

HEADLINE: The assets of the poor

SUBHEADLINE: Dr Prawase Wasi urges the media to better reflect the needs of the underprivileged and create a better society for all

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Making the mass media more responsive to the needs of the poor seems to be an uphill battle. But Prof Dr Prawase Wasi, Thailand's respected civil society leader, believes he has a formula that can ``move the mountain".

He calls it a mighty triangular approach. By bringing relevant knowledge, social activism and political pressure together, the synergy becomes a powerful force to effect social and political changes _ including media reform, he said.

In his keynote speech during the Ramon Magsaysay Awardees Meeting recently in Taipei, Taiwan, Dr Prawase, himself a Magsaysay Award-winning medical doctor, explained the role of the media in bringing about social change.

``The media is a system that can greatly affect society, positively or negatively. The powerful control and use the media for their benefit," he stated, in a plea for the underprivileged, searching for ways to resolve the structural problem of poverty.

``There are two big powers in society _ the state and business. And both use the media for their benefit. But the people, particularly the poor, are powerless and thus do not have access to the media to state their cause. The state can, and often does, use the media for propaganda and to conceal the truth. Business effectively uses it to promote consumerism," Dr Prawase said.

Fortunately, however, Thailand has begun to see some changes, he said.

``The media is increasingly devoting more attention to the poor. Newspapers, radio and television programmes across the board have increasing coverage about the plight of the poor, their struggles, the villagers' role in environment protection."

Media reforms began when the 1997 Constitution stipulated in Article 40 that radio and television waves, not controlled by the state, belong to the public and must therefore be used for the maximum benefit of society, he said.

``To realise this constitutional ideal, society still has the task of fighting overwhelming profiteerism," he declared, adding that there are several things the media should do, to reflect the needs of the underprivileged in a better manner.

First, he said, the media should make it clear to the public that poverty is a structural problem, not a personal fault, a point which should give rise to more sympathy and better understanding of the poor.

``Systematic identification of structures causing the poor to be poor will lead to structural reforms which can cure poverty," Dr Prawase said.

In addition, the media should give poverty a human face.

``Humans by nature have compassion, but alienation causes harder hearts. When people have heart to heart contact, compassion emerges leading to deep happiness and a willingness to act benevolently," the scholar explained.

He also encourages more coverage on the success stories of the poor and the empowerment of the poor through community organisations.

``The poor do not only have problems, they also have strength and successes," he said.

Community organisation, he explained, is the key to alleviate poverty both in the rural and urban areas.

To help people get organised, he urged those who have the know-how to get connected with the rural poor who need technical support.

Meanwhile, locals need to strengthen their ties through networking and sharing experiences _ an empowerment process by itself, he said, adding that community radio is an important tool in getting people organised.

He also urged the media to do better in explaining the linkages between micro and macro economy and the significance of balanced development.

``Development is usually unbalanced with a macro economy destroying the micro one. But it does not need to be that way; both can connect in a supportive manner. This needs to be understood and promoted," Dr Prawase said.

The media understanding of the role of education in fostering social justice, he said, can go a long way in strengthening communities.

At present, he added, the rote-learning, western-oriented education system makes youngsters lose touch with their own cultural roots. The local communities will be empowered when the young have a chance to learn about their communities, he added.

He suggested a restructuring of the different factions of the media, be it through research, personnel training or budgeting, to complement one another with shared goals in promoting social justice.

Like in other social movements, efforts for media reform can benefit from the ``triangle" strategy, he explained. It consists of knowledge, activism and political pressures. ``Creation of relevant knowledge through research is crucial, but not adequate by itself; it must interact with social movement or social learning," he explained.

``On the other hand, without relevant knowledge, social movement cannot become strong and may deviate from the original purpose. Knowledge derived from research must be translated into forms and languages that can empower the public.

``Many academicians shun politicians, thinking that they are bad people and do not wish to do anything with them. But politicians have authority over the use of state resources and in law promulgation, which are very often needed in development. Thus without political involvement this working model is not complete."

This ``triangular" approach has already been used successfully to move a few ``mountains" in Thailand, he said. The case in point is the advent of the 1997 Constitution for political reform, the Eighth National Economic and Social Development Plan _ from an economy-dominated development to a more human-centred development _ or the issue of the 1999 National Education Act and even in the current reform of the health system.

` `Groups [preferably a mixture comprising academics, NGOs and government officials] can initiate the `triangular' process that will lead to media system development for society as a whole and for the poor in particular."