

Media activism: Right based approach to Promote Development issues

By Shafqat Munir

Development Journalist/Researcher

President, Journalists for Democracy and Human Rights (JDHR)

Shafqat62@hotmail.com

Abstract

No one can deny the role of media in spreading and sharing information. When we talk about promoting development issues in media, we need to know the concept of 'development support communication' with a rights based approach. If the communities about whom the policies are made are not aware of what is going to affect their lives and their trends of livelihoods, economy and environment, they could not generate a response good or bad. This is the media, which owing to its basic responsibility of protecting the people's Right to Know, intervenes telling the people the real story behind any development activity.

Scientific Research on technical, economic, trade, socio-political, cultural and environmental issues generates a lot of data and information covering different aspects of these issues. Certainly, this scholarly collected and analyzed data would be useless unless it is spread among the stakeholders and the people at large. The scientifically written research papers do have research material, which is not all the time fit to be published in newspapers, news magazines or to be broadcast on radio or television. Media operate through different formats. For example broadcast medium is linked to listening needs of the people while print medium is linked to the sight needs of the readers. Both have different ways to script writing based on the same research material. Usually the scientific research is kept in cupboards in the form of books or research papers only for the fellow researchers. This is the media, which explores the results of these studies to the masses.

Since inception of the World Trade Organization (WTO), particularly the trade talks to structure the future trade relations across nations, civil society and research organizations have been active in analyzing the pros and cons of different agreements under WTO and their impacts on the livelihoods of the farming and marginalized communities. In the recent rounds of trade talks from Seattle to Cancun, three agriculture specific agreements, Agreement on Agriculture, Agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) and Agreement on Application of Sanitary and Phyto-Sanitary Measures, are important to most of the South Asian countries being the agriculture based economies.

Farmers are marginalized communities in almost all the developing countries who are fast becoming victims of globalization, particularly the TRIPs agreement under the World Trade Organization (WTO) regime that snatches their basic right to choose and right to know, right to store, reuse, recycle and share their seed and plant varieties. They are also facing acute problems due to withdrawal of subsidies on their corps. Their vulnerability is growing with the emergence of corporatization of farming in one or the other way. It is a fact that new multilateral agreements under WTO regime are violating the rights of the people protected in natural law, the UN Declaration of Human Rights 1948, International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1966, International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, 1966, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and similar other international, regional, bilateral and country level human rights conventions and laws by allowing monopolies in the agriculture sector. In this regard the patents on life forms are serious violations of the rights of the farming communities. This area is an integral part of development agenda.

This paper discusses how media activism could influence policy making process in the interest of the promotion of development issues with a rights based approach, thus saving communities from the hazardous impacts of the policy making process on trade, economics and environment and living and livelihoods of populations. The paper also discusses how civil society players advocating and lobbying for the pro-people stance in the ongoing trade negotiations under WTO regime could accelerate media activism on various public interest development issues.

Media Activism

Information sharing at local, national, regional and global levels is vital to humanitarian responses towards economy, environment and society. Media, while playing its role as the agent of information and protector of the Right to Know of the people shares information at broader level, actually raises the level of awareness about the issues which impact the livelihoods of the people and their role in society. Since economy, environment and society are interlinked and particularly policies, initiatives and dialogues on these subjects affect the people, majority of whom are not aware of them. Media, particularly the segment of media that deals with development issues, takes up the concerns of the stakeholders and communities through professional activism.

Media activism forces policy makers and implementing agencies to move in the right direction with a rights based approach, thus avoiding harming the people's interests while formulating any policy regarding economy, environment and society. Media activism forewarns certain communities and the people at large about the hazardous impacts of any such policies. If we see South Asia in the context of international politics of globalization of economy, WTO agreements, environmental conflicts and clashes among different societies, we find the region the most volatile and politically unstable and divided over even the common concerns at global level. There is a dire need not to see media as just a tool of news coverage of certain events rather it should be mobilized and motivated as stakeholder. Both media and civil society at their level could protect the rights of the people.

We need to look into further rounds of trade talks under WTO arrangement and mobilize media to shape public opinion on the issues concerned in the context of the WTO agreements, particularly the agriculture specific agreements. Whenever there is something important all including the government want the media to be involved as they consider that the role of the media is very important. But normally media is involved just to get news coverage and it is not considered as a stakeholder. We need to understand that media is a stakeholder in the areas of public interest. For this purpose, different concepts of journalism could better lead us towards making strong partnerships and networking with media to get across our messages to the policy makers, thus influencing them not to accept any thing at the cost of the people's rights.

Concepts of Journalism

There are different concepts of journalism that reflect the issues of press freedom and media's role in protecting the people's rights, particularly relating to development. Due to monopolies in media beginning from the CNN and other multinational media giants, the global media is largely protecting the rights of the rich Multinational Corporation with commercial aspects thus compromising the rights of the people. In this sense, "Press freedom is the freedom of 200 rich people to spread their opinions": [Paul Sethe, a German Conservative] "The press freedom of bourgeois society comprises the freedom of the rich systematically and

incessantly to defraud, demoralize and make a fool of the exploited and an oppressed masses of the people, the poor.” [Lenin, 1917]

On the other hand, if media is mobilized and motivated on larger public interest developmental issues reflecting the opinions of majority of the people, then the role of a few rich or those in the power corridors could be reduced. Thomas Jefferson once said: “Were it left to me whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without government, I should not hesitate for a moment to prefer the latter” Both of these concepts of the freedom of press and media in one or the other way establish that the right to know of the people, the poor, the neglected and the exploited is supreme over the right to information of a few hundred rich. Here comes the media activism on the issues concerning the people related development. In the era of globalization, there is a dire need that media should not be allowed to be overpowered by these few rich rather it should be mobilized in the larger interests of the communities being affected by certain regimes imposed on them by monopolists and exploiters.

The libertarian theory of media that dates from the 19th century sees the people as distinguishing between truth and untruth. Press was declared the “Fourth Estate” in this theory. It was also declared free of government influence and control. If we apply this theory, we find that though due to international pressure, governments’ influence or control on media is gradually reducing. But another phenomenon is fast emerging with the introduction of certain new agreements under WTO in the name of trade liberalization; and the multinational corporations (MNCs), as a result, are gaining monopolies and patents even on the life forms literally influencing rather taking over the role of governments.

Like governments, MNCs also use media advertisement, a big source of revenue, as tool to influence media coverage. For example, you would hardly see media reporting critical of Pepsi, Nestle or Monsanto in Pakistan. The revenue generated through advertisements from government and MNCs sometimes plays havoc with the public interests. Even if there is well researched and substantiated information against any big giant such as Nestle, Monsanto and others, it would be covered partially if at all it gets space in media. Follow up or more news stories against the products of the MNCs normally do not get space in media because they provide large chunk of revenue to the newspapers and TV channels. Similarly, governments give pieces of press advice to the owners thus blocking coverage of certain issues that according to them could invoke negative reaction among the people. This kind of corporatization and commercialization of media badly damaged the people’s rights and liberties that undermined the Libertarian Theory.

Following failure of the Libertarian Theory of Media, Social Responsibility Theory of Media emerged with a rights-based approach to address real social problems facing various communities across nations. Under Libertarian Theory, it were the owners and the operators in the press who had to decide what should go or be blocked in print/broadcast media. The Social Responsibility Theory rests on the notion of a free press acting socially responsibly. It is the reigning theory in the rich West, but applied only on their internal affairs. It rests on the notion of free press acting responsibly towards their society with a commitment both on the part of the journalists and owners of media organizations.

Under the Social Responsibility Theory of Media, the Right to Know of the People has been recognized as the supreme right of the people. Citizens enjoy the right to know about what is going to happen that could affect their livelihoods and is in their interest. Media by virtue of its role and responsibilities is bound to safeguard the people’s right to know.

Journalists’ sense of responsibility to society

It is considered a moral, social and professional duty of a journalist to be responsible towards society. That is why media persons are focused and concerned on the development issues affecting the lives of the people as to them, news is what affects the lives of the people and/or interests to them. These are the two premises on which journalists write news items and draft their stories and articles. Prevailing international norms say journalists should have the freedom to gather, draft and present news stories. It is their free choice what to cover. But if they are barred from doing their duty or someone else decides for them what is worth covering and what is not then this is denying them their professional right. Some people may have greater, in depth knowledge of some areas but journalists are supposed to have a general knowledge of a lot of specialized areas that they cover. They even make technical stuff digestible for consumption of the people. The professional perception is that they should remain true to their duty to inform their readers, listeners and viewers and promote a rights based approach to help reduce vulnerability.

Rights based approach promotes people's right to development

With the emergence of worldwide rights movements, awareness of human rights and a widespread rights-based approach to settle disputes and reduce vulnerabilities are gaining space across communities and countries. The trend now is to give rights an explicit legislative basis, and to incorporate them into a wide range of agreements and policies including commercial contracts and labour agreements. A number of major commercial entities and communities are committing themselves to upholding basic human rights by joining the United Nations sponsored initiatives in this regard. John Handmer of Risk and Community Safety Research Initiative, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, in a paper prepared for the Annual Hazards Workshop, University of Colorado, Boulder, July 2001 writes: "Our awareness of human rights has been greatly enhanced by globalization of media and the spread of North Atlantic notions of democracy."

To some commentators this reflects a resumption of the U.S. led post World War II project - interrupted for 40 years by the cold war (Cately, 1997). This project included the spread of human rights expressed through democratic institutions of the U.S. model and global free trade and financial systems. Global trade and finance are formally represented by the Bretton Woods institutions of the IMF and World Bank, and by GATT (now the World Trade Organization or WTO). The concept of rights not only covers individual freedom of expression, voting and trade, but basic needs of human beings including water and sanitation, food, housing, employment opportunities, a clean environment and increasingly gender and cultural rights, and security as the hardcore developmental issues. With the widespread public outrage against the policies of the Breton Woods institutions that harm the interests of the labour and the farming communities, various groups and activists and certain governments across the rich and the poor countries are contesting these basic rights.

The worldwide human rights groups and activists and movements promoting vulnerable people's rights have created awareness of fundamental rights violations of which cause vulnerabilities among stakeholders. As part of economic globalization, multinational corporations and corporatized atmosphere are gradually monopolizing trade and agriculture in the name of trade liberalization thus rendering the marginalized segments more vulnerable. The globalization is fast creating losers as a result of enhanced competition for capital and trade and now the easy relocation of commercial activity. It has been observed that the globalization by creating vulnerable communities worldwide is causing loss of livelihoods and environmental degradation, two important developmental issues.

There is a consensus among the human rights groups that a rights approach could help reduce vulnerability provided legal instruments support the approach. Existing human rights, and

rights related law appear to cover many of the components of vulnerability. In addition, long established international humanitarian law sets out obligations in times of war (Plattner, 1992), and there is currently debate over the existence of much broader rights to humanitarian assistance (Kent, 2000). Some times laws and acts give protection to the people's rights and the other times certain traditions and customs or practices provide protection to the people. The farmers' fundamental rights to have implements and skills to sharpen them, acquire skills in cultivating and reaping the crop, acquire piece of land and knowledge about soil and protection against eviction and displacement, store crop and seed, reuse and share the plant varieties, protect their indigenous knowledge, plant and seed varieties and sufficient water are protected since centuries by natural law.

Millennium Development Goals and Media

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are an ambitious development agenda for poverty reduction to improve lives of people. This agenda was agreed upon by the world leaders at the Millennium Summit in September 2000. For each goal one or more targets have been set to be achieved by 2015, using 1990 as the benchmark.

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

Target for 2015: Halve the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day and those who suffer from hunger.

2. Achieve universal primary education

Target for 2015: Ensure that all boys and girls complete primary school.

3. Promote gender equality and empower women

Target for 2005 and 2015: Eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005 and at all levels by 2015.

4. Reduce child mortality

Target for 2015: Reduce by two-thirds the mortality rate among children under five.

5. Improve maternal health

Target for 2015: Reduce by three-quarters the ratio of women dying in childbirth.

6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases

Target 2015: Halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS and the incidence of malaria and other major diseases

7. Ensure environmental sustainability

Targets:

- Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources

- By 2015, reduce by half the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water
- By 2020, achieve significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers

8. Develop a global partnership for development

Targets:

- Develop further an open trading and financial system that includes a commitment to good governance, development and poverty reduction-nationally and internationally
- Address the least developed countries' special needs, and the special needs of landlocked and small island developing states
- Deal comprehensively with developing countries' debt problems
- Develop decent and productive work for youth
- In cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries
- In Cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies- especially information and communication technologies

Some major Environment and Development Issues

BIODIVERSITY

WATER RESOURCES

FOOD SECURITY

AGRICULTURE

GLOBALIZATION

MOVEMENTS OF PEOPLE/MIGRATION

URBANIZATION/DISPLACEMENT

FORESTRY

POPULATION PRESSURES

HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT: ENVIRONMENTAL human rights law is a concept of the late 20th century? a link first established in a UN Declaration in 1972 and further investigated and defined by the UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities in a series of four reports to the UN Commission on Human Rights, submitted between 1989 and 1993. These landmark reports established the legal basis and human need for environmental rights and recommended certain rights to be enshrined in international law through a Draft Declaration of Principles on Human Rights and the Environment.