



Up close & personal with Martin Khor

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THERE is a certain small-town charm about Martin Khor that has stuck with him all these years. He is most comfortable in his trademark batik shirt although he has to be properly suited up these days as he interacts with policy-makers and world leaders on the global stage. And home is still where the heart is.

"I am based in Geneva but due to my job, which is to understand and be involved in global issues, I travel a lot, to many parts of the world. Fortunately I am able to come back to Penang and Malaysia at least twice a year. It is very important for me to touch base with home and my home country," he says.

After all, it was in Penang that Khor's formative career as a consumer advocate and an intellectual icon for the developing world took shape.

After graduating from Cambridge where his peers included Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, and a three-year stint teaching economics at Universiti Sains Malaysia, Khor took up the position of research director at the Consumers Association of Penang.

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It was in this organisation that he developed a keen interest in consumer and environmental issues. Apart from his research work, he edited the Utusan Konsumer, which became a major alternative media that fearlessly championed the rights of consumers.

Khor pays tribute to CAP president S.M. Idris, whom he says was able to connect the problems facing ordinary people in their daily lives to their environment and the market place, and who developed the art of bringing these problems to the attention of the Government for it to solve.

"From identifying thousands of individual problems, CAP was able to get the Government to establish new laws and even new institutions to protect the consumer and the environment. I worked with a very dedicated, idealistic and skilled team of staff and volunteers who pioneered a lot of social work combined with advocacy, public education and community organising," says Khor.

As a consumer advocate, Khor's views were sought after by the media and even at the official level, like pre-Budget meetings, as he was known for his reasoned arguments. His views represented the common people but they were always backed by solid research.

It was through such initial work that Khor's journey from Penang to Geneva took shape.

CAP found that national work was not enough because many of the problems had their source in international systems, and thus it established the Third World Network (TWN) in November 1984 connecting NGOs in other developing countries.

Khor initially worked at both CAP and TWN before becoming full time director at the latter. The international secretariat is based in Penang but TWN also has regional offices worldwide, including one in Geneva.

TWN's mission is to connect the concerns of local communities and national groups in developing countries to the international arena and institutions such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, which have such influence over national policies and the lives of people.

Khor travelled extensively on this job but he still found time to write a regular column for The Star. His first column was entitled Dollars and Sense in 1978 which focused more on local issues. The next column was Earth Trends (1988) where issues of the environment took prominence and his current column is Global Trends (2003) which appears every Monday.

Khor's career took a paradigm shift in March 2009 when he was appointed executive director of the South Centre, an inter-governmental organisation whose members are 51 governments from developing countries.

The centre was set up after the South Commission chaired by former Tanzanian President, Julius Nyrere, released its report on Challenges to the South in 1990.

Malaysia had a big role in setting up the commission because the idea arose at a Kuala Lumpur conference on the South, and the then Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad went to see Nyrere in Tanzania to request him to chair and set up the commission.

"While the developed countries have many organisations like the OECD and the European Commission as well as national think-tanks that do research for them on international issues, there are few in the developing world. So the South Centre was set up to fill in the void," says Khor.

With a small team of less than 10 professionals backed up by eight administrative staff, Khor is in charge of both the research and the management of the centre.

"We conduct research on economic issues like the impact of the global crisis on developing countries and the reform of the international financial system, on climate change and sustainable development, on trade negotiations in the WTO as well as the free trade agreements, on intellectual property and its effects on development," he says.

"Our aim is to implement South-South cooperation, especially in the area of policy formulation and experience sharing, so that the developing countries can voice their views in a more united and effective way in international fora such as the WTO and the United Nations."

Khor got his baptism of fire in his new position at the recent Copenhagen Climate Change Conference when he had to deal mainly with world leaders and their officials. This is in contrast to the time when he would be participating from the NGO side.

Copenhagen conference

"The climate change issues are complex, so it is not surprising that they take time to sort out, and we knew that Copenhagen would not be able to complete the negotiations. Still, some progress was made in the official conference involving almost 200 countries," he says.

"Unfortunately, the host country felt that if a small meeting of 26 heads of governments could be held, they could somehow in one or two days solve all the problems that the negotiators were still grappling with.

"Of course, this was impossible to organise successfully and there was a lot of chaos because even the 26 could not agree. Meanwhile there were another 100 over political leaders that were left on the sidelines with nothing to do and getting frustrated, while thousands of other officials were trying to narrow their differences but feeling their issues were being hijacked somewhere else.

"The way forward is to get back to the official two working groups in which all countries can take part, and sort out the issues one by one.

"This year more progress can be made in these groups and hopefully there can be a conclusion. But the multilateral and inclusive process must be given the chance to do its work, instead of a small group of politicians or countries trying to do a short cut by meeting among themselves and then asking everyone else to sign on."

Khor says democracy may seem slow as it involves all, but in the end it is more sustainable and thus, faster in getting lasting results.

He is apparently quite used to change taking time.

"Change is a complex and difficult process. Moving from one state of knowledge, practice and structure to another requires a combination of factors.

"Initially there has to be identification that there is a problem, and what are its causes, and what are the alternatives. Then there is the action to make people aware of the problem and committed to act to find its solutions." "I think the most important aspect is to find in oneself and in other people the desire to search for truth including about life and society, and to find out where are the problems that truth face, especially the poor and vulnerable people, and how to help them and empower them to find solutions.

"It is important to have the spirit and conviction not to accept the problems that you see around you as something inevitable but instead as something that can be changed and overcome."

Asked if he feels like he is constantly facing impossible odds, Khor says, "Yes, often!"

"The problems of the world are so huge. The problems faced by each group and even each person seem so intractable. At the international level, the powers-that-be seem to have set up their systems to maintain their dominance so well. But each problem can be tackled if the hard work of analysis, writing, communicating, organising people and so on are done practically, and not just in theory or rhetorically.

"There is no magic formula of how best to effect change. It requires a combination of spirit, idealism, knowledge and actions, and all kinds of people. There is a role for everyone."

His current workplace certainly helps him view things from a global perspective.

"The staff includes people from many countries and regions. But I meet an even wider range of people from Africa, Asia, South America and the Caribbean, as well as from Europe and North America. They include diplomats, policy makers, ministers and sometimes Prime Ministers and Presidents.

"We have to understand their different situations and views, and yet try to assist them to find their common interests and to fight for these."

And what does he do to relax?

"I don't seem to have much time to relax, given the nature of my work. I watch TV or movies, and read some books. I like browsing in bookshops whenever I have the chance, but I don't have the luxury to finish reading the books.

"Talking to people at dinner is another pastime, and it is nice to walk around the small Geneva town at weekends. When I am back home in Penang, I try to swim a lot."

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