

Media activism: Promoting Rights Based Approach to Protect Farmers' Rights in the HKH Region

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Abstract

No one can deny the role of media in spreading and sharing information. When we talk about protecting farmers' rights in Hindu Kush Himalayan (HKH) region, we need to know that the sustainability of any development for the communities in fragile areas like HKH region lies in better development support communication with a rights based approach. If the farmers in HKH 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 ready to be published in newspapers, news magazines or 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. Most of the time 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 them 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 communities. In the recent rounds of trade talks from Seattle to Doha, 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 farmers 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 paper discusses how media activism could influence policy making process in the interest of the farmers' rights with a rights based approach, thus saving communities from the hazardous impacts of the policy making process on trade, economics and environment. 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 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, take 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 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 farming communities in the HKH region.

We need to look into the further rounds of trade talks under WTO arrangement and mobilize the 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 farmers' 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 of farmers. 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 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, particularly the farming communities and that too in the mountains. 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 MNCs as a result are gaining monopolies and patents even on the life forms literally influencing rather taking over the role of governments. As previously done by the governments, the MNCs now using advertisement, a source of revenue, in media as tool to influence media. For example, you do not see reporting against Pepsi, Nestle or Monsanto. The revenue generated through advertisements from government and MNCs sometimes plays havoc with the public interests. Even if there is a well researched and substantiated information against any big giant like 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 newspaper owners. Similarly, governments give pieces of press advice to the owners thus blocking coverage of certain issues concerning the vulnerable farming communities in particular and the people in general. Look at the coverage of the Doha Ministerial meeting; journalists were not free to report. Only a few journalists and media teams that also from big media giants of the world, which control and monopolize the flow of information were allowed in Qatar. Most were from rich countries. Most stories appeared only on the business pages as if it were routine happening and not something big that could largely affect the livelihoods of the people. The WTO agreements have far reaching changes and impacts on public and state policies all over the world, but the talks and information about the WTO agreements is normally being down played. Majority of the newspapers from South Asia and other third world countries did not even bother to send their representatives to cover the trade talks rather they reproduced what was generated on the information front from the media giants of the developed world. This needs to be replaced with free media coverage of the ongoing trade talks so that the media could promote the rights based approach to protect farmers’ rights in the HKH region.

Following failure of the Libertarian Theory of Media, Social Responsibility Theory of Media has 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. By limiting access of media to Doha Ministerial and the forthcoming such events, the real players, the monopolists and exploiters are literally denying the right to know of the people thus curbing the rights based approach in protecting the rights of the fragile communities.

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 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 and promote a rights based approach to help reduce vulnerability.

Globalization and Media Activism in Trade talks

Media reports inform people on what they do not know and would be interested in knowing particularly about the events they were not involved in. These sorts of pieces of information not only educate the people rather provide them room for networking with those who take decisions affecting their lives positively or negatively. It would, on the other hand, inform the decision makers of the people's views and reaction expressed in the news media and thus proves to be helpful in lobbying. This flow of information builds the capacity of the readers, viewers and listeners. So the media activism is extremely important. But unfortunately media has not been given the access to the previous trade talks, it needed. Now we should lobby with and force the Cancun WTO Ministerial Meeting's organizers to involve media as a stakeholder and pave way for media activism with a rights based approach to protect the farmers' rights.

Seattle/Doha trade talks on media

The electronic media is perhaps the most influential one today. But the role of this media left a lot to be desired when it came to the coverage of Doha WTO Ministerial Meeting. It aired only a very partisan worldview. Covering only a few protests is the tactics to give viewers the idea that not much opposition was offered to the process. Negative projection was thus translated into the message that only a few were in opposition to what went on there. Even in the case of Seattle, the mainstream media like CNN, BBC, NBC, ABC and others did cover the protests but kept on saying that talks were going as scheduled and nothing was amiss. The impact of that coverage was totally different from what was actually happening in the streets of Seattle and behind the locked negotiation rooms.

If you collect newspapers covering Seattle, you see minor things were blown out of proportion while the protests and their spirit of opposition was downplayed. This is because most of the print media, like the electronic media, is big business and is thus naturally allied to other big businesses pushing the agenda of globalization through the WTO process. The global networks and publications are influenced by MNCs. Quite a few of these electronic, print and online media share board memberships with MNCs. For example some of the directors of Reuters are supposed to be the directors with Pepsi!

Rights based approach protects farmers' rights

With the emergence of worldwide rights movements, awareness of human rights and a widespread rights-based approach to settle disputes and vulnerabilities are creating 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 policy 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 US 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 US 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 food, housing, employment opportunities, a clean environment and increasingly gender and cultural rights, and security. 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. In an era of globalization, particularly the globalization of economy, multinational corporations and corporatized atmosphere 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.

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.

Now these centuries and generations old fundamental rights of the farming communities are being snatched by allowing multinational corporations (MNCs) the monopoly over plants and seed varieties and reducing choices of the farming communities. Introduction of corporate farming thus depriving small subsistence farmers of their right to cultivation and displacement of landless farmers from the state owned farms, withdrawal of subsidies in the name of globalization or liberalization are massive violations of the fundamental human rights of the farmers. If we look into the process of multilateral talks under WTO regime, we find that the WTO and its functionaries are hardly concerned about the principals set by the natural law and international conventions on human rights rather they consider human rights as a hindrance to trade liberalization. International Federation of Human Rights League (FIDH) in its report 320/2, November 2001 says human rights are only considered in an indirect connection with the facilitation or hindrance of trade liberalization.

Under WTO regime, trade is not required to conform to the notion of human rights rather it opts for the reverse despite the fact that the preamble to the Agreement establishing WTO has duly incorporated the spirit of the Article 55(a) of the UN Declaration of Human Rights. By incorporating the spirit of the Article 55(a) in the document that provided basis for WTO's establishment, the authors duly recognized that WTO rules were subordinated to the principles of the UN charter. But in practice how WTO talks are being conducted is a clear violation of the UN charter rather it makes mockery of the globally acknowledged UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

Indigenous knowledge system is very important in the village context; particularly the farming communities do have this capability. This knowledge system is at stake due to the TRIPs agreement. The journalists can make news stories based on the indigenous knowledge system prevailing in their areas regarding farming and agriculture and local level cottage industry. The elders can provide sufficient knowledge on the growers and farmers' issues of concern and their solution. They can advise how in case of the shortage of water, the farmers can store water and reuse some water resources just to conserve water amid depleting reserves of water.

As the background paper of this seminar in the context of the TRIPs agreement says "effective *sui generis* system" has not been defined anywhere, therefore, it is subject to varied, often conflicting, interpretations. Another related issue is that of providing farmers the right to recognition and compensation for their role in protecting and improving genetic resources and traditional knowledge. To give farmers the right to recognition and compensation for protecting genetic resources, we should take advantage of media activism to urge upon the policy makers in our countries that they should advocate strengthening the UN Convention on Biological Diversity already ratified by 186 countries and that protect this right of the farmers instead of accepting any other model that deprive the farmers of this right. Through media activism we could impress upon the developing countries that if they go for the UPOV model, they would be causing disaster for the livelihood of their farming communities.

The media activism could promote the right-based approach on the developments taking place in Geneva on the current round of WTO negotiations on agriculture with March 31st as the deadline for its modalities. This is the last chance for us to restructure the Agreement on Agriculture of WTO. Nevertheless, the state of negotiations in Geneva is not satisfactory because of typical power play and the manipulations in WTO. If the negotiations continue in this way we may lose the last chance to achieve substantial benefits for the farming

communities. We need to expose the draft modalities released by Mr. Stuart Harbinson, Chairman of the Committee on Agriculture that give peanuts to the poor countries while giving more flexibility to the already privileged nations. The new modalities in the agreement do not change the underlying structure of agriculture trade rules, which are causing widespread hardship for farmers and discourage sustainable models of agriculture. It ignores the role of women, which are contributing a major part in agriculture production. The new modalities seem the mouthpiece of transnational companies and safeguard their interest rather than the small farmers, which are in majority in the region.

We by mobilizing media could urge upon the government to reject these modalities and demand for the new trade rules in agriculture, which should take food security and food sovereignty fully into account and allow the developing countries to protect their farmers against the world low prices. The agreement on agriculture should allow the developing countries to increase their tariffs and restrict imports on agricultural goods as new modalities give cushion to the developed countries for dumping on one hand and restrict other parties to pursue the dumping. There is a time that we should explore media activism to force our government to reject the Harbinson Draft modalities because it is loaded against the small farmers.

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