livelihood if it is threatened. In rural areas where information is scarce and exploitation by traders and moneylenders is most severe, the rural education program also helps by providing counselling and advice to the people.

CAP's Consumer Education Section provides training and educational services for many groups, including school, college and university students, youths, women and workers.

CAP has helped to establish consumer societies in more than 50 schools. School societies investigate pollution problems in the neighbourhood, make surveys on canteen food safety and school-bus services, and discuss and debate consumer themes. Several teachers are also using consumer articles and publications in their classes. In teacher training colleges and universities, consumer education is also spreading as more courses on basic needs and environmental issues are introduced. CAP also works with youth organizations, trade unions, women's associations, resident organizations and voluntary groups, and does house-to-house counselling to the poorer urban

areas. It also organizes seminars, exhibitions and workshops.

Important results of CAP's testing, survey, complaints and environment activities are condensed into press statements, translated, and sent for coverage in newspapers of four languages. The continuous stream of press statements (two or three a week) keeps the public fully informed of the latest developments. CAP also contributed regular weekly or fortnightly columns in 10 newspapers and periodicals, dealing with case histories of consumer complaints, survey and test results and general articles on consumer problems.

CAP produces a 16-page monthly newspaper, the *Utusan Konsumer* (Consumer Forum), with two editions in English and Malay; it has a current circulation of 30,000. The *Utusan Konsumer* carries critical news, comments and analyses on the latest developments in matters related to prices, food, and nutrition, health, complaints, pollution and resources, transport and housing. It also comes out regularly with exposé features on dangerous goods, misleading advertisements, fraudulent companies, the apathy of government bureaucracies and the plight of rural communities.

Books, slide shows, pamphlets, posters and postcards are also produced to inform the public and for educational purposes. The consumer message is now also heard over the air in Malaysia. CAP is helping to produce weekly consumer programs in four languages over Radio Malaysia. Letters of comments and enquiries sent in by listeners show that the radio programs are reaching the people effectively.

In its efforts to bring about enforcement of consumer legislation and the introduction of social reforms, CAP has succeeded to a certain degree. Some products reported by CAP to be harmful have been withdrawn, while in a few cases environmental problems in certain localities have been resolved. The setting up of a Division of Environment and the gradual introduction of environment legislation regulating the permissible standards for effluent discharge in recent years is at least partly

attributable to the efforts of the environment movement started and led by CAP. The Education Ministry is also responding to suggestions to incorporate consumer education within the official school and college curriculum, while the Finance Ministry supports the part played by the consumer movement to keep prices down.

The experience of CAP can prove valuable to public interest groups or potential groups in Third World and even industrialized countries. There are many aspects that can be used in other countries. The problems and issues with which CAP is grappling are common to all the Third World as well as industrialized countries. The overpowering dominance of big business, the unethical marketing of dangerous products, the need for a basic needs development approach, the underprivileged position of the poor and their lack of access to basic necessities, the dislocations accompanying hasty growth, the environmental and energy crisis, the influence of the consumer culture and the resultant alienation of

modern man — these are key developmental and cultural issues faced by all societies undergoing change today.

CAP's principal objective of raising the awareness and commitment of people to the necessity for basic needs and environmental reforms is becoming increasingly acknowledged as the first but most vital and difficult step on the journey to genuine development. Traditionally, most development-oriented groups would place highest priority on charity aid, disaster-relief or school and hospital building programs. CAP is showing that programs which aim at conscientising people on basic needs issues, which protect their interests and which press for basic social and environmental reforms are even more essential in the long run. CAP holds that unless people's consciousness changes, genuine socio-economic and cultural development will not result, however many roads and buildings are constructed and however many billions of dollars are poured into aid.

CAP wants people to think out for themselves the values of development, the rationale of producing and consuming goods and services, the type of culture that will bring about genuine cooperativeness and happiness among fellow men and harmony between man and nature. On the basis of this reflection, people can then act to bring about the changes required for attaining this type of development. ★

A remarkable achievement

One of the first films ever produced by a developing country on the environment crisis of our times won the silver (second) prize last year in the Berlin International Consumer Film Festival, competing against 102 other films entered by 16 countries.

The achievement is all the more remarkable when you consider that the featurette titled "Crisis in the Malaysian Environment" and made by the Consumers' Association of Penang, was edited, produced and completed locally at a cost of under \$10,000. It did not receive any government funding or assistance, and the planning, direction and script were handled by CAP members themselves.

As the title suggests, the 16mm., 21-minute color film depicts various aspects of environmental crisis in Malaysia: pollution of rivers and seas, rapid deforestation, sewage disposal, land mismanagement, urban congestion and air pollution.

Much of the film was shot in remote areas seldom, if ever, visited by city or town folk. Featured are fishing villages with declining catches, padi fields with crops destroyed by factory pollution, farms with livestock drowned by floods, and forests so depleted that within a decade there may be no timber left.

The citation accompanying the award praised the film for "showing in an impressive and comprehensive manner the struggle of the Malaysian consumer organizations, and for using documentary sources to sensitize the awareness of politicians and the public at large, and to motivate them to take appropriate action".

The movie is now available on loan to Canadians through the Rev. Carl R. Major of the Anglican Church of Canada, 600 Jarvis Street, Toronto, Ontario, M4Y 2J6.